UNIVERSITY OF
FORWARD
THINKING
WESTMINSTER▦

Political organisation, leadership and communication in authoritarian settings: Digital activism in Belarus and Russia

Herasimenka, A.

Political organisation, leadership and communication in authoritarian settings:
Digital activism in Belarus and Russia

Aliaksandr Herasimenka

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements of the University of Westminster

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2019

Abstract

Citizens of authoritarian regimes face multiple constraints when they express critical political views using digital media. The regime may monitor their activities, censor their speech or persecute them. Despite these challenges, politically-active citizens organise outside of traditional hierarchical arrangements to advocate for pro-democracy changes.

I analyse how the affordances of digital media help activists to organise, to select and to protect their leaders, as well as to distribute information. I use interviews, content analysis and participant observation to study two recent cases of successful political campaigning on digital media. Unusually, both cases managed to challenge the state elites in authoritarian countries, Belarus and Russia respectively.

I found that the two studied organisations relied on ad hoc, segmented and shadowed organisational configurations that deployed vast digital communication infrastructures to disseminate information. Journalists, the authorities and the public often misperceived these configurations as either over-centralised or not organised at all. This misperception, as well as the management of leadership visibility on social media, allowed activist groups to protect some of their leaders from persecution.

The findings contribute to the discussion regarding the nature of political organising in the digital age by refining and problematising social movement theories for digital authoritarian contents. The study also contributes to the discussion of the strategies that authoritarian regimes use to respond to and combat online opposition. These findings challenge the idea that authoritarian regimes have neared full co-optation of the internet. Instead, the internet should be considered as a battlefield for political influence.

List of contents

List of tables and illustrations

Acknowledgements

Author's declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

List of Terminologies and Abbreviations

API	Application programming interface
FBK	The Anti-Corruption Foundation ("Fond Borby s Korruptsiey" in Russian)
FSB	Federal Security Service
GFC	Great firewall of China
ISP	Internet service provider
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PASD	The "Parasites" and "Social Dependents" group
PSL	Pseudonymous segment leader
REP	The Belarusian Independent Trade Union of Radio-Electronic Industry Workers
SMO	Social movement organisation
SNA	Social network analysis
UCP	The United Civic Party
UK	The United Kingdom
US	The United State of America

Chapter 1 Introduction. The challenges of organising and content distribution in authoritarian settings

1.1 Research problem and aim

From the squares of North Africa in 2011 to the polling stations of the United States in 2016, people in many countries have witnessed chaotic transformations of and disruptions in national political and media systems. These disruptions were partly facilitated by the increased use of digital media (Bennett et al., 2017; Chadwick, 2013; Kavada, 2018). Digital media are named among the factors contributing to the rise of populism, radical ideologies and brutal or antisocial behaviour. Organising for political ends has been transformed as well. In the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and other democracies, new ways of communicating messages have modified how politicians and civic activists organise and campaign.

As in democracies such as the UK or the US, these issues are also part of everyday reality in countries whose citizens do not enjoy as many democratic freedoms and where people can suffer for the expression of political views. We often describe such countries as non-democratic or authoritarian[1]. However, digital media are viewed slightly differently in these countries, which From China to Russia, digital platforms are one of the few media tools that critical citizens use to express themselves, reach a broader audience and mobilise their supporters for collective action. Alongside the profound changes that the use of digital media brings to many places, their democratic potential gives hope to the citizens of authoritarian countries.

The aim of this research is to solve three puzzles related to the democratic potential of digital media: how political organisation evolves with the advance of digital technologies; whether and how organised pro-democracy citizens can rely on digital media to adapt to repressive environments of authoritarian countries; and what consequences this reliance has on the ability of these citizens to challenge authoritarian elites. By using predominantly qualitative techniques, such as interviews with leading activists and experts, observation and analysis of digital media content, I analyse two prominent pro-democracy organisations in order to uncover the layers of their organisational structures, leadership and innovative methods of content distribution.

Authoritarian countries are places where billions of people live, and millions struggle, but this struggle is often under-recognised in scholarship. 2.8 billion people lived under

---

[1] I use terms 'authoritarian' and 'non-democratic' interchangeably.

authoritarian rule in 2018 (Freedom House, 2019). Around a third of the countries in the world can be described as authoritarian, excluding microstates (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). Another 23% of countries can be classified as "hybrid regimes" (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, "repression for criticism of the government and pervasive censorship" is common, "media are typically state-owned or controlled by groups connected to the ruling regime" and "corruption tends to be widespread and the rule of law is weak" (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019, p. 49). The number of authoritarian countries has been growing over the past decade, and democratic decline has been observed even in long-established or mature democracies (Freedom House, 2019; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). There has been an increasing influence of authoritarian politics around the world.

In the previous decade, many writers assumed that greater exposure to digital technologies would foster pro-democracy changes. Since then, many countries have built impressive digital infrastructures, and in some cases the higher exposure of the population to digital technologies combines with long-lasting repressive authoritarian regimes. For instance, Belarus has one of the highest rates of fixed-broadband subscriptions per capita in the world (International Telecommunication Union, 2019). Russia is home to many prominent digital technology companies such as Yandex, a search engine, and VK, the most popular social media platform in many post-Soviet states. The academic literature describes both Belarus and Russia as authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Tolstrup, 2015). These two neighbouring countries are ruled by strong leaders that continue enhancing their power by attacking political opponents, imposing censorship and controlling traditional media. Belarus and Russia have similar historical traditions in their media, social and political spheres. Belarus and Russia are chosen as the national cases for analysis because they are repressive states with a high level of proliferation of digital technologies.

The dissertation analyses two cases of digital activism. First, it examines the three campaigns of Alexei Navalny during the pre-electoral period of 2017-2018 in Russia. Alexei Navalny is a dissident and is often considered the main figure in radical political opposition in Russia. He was a popular anti-corruption blogger, an adviser for a local government and a leader of an unregistered party. In March 2017, his anti-corruption organisation launched a campaign demanding the ousting of the country's prime minister. Later the same year, the Navalny organisation tried to register him as a candidate in the 2018 Russian presidential election. After the authorities refused to

register him, the Navalny organisation started its third campaign of that year which sought to democratise the electoral process. The three campaigns of the Navalny organisation number among the most prominent recent cases of large-scale digitally-enabled political activism in Russia.

Second, the dissertation analyses another highly prominent campaign, one that took place in Belarus in 2017. It is known as the "social parasites" protests or the "Anti-tax" campaign. It emerged following the implementation of an absurd tax on unemployment. The campaigners used different methods to advocate for change in the tax policy. This advocacy eventually led to a series of 32 rallies and turned into one of the largest protests since Belarus's independence in terms of its geographical spread. Once the tax was revoked, the campaign transformed itself in a pro-democracy movement that demanded solutions to the socio-economic crisis and political reforms.

The Belarusian Anti-tax and the Russian Navalny organisations are similar political movements in two similar countries. Both organisations demanded policy and systemic changes, were large in terms of geographical scale and actively used digital platforms. They also experienced similar challenges in the digital space. While there are many differences between the countries and the cases, it is hard to find two non-democratic countries that are so alike and that have experienced similar large-scale digitally-enabled protest campaigns simultaneously in the same manner.

These organisations should be viewed in the context of other large-scale digitally-enabled political mobilisations happening in these and other authoritarian states. The significant difference between the selected organisations and previous pro-democracy movements in the two countries was that they were successful, at least to a certain degree. In fact, the Anti-tax campaign is a successful case in terms of averting the policy it opposed. The results of Navalny's campaigning are more complex and associated with the process of building a sustainable movement. In other words, the studied organisations managed to produce visible and tangible results in terms of mobilisation or influencing the public agenda or policy. By studying these two successful cases of large-scale pro-democracy campaigns, we can learn about the organisational forms and communication mechanisms that emerge in such campaigns. We can also advance our understanding of the forms and mechanisms that enable an organisation to challenge authoritarian rule.

1.2 Three literatures explaining the political use of digital platforms

Three overlapping literatures have advanced scholarly knowledge of digital platform use in political organisations. These are social movement studies, platform studies and the literature on political communication. Let me briefly review each body of literature.

First, the literature on social movements has long dealt with the phenomena of collective action and leadership in movement organisations. The work of Gerlach & Hine (1970) is of special relevance to the study of social movements in authoritarian settings. Prior to the proliferation of digital platforms, Gerlach and Hine (1970) described a pattern of decentralised organisation. Using examples of contentious movements in the 1960s, they characterised decentralised organisation in terms of its ability to adapt in response to the ruling regime's efforts to suppress it (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 65). The authors found that adaptations potentially made the suppression of such an organisation ineffective due to three characteristics. First, adaptive organisations consist of many diverse subgroups or segments. Second, they have many centres of influence – that is, they are polycentric. Third, these organisations constitute an integrated network rather than being a myriad of isolated instances. These three characteristics are the three pillars of Gerlach and Hine's model of an organisation adaptable to the authorities' pressure.

More recent literature which addresses the use of digital platforms by social movement organisations (SMOs) mostly discusses the social and interactionist sides of platforms (Poell & van Dijck, 2018). This perspective has allowed scholars to learn more about the consequences of digital media use by social movements. However, this perspective often views social media sites as black boxes that merely support mediation and mobilisation (McCurdy, 2013).

Second, digital platform studies open up these "black boxes," examining the architecture, algorithms and other components of social media platforms (Milan, 2015b, p. 2). This literature highlights several dimensions of platforms including their technological, economic, social and cultural components (van Dijck & Poell, 2015). The analysis of these components helps us to understand how platform companies disrupt different fields, such as education or security. The proliferation of platforms also contributes to the datafication and the commodification of all social relations when platform corporations process, circulate and sell users' data (Dencik et al., 2016; Fuchs, 2014b; van Dijck, 2013b). In addition, platformisation poses new challenges to society such as the spread of computational propaganda (Sanovich et al., 2018) or unregulated

large-scale, data-driven political campaigning (Aagaard, 2016). Platform studies suggest that digital media shape, and are being shaped by, social and political processes and, thus, should not be taken for granted or viewed uncritically.

Third, the political communication literature provides access to a long tradition of research into political participation, civic engagement and government policy. One of the fastest growing domains within this field is termed "digital politics." The burgeoning literature on digital politics discusses the use of platforms by political actors, including activists, politicians and social movements (Postill, 2018, p. 8). This set of literature sheds light on the processes of mediatisation of politics and platformisation of political communication. However, relatively little attention has been dedicated to the digital politics of non-democratic countries. Digital politics in authoritarian states remain an underexplored area apart from a few notable exceptions (Karatzogianni et al., 2017; K. E. Pearce, 2015; Poell et al., 2016; Tufekci, 2017).

One of key debates in this field is concerned with the nature of political organisation in the digital age (Karpf, 2019). The literature does not agree as to the optimal forms of organising in the era of platforms (Bennett et al., 2017). Analysis of innovative civic and political organisations demonstrates that a hybrid form of organising, combining a traditional vertical type of organising with a more innovative and ideal-driven horizontal type, can bring benefits to digital activists (Chadwick, 2013; Wells, 2015). However, the "hybrid" theories do not provide a definitive answer as to the nature of organisational adaptations required for successful campaigning in mediatised political environments. In addition, many studies point to a "connective action" organisational approach whereby digital media are used to mobilise decentralised voices by relying on "organising without organisations" (Karpf, 2019). At the same time, some organisational and leadership forms occurring among platform-based groups are not intended to be public (Kim et al., 2018), which can mislead the authorities and the media. This dissertation addresses these gaps by focusing on the behind-the-scenes practices of organising while exploring implications for publicity and security (Barros, 2016). The combination of these three literatures helps to build a more nuanced picture of digital platform use in political organisations.

This project represents one of the first attempts to study the political use of social media platforms in the contexts of Belarus and Russia. These non-democratic countries present us with a set of problems and questions that are in some respects distinct from the issues relevant to mature democracies. In the reviewed literature, I was unable to find a

systematic analysis of the factors that influence the organisational sustainability of digitally-enabled groups in Belarus and Russia. The existing studies also fail to provide a clear conceptualisation of the relationship between the organisation of digital campaigning and their practices of information dissemination in authoritarian countries. In addition, the political consequences of the use of local digital platforms such as VK (Vkontakte), OK (Odnoklassniki) or Telegram are often overlooked by studies that focus on these countries.

1.3 The political and media systems of Belarus and Russia

This section describes the media and political systems of Belarus and Russia and other relevant details that provide the background for the case studies.

1.3.1 Political systems

Belarus and Russia are often labelled as competitive authoritarian states (Levitsky & Way 2010). This means that they have the facades of pseudo-democratic institutions such as "legislatures, multiple political parties, and somewhat competitive elections" (Frantz, 2019), but incumbents, such as presidents or prime-ministers, abuse power in order to remain in their position (Levitsky & Way 2010, p. 5). By contrast, some variations of authoritarian systems like China provide no viable channels to contest executive power and, therefore, to change the regime legally. Levitsky & Way (2010, p. 7) define such systems as China as "full authoritarianism."

Authoritarian regimes with pseudo-democratic institutions last a bit longer than those without them (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014). This is because authoritarian regimes can use pseudo-democratic institutions like elections to signal their dominance and establish a local base for support by distributing resources and positions in bureaucracy (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014). Competitive regimes also allow for more freedom of civic organising by legalising some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Diamond et al., 2016). The legalisation is important because authoritarian states often strictly control activities of political and civic groups by legal means such a requirement to register any group with the state to receive legal status. In Russia, for instance, many prominent human rights organisations such as Golos or Memorial (Respondent 6, personal communication, August 7, 2017; Respondent 7, personal communication, August 4, 2017) lost their legal status after 2011, which halted their activities (Mazepus et al., 2016). The advantage of legal status is that it allows campaigning openly rather than covertly.

In Belarus, public associations without legal status such as opposition groups are prevented from any activities related to political or social life. It is illegal to disseminate information on behalf of such an association (Szostek, 2015). From 2005 to June 2019, the Criminal Code provided liability for "illegal activities of a public association, religious organization or foundation or participation in activities thereof" (The Human Rights Center "Viasna", 2018). Acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation is still an administrative offence in Belarus. However, the Belarusian state granted legal NGO status to many civic groups, including those organisations that were critical of the regime and advocated for contentious issues such as human rights or trade unionism. At the same time, opposition organisations that try to register as parties have been repeatedly denied this status (Charnysh & Kulakevich, 2016) and were forced to function illegally. The examples include the Belarusian Christian Democracy (BChD) and the Belarusian Party of Workers. The authorities of Belarus have not registered a new political party since 2000 (The Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus, 2019).

In Russia, many pro-democracy NGOs fall victim to laws that brand them as "foreign agents," which in Russian is synonymous with a "foreign spy" (Kara-Murza, 2017; Robertson & Greene, 2017). Similar to Belarus, it is also difficult to register a party that would refuse to play by the government playbook. For example, the supporters of Alexei Navalny in Russia tried to register their party with the authorities at least five times from 2012 to June 2018 but failed (Meduza, 2018a). Thus, it seems that it can be harder to register a political party than to legalise as an NGO in Belarus or Russia.

Consequently, some clearly political groups try to receive the status of an NGO. Examples from Belarus include the "Tell the Truth!" campaign, whose representative stood for the 2015 presidential election as one of few opposition candidates. Another organisation registered as an NGO in Belarus, the Movement for Freedom, has an observer status in the European People's Party, which is currently the largest party in the European Parliament (The Movement For Freedom, 2018). Some scholars argue that such a form of political organising as a political party is "largely irrelevant" in Belarus (Charnysh & Kulakevich, 2016) not least because "politics" is removed from the electoral arena (Bedford, 2017, p. 404). Others suggest that parties should be viewed as the groupings of dissidents. For instance, Respondent 16, who unsuccessfully ran for every parliament and local elections since 2004, calls himself a "dissident" rather than a politician (personal communication, September 5, 2017). That might explain why the boundary between a civic organisation and a political party is blurred in Belarus.

Higher chances of been legalised as an NGO do not necessarily mean that civic organisations that are critical of the government are as strong in Belarus or Russia as in mature democracies. Civil society in these countries is often viewed as stymied and weak (Freedom House, 2019; Greene, 2014; Vaiciunaite, 2014). Some authors explain this with economic factors. They suggest that the structure of the economy in some post-soviet states deprives citizens of economic autonomy and thus stymies civic activity (McMann, 2006). Other authors explain the weakness of civil society with regime's deliberate attempts to restrict civic activity (McFaul & Treyger, 2004; Vaiciunaite, 2014). These authors highlight such depredations as the co-optation of activist groups, legal challenges for NGOs, trade unions and political parties, as well as curtailing of independent broadcasting. The state-run media also attacks civic activity and accuse them of, for example, providing covers for espionage or otherwise serving foreign interests (Greene, 2014, p. 103). The law restricts the funding of civic groups, especially foreign.

Another common restriction on political activism in authoritarian states is the limitation on freedom of assembly. In Russia, there is no official ban on political rallies. However, the restrictions on the assemblies are numerous. According to Russian law, organisers of demonstrations, rallies or other public assemblies must obtain a "sanction" (an authorisation) from local authorities (On assemblies, meetings, demonstrations, marches and pickets, 2004). If an authorisation is not obtained, an event is considered "unsanctioned." This means the police can use force to prevent people from gathering, leaders from public speaking, detain participants and use force. Organisers are punished with fines or arrests.

In addition, it is difficult to disseminate information about the planned protests in Russia if they are not authorised. It is forbidden to post information about demonstrations and other types of collective action if they are not agreed with local authorities (On assemblies, meetings, demonstrations, marches and pickets, 2004). Distribution of information on social media about unsanctioned protests might, therefore, lead to the persecution of core campaign activists. Consequently, people who participate in mass demonstrations and protests in the two countries routinely become subjects of administrative or criminal persecution that sometimes leads to prison terms (United States Department of State, 2019a, 2019b). The restrictions on freedom of assembly are often explained with the fear of the elites that such actions can threaten regime stability and lead to regime change (Silitski, 2010; Stockmann, 2013).

Despite the restrictions, four large waves of pro-democracy protests happened in Belarus (three of them) and Russia since the proliferation of the internet in the second half of the 2000s. Three of them were linked to the elections, and one was associated with the Arab Spring events.

First, the Ploshcha ("Square" in Belarusian) protest erupted in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, after the presidential elections when Lukashenka was selected for his third term in 2006. The protesters described that election as fraudulent. The collective action against the elections lasted for five days and resulted in the large-scale repression of the opposition (Bulhakau & Dynko, 2011).

The second recent wave of the pro-democracy protests happened in Belarus in similar circumstances following the presidential elections of 2010. That time, the protests lasted for several hours and resulted in the detention of more than 1 000 people, including nine out of eleven presidential candidates (Tarkowski et al., 2011). Then more than 40 opposition leaders were sentenced to years in prison (Tarkowski et al., 2011). The abuse of human rights prompted the EU to introduce economic and political sanctions against the Belarusian elite that lasted until the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 (Emmott, 2016).

Another wave of protests in Belarus happened just half a year after the 2010 elections following the events of the Arab Spring. This mobilisation was associated with decreased living standards and the proliferation of social media among the younger urban population (R. Balmforth & Makhovsky, 2011). These young people joined the "leaderless" movement called the "Revolution via Social Networks" (Tarkowski et al., 2011). The initial rallies of the movement met no repression. However, after three weeks of collective action, some of the leaders were identified (or they identified themselves) and were repressed, along with many rank-and-file participants (Tarkowski et al., 2011). Perhaps the main difference between this and the previous protests was that the 2011 movement was largely unrelated to the established opposition structures, which prompted many observers to define it as "spontaneous" (Kazak, 2011). All three waves of protests did not result in any pro-democracy political or policy change in Belarus (Bulhakau & Dynko, 2011) or the emergence of a sustainable and long-lasting large-scale movement.

Fourth, the 2011–12 "For Fair Elections" protests lasted in Russia for about eight months and became the largest wave of social movement activism since 1991 (Gabowitsch, 2017). This movement erupted following the reports of irregularities

during the parliamentary election (Zvereva, 2016). The movement prompted the authorities to introduce certain changes to the political system of the country like the reform of the election procedures. The "For Fair Elections" movement were to a high degree inspired, followed and organised through the internet (Toepfl, 2017; Zvereva, 2016). Perhaps this significance of the internet for the movement explains why the authorities started introducing new restrictive regulatory measures in 2012. That made some technologies used in the streets of Moscow in 2012 less effective (Lonkila, 2017).

1.3.2 Four steps towards non-democracy

Both Belarus and Russia are also called personalist authoritarian regimes (Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2015, p. 17), which highlights the role of authoritarian leaders in their political systems. These leaders, Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin, have consolidated and enhanced their personalist rules since the 1990s. Both the current presidents of Belarus and Russia came to power through democratic elections. In both countries, the process of dismantling democratic institutions followed soon. In Belarus, democracy experienced a setback shortly after the election of Lukashenka in July 1994 (Szostek, 2015). In Russia, Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999. Since then, the political regimes have pushed for new limits on many occasions from the dissolution of parliaments to rigged elections. The dominance of the two authoritarian leaders is another striking similarity between the two countries.

Different theories try to explain why Belarus and Russia have turned into non-democracies and were cemented as personalist authoritarian regimes over the past 20 years. Many studies connect the rise of authoritarianism in Russia to the nature of its resource-based economy (Greene, 2014). Other scholarly research highlights the regimes' ability to incorporate corruption into people's everyday lives and the Russian imperial past and neo-imperial present (Inozemtsev, 2017). The latter argument is based on the assumption that "Russia feels itself to be a nation that must continuously expand. But a nation that cannot come to terms with its legal boundaries cannot sustain democracy" (Inozemtsev, 2017, p. 83).

Belarus' regime is often considered to be a product of Russian politics. Tolstrup (2015), for example, argues that the existence of the Belarusian authoritarian model is partly a result of the Russian intervention with the politics of this neighbouring country, particularly its election process. "The Kremlin collaborated with the regime in discrediting and harassing the democratic opposition" and "Russian businesses,

profiting from the close connections to the Belarusian dictator, provided ample financial assistance to his campaign," says Tolstrup (2015, p. 684).

Although some of these theories mention the media as one of the factors – normally secondary – of the sustainability of these regimes, the role of the media in the process of power consolidation remains unclear (Stockmann, 2013) or even neglected (Way, 2005). It is also unclear why some authoritarian states are better able to use the media to their advantage than others (Stockmann, 2013, p. 243). Fuchs (2018) suggests a link between the success of the authoritarianism and the media. Authoritarian leaders do not need argumentative discussion, Fuchs argues. Instead, they appeal to emotions, anxiety and the authoritarian personality of their citizens that emerges as the response of external, predominantly economic factors. Authoritarian personality needs strong patriarchal leaders to shed people's anxiety. Having access to the most powerful media makes the appeal of authoritarian personalities easier. This appeal can be combined with the attractiveness of the authoritarian ideology in a highly anxious society, such as a post-soviet one. It then provides fertile soil for the consolidation of power in the hands of strong leaders. The theory of the authoritarian personality in Fuchs's reading demonstrates the role that the media can play in authoritarian power consolidation.

I identify four stages of the development of the media systems in Belarus and Russia that facilitated the consolidation of power in the hands of authoritarian leaders. First, after coming to power, the future authoritarian leaders sought to establish their control over the most important mass media of their time – television and radio. It was the time before the internet proliferated wildly. Take the example of Russia. Four days after becoming the president in 2000, Putin sent police to raid the offices of the company that owned the leading television channel in terms of news service – the NTV (Greene, 2014, p. 85; Kara-Murza, 2017). Kara-Murza (2017), who is a son of one of the founders of the channel, remembers that "NTV came under effective government control after a year-long campaign that deployed all the resources of the state to bring the unruly broadcaster to heel." Since then, the channel belongs to the state-owned company Gazprom that extracts and sells gas and oil.

During the first three years of his presidential term, Putin took control of all national television stations that covered politics (Way, 2005, p. 259). "The last privately owned nationwide television channel was taken off the air by order of Putin's information minister in June 2003, with the official explanation that 'the interests of viewers'

demanded this step" (Kara-Murza, 2017). Taking control of national television stations was the first important political move by Putin.

In Belarus, the local television and radio were monopolised under its president Lukashenka by his third year in power in 1997 (Way, 2005, p. 243). For years now, the standards of journalism as to fairness and balance of opinion are diminished in this country (Freedom House, 2016a). During the latest presidential election campaign, broadcast media devoted 86% of their political coverage to Lukashenka (OSCE, 2016). Similarly, Freedom House (2017) now argues that television in Russia, "which is still the leading source of news and information, often functions as a propaganda tool for the government." This means that in these countries, the audience has almost no access to opposition views on television (Way, 2005, p. 243). These takeovers of key broadcasters affected the political coverage in both countries.

Second, after the control of the main television channels was established, the takeover of other prominent political media followed. Newspapers were gradually forced either to change ownership or to shut down. Their journalists were prompted to look for jobs elsewhere or to leave the country. This story was similar across Belarus and Russia again. For instance, many prominent Russian journalists have left for Ukraine or the EU during this period. The Belarusian media professionals have gone to Russia, the EU or elsewhere, often in a status of political asylum seekers. Since then, "much of Belarus's independent [of the government influence] press has been run out of business and forced to close" (Freedom House, 2007). This resulted in an overwhelming proportion of state-controlled media that covers issues according to the views of the authorities. In Russia, "meaningful political debate is mostly limited to news websites, some radio programs, and a handful of newspapers" (Freedom House, 2016a). A few remaining private media companies whose owners were not dependent on the ruling elites and normally chose a co-opting strategy to avoid a possible loss of their business.

Third, the control over the main mass media channels has helped the emerging authoritarian leaders to remove their political opponents – prominent opposition leaders – and keep other ambitious men and women out of politics. This removal was needed to ensure that the next elections will be won without trouble for the regime. Media helped to justify this removal by overpowering the national political conversation. Some of the opposition leaders were forced to leave their country. Others were sent to prison like two businessmen, Andrei Klimau in Belarus and Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Russia (Robertson & Greene, 2017). The latter was a prominent supporter of different

opposition organisations and parties from the communists to the liberals. Khodorkovsky spent ten years in prison, and almost no one questioned the political motives behind his imprisonment by the end of his two prison terms.

Some most stubborn people such as at least three leaders of the Belarusian opposition in 1999 and a former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov in Russia in 2013 were removed from the political arena through their assassinations (Kara-Murza, 2017; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2009). These assassinations helped the regimes to keep their grip on power (Robertson & Greene, 2017). The murders with clear political motives sent an unambiguous signal to critical citizens. The organisers and masterminds of these high-profile political assassinations remain unnamed (Kara-Murza, 2017; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2009).

Fourth, traditional media like newspapers and radio cover these tragic events, along with many other political issues, in a specific manner. For instance, traditional media in Belarus, the majority of whom are controlled by the state, typically do not cover anti-governmental protests or similar contentious processes (Miazhevich, 2017). Their coverage has silenced the critical issues and questions and overpowered the discussion in society. Miazhevich (2017) describes this strategy of traditional state-run media as "co-opting." Government-controlled traditional media of Russia often use a conflict-oriented, scandalous, extreme and divisive style of coverage (Robertson & Greene, 2017) typical for many western tabloid media (Goscilo, 2013). Russian media specialists have been learning and practising this scandalous coverage for years (Pomerantsev, 2014). This type of coverage has gradually developed into a tabloid-style propaganda machine.

The Russian amplified propaganda machine was deemed to manipulate public opinion during the problematic events such as the occupation of the Crimea in 2014 (Robertson & Greene, 2017). The state-controlled media covered those events using appeals to the audience's emotions and ethnic pride and identity (Robertson & Greene, 2017, p. 96). It appeared to be a lucrative strategy for the country's political leadership. Unsurprisingly, people in Russia who watched more state-television news increasingly supported Putin in 2014. Television remains the main source of news for Russians (Levada-Center, 2018b). By contrast, citizens who mostly got their news from independent sources "were less likely to rally behind Putin" (Robertson & Greene, 2017, p. 95). These results of public support demonstrate a correlation between the support of Putin and his propaganda machine. However, from Robertson and Greene's survey, it is not clear

whether there is a causal connection between support for Putin and the exposure to state-television news. Still, the effects of the television propaganda machine are considered to be substantial.
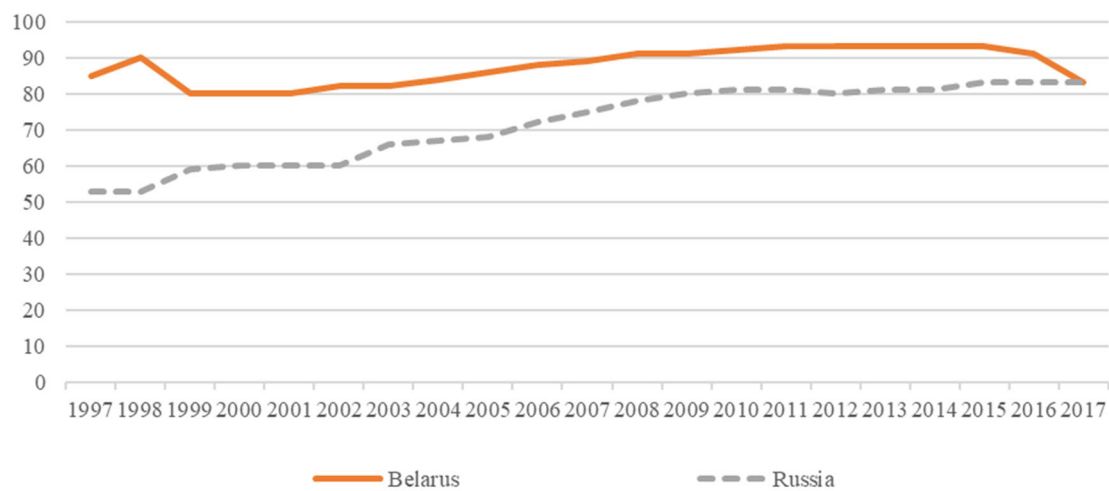
Figure 1.1. Country scores (0 = free, 100 = not free) in the "Freedom of the Press" reports for Belarus and Russia in 1997 – 2017. Sources: Freedom House; Litvinenko (2019).

As a result of the seizure of control over television and other traditional media by the governing elites, silencing of political opponents and the development of a scandalous propaganda machine, many people of Belarus and Russia live in a media cocoon of settled opinion. These people are often convinced that their countries can only survive if their current political leadership is in power. This has contributed to the people's disillusionment with the established opposition organisations (Robertson & Greene, 2017) and their perception of political opportunity structure (Stockmann, 2013). As Figure 1.1 shows, the levels of restriction on basic political freedoms have been similar in Belarus and Russia recently (Freedom House, 2016a, 2016b; Reporters without Borders, 2017; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). At the same time, it seems like the political system of Russia has been turning into a more restricted one over time, while the Belarusian system moves in the opposite direction though very slowly (Freedom House, 2019).

This historical narrative demonstrates the dangers of state control of traditional media in countries that have no stable democratic institutions. Political institutions that would prevent power grab in the countries with a long democratic tradition could not stop the authoritarian consolidation in Belarus and Russia. This resulted in the emergence of authoritarian states in these countries just a few years after the previous authoritarian state they were part of – the Soviet Union – had collapsed. That is why the role of the

media should not be missed from the discussion about the reasons and consequences of the development of non-democratic political systems.

It is hard to catalogue the full toolkit used by the Belarusian authorities in order to control the media in this brief background section. However, it is fair to say that this catalogue is "extensive" (Szostek, 2015), while the tale of "control and repression" (Sahm, 2009) is "depressing" (Szostek, 2015). Traditional media in Belarus were described as the "propaganda empire" long before the talks about a propaganda machine in the Russian context (Hill, 2005).

The emergence of a similar propaganda machine in Russia has also affected Belarusian media because Russia tries to intervene in the politics of Belarus (Tolstrup, 2015) and traditional media of the two countries are closely interrelated (Szostek, 2015). The current relationships between Russia and Belarus are dominated by the political consequences of the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea by Russia and "New Russian Imperialism" (Kuzio, 2015).

Belarus remains the only country of the Eastern Partnership, a community of six post-soviet non-EU states located in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, free of military territorial conflicts. All other countries of the community are involved in conflicts over unrecognised breakaway territories. All these territorial conflicts also involve the Russian military. Belarus is considered to be one of the closest political and military allies of Russia (Pankovsky & Kostyugova, 2018). At the same time, the two countries had multiple economic and political disputes over the last 20 years (Szostek, 2015). At present, the Belarusian authorities recognise its dependence on Russia but also try to reduce Russian dominance by seeking support from European countries and the US (Pankovsky & Kostyugova, 2018).

The Belarusian regime has accepted the Russian "pervasive" (Boulègue et al., 2018, p. 2) dominance of the Belarusian media system. This dominance is mostly exercised through Russian television programmes that range from news to sports broadcasts and are watched by the majority of the citizens of Belarus (Laputska & Papko, 2018; Szostek, 2015). According to the Belarusian government's estimates, "Russian production currently occupies as much as 65% of Belarusian media space" (Kłysiński & Żochowski, 2016, p. 7). In 2016, 66% of Belarusians watched Russian television channels, either regularly or occasionally (Laputska & Yeliseyeu, 2016). 84% watched any television channel occasionally in 2017 (Ecorys, 2017, p. 19). Furthermore, 70.5% of Belarusians fully or partly trust messages in Russian media (Laputska & Yeliseyeu,

2016). Russian television is one of the main sources of information for Belarusians (Laputska & Papko, 2018; Szostek, 2015).

The content of Russian television can potentially strengthen people's anxiety and appeal to the authoritarian personality:

> Russian television (above all due to cable TV providers) is widely available and has a rich offer which is appealing to averagely and poorly educated Belarusian citizens, especially its long criminal series and soap operas. It successfully promotes such pathologies as: excessive drinking, corruption, violence and aggression in human relations (Kłysiński & Żochowski, 2016, p. 34)

The dominance of Russian traditional media allows for "accidental influence" (Poczobut, 2016) of the Russian propaganda machine in Belarus.

The dominance of the Russian-controlled media in the digital realm of Belarus is remarkable. The most visited social media platforms in Belarus are owned by a Russian oligarch (Table 1.1). Around half of the internet traffic that leaves Belarus goes to Russian websites (Doroshevich & Sokolova, 2017).

Since the majority of citizens use the Russian language in daily life (Freedom House, 2018a), Russian-speaking digital news sites receive a large portion of the traffic from Belarusian users (Freedom House, 2018a; Laputska & Papko, 2018). Some authors even argue that the internet in Belarus is part of the Russian "cyberempire" where Russian "cyberhegemony" is performed on the level of linguistics (Uffelmann, 2014, p. 278). Belarus has been part of the Soviet Union and, before this, the Russian Empire for 200 years. This domination left cultural, media and political post-colonial legacy (Bulhakau & Dynko, 2011) that is tangible in both media and political spheres.

1.3.3 Digital media

The control of the media was instrumental in the establishment of the authoritarian systems in Belarus and Russia before the internet and digital media brought volatility and unpredictability to the political process. With the proliferation of the internet (Figure 1.2), active citizens started challenging the authoritarian systems in new ways. Following the establishment of the control over the main television stations, it took some time for the authorities of Belarus and Russia to understand the potential of digital media, specifically local social media platforms (Lonkila, 2017, p. 115). Thus, until the protest wave of 2011-2012, platforms provided an important "weakly regulated alternative to the biased broadcasting of Russian national TV channels" (Lonkila, 2017, p. 115).
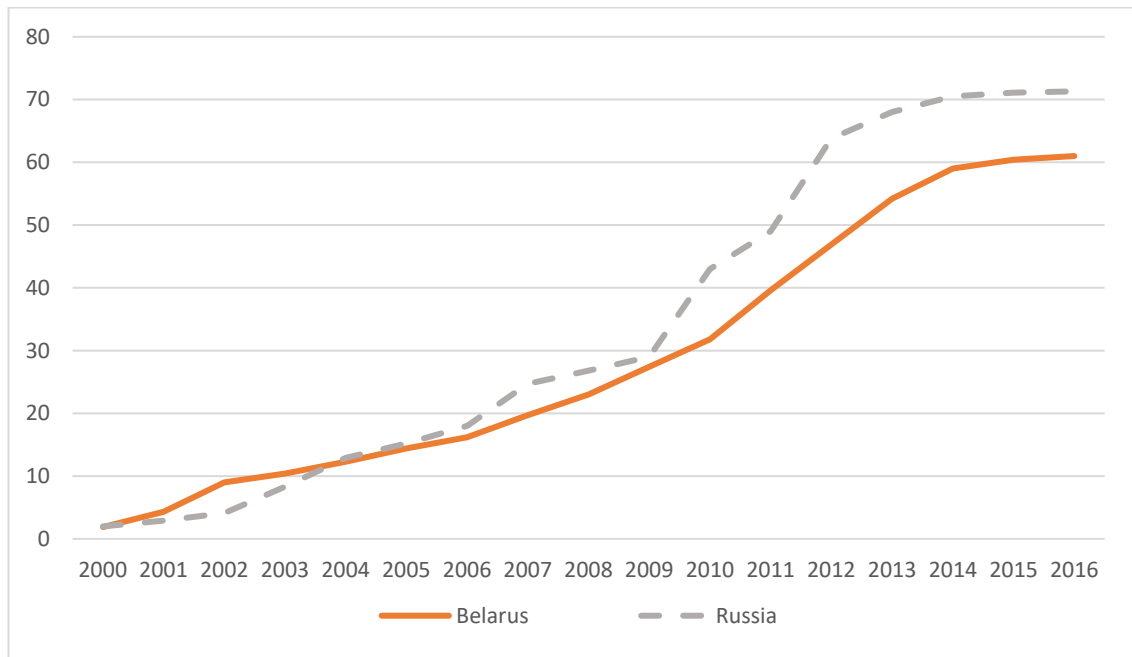
Figure 1.2. Internet penetration in Belarus and Russia in 2000 – 2016, as % of the population. Sources: Internetlivestats.com; Litvinenko (2019).

Social media platforms remain relatively unregulated in Belarus (Freedom House, 2018b) except for some cases of political persecution for critical speech online. However, in Russia, the most popular social media platforms "have been placed under control of oligarchs loyal to the Kremlin" (Filer & Fredheim, 2016, p. 12). This "oligarchic control" model was first implemented in relation to the main television stations and print outlets in the 2000s (Filer & Fredheim, 2016, p. 12). Since 2012, oligarchic control has spread on digital media as well (Pallin, 2017). A corporation called Mail.ru controls the most popular Russian-speaking social media platform VK (Table 1.1). In 2014, VK attracted twice more visitors than, for instance, Facebook in Russia (Izvestija, 2015). Besides VK, Mail.ru controls the second and the sixth-most-popular social media platforms OK and My World (Izvestia, 2015). This control makes Mail.ru the most powerful social media company in Eastern Europe. The owner of Mail.ru, Alisher Usmanov, is often described as an oligarch loyal to the Russian government (Higgins et al., 2018). VK removes users' political content and share their data so the policy can persecute them (Meduza, 2016). These practices demonstrate Usmanov's loyalty to the Kremlin. Private ownership of the most popular Russian-speaking social media platforms helps the Russian government to control digital media.

Table 1.1

The audiences of social media in Belarus and Russia

Platform	Russia		Belarus		Parent organisation
	Alexa ranking*	Share of internet users** (%)	Alexa ranking*	Share of internet users*** (%)	
VK	3	65	3	58	Mail.ru (Russia)
OK	7	63	10	32	Mail.ru (Russia)
Instagram	11	23	15	26	Facebook (US)
Facebook	17	23	23	18	Facebook (US)
Twitter	50-1000	7	50-1000	7	Twitter (US)
LinkedIn	Filtered	Filtered	50-1000	7	Microsoft (US)

Note. *A platform position in the Top Sites ranking based on the Alexa traffic rank as of February 2019. Source: Alexa.com.

**Internet users (18 and older) who answered the question "What social media do you use?" in December 2017. More than one answer was possible. Source: Levada-Center (2018a).

***Monthly internet audience (15 and older). Based on the studies conducted by gemiusAudience in 2017 (VK, OK, Facebook, Twitter) and 2019 (LinkedIn and Instagram). Sources: HootSuite (2019); Infopolicy (2017).

The oligarchic control model is also used by the Russian authorities to manipulate online news outlets. For example, "the two most popular online news portals, *Gazeta.ru* and *Lenta.ru*" (as of 2014) are owned by the same person, Aleksandr Mamut, who is also close to the Kremlin (Fredheim, 2015, p. 44; Pallin, 2017). He also owns a popular blogging platform, LiveJournal, and a prominent news aggregator and email service called Rambler (as well as Waterstones, the UK bookstore network). Fredheim (2015, p. 44) argues that oligarchic control imposed multiple constraints on the political coverage by these outlets. The Belarusian internet audience prefers similar social media platforms to those popular in Russia (Table 1.1). Consequently, oligarchic control of the most prominent Russian-speaking digital platforms affects the internet audience in Belarus in a similar fashion as the television control affected Belarusian mainstem media.

Oligarchic control in Russia is coupled with the internet filtering infrastructure, which is a common feature of many authoritarian states. In China, the internet filtering infrastructure is controlled by an organisation called the Propaganda Department (Stockmann, 2013, p. 244). In Belarus, the Ministry of Information controls the internet filtering infrastructure. In Russia, a crucial role is played by the government agency

called the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media that is better known as Roskomnadzor. The Ministry of Information and Roskomnadzor are in charge of filtering the websites that are blacklisted by the authorities on the grounds of "extremist content" (Sanovich et al., 2018). Typically, a website is filtered on the basis of court rulings in Russia and Belarus (Freedom House, 2018b). However, provisions exist that do not require a legal process for blocking and offers no avenue for appeal (Freedom House, 2018c; The Human Rights Center 'Viasna', 2018). While the list of the filtered websites or pages on VK in Belarus included just around 250 internet addresses (Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, 2019), a similar list of Roskomnadzor in Russia contained millions of addresses as of March 2018 (Freedom House, 2018c).

In contrast to China or Iran, popular platforms are subjects to only selective filtering both in Belarus and Russia. The only exception is LinkedIn, which is completely unavailable in Russia, as well as a largely unsuccessful (Burgess, 2018) attempt of Roskomnadzor to filter the Telegram messenger. Roskomnadzor explains the filtering of these two media with their violation of the Russian laws that required the storage of user data on local servers inside Russia or sharing information with the Russian security services (Meduza, 2018b). It seems like Roskomnadzor filters professional network LinkedIn in order to demonstrate to large players that the government is ready to start blocking sites if needed (Lunden, 2017). Telegram is filtered as a consequence of its prominent role in Russia politics (Burgess, 2018). At the same time, Roskomnadzor failed to achieve compliance of global platforms such as Facebook and Google with selective censorship requests (Interfax, 2017; Sanovich, 2018). Both commercial and selective technological controls of digital media seem to be of a larger scale in Russia than in Belarus.

News websites in the two countries are also largely unfiltered except for a few news media outlets. The examples include pro-democracy news websites that are edited by political emigrants from abroad, as well as the sites of local anarchist or neo-Nazi movements. The most prominent examples of filtered digital news media are Charter97.org in Belarus and Grani.ru in Russia (Respondent 6, personal communication, August 7, 2017; Respondent 3, personal communication, January 17, 2017). Despite filtering, some users in Belarus and Russia can access these websites. For example, on 24 January 2018, the authorities of Belarus started blocking access to Charter97.org, an independent from the government news outlet edited from Poland by political refugees (Freedom House, 2018a). The Ministry of Information accused the

outlet of "spreading banned 'extremist' content and other information that could hurt Belarusian interests" (The Human Rights Center 'Viasna', 2018). Over about a month, its traffic had fallen to the lowest level in a year. However, Charter97.org remained the 11th most visited news media in the country according to the Alexa ranking (Figure 1.3).
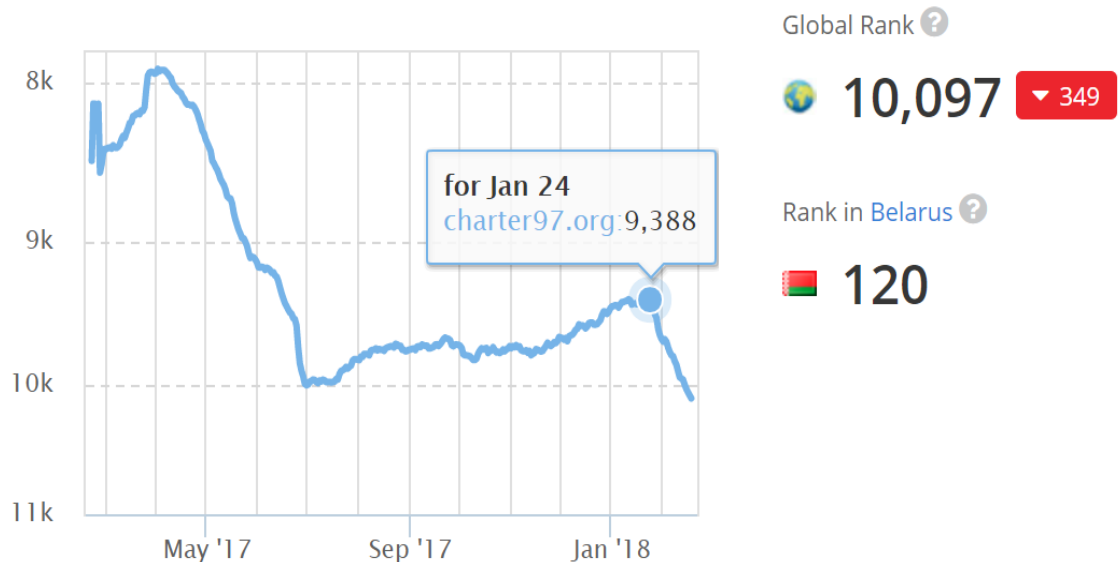
Figure 1.3. The Alexa Traffic Ranking for Charter97.org in February 2017 – February 2018. Screenshot from Alexa.com.

Similar to Charter97.org in Belarus, access to Grani.ru has been officially blocked in Russia since 2014, but users can access the website. Grani was the name of an information program that was closed following Putin's capture of the NVT television channel in 2001. Grani was first blocked in spring 2014, at the height of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Sanovich et al., 2018). Since 2014, the editor-in-chief of Grani.ru lives in exile in Paris (Respondent 6, personal communication, August 7, 2017). In 2017, the main themes that Grani.ru covered included such topics as the authoritarian regime, pro-democracy movements and political prisoners (Respondent 6, personal communication, August 7, 2017). To facilitate access to Grani, its editorial team (Respondent 6, personal communication, August 7, 2017) encourages Russian users to use VPNs, mirrors, as well as to follow its content on digital platforms such as Twitter. The selective filtering strategy of the government in relation to digital news media is thus similar to one employed for social media platforms.

The Russian and Belarusian states increasingly persecute people for their active political position expressed both offline and online. From 2011 to 2016, there were at least 999 criminal cases related to users' online activity like reposting content or posting texts, images and video in Russia (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017a). A large part of these cases is politically motivated, according to the human rights defenders' report (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017a). The growing number of social media users face lengthy prison sentences because they voice dissent online. For instance, in 2014, there were 132 cases of prison terms for social media posts in Russia. In 2016, this number grew to 298 (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017a). In Belarus, no statistics of such prosecution is available. However, sporadic media reports suggest several dozens of them over the past five years.

Twitter or Facebook, along with other global social media, is limited in its reach in Belarus and Russia. As Table 1.1 shows, the largest shares of internet audiences in the two countries are attracted by the local social media, VK and OK. VK was used by digital activists to distribute content critical of the Russian government (Gladarev and Lonkila, 2012). In Belarus, VK, along with OK, became "the most important platforms for the civic criticism" of the government in 2017 (Respondent 2, personal communication, May 30, 2017)[2].

VK or Vkontakte is a predominantly Russian-speaking platform. The features of VK resemble those of Facebook. It was founded by Pavel Durov, a Russian entrepreneur, two years after the launch of Facebook and bore "a striking resemblance to Facebook" (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015, p. 37). Following the annexation of Crimea, Durov was forced to sell VK to Usmanov and leave the country (Bennetts, 2016). In a statement explaining his departure, Durov said he had been forced out of the country "over his refusal to co-operate with the security services, and that his company was now under the "full control" of Kremlin-friendly figures" (Bennetts, 2016). The same year, he founded Telegram, an encrypted platform that combines the features of a messenger like WhatsApp and social media like Facebook.

OK or Odnoklassniki translates as "Classmates." The original mission of OK was to help people to find their former classmates, so the target audience was, on average, older relative to that of VK (Enikolopov et al., 2018, p. 8). Consequently, VK is more popular among the younger audience than OK (Enikolopov, Makarin, & Petrova, 2018, p. 8; Figure 6.5). OK, along with VK, contains a timeline feature (see Table 4.7 for how

---

[2] All of the translations from Belarusian and Russian to English are performed by the author.

group pages were designed on VK and OK). Timelines are displayed by default when a user logs in. OK and VK have other common features with global platforms such as the Like button (or the "Class" button in OK), a list of friends, private messaging, different types of communities and posts.

Table 1.2

The default sharing mechanisms of VK, OK, Facebook and Telegram

	Like	Share	Comment
Facebook	Yes	Yes	Yes
VK	Yes	Yes	Yes
OK	"Class button" that also affords sharing	Share button	Yes
Telegram channels	No	Yes	No
Telegram groups	No	Yes	Yes

At the same time, OK has more unique features compared to those platforms that dominate the social media market globally. For instance, if a user presses the Class button, this leads to automatic sharing of the "Liked" content on the user's timeline, so all their friends can see this content. Other relatively unique features of OK are the "threads" and "trending topics" sections, as well as instant visibility of a user's physical location like a town or area. First, the "threads" section is a collection of bookmarks to the highlighted posts on a page. Second, the "trending topics" section highlights tags from the posts of a page. Both are part of the default design of pages and make the navigation across them easier. Third, the platform design displays the city or village where a user lives next to their name. Consequently, when browsing a list of users, it is easy to find users from a specific location (Respondent 10, personal communication, September 6, 2017). These three features make OK a more unique social media platform.

This background note demonstrated striking similarities between the political and media systems of Belarus and Russia. Both countries emerged from the Soviet Union as democracies but gradually went their ways down to autocracies. These authoritarian systems benefited from the ability to control traditional media. This, at least partly, explains why their authoritarian elites also try to take control of the most popular digital

platforms. Digital platform control is endorsed by the oligarchic elite and implemented through filtering of internet traffic and policy restrictions. However, this digital control is not as tight as the control of television or newspapers. These settings can be hardly called favourable to digital dissidents who need access to the media in order to appeal to citizens and put pressure on the government. Dissidents found themselves trapped between the authoritarian states that fully control traditional media on one side and oligarch-controlled local digital media companies on the other side.

1.4 Methods

The empirical results of the study are derived from analysis of interviews and participant observation, as well as content posted or arranged by digital activists. Initial informal observation of online activities on five social media platforms and nine expert interviews provided preliminary data that identified a sample and isolated the categories that the research could focus on. Following this, 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews examined the attitudes and beliefs of activists, mostly communication coordinators and local leaders of the campaigns, and provided data about their use of digital media. Physical participant observation in seven locations and document analysis provided insights into the practices of activists. Finally, quantitative and qualitative content analysis of social media posts and pages helped to explain the nuances of these practices. Unlike many studies that use retrospective digital data, I collected social media posts during or immediately following the studied events. That data was then triangulated, and the results were summarised and visualised.

A civic or political campaign is a long-term process that involves a series of communication events. In the analysis, I focus on the most contentious events from the four campaigns studied. These events are collective action and preparation for them. As I discuss in the literature review, the fear of collective action is one of the main factors that prompt an authoritarian government to implement censorship or other restrictive measures. I approach collective action as a breaking event or a crisis point whose study provides a background against which regime resilience can be tested (Cairns, 2017, p. 8). I use the term a "critical event" to refer to such events. Critical events are key units of the analysis.

1.5 Organisation of the study

The dissertation is structured as follows. First, in Chapter 2, I review social movement studies, political communication studies and platform studies literature to provide a

theoretical background for analysis of the two country cases. Second, in Chapter 3, I discuss the methods I used to collect and analyse data. Third, in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I present and analyse the findings. I structure this analysis around the backgrounds of the studied organisations, their organisational (Chapter 4) and leadership structures (Chapter 5) and the mechanisms employed for information dissemination (Chapter 6). Finally, in Chapter 7, I summarise key conclusions and present the contribution of the study, as well as a discussion of the limitations and directions for future research.

Chapter 2 Literature review

This chapter discusses previous research that helps to understand how political organisation evolves with the advance of digital technologies, whether and how organised pro-democracy citizens can rely on digital media to adapt to repressive environments of authoritarian countries and what consequences this reliance has on the ability of these citizens to challenge authoritarian elites.

The chapter starts with the definition of key concepts of the study. It then proceeds with the discussion of organisation and leadership in civic and political communities in the second section. This section focuses on both more traditional approaches to studying how digital activists build their structures and on recent theories of digitally-enabled organising and collective action. It aims to introduce the most relevant concepts that establish the link between political organising and digital media with a focus on organisational mechanisms, political action, collective action and leadership.

The third section focuses on the role of digital media in fostering political change and the initial political and communication debates that developed around this issue. It revolves around the discussion of technological, social, cultural and commercial components of social media platforms. This section also provides a review of the theories that explain the use of digital platforms in the circumstances of the platformisation of society – "the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web" and political campaigning (Helmond, 2015, p. 1). The section concludes with the argument in favour of expanding the focus of platform studies beyond western contexts.

The fourth section seeks to map out the types of response to digital engagement, expression of opinion and digitally-enabled collective action by authoritarian states such as Belarus and Russia. The authoritarian response to digital activism is observed in three forms: political persecution, censorship and surveillance. I conceptualise them under the umbrella term of digital dissidents' challenges. The final section of this chapter summarises the literature review and highlights gaps in the literature.

2.1 Definitions of the concepts

The research project analyses practices of individuals or groups of people who attempt to make a difference to their societies. Their key instrument of change is a campaign that uses digital media. A *campaign* is "a series of interactions connected to each other from the thematic point of view and oriented towards a common aim" (della Porta &

Diani, 2006, p. 188). A digital political campaign is a campaign conducted in a computer-mediated environment that can be a part of larger campaigning efforts that involves interactions between political actors. *Political digital campaign* is "any organized digital operation that is designed for a political purpose" (Y. M. Kim et al., 2018, p. 536). *Digital activism* is "political participation, activities and protests organized in digital networks" beyond mainstream politics (Karatzogianni, 2015, p. 1).

A digital campaign is often built on the *affordances* of digital technologies that are the actions that technologies facilitate or make possible (Tufekci, 2017). Some authors like Nagy and Neff (2015) or Hutchby (2001) stress that affordances emerge through the relationships between technologies and actors who use them. Other scholars connect the concept of affordances to a *practice* approach that emphasises both possibilities as well as constraints associated with affordances (boyd, 2014). Couldry (2012, p. 37) defines a practice approach in communication studies as one that asks what people (individuals, groups, institutions) are doing in relation to the media across a whole range of situations and contexts. Many theoretical perspectives view media as a set of practices (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010). Some perspectives use the notion of practice to discuss one or more aspects of a given social phenomenon, while other studies try to answer what we mean by practice in different media contexts (Postill, 2017b).

Shove et al. (2012) consider social practices to be made up of three interlinked elements: material, competence and meaning. These elements may exist outside of media practice, but the practice occurs when these elements are linked together. For example, to observe social media practice occurring, an individual might use a computing device (a material element) with some knowledge of how to use it (competencies) and the meanings that are attached to this activity. Mattoni (2012, p. 159) develops this perspective on practice in line with social movement studies. She defines practices as creative instances that include interactions with media objects (like a phone) and subjects (like activists) and draws on how these subjects and objects are perceived and how the media environment is experienced and known.

The use of practice as an analytical instrument allows distinguishing between the outcomes of digital political actions. In his study of "techno-political nerds," pro-democracy activists who operate at the intersection of politics and technology, Postill (2018, p. 179) emphasises that practices can be institutionalised and non-institutionalised. The practices of "square movements" such as Occupy Wall Street or the Sunflower movement in Taiwan were often non-institutionalised. They were

transient, unsustainable practices. That means that many of the practices perished with a movement they were observed for. What exactly determines the sustainability of pro-democracy movement's practices is, however, not discussed in this pioneering work of Postill.

When developing the concepts of affordances and practices, some authors suggest that the qualities and the features of media technologies are not fixed (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010; Couldry, 2012; Lokot, 2016). These qualities reveal themselves in situated media use – specifics that are stressed by, for instance, the anthropological accounts of social media (Costa, 2017). The situated use of media represents the understanding of media as an environment where their users are active. I consider digital media as both an environment where political activists practice media use and the objects that possess their own action possibilities and opportunities. These characteristics are often dynamic and reveal themselves when media use is practised by humans. Therefore, comparing two popular concepts of digital media studies – affordances and practices – one may argue that the concept of practices is potentially as beneficial for the qualitative studies of communication as the concept of affordances. In this research, I use both concepts.

The literature on social movements developed the framework of contentious politics that helps to analyse a political campaign in authoritarian settings. Contentious politics is traditionally understood as a set of actions conducted by a specific organisation that aims at opposing elites, authorities and opponents around their claims or claims of those they want to represent (Tarrow, 2011, p. 4). Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 8) used the framework of contentious politics to conceptualise several important notions that are extensively used by scholars of digital media and politics. One of key concepts that help to study contentious politics is *collective action*. Collective action is defined by Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 8) as "coordinating efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs."

Collective action is one of the main manifestations of social movements. *Social movements* are defined as "sustained campaigns of claim-making, using repeated performance that advertise that claim" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 237). Some approaches to social movements diminish the importance of campaign-as-organisation by viewing them as "interactions" rather than "groups." For example, Bennett, Segerberg & Walker (2014) emphasise production and sharing of digital content as key mechanisms that produce "crowd organisation." The definition of movements based on interactions was earlier proposed by Tilly (1979, p. 12), who argued that a social movement is an

interaction between authorities and spokespeople of the movement "for a given challenge to those authorities." Directed by a similar logic, Sartori defined a political party, a formation that may emerge if social movements become more institutionalised, as a communicative institution (Sartori, 1976, p. 24). These definitions stress the importance of interactions in politics. Hence, being both more and less than organisation, social movements have porous boundaries. As McAdam (1986, p. 67) notes, it becomes "extremely difficult" to "demarcate those boundaries." Therefore, some studies argue for shifting the focus of analysis to specific instances of actions associated with movements such as a repertoire.

Many other authors argue that the concept of social movements is still suited for the analysis of political action beyond mainstream politics, including the circumstances of authoritarian states. In his study of the Russian political and social activism of the 2000s-2010s, Greene (2014, p. 48) suggests that "civic society," an approach often used to analyse activism in Russia, is too west-centric. Instead, he suggests using the theory of SMOs, which he also defines as the interactions between the authorities and activist spokespeople for a given challenge to those authorities. Such definition, Greene (2014) argues, allows not assuming what sort of actors the research will investigate. The concept of social movements defined through interaction can be used to analyse digital activism in authoritarian contexts.

Social movements should be viewed in the context of national media and political systems. Here a *media system* is "a set of media institutions and practices understood as interacting with and shaping one another" (Hallin, 2016). As Hallin (2016) explains, media systems are embedded within wider social, political, economic and cultural systems. Therefore, media systems, as well as their social and political institutions, are easily affected by changes in other spheres, including those taking place under the influence of technological development.

A key feature of the political systems of Belarus and Russia is their common definition as *non-democratic* or *authoritarian* regimes (I use these terms interchangeably). One of the most discussed aspects of such regimes is the way the elections of political leadership are conducted. The traditional way of defining non-democracy suggests that groups in control of the state do not lose elections in the normal course of events in such a system (Márquez, 2017, p. 2). To ensure that they do not lose elections, the groups in control intentionally impose barriers to prevent other groups from achieving influence over the direction of state policies and the political system. These barriers add to

structural constraints like the economic costs of competing for power. Some groups of critical citizens in non-democratic states do not compete for power through elections or similar institutional mechanisms or use elections as a political opening. Instead, citizens organise sustained campaigns of claim-making charged with "anti-authoritarian ethos" (Postill, 2018; Tufekci, 2017) - distrust authoritarian institutions – in order to advocate for pro-democracy changes and challenge authoritarian power. I define such sustained campaigns as *anti-authoritarian movements*.

2.2 Organisation

2.2.1 Communication repertoire and political opportunity structure

Digital media affordances can reveal their potential through the practices of their use. For instance, the focus on how activists used different generations of media like the internet and television helped Chadwick (2013) to propose the theory of the hybrid media system. He uses the example of "38 Degrees," an organisation that, according to the author, benefited from the transformation of the contemporary British media system. Chadwick defines this system as an example of the hybrid media system. "38 Degrees" navigated through this system successfully. It was able to organise quick mobilisation of its supporters basing their campaign on

> a blend of viral messaging across its online supporter networks, ongoing organizational capacity through online polling, a keen awareness of the policy and news cycles, and a degree of interconnectedness with the news values and temporal rhythms of older media. (Chadwick 2013, p. 193)

According to Chadwick, the examples of the organisations that strategically blend newer technologies and the logic of traditional media are numerous. Digital activists who operated during the Arab Spring protests also embraced hybrid media logic that was reflected in their organisational structures (Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2015) and their information distribution strategies (Hussain, 2014). These examples illustrate Chadwick's thesis about the rearrangement of today's media system into the hybrid media system. This system is a result of the combination of new (or as Chadwick suggests "newer" media) and more traditional media practices, technologies and organisations.

The blend which "38 Degrees" prepared in order to succeed in the mobilisation included messaging, polling, the performances that made use of the existed media system. A scholar of social movements would call this blend the repertoire of the "38 Degrees."

The concept of repertoire is defined in the contentious politics framework by Tilly & Tarrow (2007, p. 23). According to this definition, a repertoire can constitute the whole set of practices both potential and "at work" that are employed by a movement. First proposed by Tilly in 1979, the idea of a repertoire of collective action draws an analogy with the repertoire of music or theatre performance. It refers to a set of means that is effectively available to a given set of people (Tilly 1979, p. 15). The concept of repertoire is therefore close to the concept of affordances since both are revealed through practice.

Digital activists choose a repertoire like setting up websites, email lists, data visualisation platforms based on the attitudes and culture of their organisation, Kavada (2013) argues. The organisation's internet culture refers to the cultural preferences of the members of the organisation (Kavada, 2013). These preferences can influence the strategic choices of activists like the choice of their communicative model. For example, in her analysis of two opposite tactics within the Global Justice movement in the UK, Kavada (2013, p. 91) defines two types of internet culture – broadcasting, which is a more top-down approach to communication with the public, and interactive. The latter is characterised by a more horizontal and dialogic process of communication. A communicative model of activists may be defined as a set of their communication repertoires. Thus, the concepts of repertoire, affordances and the organisation's internet culture are closely linked.

The concept of "political opportunity structure" which was also developed by Tilly together with Tarrow (2015, p. 49) links a political regime and repertoires of activists. Political opportunity structure describes the aspects of a regime that offer activists both openings to advance their claims and threats and constraints that caution them against making these claims (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 49). Such aspects include the stability of political alignments and a chance of split in elites, the openness to new political actors, the availability of potential allies and challenges and the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim-making. Threats and constraints can lead to repression, while during openings, dissidents may use an opportunity of a certain condition of a regime to start public actions. Political opportunity structure is a central concept in the analysis of dissidents' chances to fulfil their goals according to a tradition of contentious politics.

Political opportunity structure is a dynamic and complex feature of political regimes that can be calculated by activists in advance. Tilly & Tarrow (2007, p. 55) point out the

two properties that are important to take into account when calculating political opportunities in relation to collective action. They are the level of democracy and the capacity of a regime. Capacity refers to the governments' ability to distribute population, activity and resources via regulation of benefits, taxes, traffic flows, natural resources and many more aspects of life. Democracy refers here to a certain level of political rights, the consultation of citizens and their protection. In non-democratic regimes, threats and opportunities co-occur, which requires calculations performed by the people who are willing to influence or challenge the regime. The calculations occur in relation to the choice of whether to seize an opportunity or to respond to a threat and protect themselves (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 58). The changes in political opportunity are reflected in the changes in the repertoire used by claim makers as well as regimes to limit this claim making.

Media are crucial for the activists' perception of opportunity structure – that is one of the reasons why non-democratic regimes try to control and manipulate media (Stockmann, 2013, p. 237). For example, Lynch (2011, p. 306) argues that the changing dynamics of information flows associated with the new information environment where digital and foreign media play an increasing role shifted the balance and the perception of opportunity structure during the protests in the Arab countries in 2011. According to this theory, the similar protest movements inspired by the Arab Spring in China were not successful as the Chinese regime handled better the synchronisation of information flows and persuasion of citizens, which affect the perception of opportunity structure (Stockmann, 2013, pp. 237–238). The dynamics of political opportunity structures are complex, and their character varies dramatically from one regime to another.

The example of the "For Fair Elections" protest movement that was active in Russia in 2011 - 2012 demonstrates the effect of the changing opportunity structure (Toepfl, 2017). The 2011 parliamentary and the 2012 presidential elections opened an opportunity for opposition activists to claim the changes in the political regime through the protests. However, by the middle of 2012, the window for the protest was closed in Russia (Toepfl, 2017). It became harder for the leaders of the "For Fair Elections" movement to organise new protests. At the same time, the Russian political regime became more authoritarian. Many members of the movement, especially those who belonged to the formal structures of the "For Fair Elections," were forced abroad, prosecuted or imprisoned. These changes in the opportunity structure and the response of the government became the main contextual factors that contributed to the decline of the "For Fair Elections" movement (Toepfl, 2017). This example shows that

opportunity structure is a highly dynamic set of political factors that influence the organisational logic of activist groups.

2.2.2 Organisational mechanisms of social movements

Such authors as Bennett & Segerberg (2013), Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl (2012), Chadwick (2013) and Wells (2015) closely studied the organisational logic of digitally engaged civic and political groups. However, many more studies of social movements and digital activism ignore the organisational layer of digital politics, the literature suggests (Bimber et al., 2012; Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Karpf, 2016). Internal organising, like the backstage practices of social media teams of digitally-enabled groups, is particularly overlooked in line with this attitude (Gerbaudo, 2017c; Treré, 2015).

Karpf (2016) calls the elements of the organisational structures of digitally-enabled groups, such as strategy, reputation, growth and fundraising, "hidden variables" of the scholarly literature. In his study, Karpf focuses on the organisation of larger digital groups like petition platforms or election campaigns in the US. He notes that research into the organisational logic of such groups might be difficult, "messy and flawed" as the logic of many civic groups themselves (p. 175) but rewarding. At the same time, Wells (2015) suggests that there are still many civic bureaucratised organisations that approach the digital formally and turn digital platforms into a space for broadcasting. However, many of the mentioned authors like Karpf or Bimber and colleagues focus on successful collective action organisations rather than on those with mediocre results (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 72). Moreover, all of these authors do not test the results beyond the narrow Anglophone context. Nevertheless, these studies present a major contribution and allow us to learn about the organisation of the digital era in detail.

Organisation of citizens who come together based on solidarity is traditionally studied using the concept of social movements. In western democracies, the 1960s and 1970s are typically described in the literature as a remarkable time when these units became the prominent agents of political communication. This period often provides the material for the comparison of radical events with more contemporary examples like the Occupy movement. However, as Tilly (1979) demonstrated, the concept of social movements and the phenomenon it represents is largely coming from an even earlier time - the nineteenth century. Thus, being a "nineteenth century creation," a social movement is very much an accompaniment of development of the modern consolidated national state and various historical trends that followed it, like, for instance, the rise of the working classes or the growth of national electoral politics. That period saw a rise of

the groups of people "who voluntarily and deliberately commit themselves to a shared identity, a unifying belief, a common program, and a collective struggle to realize that program" (Tilly 1979, p. 10). This view of social movements as a united collective with a strong leader or bureaucracy that runs the organisation was quite dominant for a long time.

The literature often discusses adaptability as a key feature of social movements. Adaptability results from the internal characteristics of a movement and a context. Gerlach (2001, p. 289) argues that the most common type of adaptable movement is one that represents a segmentary, polycentric and integrated network or a SPIN movement. These characteristics were determined based on the study of movements active in the US and the neighbouring countries in the 1960s. First, SPIN organisation consists of many diverse subgroups or *segments* – essentially independent cells which can combine to form larger configurations or divide to form smaller units (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 41). The proliferation of new segments takes place independently, unrelated to central decision-making. Second, SPINs have many centres of influence or leadership. Thus, they are *polycentric* (Gerlach, 2001). Third, these organisations constituted an *integrated* network rather than being a myriad of isolated instances. These three characteristics are the three pillars of the SPIN model of organising adaptive to authorities' pressure. Gerlach and Hine (1970, p. 65) emphasise the ability of SPIN movements to adapt to the attempts of a ruling regime to suppress them. I discuss the thee elements of SPIN organisation in a greater detail in the following sections.

Scholars use the SPIN model to compare, for instance, the perspectives on the recent anti-authoritarian uprisings in Iran and Egypt (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012) or to analyse the use of email lists by the digital activists of the "movement for alternative globalization" (Kavada, 2009). In particular, Kavada demonstrated that the use of email lists by the activists led to segmentation and "a polycentric model of power" in line with the SPIN theory. In addition, with the proliferation of digital media, the literature extensively examines the networked component of organisation that was explored in the pioneering work of Gerlach & Hine. "The potential of network forms of social organization" (Karatzogianni, 2015, p. 14) is commonly viewed as beneficial for movements including those acting in non-democracies.

The proliferation of digital platforms among other factors prompted the discussion about the changing nature of social movements. In particular, the role of and a need for organisation in a digitally engaged civic organisation is actively discussed since the

internet became an important factor of a social movement lifecycle. Earl (2015, pp. 37–38) emphasises five reasons why traditional social movements still need organisation. First, organisation helps to institutionalise movements. Second, organisation is needed to provide movements with leadership and to create a strategy. Third, collective action critically requires organisation. Fourth, organisation helps to elevate some of its members to the positions of spokespeople and thus to raise the profile of the entire movement. Finally, organisation helps social movements to cultivate a common identity. Earl (2015, p. 48) argues that movements that rely on digital media need a traditional organisation at least in three situations: (a) when offline events are supported by online activities; (b) when long-term struggles are necessary to achieve desired outcomes; and (c) when stable networks are critical to securing participation. Earl's reasoning demonstrates that organisation is still a key feature of social movement.

2.2.3 Organisational challenges in the digital age

Many authors argue that the nature of social movements and collective action changed so much that it is time to redefine key aspects of the conceptualisation of social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2013, pp. 221–228; Gerbaudo, 2017c). These authors specifically focus on new demands of the citizens towards political organisations. For example, Wells (2015) describes those citizens as "late modern" and highlights their scepticism of conventional institutions. Instead, late modern citizens demand non-hierarchical organisational coordination based on participatory decision-making (Bennett et al., 2017). However, such non-hierarchical structures that emphasise participatory components might have limited capacities in struggle for power with more vertical organisations (Tufekci, 2014; Wells, 2015). Thus, political activists face a new organisational dilemma: how to satisfy the late modern citizens' demand and to build a structure that is capable of contesting actual power.

Some authors suggest that "hybrid" organisational forms might provide a better solution to this dilemma (Chadwick, 2013; Karpf, 2014; Wells, 2015). These forms combine, among others, newer and older approaches to organisation and information distribution (Chadwick, 2013). For instance, Bennett et al. (2017, p. 2) suggest that hybrid organisational forms emerge as a result of the adoption of social media communication strategies by political parties in Western Europe, established and new alike. Still, it is not clear what exact features those hybrid forms have.

Several recent theories discuss the features of hybrid organisations. Gerbaudo (2019) studied political parties across the Left-Right spectrum in mature democracies, such as

the Five Star Movement or Podemos, and defined them as "digital parties." Digital parties are based on an infrastructure of digital assets located in the Cloud. They resemble a start-up company and use a forum-like infrastructure to facilitate the interaction between its supporters. Kavada (2019) broadens this conceptualisation. She suggests that digital parties are also "movement parties" because they are concerned with winning elections, as well as changing the system of representative democracy thus addressing the demands of late modern citizens. For example, digital movement/parties view their supporters as the source of policy ideas (Kavada, 2019, p. 209). Citizens' demands require endless experimentation with new forms of party organisation and governance.

Bennett et al. (2017, p. 12) propose the framework of a connective party that is an organisation in which "platforms and affordances are indistinguishable from, and replace, key components of brick and mortar organization and intra-party functions." The connective party's repertoire includes platforms for general communication such as party websites, social media and specialised applications for proposing, discussing political ideas and decision-making, as well as "operating system" platforms for organising the key technology outlays. According to the authors, some parties, mostly radically right-wing, consider this repertoire as a vehicle that can turn traditional parties into flexible technologically-enabled organisations that can engage with voters more easily.

Another form of organising that adopts the set of social media repertoires, Postill's (2018) techno-political nerds, "typically work in small teams" (p. 28) and organise themselves in the form of ad-hoc coalitions that combine individuals with diverse skills to pursue a political goal such as opposing laws or launching collective action. The combination of skills such as computing, law and media seems to be a key element of nerds' organising. Nerds recruit manpower through crowdsourcing, the process of appealing to online volunteers to support the efforts of a nerd coalition. Crowdsourcing allows techpol nerds to scale up and to find evidence, resources or expertise across internet crowds. The coalition of techno-political activists described by Postill corresponds to the idea of a SPIN-style segmented and networked social movement.

Based on their study of protest communities in a few western democratic countries, Bennett & Segerberg (2013) theorised an ideal type of the protest organisation in the digital era - connective action. According to this theory, more individualised and personalised styles of political participation and collective action in mature democracies

are parly explained by the increased use of media platforms that encourage users to personalise their online experience. People are ready to share various discourses rather than to join formal structures like organisations. Citizens not least demand more horizontal organisation as an element of this participation (Bennett et al., 2011). They try to disassociate themselves with popular social movements and their ideologies. In other words, people are still ready to join movements or a coalition of organisations but do it "on their own terms" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 120). Bennett & Segerberg (2013) argue that new types of digitally-enabled organisations could open the floor to various personal perspectives of actions without undermining organisations' political capacities. "Crowd-enabled networks" (Bennett et al., 2014) that operate according to the connective action logic have a remarkable ability to form coherent organisation. This ability is reached through a peer-production mechanism that includes the production and dynamic integration of information content.

Still, digital and connective parties, crowdsourced networks of techno-political nerds and even a crowd-enabled network have something in common with conventional bureaucratic organisation, Bennett et al. (2014, pp. 234–235) argue. To be considered coherent, a party or a movement should present at least "three fundamental capacities." First, it should be able to mobilise resources such as material and symbolic goods. Second, an organisation should be capable of reacting to threats and opportunities. Third, as every organisation goes through the cycle of growth, change and, possibly, death, it should be able to develop new patterns of association internally. Thus, mobilisation, responsiveness and adaptation are three fundamental processes that distinguish a coherent protest-oriented organisation that rely on digital platforms.

To sum up, scholars keep searching for an answer to the question of how exactly people organise themselves in the digital era. Recent conceptualisations of political organising address several trends observed for mature democracies: mediatisation of politics (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999), the proliferation of digital platforms in political communication, growing demand for participatory political engagement and the radicalisation of voting behaviour in elections (Bennett et al., 2017).

2.2.4 Organisation and political participation

Similar to the forms of political organising, the nature of membership in a political organisation evolves drastically. In some cases, membership becomes blurred, and sometimes it is not easy to recognise the status of an individual who seems to be engaged in an online campaign (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 48). For example, Avaaz is a

large-scale "campaigning community" that defines a member as anyone who contributed to one of its many online activities such as donation and petition singing (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 49). Another prominent community, Anonymous is a "group" of hackers without leadership or possibility "to join"; however, wishing to do so is enough to be considered a member of Anonymous (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 50).

Consequently, it becomes hard to define who political activists are and how to understand whether someone has been involved in political action. It is not least because political participation can occur in very light forms such as clicking or liking internet content. Some authors who study or comment on the matter derive their arguments from more traditional views on activism and social movements (e.g. Morozov, 2011; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In contrast, other authors suggest widening or refocusing traditional definitions and approaches to activism thus paying more attention to new circumstances in which technology-enabled activities unfold (Halupka, 2016; Milan, 2015b; Neumayer & Svensson, 2014; Postill, 2014).

In this section, I discuss how digital media shape the meaning of membership and political action. I start the discussion with the notion of political activism.

The broadest definition of political activists can sound like "individuals and groups who work for political change" (Lamb, 2011). Indeed, many activists tend to unite in groups. And these groups can often be defined as a social movement. Social movements are one of the most established frameworks that help to study various sorts of activism. One of the fundamental components of traditional social movements is an act of collective action. Collective action serves as the basis of social movements (Tarrow, 2011, p. 7). However, contemporary digital activism does not always end up producing visible collective action or any other sort of physical manifestation of political activities.

These activities can stay hidden for years from the eyes of those who do not follow the internet pages of activists, since the results of their work may be traceable only in virtual space. Political activists can engage in the construction of a sustainable base of online supporters, collecting donations, organising virtual collective actions like Twitter-storms (putting pressure on prominent users of Twitter with various messages coming from a defined circle of activists). Even if all these activities are important and effective, they, nevertheless, might stay unnoticed and unrecognised by the general public. It is also because the mainstream media are more prone to cover such visible and often theatrical collective action as street demonstrations or strikes rather than virtual Twitter-storms (Chadwick, 2013). Thus, the expectations of the physical presence of

activists are associated with the more traditional views on collective action and social movements. These views and expectations produce a confusion about the nature of contemporary political activism.

Another confusion derives from different views on what political action is. In the digital space, the notion of "political" becomes modified compared to formal politics. For example, it is sometimes not clear whether mass symbolic acts on digital platforms like Twitter-storms are political actions or simple "clicktivism"? In fact, even large offline political street protests can and often do fail, while online acts of the same protest group might become successful in terms of their achieved goals. The impact of symbolic online political campaigns depends on many variables including elites and their opponents' cohesion, the willingness and the ability of states to enforce repression or the political opportunity structure (Tufekci, 2014). Still, some authors (Morozov, 2009) argue that it is not possible to attach the label "political" to some symbolic online activities. In response, other authors look for activist self-definition and self-expression (Neumayer & Svensson, 2014) and search for new frameworks (Halupka, 2016).

The answer to the question about the presence of politics in online civic activity might depend on how we understand the "political" (Marsh and Akram, 2015, p. 640). For instance, Milan (2015a) demonstrates that the "political" is also developed on social media on the level of microinteractions, which are often invisible to the public. Halupka (2016) suggests that if we move beyond a narrow and a more traditional definition of the "political," we will find a significant number of people involved in that broader version of politics. Halupka argues that many activities occur beyond contexts that are normally associated with the "political." He proposes the notion of "information activist" that describes people who consume, aggregate and distribute information. Such activists inform others and like to be informed themselves, easily driving through the waves of the digital world. Information activists may either become involved in collective action themselves or inspire others to do so, thus, encouraging political participation. In the core of this "new wave" of political participation is the internet-enabled practice of knowledge sharing (Halupka 2016, p. 10). From the activists' point-of-view, knowledge and information sharing are the practices that might influence policy and decision-making. The framework of "information activist" helps to escape the confusion regarding the nature of the "political" and to emphasise sharing practices.

Postill (2018) develops this line of thought and argues that skills of political information management, along with law, politics, computing and art, are at the core of digital

politics. Postill defines active citizens who are concerned with authoritarianism and operate at the intersection of technology and politics as techno-political nerds. Postill's nerds are ideologically diverse, pragmatic team collaborators and "staunch[ly] anti-authoritarian" in their views. The examples include the Wikileaks founder Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, a former US National Security Agency's worker, as well as dozens of influential personalities who shaped the Arab Spring, Taiwan's Sunflower movement, the Gezi Park protests and other recent political movements (Postill, 2018, p. 121).

Postill shows how techno-political nerds influence transnational political issues such as digital rights or electoral politics. For example, Postill (2018, p. 16) argues that the recent protest movements such as Occupy and the Arab Spring "were co-designed, launched, spread and remixed by crowd-powered teams of nerds" contrary to their "global media representations" as "spontaneous explosions of youthful outrage." Some of techpol nerds are also described in Postill's (2014) works as "freedom fighters" or "freedom technologists" as they are closely involved with the issues of democracy, human rights and freedoms across the globe possessing necessary technological and political skills.

Karpf (2016) highlights a specific aspect of digitally-enabled activism that emphasizes feedback and listening to followers. The listening practices help to understand how to act more efficiently and adjust according to followers' demands and expectations. "The capacity of civil organizations to more effectively listen" is one of the most crucial affordances associated with digital technologies, argues Karpf (2016, p. 1). The listening capacity includes recording and analysing data related to the audience of large advocacy organisations, as well as looking for the best ways to approach it online through testing. Karpf describes such listening practices as "analytic activism." For instance, analytic activism allows for "narrow, precise targeting of the public" based on data analysis (Karpf, 2016, p. 159). At the same time, analytic activism seems to be rather expensive practices that are open primarily to well-financed civic organisations as activists need to have capacity, knowledge and resources to be able to use analytical instruments such as big data solutions.

The theory of analytic activism demonstrates how the affordances of technologies enable gathering feedback and the proliferation of marketing strategies. An organisation that acts in the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) can use platforms to collect large quantities of data about social processes and to process this data in order to improve

organisational performance and to receive an advantage. However, the theory does not explain whether these styles of activism develop primarily from the actual need of organisations to use marketing and to listen to their followers or simply because some of activists possess necessary skills and capacity to analyse the data and then to use this analysis to build a marketing-like campaign. In addition, citizens of mature democracies are increasingly resistant to the professional of marketing techniques in parties' communication (Bennett et al., 2017, p. 1658). Therefore, analytic activism can be at odds with the values of an organisation's followers.

What unites the concepts of nerd, analytic and information activism, as well as other similar frameworks, is that the types of activism cut across political ideology in non-traditional ways. Similarly, the concept of anti-authoritarian movement identifies protest organisations that emphasise "participation, institutional distrust, horizontalism, ad hoc organisations eschewing formal ones" (Tufekci, 2017, p. 83). These movements are associated with distrust of authority and desire for participation (Tufekci, 2017, p. xiv). Tufekci's examples of anti-authoritarian movements include the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, Occupy Wall Street protest in the US and the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Chrona & Bee (2017) highlight that anti-authoritarian movements are associated with pro-democracy protests in "neo-capitalist world such as the ones in the Arab states, Russia, Hong kong and Ukraine." Rinke & Röder's (2011, p. 1275) conceptualisation of anti-authoritarian movement includes "the anti-authoritarian challenge of power" and desire to contribute to regime change. Though these authors use the concept of anti-authoritarian movement to build their argument, they mostly focus on these movements' narratives and goals, but none of them seems to explain what makes anti-authoritarian movements different from traditional SMOs in terms of organising and leadership.

The frameworks of cloud, information, analytic and nerd activists/freedom fighters are recent conceptualisations of the growing phenomenon of largely non-institutional digital politics. This domain of politics grew with the post-2008 protests and uprisings. The redefined concept of anti-authoritarian movement emphasises the pro-democracy element in the recent uprisings and large-scale protests. These frameworks highlight different aspects of digital activism including skills, practices and the role of platform affordances. They allow broadening the definition of political action and participation in the analysis of digitally-enabled political organisation.

2.2.5 Leadership

The key aspect of political organisation is leadership (Gerbaudo, 2017c; Poell et al., 2016; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). There are two dominant strands of research in relation to leadership in a protest-oriented organisation that uses technologies. First, many studies in the tradition of SMOs argue that protest-oriented organisations require traditional charismatic leadership that should control almost every process within the organisation. Second, theories like connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) argue that the crowd drives contemporary protest-oriented organisations through self-motivated online sharing and traditional leadership loses its significance.

The first school of thought is also affected by the intention of many digitally-enabled political organisations to build more leaderless and decentralised structures (Gerbaudo, 2017c, p. 186). These were the intentions of such recently prominent protest organisations as the Occupy Movement or the Global Justice Movement (Kavada, 2014, pp. 7–8). Prior to Occupy, other social movements also tried to adhere to more horizontal and self-organised structures. Gerbaudo (2017c, p. 186) associates this quest for inclusiveness, decentralisation and transparency with the prominence of post-1968 anti-authoritarian positions and techno-utopian cultures of many movements. Gerlach (1971) argues that organisations without single recognisable leaders can evade suppression by the authorities more easily. The intentions to build more decentralised and possibly leaderless structures can also allow an organisation to be more inclusive and listen to their members/followers better.

Some authors emphasise that the affordances of digital platforms seem to be quite supportive of leaderless and horizontal social structures that many contemporary movements wish to establish. For example, Chadwick (2013, p. 44) assumes "the horizontal nature of social media communication" when explaining his theory of hybrid media systems. Discussions, open walls and online polling are examples of platform affordances that facilitate a more horizontal and networked style of organising when it comes to large-scale advocacy (Chadwick, 2013; Kavada, 2014). These affordances, if combined with the ongoing personalisation of politics, emphasise the leaderless character of many contemporary social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2013).

Other authors view leaderless as a rhetorical construction: a self-description and a goal of many digitally-enabled organisations rather than a reality (Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Poell et al., 2016). These organisations might promote such self-description to

"transcend traditional political alignments" to avoid the emergence of "celebrity leaders" or to avoid repression in non-democratic environments (Poell et al., 2016, p. 1009). The opposite is also possible: journalists sometimes cannot "resist the opportunity to pinpoint a 'mastermind' or 'leader'" (Coleman, 2014, p. 155) of a group despite an activists' declaration that they have no leaders.

In a similar fashion, some authors view horizontality as "a fallacy" (Levi, 2012 as cited in Postill, 2018) or "a fetish" (Hickel, 2012) that is only possible during the "square phase" of social movements (Postill, 2018). During that phase, movements turn urban squares into sites of deliberation and decision-making (Gerbaudo, 2017b). The post-square phase of the movement would require scaling this horizontal decision-making up to millions of people who might not share the same values of the core activists who started the movement (Postill, 2018).

If a protest community has no leaders, its square phase can suffer. For example, leaderless communities often struggle to select representatives for talks with the authorities or to consult bigger assemblies (Tufekci, 2014, p. 13). This disadvantage undermines the capacity of protest organisation. This capacity is defined in terms of the organisation's ability to pose a threat to authoritarian elites. That is what happened by the end of the Gezi protests in Turkey in 2013 (Tufekci, 2014, p. 15). A similar situation was observed during the Euromaidan protest in Ukraine in 2013-14, which went on for five months without recognised leaders (Bohdanova, 2014, p. 140). It seems like many organisations that adhere to leaderless and non-hierarchical coordination principles might lack the capacity to struggle for political power.

Many scholars agree that, despite the idealism about horizontality, informal hierarchies are persistent across all kinds of organisations that adhere to horizontal principles but use social media as communication channels (Gerbaudo, 2017c; Kavada, 2012; Poell & van Dijck, 2016). Poell & van Dijck (2016, p. 230) suggest that digital media "do not, as is often assumed, facilitate horizontal activist networks." Rather, these media enhance the visibility of particular actors like as a spokesperson of a protest community. Indeed, the design of digital platforms like Twitter or Facebook, which are popular with these organisations, might clash with the intention of activists to build a more inclusive and leaderless movement (Kavada, 2015, p. 884). It is because somebody should write online using the name of the group, talk to the media, and, eventually, become recognised as part of the image of a movement.

For instance, Kavada (2012) examines how the technological architecture of platforms reorganises the bonding of members of an international advocacy organisation Avaaz and its control over own public image. All technological features, even the least noticeable ones, play their role in this process. For instance, Facebook's Timeline page make the voice of page creators more visible and dominant compared to the voice of ordinary supporters of the organisation. Because a page creator dominates over the online representation and the discussion between supporters and members of the organisation, they can also maintain control over the organisations' image (Kavada, 2012). Thus, it is quite difficult to avoid the emergence of a potential leader if a movement relies heavily on digital platforms.

Poell et al. (2016) define people who replace traditional SMO leadership as "marketing" or "connective leaders." These leaders often play the roles of platform administrators and employ "sophisticated marketing strategies to connect users in online communication streams and networks" (Poell et al., 2016, p. 994). These strategies help marketing activists to drive their campaigns and to unite their followers using carefully crafted frames and messages. Gerbaudo (2017) describes the leaders of organisations that rely on platforms heavily as "digital vanguard." Their leadership is informal but still struggles with emerging power relations associated with their invisible but influential administrators' position. Finally, some political organisations like the Five Star Movement in Italy try to bring elements of participatory decision-making but remain non-transparent as to the process of internal organising. This opaqueness raises doubts about the actual goals of such organisations (Politi & Roberts, 2017) and could be viewed as an example of "phony participation" culture (Postill, 2018).

These and other attempts to conceptualise the role of leadership in digitally-enabled community (Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Milan, 2015b; Treré, 2015) are unresolved in relation to wider perspectives. In particular, these conceptualisations rarely examine the post-Arab Spring non-democratic contexts where the issue of leadership might be perceived through different lenses. The organisation of communication and leadership on the platforms beyond Twitter and Facebook remains underexplored as well (Hall et al., 2018). What unites different approaches to leadership is an understanding that the traditional perspective on social movements does not explain the nature of coordination in a digitally-enabled organisation sufficiently.

In authoritarian countries, the position of a political leader can be the least secure when an organisation is confronted with the repressive machine. Silitski (2005) describes the

strategy of the authoritarian rule in Belarus as a preemptive policy designed to prevent the spread of protest activities through society. One of the pivotal aims of this policy is to remove all democratic opposition political leaders from the political arena. Leaders who are removed include those who do not pose a serious challenge. For example, in 1999, "some of the opposition leaders who were considered potential contenders for the Belarusian September 2001 presidential contest either died or disappeared" (Silitski, 2005, p. 88). The fate of some of these people is unknown. Their disappearance still shapes politics in Belarus and seems to prompt would-be political leaders to have reservations about security. Consequently, Silitski conceptualises the regime in Belarus as preemptive authoritarianism. Gel'man (2015b) argues that a preemptive policy is a common feature of post-Soviet repressive systems including the Russian. Thus, both Russia and Belarus can be conceptualised as preemptive authoritarianism where civic and political leaders are targeted first by the authorities.

An organisation that acts in a repressive environment can develop a pool of leaders, the SPIN theory argues. This multiplicity of leadership emerges through the process of segmentation within a movement. Gerlach (2001) defines this process as polycentricity of SMO. Many leaders emerge when the members of various segments of a movement develop personal or social cleavages and ideological differences. They also can be engaged in personal competition, or they might simply not know about the existence of other groups that nonetheless can be described as part of a larger movement. Moreover, a leader can emerge through a crisis when ad hoc solutions are needed (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, pp. 41–55). According to the SPIN model, if an organisation is polycentric, it can create a pool of potential leaders in case the current ones are eliminated. "For every group or leader eliminated, new ones arise, making movements look like the many-headed Hydra of mythology" (Gerlach, 2001, p. 303). Consequently, the processes of multiplication of leaders and segmentation are the "best insurance against effective suppression" for an organisation (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 69).

A helpful element of the SPIN model is its understanding of movement organisation as a network. SPIN organisation has many leaders who should manage diverse segments of the network. New segments are formed "from the splitting of an old segment, from proliferation by the gathering of new members under new leaders and from combinations" of these processes (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 42). New segments remain connected to each other. Their connections or linkages are based on the personal relationship between segment leaders, as well as on wider associations or extra-group

linkages. Linkages allow a network of segments with various leaders to be described as a movement or an integrated network rather than a leaderless amorphous collective.

Gerlach & Hine (1970, p. 38) also argue that leadership in this type of a decentralised organisation is "based on personal charisma rather than on the fulfilment of bureaucratic training requirements and progression up through ranked positions". This type of charisma diffuses through the organisational segments. Gerlach & Hine (1970, p. 39) call this type of political leaders' charisma "communicable" because it can be conveyed from a "charismatist" to another person. The communication inspires that other person to work on their own initiative. It also ensures that charisma – an important quality for successful leadership in many situations – can be "distributed" across multiple leaders of an organisation.

The reviewed theories suggest that digitally-enabled organisations should come to terms with the fact that one or many people will eventually become an official or unofficial spokesperson for a group. In other words, whatever the attitude toward leadership is, organisations that rely on platforms will probably have multiple centres of influence.

2.2.6 Collective and connective action

Protest is a key manifestation of political action. Protest action is considered to be part of a large "repertoire of contestation" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). The processes of mediatisation of politics and platformisation of political communication have triggered a discussion about the nature of digitally-mediated protest as a type of collective action. Bennett & Segerberg's (2013, p. 59) theory of connective action suggests that, in the digital era, protest organisation acts more like a facilitator of political action than anything else. According to this theory, the logic of connective action is adopted by new types of SMOs that learned how to provide "easily personalised action frames as a basis for technology-assisted networking" (Bennett & Segerberg 2013, p. 2) and to facilitate "crowd-enabled networks" (Bennett et al., 2014).

For example, Bennett & Segerberg analyse two types of organisations that were active as protest communities during the G20 summit in London in 2009. They found that one of them – a coalition of more traditional types of rather radical organisations – was based on sharp ideologies and conducted old style "organization-driven" collective action. At the same time, another coalition of organisations used communicative mechanisms that allowed personal narratives of participants to become more visible during the protests. Simultaneously, interactions between the participants of the second

coalition became easier online. In the end, the coalition of various NGOs mobilised a greater number of participants and was covered by media more positively. Therefore, some protest communities that are digitally enabled allow participants to express their concerns directly and to self-organise in connective action using digital platforms.

The connective action theory is criticised from several positions. First, many debates take place around the idea of personalised action frames. The critics discuss a variety of issues from the real extent of this personalisation processes to the valence of this phenomenon (Fuchs, 2014a; Tarrow, 2014). Second, the concept of connective action still does not explain all possible dynamics around the construction of the contentious organisation. For instance, the identity construction process is not clarified by the studies of Bennett & Segerberg. In addition, there is a more general criticism of scholars who argue that Bennett & Segerberg neglect how social movements are facing the powerful and sometimes repressive structures like police or media corporations (Fuchs, 2014a) thus overlooking the "politics of platforms" (Milan, 2015b, p. 2). This criticism suggests that the framework of connective action does not fit easily with the traditional views on social movements and organisations (Karpf, 2014, p. 261).

Kavada (2018) suggests that the contradictions pointed out by the critics of the connective action framework might be associated with the different understandings of the object of enquiry by social movement scholars. While Bennett & Segerberg (2013) study "the online crowds constituted on social media platforms, other researchers focus on core activists and their" strategies (Kavada, 2018, p. 109). Despite this misunderstanding, the connective action framework extends the knowledge about core activist as well. In particular, this framework demonstrates how different patterns of public communication of digital activists can be identified and compared. Thus, the analysis of the technological affordances and features used by an organisation can help to advance the understanding of the organisational capacity and digital engagement of different types of communities.

Scholars who criticise the connective action framework often view digital platforms as the space for building the collective rather than space where personalised narratives flourish (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2014; Kavada, 2015). This view brings attention to the issues of group's representation and interaction. First, the representational dimension of platforms reflects common agendas and identities of an activist group through various forms of content like text, images, video. For instance, pages of civic campaigns may reflect organisational culture, identity and values as a public display of campaign's

connections with its supporters, critics and other organisations (Kavada, 2012). Thus, the representational dimension of platforms helps to study an activist group's organisational representation. It also allows tracing how groups get organised and mobilised online as well as how different groups interact with each other (Bennett et al., 2014). Second, the dimension of inner interactions allows exploring an organising process through the study of communication in an organisation.

Social movement scholars also discuss the changing nature of collective action in relation to is the public perception of many pro-democracy anti-authoritarian movements as "spontaneous eruptions" of anger, indignation and other emotions (Postill, 2018, p. 121). Such perception was observed for the cases of, for example, the 15M movement or Taiwan's Sunflower movement. Studying recent digitally-enabled protest movements in Spain such as 15M, Flesher Fominaya (2015, p. 143) argues that "spontaneity" is a common frame "strategically deployed by social movement actors and help present grievances and claims as the popular will of the people." Postill (2018, p. 121-123) argues that many pro-democracy movements across the globe were framed by the media in a similar fashion, especially during their early stages. However, the analysis of "the period of latency" (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) of a movement often demonstrates that "most new protest movements" are "carefully conceived, organised" (Postill, 2018, p. 121). A large-scale movement might be "unexpected" for external observers. Nevertheless, these movements are rarely spontaneous.

The frames of spontaneity may emerge as a consequence of the "gulf in understanding" (Postill, 2018, p. 123) of collective action in the digital age. Most members of the press and the general public often see a protest as an inexplicable and spontaneous event that peaks, declines and dies out. By contrast, from a core activist perspective, a protest might be a carefully choreographed public performance of outrage (Gerbaudo, 2012). These are two different visions derived from the outsider and insider perspectives.

The "spontaneity" frame can also be a result of strategic framing by activists (Postill, 2018, p. 123). For example, one of the core activists of the Tunisian pro-democracy movement in 2011, Ali Bouazizi, added two "fictive elements" (Postill, 2018, p. 43) to his narratives of the episode that later triggered further events associated with the movement. He turned a school dropout victim into a university graduate. He also claimed a female police officer slapped him, which did not happen. Both fictive elements allowed Ali to bridge the protest frames for all Tunisians and mediatise the protest (Postill, 2018, p. 43).

Other examples of a narrative that can be strategically deployed (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) by the spokespeople for a movement include the "people's" or "ordinary citizens" movement narratives (Poell et al., 2016). These narratives discuss the organisation of a movement. Poell et al. (2016) suggest that the movement that deploys such narratives can be led by professionals such as connective leaders who employ marketing strategies to build organisations and mobilise followers. The narratives allow political activists to appeal to their followers. In addition, one can synthesise the theory of "ordinary citizens" and "spontaneous" narratives deployment with the representation of SPIN organisation as leaderless. This synthesis allows hypothesising that both frames can be employed in the organisations under pressure to avoid a certain level of publicity of their organising structures.

2.3 Digital platforms as technological, commercial, social and cultural phenomena

2.3.1 Digital technologies and pro-democracy change

The project focuses on the countries where many critical citizens demand democratisation of political and media systems. Broadly, this refers to the transition of the political system to a more democratic one. The proliferation of digital media technologies and notable regime changes in the early 2010s reinforced the assumption that pro-democracy social and political change can be driven by emerging digital technologies (Postill, 2018, p. 11).

To illustrate this assumption, I start with an overview of an early discussion about the role of digital media in democratisation. The earlier discussion about the democratic potential of digital media was launched by popular accounts in mostly non-academic literature (Treré & Mattoni, 2016) and later was much criticised for being deterministic (Fuchs, 2014, p. 202) and overly emotional (Tarrow, 2014, p. 468). In particular, many of the early accounts of the relationship between technologies and political actors were mostly concerned with the positive or negative roles of the internet in democratisation (Karpf, 2016). Authors like Diamond (2010) or Shirky (2009) approached the debates with the hope that new technologies would make a difference to any society, offering a more democratic and open place for discussion and deliberation. They also argued that with the dissemination of internet technologies, individuals and grassroots activists received powerful tools to influence the decision-making process and to resist suppression from the authorities in a non-democratic political system. Thus, many

commentators discussed technologies like social media as a "liberation technology" that would help spread democracy (Diamond, 2010).

Other popular accounts (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011a) dismissed many predicted democratic virtues of the internet and claimed that these virtues do not allow real engagement and participation in politics. For example, in his widely cited New Yorker magazine article, Gladwell (2010) claimed that actions facilitated by platforms such as Facebook could never engender the relationships that characterised the American social movements of the 1960s.

The critics of these popular accounts of the role of the internet pointed out that they were deterministic and based on "a mixture of individual anecdotes and economic theory, rather than empirical evidence or research" (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 27). Meanwhile, the political implications of technologies have been studied long before the internet became a noticeable factor of political life in non-democracies. For example, MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) showed that technologies operate, and are operated upon, in a complex social field. This and similar earlier studies have already dismissed the determinism of the idea that technologies directly generate social consequences.

Debates about the role of digital media in fostering political change intensified in the wake of a series of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010 and 2011. These uprisings became labelled as the Arab Spring. Many authors positioned the usage of Twitter and Facebook during the Arab Spring in the centre of the discussion about those events. In particular, scholars have been discussing the role, the prominence and the implications of social media usage during these and similar protests (Filer & Fredheim, 2016, p. 5).

Various authors point out several analytical fallacies of the debate, which could lead to wrong perceptions of the role of technologies and media in the political process. First, the early debate on the Arab Spring and similar protests in authoritarian countries were abstracted from political and technological contexts (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 93). In particular, it was worth paying more attention to various kinds of actors who used technologies like activists, authorities, NGOs, foreign countries and companies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Many studies of the political use of the internet, unfortunately, lacked such contextual features as the discussion of the traditions of activism and social movements.

Second, earlier accounts of technologically-driven political engagement often lacked a deeper understanding of the relationships between digital media and society (Mansell et al., 2007, p. 363). The link between the two can be found, for example, in theories of social movements. In particular, social movement studies suggest that digital activists should develop their cause around inherited cultural understandings to inspire people to collective action (Tarrow, 2011, p. 32). Moreover, these understandings are framed by the media that transmit the messages of activists and other actors like the government. Hence, the media engage in a complicated cultural framing processes that help or constrain activists.

Another side of the relationship between digital media and society were extensively studied later from the critical digital media studies perspective. Fuchs (2014, p. 202), one of the most influential authors in critical digital media studies, suggests that society is shaped by but also shapes technologies. These relations can be observed on social media platforms, especially if platforms are used for political purposes. Milan (2015a) demonstrates how communicative actions have shaped the usage of social media by the Occupy movement activists in western democracies. At the same time, the activists' actions were shaped by technologies as well, which demonstrates that technologies reflect the political and cultural dynamics of social life. This approach reflects MacKenzie & Wajcman's (1999) argument that technologies do not directly generate social consequence. Thus, claiming that media technologies almost exclusively shape society – that some earlier commentators of the Arab Spring did – leads to technological determinism.

Third, some authors did not ask important questions on digital politics. For example, Karpf (2016, p. 2) argues that the question about the good or bad qualities of new technologies in communication "was fundamentally wrong." Rather, those inquiries are valuable that discuss, for instance, what strategies and tactics technologies afford activists to use. The strategies and tactics discussion allows us to assess the power of digital technologies in the political world. This is the power that governments are also keen to share. As Gunitsky (2015) noted, some earlier discussion about the role of digital media in politics did not pay sufficient attention to the abilities of a government to watch, censor and control online content. Therefore, many commentators on technological affordances did not have an answer to the question of what to do with the disruptive attempts of a government to prevent citizens' initiatives for democratisation.

All in all, various episodes of the protests of 2010-2011 brought the discussion about the implications of the internet for democratisation to a new level. However, earlier accounts like those of Shirky (2009) or Diamond (2010) that preceded or immediately followed those protests look too simplistic now (Gunitsky, 2015). One of the most prominent questions in those days - "Will the revolution be tweeted?" - already seemed "ephemeral" in a few years after the events (Bennett & Segerberg 2013, p. 113).

Fortunately, more nuanced debate and discussion dominate the literature on the political role of technologies these days. In recent years, the literature increasingly focuses on digital activists and their strategies, repertoires and practices (Shea et al., 2015). The scholarship and broader public seem to agree with the idea that not only does the internet influence society, but also society, powerful actors or individuals influence the internet in various contexts (Oates 2013). For instance, research has demonstrated the importance of norms and cultures of communication in determining the use of digital media. In addition, more recent episodes of the use of digital media and the internet have emerged such as 15-M movement in Spain (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) or the Euromaidan in Ukraine (Lokot, 2016). A variety of these episodes and the proliferation of digital media attracts growing attention from scholars.

At the same time, it seems that the research that is concerned with how technologies facilitate pro-democracy changes requires a dialogue between social movement, digital politics and platform studies literatures. In particular, the phenomenon that I term as authoritarian digital politics is strewn across numerous literatures and hampered by the lack of a common conceptual language. To overcome this limitation, more attention should be paid to how politics and media work together.

2.3.2 Digital platforms and their affordances and components

2.3.2.1 Platform infrastructures

Analysing the role of digital platforms in western societies, van Dijck and Poell (2015, p. 1) propose the framework of the "platform society." The "platform society" is the global "ecosystem" infrastructure of all kinds of platforms whose interdependencies are structured by a common set of mechanisms. Platforms have become so prominent that scholars like Helmond (2015, p. 1) started using the term "platformisation" of the internet. Helmond (2015) suggests that the rise of the idea of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web has its own logic. The logic of platformisation ensures the economic expansion of platform corporations such as Facebook and Google. It also leads to the "decentralisation of platform features"

around the internet (Helmond, 2015, p. 8). In other words, features such as the "like" button or the Timeline spread on other sites and apps, connecting them to the leading social platforms. The features of platforms become an integral part of social interactions on the internet.

Platforms can be combined in various configurations. The most obvious configuration is the global infrastructure of platforms discussed by Helmond (2015) and Dijck et al. (2018). Platforms may also constitute specific communicative spheres (Khazraee and Losey, 2016) and create distinctive ecologies (Treré & Mattoni, 2016) that can be "inhabited" and directed by political actors. Studying how different platforms operate in combination can help to analyse political campaign dynamics and the ways each platform shapes activist communication. According to Poell (2014), this "infrastructural" approach can yield more accurate results in contrast to inquiries that focus on a specific platform and then trying to extrapolate observations about the whole infrastructure.

Political actors can form their own digital media infrastructures or ecologies by creating and linking, for example, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, websites, meme galleries and web TV services (Treré & Mattoni, 2016, p. 302). Rinke & Röder (2011) include three elements in their concepts of the media ecology of the Arab Spring protests: social media, transnational TV channels and emails. Treré & Mattoni (2016) discuss the 15M movement in Spain to demonstrate that its digital media ecology included elements such as email lists, messenger platforms, video and audio streaming platforms, social media and websites. The variety of media infrastructure configurations emphasises the "environmental role of media" (Cammaerts et al., 2013, p. 3) in relation to society and the political system. Thus, a communication infrastructure of digital activists can be defined as the combination of public and private communication spaces used by activists.

Platform studies normally examine social media from two perspectives. On the one hand, platforms might be defined as emerging technological systems that are largely created to support the commercial logic of social media corporations. On the other hand, platforms are the sites of interactions where user actions take place. These perspectives produce various classifications of platform dynamics. Warfield et al. (2016, p. 2) highlight social and media components of this dynamics. The social component is normally focused on people, interactions and the ethnography of these interactions. The

media component is concerned with algorithms, surveillance and the relations between producers, distributors, contributors, designers and owners.

Another typology is proposed by van Dijck & Poell (2015). They define the social component as "socio-cultural" and the media component as "techno-commercial" phenomenon of digital platforms. In her research focused on digital activism, Milan (2015b) highlights several dimensions that influence digitally-enabled activism. In particular, she argues that platforms change organisational patterns and opportunity structures of activist organisation. In this dissertation, I adapt van Dijck and Poell's approach and discuss four dimensions of digital platforms: technological, commercial, cultural and social.

2.3.2.2 Affordances of digital platforms and their technological components

Platformisation alters political organisation, engagement and campaigning. Observers still get amazed by how, for example, groups of a few students might be able to perform a job of a whole traditional newsroom when gathering and distributing information by means of Twitter about large political campaigns and movements like the Gezi protests in Turkey (Tufekci, 2014, p. 11). Larger organisations also benefit from platforms and digital media. Studies of digital engagement emphasise three characteristics of the presence of internet technologies in activism: the internet allows activists to facilitate and coordinate their movement at a lower cost, doing it more quickly and at a larger scale (Earl & Kimport, 2011). The literature often calls these characteristics the main affordances of the internet. Furthermore, scholars repeatedly expand the list of affordances with new advantages like the access to a vast amount of open data or a possibility of the decentralisation of information and organisational hierarchies.

Research in the use of digital platforms during large-scale protests demonstrates how their affordance shape organisational processes in social movements. For example, Lokot's (2016) study of the Euromaidan protest in Ukraine demonstrates that the affordances of digital technologies expand opportunities for co-presence and witnessing of collective action, connect existing participants in new ways, as well as contribute to the emergence of "connected networks of individuals [that] could further develop into an active, sustainable civil society" (p. 299). These effects of digital affordances form the core of the concept of augmented dissent (Lokot, 2016, p. 290). This concept suggests that platforms and networks of protest participants are just the extension of the physical space where the real action takes place. In other words, digital platforms cannot be examined separately from the physical location of protest events.

Indeed, the coordination of political campaigning and mass protests became easier and quicker than it used to be, but platformisation also brings its challenges. For instance, the policy of platforms encourages users to reveal their real names when registering on a social media platform. The visibility mechanisms display those names to the outsiders to reflect a communicative act such as pressing the Like button on Facebook or VK, a Facebook-like Russian platform. These visibility affordances of digital media allow the police in an authoritarian state to monitor platforms and identify those users who express a critical political opinion (Lonkila, 2017, p. 122). Thus, visibility affordances help the authorities to surveil political opponents. Some other affordances related to surveillance and censorship are reviewed in the next section. These challenges of platformisation bring forward the idea that affordances could have both positive and negative consequences for digital activism.

Another example from recent political events demonstrates how platform affordances are used to disturb political debates and to spread propaganda. In recent years, digital platforms became exposed to entities that only seem to be humans but have more similarities with technological user agents. These agents are also known as bots. They maintain profiles like humans and use platforms similarly to distribute information directed by a bot owner via posts and comments (Turovskij, 2014). The literature agrees that bots can be potentially influential, but to study them and understand their impact is "phenomenally difficult" (Karpf, 2017). Karpf (2017) expresses a popular among the scholars of digital politics opinion that the effect of propaganda that uses trolls are bots might be much less extensive than the numbers suggest.

Nevertheless, some studies provide evidence to demonstrate the impact of such disruptive instruments as bots. In particular, the evidence suggests that the political use of bots was more prominent in non-democratic countries before their use spread in democracies (Filer & Fredheim, 2016; Sanovich, 2018). For instance, automated content spread by bots polluted the online space in Russia, argue Filer & Fredheim (2016, p. 10). This automated pollution reduces the utility of social platforms for activists and ordinary citizens, they claim. Already before 2012, the efforts of human bloggers have become substituted by automatic bots in Russian-speaking countries. For example, during the 2011-12 "For Fair Elections" protests, the use of Twitter became quite difficult for opposition activists. Whenever an activist made prominent use of a particular hashtag, spam bots would immediately swamp it (Paulsen & Zvereva, 2014). In line with this observation Filer & Fredheim (2016, p. 1) conclude that social media platforms likely do not fulfil any political function across national context. Rather, the

online space might be dominated by the pre-existing relationships between the state and offline domestic media. According to this theory, the existing status quo in traditional media just migrates to and pollutes the internet with pro-government propaganda, once again restricting the space for free speech.

2.3.2.3 Commercial, social and cultural components

Within the study of communication and media theory, much attention is traditionally dedicated to the issues of ownership, commercial control and similar topics of the economy. These issues are often studied through the lenses of a political economy approach. Authors who study digital platforms in the tradition of political economy regard them as the illustration of the power relationships between individual consumers and institutions that produce technologies or content (van Dijck, 2013b, p. 27). For example, the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky (2008) describes how a small number of profit-oriented media companies have come to dominate the global media production. It demonstrates how media become controlled by non-media commercial entities and governments.

Commercial control on digital platforms is implemented through platform algorithms and their design. The algorithms and the design shape the meaning production and social interactions on platforms (Milan, 2015a; van Dijck, 2013a). In addition, the technological infrastructure of platforms allows social media page owners to curate their content on platforms through settings, policies and the general logic of platformisation (Heyman & Pierson, 2015; Milan, 2015b; Schwartz, 2015). Commercial logic normally directs all these control processes.

It seems that total commercial control over the most important platforms has spread all around the world. At the same time, as Poell and van Dijck (2016, p. 232) suggest, social media platforms became so important to civic activists that they need to pass through those commercial platforms sooner or later. "That is the reality today's citizens and activists have to live with" (Poell and van Dijck, 2016, p. 232). Thus, instead of criticising commercial platforms, Poell and van Dijck suggest shifting the critical discussion to other issues like technological and commercial mechanisms that shape these processes. At the same time, we need to stay critical about attempts of big companies to claim the label "public" or "independent" when referring to technological and commercial spaces they construct online. In other words, the critical analysis of digital platform companies and their policies also should also propose solutions to those issues.

The social science perspective on technologies views digital platforms as "producers of sociality." This perspective allows investigating how platforms enable social connections and allow personal narratives to be performed as much as they are performed through face-to-face interactions (Milan, 2015b, p. 1). Therefore, platform content is one of the keys to studying digital representation and interaction. Content posted on and transmitted through platforms is part of the social and cultural infrastructure of platforms (van Dijck, 2013b). Hence, studying content helps to examine the social consequences of digital media usage.

The use of features like Timeline to post content often becomes crucial for political engagement. Alaimo (2015) analyses the content of the Facebook Arabic Page "We are all Khaled Said" that was prominent during the Egyptian revolution in 2011. He evaluated the postings by the page owner and found that the content of the page consisted of sophisticated, coherent and substantive posts (p. 5). The posts were also "deeply action-orientated" and were "clearly crafted" to inspire, convince and exhort the users who access the page prior to and during the revolutionary period. This political content contributed to informing and emotionally supporting the users and was associated with the triggering of the further events related to the Egyptian revolution. The analysis demonstrated that the content that appeared on the Timeline of potential supporters of the pro-democracy changes in Egypt played an important role in the political processes.

Besides content, two other important mechanisms shape interactions on platforms, which include visibility and emotional connectivity (Poell & van Dijck, 2016). These mechanisms can motivate or even compel many social actors – including activist groups and state institutions – to reconsider their representation and positioning in society (van Dijck & Poell, 2015, p. 1).

First, social platforms enhance the visibility of actors and their content making "the invisible visible" (Meikle, 2016, p. 94). For example, Twitter "allows for the high visibility of a small number of users with many followers" (Duguay, 2016, p. 289). These popular users can become a connection point between the political cause and a larger audience. At the same time, a political cause like a protest may help ordinary users of Twitter to rise to prominence (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). That is what was happening during the Arab Spring protests in Egypt. During these protests, as Gerbaudo (2016) argues, that platform visibility mechanisms facilitated the development of new hierarchies within the protest movement.

The mechanisms of visibility on social platforms shape how people think of their communication practices. This means that visibility mechanisms like other affordances may play positive as well as negative roles depending on the political context (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 152). For instance, during the Arab Spring users who joined the protests groups on Facebook at their initial stages were comparatively less secure than those who joined later. These first joiners' names, pictures and other data could become associated with the open opposition to the state. Later, when the number of participants of the movement grew, more people could join it with a lower risk of persecution (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 70). This demonstrated the growing support for the opposition to the government in Egypt. Thus, the platform visibility played both a positive and a negative role in these events in the circumstances of an authoritarian country.

Second, Papacharissi (2014) argues that digital platforms become useful instruments for persuasion and engagement as they help to disseminate less reasoned but more emotional content. She points on "affect" as a catalyser of this engagement and political discussion that might follow the dissemination of emotional content. People can feel more empowered, Papacharissi suggests, when they can see how their opinion makes a difference to others. In that process, affective stories become the inevitable resource of initial engagement that make people more engaged and feel connected. Nevertheless, as Duguay (2016) argues, digital platforms often reduce users' expression and homogenises it to fun and emotions. This reduction leaves less room for customised creativity. Hence, the connection of platform users which is based on emotions – or "emotional connectivity" (Poell & van Dijck, 2016, p. 232) – is not always an entirely positive consequence of digital media usage.

Other researchers highlight the rational side of people's interactions with digital platforms rather than their emotional side. Margetts et al.'s (2016) research is an example of this approach. Their study is inspired by the pre-internet social movement studies and social psychology, which increasingly view people as rational individuals (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 25). It highlights the importance of social information in individuals' communication practices. They define social information as real-time information provided by platforms that help users to make the calculation and decide whether to participate in politics through signing a petition, sharing news, joining a group or taking part in offline collective action (p. 12). For instance, the decision to participate in a donation campaign or to sign a petition online is associated with what updates people see about these actions in real time. Such features like the list of the most popular or trending campaigns on a petitions website increase the number of

signatures petitions receive (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 98). "Small changes to the platform design […] can have unanticipated consequences" leading to the increase or decrease in participation numbers (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 76). However, Karpf (2016, p. 62) argues that Margetts et al. base their claims on the wrong assumption that different platforms have similar affordances. Karpf argues for the differentiation between the affordance of, for instance, social petition sites and the affordances of Twitter.

2.3.3 The assumption of platform universality and local platforms

A relatively small number of inquiries into the political use of social media is concerned with more than one platform. Even a smaller number of studies manage to move beyond the Western or the Silicon Valley (van Dijck et al., 2018) contexts of platforms like Facebook or Instagram into the different platform societies (van Dalen et al., 2015; Filer & Fredheim, 2016, p. 3; Meng and Rantanen, 2015). Some of those studies that try to engage with non-western contexts still do it through the lenses of western platforms that are not necessarily used that extensively. For instance, Spaiser, Chadefaux, Donnay, Russmann, & Helbing (2017) focus their analysis of political interactions on Twitter during the "For Fair Elections" movement in Russia, a period when "Twitter was not that relevant for the Russian Internet users" (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2015, p. 14). By the time of the launch of the movement, only 1.6% of Russians used Twitter compared to 23% of those who used VK (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). This type of sampling strategies reminds about the observation made by Rantanen (2002) regarding the scholarship of media and communication in the 1990s. Then the scholarship was "largely based on its false assumption of universality – how media and communication operate everywhere in a similar way" (p. 128). Perhaps, the assumption of universality is still a relevant characteristic of platform studies.

Most of the research into digital activism on OK or VK is concerned with collective action and the use of the platforms during the mentioned above the "For Fair Elections" movement (Greene, 2014; Toepfl, 2017). Beyond this, the Russian culture, digital literature and the specifics of online language are the main focuses of the internet studies in Russia (Gorham et al., 2014, p. 4). Unfortunately, these locally produced studies are less informed by recent developments in international research of communication technologies (Gorham et al., 2014, p. 4). They also tend to perceive Russian internet (a.k.a. "Runet") as a "unique" digital object similar to some other Russia-related objects of social science inquiry like politics or literature. Such "unique"

objects often presented by the scholars of Russia as ones "which cannot be understood through the prism of research frameworks developed in other countries" (Gel'man, 2015a).

Just like in Russia, some scholars that study the media in China tend to "emphasize the so-called Chinese characteristics" (Xinning, 2001, p. 68). In another authoritarian country, Iran, some researchers argued that blogs and messaging services formed a distinctly Persian communicative sphere over the past decade (Khazraee & Losey, 2016, p. 51). By "deprovincializing" (Acharya & Buzan, 2017, p. 361) the studies of locally designed platforms and by travelling beyond national or regional contexts, we can attempt to overcome this assumption of "uniqueness."

Until recently, the researchers that were concerned with issues related to predominantly Russian-speaking platforms usually focused on something that they call "the blogosphere." That is the community of bloggers and commentators that are mostly concentrated around the Russian-owned blog platform LiveJournal (e.g. Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016; Gorham, Lunde, & Paulsen, 2014; Koltsova, Koltcov, & Nikolenko, 2016). LiveJournal played a significant role in the "For Fair Elections" movement (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015), which partly explains this attention to the blogosphere.

Different arguments explain why LiveJournal became an important platform for the Russian-speaking internet. A cultural argument suggests that during the "For Fair Elections" movement, texts were more important than video, while professional writers and prominent journalists played a noticeable role. Bodrunova and Litvinenko (2015, p. 18) argue that this was a consequence of the "traditional textocentricism" of the Russian culture – the relative importance of long texts that occupy a prominent position in the cultural production. Think of the lengths of Tolstoy's War and Peace, for instance. Indeed, the LiveJournal blog space was more convenient for longer texts than any other popular platform. By contrast, the argument that follows the architecture-focused approach explains the popularity of LiveJournal in Russia with its affordances for anonymity (MacLeod, 2009). Indeed, the platform did not require its users to reveal their real names, and many popular bloggers who used it became famous under pseudonyms. The extensive focus of the researchers on LiveJournal became of more peripheral importance after 2013 when the "For Fair elections" protests faded. Popular Russian authors, as well as politically active publics, have moved to Facebook, as well as VK (Filer & Fredheim, 2016) and, as I show in the analysis, Telegram, leaving LiveJournal aside as a less important platform.

The popularity of VK is also explained with cultural argument. Some studies suggest that VK fits values and expectations of local users in the predominantly Russian-speaking countries better than the global social media like Facebook or Twitter (Baran & Stock, 2015). Another strand of research suggests that in the Russian-speaking internet, Facebook rose as the "online communicative milieu for the 'thinking community'" (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016, p. 120). Bodrunova & Litvinenko (2016) point out that the cultural practices of VK usage are different if compared to how people use Facebook besides their visual similarity. These differences in how platforms enhance cultural norms can be associated with their policy and community standards but also with certain worldviews and interests of platform owners (Milan, 2015b, p. 2) that they mount in technologies.

At least up to 2013, local Russian-speaking platforms such as VK and OK contained less political content and were less significant space for dissemination of critical political information (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015) than global platforms. By contrast, Facebook was used extensively by the organisers and the participants of the protests – mostly by pro-democracy orientated citizens (Gabowitsch, 2017). The reasons for this state of affairs remain unclear (Lonkila, 2017, p. 124). Lonkila (2017, p. 124) explains the politicisation of global platforms with the presence of prominent figures of the Russian political and cultural life on global rather than local platforms. These prominent people are trusted by internet users who lack confidence in formal institutions.

Audience studies explain the difference between Russian VK and Facebook. They argue that VK is simply easier to use than Facebook if a typical internet user from Russia is concerned (Baran & Stock, 2015). Gladarev and Lonkila (2012) argue that the design of VK seems to be well suited for the established cultural practices of the Russian-speaking countries. They point out differences in the construction of sociability on those two media platforms. Since personal social ties traditionally play an important role in post-Soviet societies, it is possible that domestically designed VK plays its socialising role better than western-designed Facebook. In other words, one's Facebook friends and one's VK friends in the Russian-speaking countries are two different types of friends (Lonkila, 2011). The platform architecture-focused research suggests that Facebook-style platforms are independent of norms and values which drive their users. This suggestion is based on Dencik and Leistert's (2015, p. 43) study of the algorithms of Facebook and similar platforms. Still, both culture-oriented and architecture-focused research should be grounded in the context of platform users.

Platform studies literature that focuses on Belarus is even scarcer. Few studies are concerned with the political use of social media platforms in this country. It would be fair to say that almost no research that covered that topic in Belarus was published in peer-reviewed journals or books (Chulitskaya, 2017). A few publications that do cover the issues related to the political use of digital platforms in Belarus are mostly descriptive (e. g. Niadzvietski, 2011). Thus, Belarus remains "largely overlooked and little explored" (Miazhevich, 2017) in communication and media scholarship.

Beyond the issues of political communication and social media, the literature that covers political and social processes in Belarus is largely concealed from the anglosphere behind a language barrier. Belarus "possesses hidden histories that rarely escape into the outside world" suggests Norman Davies (Davies, 2012, p. 239), one of few British scholars who studies Belarus. This lack of research into Belarus is, however, compensated with a wealth of the policy and analysis reports on the political and social issues of this country.

This little amount of research might be explained by the difficulties of communication in the political environment of this country. Just like Russia (Gel'man, 2015a), the government of Belarus restricts academic freedoms (The Quality of Higher Education: National Endeavours in the European Context, 2017). More than any other discipline, the studies of politics suffer from authoritarian restrictions elsewhere in the world (Huntington, 1988). At the same time, the issues associated with the use of platforms for political purposes are often contentious. Therefore, one can argue that it is relatively problematic to study the use of digital media for pro-democracy social and political change as a scholar based in Belarus or Russia. Hence, little research into the topic is available.

2.4 Repressive digital politics

2.4.1 Forms of repressive digital politics

Groups that compete for power and influence in the political process are interested in gaining access to traditional mainstream media. However, in non-democratic countries, access to the mainstream media is often highly restricted even for moderate critics of the regime. Moreover, traditional media like central news agencies, newspapers or television stations often strengthen the regime (Rod & Weidmann, 2015) rather than the opposition. Wilson (2005, p. 43), for instance, argues that the authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe stand, among other things, thanks to the culture of information control.

This control is mostly pervaded over traditional mainstream media for the regime's benefit.

In these circumstances, opposition actors can and do turn to the internet platforms that allow interacting with a large audience (Lonkila, 2017, p. 122). The use of digital media allows the opposition to overcome the control mechanisms imposed on traditional media by the government and to introduce fast "peer-to-peer" communication channels that facilitate the distribution of information. Indeed, earlier research of non-democracies suggests that political activists benefit from the penetration of the internet. For example, Stein (2016a, p. 936) found that higher levels of internet penetration correspond to more mass anti-government actions in authoritarian countries. Thus, the internet is often the main public communication channel for anti-authoritarian movements.

After a brief period of uncertainty following the proliferation of digital platforms, politicians and governments both in democracies and autocracies started tightening their grip on the internet. Many non-democratic regimes like China, Vietnam, Iran, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Russia, Cuba and Venezuela eventually learned how to control and to use the internet to consolidate their power (Gunitsky, 2015; Rod & Weidmann, 2015; C. Walker & Orttung, 2014). Research on that topic argues, for instance, that some authoritarian regimes learned how to co-opt social media and how to use technologies to harass critical citizens (Gunitsky, 2015; K. E. Pearce, 2015; Stein, 2016b). These studies claim that just as technology affords opportunities for those living under authoritarianism, it also affords opportunities for those in power. Those opportunities rarely come from the

> capacity to engineer technological systems alone. Instead, the state plays a more elaborate role in curating competing stakeholders to collaborate and cross-pollinate their expertise across sectors. (Liang et al., 2018, p. 3)

This and other arguments in similar studies into non-democracies are often quite pessimistic. Such studies conclude that digital platforms "may increase possibilities for the state to control its citizens" (Lonkila, 2017, p. 121) and help to form the system of "effective media control" (Walker & Orttung 2014, p. 72) that is built by authoritarian governments in order to expand their "claims to legitimacy while undermining potential alternatives."

Many of these pessimistic conclusions are made based on the study of the governmental policies and the processes among the political elites. If a researcher relies too

extensively on policy analysis, they risk succumbing to the state-centric approach and to view authoritarianism as necessarily a state-level phenomenon (Glasius, 2018). This approach dominates the analytical literature on the technologies and media in regimes like the Chinese (Stockmann, 2013) or Russian (Walker & Orttung, 2014). A great part of the literature on the Russian-speaking media considers actors such as activists, journalists and politicians merely as the functions or the objects of the government media policy. This makes the representation of those actors similar to black boxes.

Different factors could explain this "black box" situation. The most obvious are ones that refer to methods and data collection: it can be difficult to access the data needed for an actor-centric study, especially when it comes to an authoritarian state (Goode & Ahram, 2016). Thus, researchers often rely on reports, surveys of questionable reliability and policy documents. Hence, they look at the situation on the ground from the point of view of the state. As Goode and Ahram (2016) argue, the overreliance on the positions and documents produced by the authoritarian governments is harmful to research.

Fortunately, some studies help to reveal deeper mechanisms related to individual practices of internet use. They examine the preferences of social media consumption of people who join the anti-governmental protests (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016), how ordinary users of social media turn into leaders of digitally-enabled protest movements (Poell et al., 2016) or citizens' strategies and tactics of overcoming the limitations of internet use (Gunitsky, 2015; Meng & Rantanen, 2015; K. E. Pearce, 2015).

Nevertheless, many important research questions remain unanswered. In particular, few studies attempt to provide a framework for the systematic analysis of the response of authoritarian regimes to online activities and explain why a particular type of restriction has been used (Sanovich et al., 2018, p. 4). Digital dissents' response to online restrictions and their strategies and practices in relation to overcoming these restrictions remain scarcely researched. Morozov (2011b), Roberts (2014) and Sanovich et al. (2018) propose their classification of strategies employed by autocrats to combat online opposition. Morozov (2011b) distinguished between technological and socio-political responses on digital political activism. Technological responses include Internet-filtering, while socio-political responses range from employing automated accounts such as bots to destroy online communities to physical attacks on outspoken dissidents. Roberts (2014) emphasises the differences between the effects of the use of online tools

to control digital dissidents. She focuses on censorship (fear to speak or to listen) and access restrictions (that are discussed as "friction or flooding" of traffic).

Based on the analysis of the response by the Russian state, Sanovich et al. (2018) propose to distinguish between restrictive measures such as filtering of web-pages and the engagements of the state in online activities to shape the formation of opinions. Their classification contains three forms of such repressive digital politics - offline action, technical restrictions on access to content and online engagement. Offline action refers to policy restrictions such as changes in the law, the ownership structure or intimidation and persecution. Technical restrictions on access to content include various forms of censorship, such as filtering or DDoS attacks. Finally, online engagement forms involve creating content to engage with users.

Sanovich et al.'s (2018) classification of the forms of repressive digital politics seems to be the most encompassing for the contexts of countries such as Belarus and Russia. However, it can be improved to highlight the user's point of view on the challenges of digital activism. First, it might be not very important for a user whether a restriction such as a blocked webpage is the result of offline or online action. For ordinary users, a blocked webpage is a form of censorship that does not allow them to access the information they require. Thus, the differentiation between "offline" and "online" forms may be irrelevant. However, one exception remains. It is based on a monopoly of the state on the legitimate use of violence (Ackland, 2013). Persecution such as imprisonment can hardly be experienced by a user online. Therefore, I focus on persecution as the sole type of the offline form of repressive digital politics.

Second, Sanovich et al. do not discuss surveillance as one of key forms of digital politics in authoritarian states though they mention how "elaborate" surveillance systems has become. In the meantime, authoritarian regimes such as the Russian apply legal and illegal methods to monitor dissidents' movements and to intercept their electronic communication. The state also organises covert audio and video surveillance (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017b). Surveillance is a key form of repressive digital politics that often remains overlooked.

Finally, Sanovich et al. discuss the third option for the authoritarian regime, online engagement, in detail. The Russian government exemplifies how this option is used. It obtained skills of eliminating the unwanted opposition and started providing information that favours their regime and thus manipulates political discourse online (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Filer & Fredheim, 2016). In Russia, various techniques

that promote a required ideological position on social media were developed over the years (Spaiser et al., 2017, p. 1). As discussed in previous sections, by polluting the online space with bots and spam, the authorities disempower regime critics and manipulate public opinion on social media. However, online engagement is a new form of authoritarian politics and is not present on all the platforms used by digital dissidents, which I discuss later. Therefore, Sanovich et al.'s (2018) classification has its disadvantages.

I propose an updated classification of the forms of repressive digital politics. I use the term the three challenges of digital dissidents to refer to these forms. They are censorship and surveillance, as well as offline actions such as persecution. In the following sections, I focus on the forms that are allowed by the affordances of digital media – censorship and surveillance. In the results chapters, I use the results of this study to argue that in order to study the three challenges of digital dissidents, we need to address them from a user's point of view.

2.4.2 Censorship

Censorship is defined as a restriction on access to and distribution of alternative messages (McQuail, 2010, p. 44). Political censorship practices involve filtering of web-traffic (Hussain, 2014), criminalisation of access to alternative information (McQuail, 2010), as well as multiple practices of self-censorship when media professionals such as journalists, or ordinary users, restrict their political expression on the topics perceived as "sensitive" (Stockmann, 2013). Censorship is a form of control that effectively prevents activists from the creation of "peer-to-peer" communication channels (Rod & Weidmann, 2015). Censorship also makes it harder to access alternative messages or leads to the persecution of activists. In the following sections, I discuss how censorship is implemented in non-democracies.

Fear and disbelief are common feelings experienced by citizens in authoritarian states. These feelings are the results of the limitations on political participation, e.g. persecution and control imposed by authoritarian regimes to deactivate society politically. For instance, self-censorship in Chile in the 1980s resulted from the reliance of its authoritarian regime on massive intimidation (Rosenberg, 1987). Consequently, citizens in such regimes as the Chilean perceive self-censorship as a strategy that helps to avoid political persecution and surveillance.

Self-censorship has many consequences. Censorship is one of the reasons why it is difficult to measure political opinions in authoritarian states. Citizens of such countries fear to discuss their political preferences. In China, studies have demonstrated a response bias among survey participants to politically sensitive questions (Birney et al., 2017; King et al., 2004). Another consequence of self-censorship is observed for the communities of media professionals. Stockmann (2013, p. 39) argues that the Chinese media are supposed to remain apolitical. As a consequence, media professionals in China are prevented from "critically interrogating the broader social and political structure" (Stockmann, 2013, p. 39). Therefore, self-censorship in authoritarian states is related to emotions, as well as structural constraints on their media and political systems that are imposed by the state.

Self-censorship also affects ordinary citizens' discussions online. In line with Milan's (2015a) theory of microinteractions as political acts, the theories of peer production networks (Bennett et al., 2014) and of nano-level actions (Lonkila, 2017) emphasise the importance of citizens' participation in online content (co-)production along with their reaction to it in the form of likes and shares. Ordinary users produce and help to circulate content. Their actions eventually can help to create political momentum for collective actions offline. However, if citizens are restricted by structural constraints or their emotions, they can self-censor themselves and not participate in networks of content producers. Indeed, in an authoritarian state that imposes constraints on expression, such a tiny act as "tweeting may be a very brave act" (Tufekci, 2017, p. xxvii). By contrast, Lonkila (2017) argues that nano-level activities can hardly be restricted due to their ambiguity and frequency. Still, the literature largely agrees that self-censorship affects political participation negatively.

Whilst citizens can practice self-censorship and restrict their self-expression including "nano-level" actions such as likes and shares (Lonkila, 2017), they still can turn to digital media in search of critical political information posted by other citizens (Robertson & Greene, 2017). That is when filtering efforts of the authorities become important. Filtering of web-traffic allows the authorities to restrict access to unwanted content (Lonkila, 2017). Another way to restrict this access is to remove it by forcing the platform owners to follow the rulings of the authorities in non-democracies such as China and Iran. One of the most common types of content that is removed frequently is messages that cover collective action, planned or happened (Khazraee & Losey, 2016; King et al., 2014). Filtering and platform cooperation with the regime seem to be the most common ways to impose censorship online.

Sanovich et al. (2018) argue that three factors influence the ability of autocratic governments to filter web-traffic. First, governments should control critical internet infrastructure. Second, they should prepare to filter online content. Third, the state should possess financial and human resources to do so. Cairns (2017, p. 4) argues that in order for digital censorship efforts to be successful, they should be less visible and obvious so not to harm authorities' reputation and balance political risks. These preconditions are fulfilled on a different scale by such authoritarian states as China, Iran, Turkey, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Belarus and Russia (Sanovich et al., 2018)

At least up to 2018, one of the most advanced digital filtering infrastructures is being implemented in China (Cairns, 2017) – a place where "the authoritarian practices routinised" (Karatzogianni, 2015, p. 50). The massive infrastructure of the "Great Firewall of China" (GFC) was first designed in 2003 to censor online content. The GFC became a symbol of the political control of the internet (Sanovich et al., 2018). King et al. (2014) estimate that around 13% of all social media posts in China get censored. Not every page or website is banned in China. Instead, the Chinese regime can temporarily relax or increase censorship control. This strategy of "selective censorship" (Cairns, 2017) is partly a result of balancing the factors of regime reputation and the threat to the regime. The research into the digital censorship strategies of the most advanced authoritarian regimes demonstrates that pro-democracy activists should balance their counter-censorship efforts and take into account regime costs to impose censorship and the authorities' fear of collective action.

The Chinese authorities have built their mechanism of digital censorship with the involvement of the commercial interests of IT companies that agree to help the government to censor and filter unwanted critical content. Such companies potentially lose profits because of their inability to access some blocked global services and platforms without specific technological arrangements like VPN (Hornby et al., 2018). However, their earnings are also substantial. Take an example of another country that engages in controlling the infrastructure and blocking online content actively. The Turkish government, along with helpful media corporations, has been "increasingly controlling broadcast media via political and financial pressure" (Tufekci, 2014, p. 3). Such corporations consider their political loyalty, which is reflected in the editorial policy of their outlets, like a key that gives access to other economic areas with more valuable commercial contracts from the government (Castells, 2013; Tufekci, 2014). The examples of Turkey and China demonstrate that, in authoritarian countries,

censorship is a consequence of the cooperation between the regime and large loyal companies.

Loyal commercial organisations not just help non-democratic governments in their censorship efforts. They also assist the ruling elite in consolidating political power, legitimising the regime and receiving secretive feedback from citizens. For instance, Stockmann & Gallagher (2011) showed that the gradual privatisation of the Chinese media industry in the 1990s and the 2000s did not thwart the ruling party's authoritarian legitimacy. On the contrary, "changes in management, financing, and ownership combined with new technologies" left the Chinese media in the orbit of the party line regarding coverage of certain issues and further stabilised the political system (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011, p. 22). The state uses media to guide public opinion on critical issues, but it also uses media to obtain societal feedback (Cairns, 2017, p. 2). Political economy research into China demonstrates that the privatisation of media companies in a modern authoritarian state made its media more credible in the eyes of citizens and, therefore, more persuasive (Stockmann, 2013, p. 23). The example of China contrasts an assumption which is popular in democratisation theories that market competition plays a facilitating role in destabilising authoritarian regimes and erodes the regime's legitimacy (e.g. Lawson, 2002, p. 205). Instead, market reforms can help the regimes to prevent pro-democracy changes.

Having learned how to use media to enhance its legitimacy and stability, the Chinese regime has started supplying knowledge about internet control and surveillance to other authoritarian regimes, like the Belarusian or the Russian. For example, following the events of the Arab Spring and mass protests in Belarus labelled as the "Revolution Through Social Networks" in 2011, the Belarusian authorities have been actively engaging data, equipment and practices with their Chinese counterparts (Hall, 2017). This exchange helped the government to introduce digital censorship.

Russia also takes an example from the Chinese experience of digital censorship (Soldatov & Borogan, 2016). Russian executives responsible for drafting internet-filtering legislation have met Chinese experts and officials responsible for filtering including Fang Binxing, the so-called father of the Great Firewall. Both countries started drafting the most recent restrictive filtering legislature simultaneously at the beginning of 2016. The drafts of the laws that required foreign companies including social media to store their citizens' data inside the country were adopted in Russia a few months after the Chinese president Xi called for the building of "internet sovereignty"

(Jie, 2015; Zenovina, 2016). Censorship technologies are implemented across different types of authoritarian regimes, and those regimes also learn from each other.

2.4.3 Surveillance

Digital political censorship and filtering are often linked to another form of the authoritarian response - surveillance. Fuchs (2015, p. 395) defines surveillance as practices that try to bring about or to prevent certain behaviours in groups or individuals by gathering, storing, processing, diffusing, assessing and using data. The issue of surveillance makes apparent the difference between dissident groups in non-democracies and civil society organisations. In contrast to civil society that seeks engagement with the state and tries to influence it, dissidents have traditionally been described as "a civil society in conspiracy" that create "networks of sympathy" and a "parallel polis" (Greene, 2014, p. 45). Authoritarian elites try to learn about these parallel networks and prevent them from developing, which leads to a need in surveillance practices. That is how surveillance becomes part of everyday life for many digital dissidents.

The Chinese examples of digital political surveillance are notorious once again. The infrastructure of the GFC provides mechanisms for surveillance of internet users. The practice of surveillance ultimately induces self-censorship at various levels of society. In recent years, the Chinese authorities pay more attention to big data as a strategic resource for maintaining authoritarian control (Shih-hung, 2018). The terms like "Data-in-Party-control" and "Cloud Dictatorship" are coming into use. The authoritarian state implements these innovative monitoring, blocking and filtering measures to disconnect citizens from global information flows, to monopolise them domestically (Stockmann, 2013, p. 237) and to surveil the population.

China also supports Russian efforts to handle and analyse vast amounts of data about its citizens. The Russian government cannot buy surveillance equipment from western companies because of sanctions (Soldatov & Borogan, 2016). Just like in China, the Russian state also implements systems of surveillance, which is partly motivated by political goals (Soldatov & Borogan, 2015), though the evidence is scarce. A report by digital rights advocates suggests that the authorities in Russia organised "a complex system of monitoring and surveillance of civic activists" (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017b). Russian surveillance is directly connected to the state monitoring activities on digital platforms. This monitoring sometimes results in convictions or punishments for citizens' actions online (Lonkila, 2017, p. 122).

State surveillance could be addressed by visibility management mechanisms such as those that allow anonymising an internet user (Youmans & York, 2012). Historically, anonymity has been the norm on the internet (Zajácz, 2013). It is still common for some social media platforms to conceal the identities of the administrators of pages by anonymising them automatically. An example of Facebook pages, which are one of the most common mechanisms of organisational representation on social media, demonstrates how the norm has been in decline. The default settings of Facebook pages do not publicly reveal the name of page administrators, who are often the spokespeople for groups associated with a page. However, Facebook, as well as most of the other popular social media, cooperates with the national states and might provide the name upon a government's request. For instance, to open a criminal case against a particular user, the Russian police just needs information about the IP-addresses used to access an account on social media (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017b). Thus, the internet anonymity norm has progressively come under pressure, and authoritarian governments have learnt more about the spokespeople for opposition groups on digital platforms theory surveillance mechanisms.

2.5 Summary of the literature review and research questions

In Chapter 2, I reviewed three overlapping literatures that have advanced knowledge of digital platform use by political organisations. They are platform studies, social movement studies and digital politics. In what follows, I summarise the discussion of the literature review with the emphasis on the gaps that I identified. After this, I present the research questions that emerged from this literature review.

2.5.1 Platform studies, digital politics and social movement studies

First, platform studies literature is concerned with the consequences of the platformisation of society. Platformisation facilitates decentralisation of platform logics, politics and features around the internet. Consequently, the features that emerge from one platform, such as the "Like" button, are disseminated across many third websites. Digital platforms can be discussed from four perspectives: technological, commercial, cultural and social (van Dijck and Poell, 2015). The social and cultural components emphasise users' practices, interactions, representations, as well as the content they create, share and interact with. The study of the technological and commercial components of platforms helps to decode algorithms back into social action and to demonstrate how commercial control, organisation and ownership of platforms affect

social action. In addition to these components, scholars of digital platforms highlight three phenomena - visibility, temporality and emotional connectivity – that shape platform use. Visibility helps political actors to remain prominent but also enhances the development of new hierarchies within an organisation. Temporality signifies the changes in the temporal dynamics of social interactions on digital platforms. Emotional connectivity helps political actors to gather support online by publishing framed appeals.

The pressures of platformisation mean that political actors should be ready to adapt and to meet the restrictions of platform design and policy. In return, political actors seeing an opportunity to become part of the global communication infrastructure (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Helmond, 2015) and to preserve or gain power (Chadwick, 2013, p. 21; Gunitsky, 2015). The elites might be slower in this adaptation than their opponents, but they eventually start using digital technologies as well. Consequently, society becomes vulnerable to control by the elites and other structures including those that own platforms. These structures are often directed by political interest and commercial logic.

Political and economic control of platform interactions is made possible by the specifics of the architecture of online communication spaces. Political elites and platform owners impose their control on digital interactions through such mechanisms as algorithms (e.g. by defining how the Timeline is formed or how bots are deployed), designs (e.g. what is visible to whom) and settings (e.g. what opportunities for the control of own data a user has). Consequently, control becomes less direct and apparent. For instance, the state no longer needs to tell people what to say or not. Rather, to enhance regime stability, it can establish its control over the content of conversation through platform owners who are vulnerable to any changes in commercial regulations and informal mechanisms, as the examples of China and Russia showed. The crucial argument of platform studies is that the largest platforms are driven by the commercial logic of their owners (Milan, 2013; Stockmann, 2013; Tufekci, 2014; van Dijck, 2013b). However, the recent cases of non-for-profit platforms such as Telegram are studied less extensively in this respect.

The mechanisms of this less direct type of digital control are quite obscure, and its precise effect on social and political systems is not clear yet. For instance, scholars keep debating whether the deployment of bots has any effect beyond the immediate obfuscation of political discussion (Vasilkova et al., 2018). The mechanisms of the deployment of digital censorship are also a disputed subject. Some authors suggest that digital censorship is imposed in a more straightforward way when political elites

attempt to censor speech online (e.g. Walker & Orttung, 2014). Others argue that digital censorship is a more dynamic process and depends on the issue, the political climate and elite preferences, among other variables (Stockmann, 2013). Even less is known about active citizens' strategies of overcoming digital censorship on social media.

Digital politics literature discusses the extent to which platforms can drive political change. Two types of schools of thought typically drive this democratisation debate. The first school suggests that social media platforms likely do not fulfil any political function across national contexts in non-democracies. Rather, the online space has become part of the system of "effective media control" (Walker and Orttung, 2014, p. 72) that is dominated by the pre-existing relationships built upon restrictions on freedom of speech, persecution of the political opposition and surveillance (Filer & Fredheim, 2016; Gunitsky, 2015; K. E. Pearce, 2015; Stein, 2016b). For instance, political activists in authoritarian states who use platforms may be vulnerable to state surveillance that helps to identify them. Following the identification of activists, the state may try to persecute them, which spreads political fear that contributes to the self-censorship of other active citizens. Thus, the affordances of platforms increase possibilities for the state to control its citizens.

The disadvantage of some of digital politics literature is that it focuses exclusively on the effects of the political environment on digital media. Such state- or policy-centric literature approaches the response of the state to the disruptions caused by digital platforms asking questions about the policy restrictions imposed by the authorities and how these restrictions affect media owners and other elite actors. At the same time, non-elite actors like political activists rarely become the focus of the inquiries into the relationships between politics and digital media in this context. Thus, state-centric approaches present platforms as black boxes or mere powerful tools for mobilisation (Milan, 2015b).

The second school of thought in the democratisation debate pays more attention to an actor-centric rather than a state-centric approach and suggests that political activism still benefits from the proliferation of digital media despite the increased control. This school of thought argues that the main affordances of digital media allow for collective action at a lower cost, doing it more quickly and at a larger scale. These affordances extend offline networks of activists and enhance them and thus "augment dissent" (Lokot, 2016). Moreover, the affordances of digital media allow political activists to listen to their audience and to adjust their strategies accordingly (Karpf, 2016). The

affordances provide activists with an opportunity to control their visibility and content (Youmans & York, 2012; Zajácz, 2013). By examining how activists combine platform affordances, we can analyse the factors that determine the sustainability of their practices. However, one should always distinguish between the affordances of different platforms as they are not universal.

Many of the theories I rely on in this research are developed in the tradition of social movement studies. The research into activism through the lenses of SMOs can help to avoid the common pitfalls of studying non-democratic countries (Greene, 2014). In particular, social movement theory recognises the importance of the political context. It helps to highlight what shapes the processes of democratisation, organisational development or digitally-enabled collective action. Therefore, social movement studies add important nuances to the narratives of democratisation and political participation literature.

Political participation, along with social movement literature, is concerned with a broad shift in how political organising unfolds and how leaders of digitally-enabled political groups emerge. Some authors discuss the emergence of "hybrid" organisational forms that help political actors to contest power in the digital age (Bennett et al., 2017; Chadwick, 2013; Karpf, 2014; Wells, 2015). A few authors propose more nuanced conceptualisations of effective organising that results from the adoption of digital communication strategies. They include the concepts of digital party (Gerbaudo, 2019), nerd politics (Postill, 2018), analytic activism (Karpf, 2016), connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and connective party (Bennett et al., 2017), as well as the modified SPIN model (Gerlach, 2001). For instance, Postill's (2018) concept of "nerd politics" highlights the importance of skills, crowdsourcing and organisational segmentation for political activism. Similar to the models of nerd politics and SPIN organisation, the connective action theory emphasises the significance of the response to external conditions, long-term adaptations and resource mobilisation for SMO.

Likewise, the conceptualisations of political action and political activism in the digital age also vary. The theory of cloud activism argues that the "political" is hidden on the level of micro-actions in the digital space (Milan, 2015a). "Staunch[ly] anti-authoritarian" techno-political nerds (Postill, 2018) work on backstage and lead the collective action of thousands of people as digital platform administrators. Marketing activists (Poell et al., 2016) also operate on backstage using their professional marketing and branding skills and techniques. Though these concepts explain how political

activism functions on digital platforms, they often do not elaborate on activists'
motivations, trajectories and internal organising mechanisms.

The issue of organisation is closely related to leadership. Many recent digitally-enabled
organisations appeal to a broader audience by their promise to build leaderless and
horizontal structures (Gerbaudo, 2017c, p. 186). However, examples of techno-political
nerds, marketing activists and digital vanguards (Gerbaudo, 2017c), who often perform
the roles of spokespeople for their allegedly leaderless organisations, demonstrate that it
is difficult to avoid the emergence of leaders if a movement relies heavily on platforms
(Kavada, 2012). Indeed, those spokespeople and administrators may become dominant
actors in an SMO (Gerbaudo, 2017c). While some authors suggest that the affordances
of platforms are supportive of the leaderless structures ideal (Chadwick, 2013, p. 44),
others argue that leaderless can be just the rhetorical construct (Flesher Fominaya, 2015;
Poell et al., 2016). Rather, the narratives of a leaderless or horizontal organisation can
be "strategically deployed" (Postill, 2018) to avoid a leader's persecution in the difficult
circumstances, for example, of preemptive authoritarianism (Silitski, 2005). What unites
different approaches to leadership is an understanding that the traditional perspectives
on social movements do not explain the nature of organising and connecting in a
digitally-enabled organisation sufficiently.

Before concluding the discussion of the literature, I point out two common features that
most of the reviewed studies miss. First, many studies of the democratic potential of
digital media were not assessed for other countries except a few western democracies.
These studies often focus on democratic English-speaking countries or are based on
English-language content and sources (della Porta, 2013; Filer and Fredheim, 2016;
Meng and Rantanen, 2015). This is ironic because the current discussion around the use
of digital platforms for political change received one of its largest impulses from the
2009-2012 protest events in non-democracies. Unfortunately, the later developments in
these countries seemed to be disregarded by many students of digital politics and social
movements.

Second, similar criticism may be applied to the sampling of digital platforms in many of
the reviewed studies. These studies' conclusions were often observed only for Twitter
or Facebook but are not tested for other social networks. This implies that the
assumption of platform universality drives many of the reviewed theories. However, by
focusing exclusively on one type of sources or contexts, we risk disregarding the

complex variety of the uses of media (Filer and Fredheim, 2016, p. 14) in different contexts.

2.5.2 Three challenges of digital dissidents

The literature review also allows to identify and classify common challenges faced by activists from opposition and dissident groups that rely on digital platforms in non-democracies. They are persecution, surveillance and censorship.

First, repression is the most common type of reaction of authoritarian states on protest activities (Cai, 2010; della Porta, 2014; Grimm & Harders, 2018; Sika, 2019). The Belarusian and Russian states continuously persecute dissident organisations and activists (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017b; United States Department of State, 2019a). Activists can be arrested, prosecuted, jailed and, in a few cases, even lose their lives. In 2017, the European Court of Human Rights issued a record number of rulings concerning the violation of human rights in Russia (Belarus is not even a member of the Court). Every fourth decision of the Court was made in relation to Russia (Council of Europe. Committee of Ministers, 2018). As recently as 2017, thousands of people were arrested and tried for participation in protests and other political activity in Russia and Belarus (Amnesty International, 2017, 2018). The leaders of these protests are often the first targets. For example, Alexei Navalny spent some 60 days in jail in 2017. The chief of staff of his campaigning organisation, Leonid Volkov, spent 65 days in jail in the same year. Thus, the persecution of leadership is a significant challenge faced by digital dissidents.

Second, authoritarian states apply legal and illegal methods to monitor dissidents' movements and to intercept their electronic communication. The reports by local human rights groups suggest that the states increasingly place their political opponents under surveillance. "The Russian state had, in recent years, organised a complex system of monitoring and surveillance of civic activists, independent journalists and the political opposition" (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017b). The state tries to intercept electronic communication by using covert audio and video surveillance. In particular, surveillance practices are enabled by platform algorithms and internet service providers (ISPs) that are used to monitor and filter web-traffic.

The security services of the two countries monitor web-traffic by using an elaborate system of digital surveillance called SORM (Aliaksandrau, 2013). The government requires every ISP and all social media platforms operating in Russia to install SORM

monitoring equipment (Ahmed et al., 2018, p. 59). Soldatov & Borogan (2015) argue that this mass system allowed the monitoring of phone calls or web-traffic. In addition, surveillance on digital platforms is promoted in conjunction with market logic (Helmond, 2015; Stockmann, 2013; van Dijck, 2013b). In Russia, the most popular social media platforms such as VK and OK "have been placed under the control of oligarchs loyal to the Kremlin" (Filer & Fredheim, 2016, p. 12). In contrast to large global companies such as Google or Microsoft, these pro-Kremlin owners of digital platforms implement all the surveillance technologies required by the state. Surveillance is one of key challenges faced by digital dissidents.

Third, digital dissidents face censorship. Mainstream traditional media like television, radio and most newspapers do not broadcast the points of view of digital dissidents in Belarus and Russia. When the state censors traditional media, activists should find an alternative way to approach their audience (Stein, 2016b, p. 23). An obvious solution is to turn to digital platforms. However, in contrast to earlier periods, many authoritarian states have recognised the potential of the internet and put multiple constraints on the dissemination of alternative information online (Gunitsky, 2015). In addition, the police monitor some platforms and prosecute people who share political content on local platforms (Meduza, 2016). Hence, dissidents are limited in their means of information dissemination, and this affects their capacity for attracting new followers.

2.5.3 Research questions

I focus on active citizens who oppose restrictions on political organising and who combine their media, political and technological skills and resources to advocate for pro-democracy changes in authoritarian states. These citizens are neither crowds nor atomised dissidents. They are part of anti-authoritarian movements. Anti-authoritarian movements use digital media platforms to organise themselves, select and protect their leaders, as well as to distribute their messages. These are the key organising and information processes in such movements. These processes are shaped by two important contextual factors: authoritarian digital politics and the mechanisms of digital platforms. The mechanisms of platforms are studied from the perspective of their affordances - the actions that digital technologies facilitate or make possible (Tufekci, 2017). Thus, the central concepts of my study are the use of digital media, the forms of organising and leading and the mechanisms of information distribution. Together they constitute the main research question of the dissertation:

How does the use of digital media influence the forms of organisation and leadership and the mechanisms of information distribution in anti-authoritarian movements?

The processes of political organising are affected profoundly by the rapid transformation of political and media systems. Some of those processes contribute to the emergence of new combinations of organisational and leadership forms (Bennett et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018; Postill, 2018). These combinations change media and politics across many countries. Hence, the first additional question that directs the examination of these forms is:

1. What forms of organisation and leadership emerge in anti-authoritarian movements that rely on digital media?

In the context of authoritarian digital politics, active citizens can both benefit and suffer from the affordances of digital media. For example, activists can enhance their visibility and perform their activities faster and at a larger scale by using digital platforms (Earl & Kimport, 2011). However, the authoritarian state also uses affordances to establish its control of the online realm, to impose censorship on activist content and to monitor political opponents (Gunitsky, 2015; Oates, 2008). In order to consider how the use of digital media influences the organising and information processes in anti-authoritarian movements, the affordances of these media should be identified. Thus, the second additional question addressed by the dissertation is:

2. What are the affordances of digital media that shape the processes of political organising and information distribution in an authoritarian political context?

Third, activists do not normally use just one platform to organise and distribute messages. They combine digital platforms in larger structures that I define as communication infrastructures. To understand how anti-authoritarian movements can successfully combine platforms and their affordances, the study asks:

3. What is the role played by different platforms in the communication infrastructures of anti-authoritarian movements?

Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter, I provide the rationale for selecting the cases and choosing data collection methods for this mixed-method research: in-depth interviews, participant observation and a set of content analysis methods. I also describe how I drew the sample, collected and analysed data. Finally, I discuss methodological challenges, limitations and ethical dilemmas.

I started this project in an attempt to develop my previous analytical and practical work in the field of digital activism. I hoped to investigate several cases of political campaigning on social media platforms in authoritarian countries. My aim was to explore how political organisation evolves with the advancement of digital technologies with a specific focus on authoritarian settings that are characterised by state surveillance, censorship and persecution of activists. I was engaged in this topic since my BA studies in political science and throughout my practical involvement in media work and civic organisations in the region.

I chose to expand my study to Belarus and Russia, two countries with similar media and political conditions. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, Belarus and Russia have rather similar technological and digital media settings, as well as many characteristics of political systems and cultural features.

3.1 Selecting the cases

Many studies analysing the relationships between digital platforms and social movements focus on particular groups during particular periods of times with the emphasis on critical events such as massive protests (Baron, 2014, p. 127). At the point of choosing Belarus and Russia as the main national contexts of my research, I did not specify what activist groups I would study. I was looking for groups that used digital platforms actively. Such groups should have initiated a campaign with a clear aim at influencing the public agenda, decision-making process and, possibly, at triggering a systemic change in their political systems. Such campaigns could potentially provide enough data for the analysis of organising and communication under repressive pressure.

When the second year of my PhD project had just begun, two significant events happened in Belarus and Russia. First, the Anti-tax movement, perhaps the largest movement in the last two decades, emerged in Belarus. Second, shortly after the Anti-tax movement grew as a significant political power, Russian activist Alexei Navalny

published on YouTube an investigation and a report into the Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev's alleged corruption. This investigation helped to mobilize many thousands of people across Russia for the largest in many years protest campaign (Kara-Murza, 2017). These events have defined my project.

I started to follow two groups behind these events. The first group was well-resourced, innovative and experienced: Navalny's anti-corruption professionals in Russia. The second group was the activists of the Anti-tax campaign in Belarus, who were much less advanced in their knowledge of technologies and politics. This group is also known as the movement of "social parasites." Despite this knowledge gap, the two groups displayed a similar ability to shape the public agendas of their countries. These two organisations also managed to challenge their political regimes. This challenge has partly resulted in similar repressive responses from the governments.

The two cases were large-scale and long-term political campaigns. I was specifically interested in the initial protest stages of these campaigns in February and March of 2017. This interest was associated with the results of the mobilisations that were described as the most geographically dispersed series of protests in Belarus (Herasimenka, 2017) and Russia (Kara-Murza, 2017; Kashin, 2017) since the early 1990s[3]. Thus, the Anti-corruption and the Anti-tax organisations became one of the most significant political events of their countries in 2017. Therefore, an opportunity to collect in-depth data about their organising structures and digital infrastructure was a rare one for the places where political life is highly restricted.

The selected cases yielded unexpected outcomes and represented exceptions to the recent rule of pro-democracy campaigning failure in their countries. Greene (2014, p. 105) suggests that studying the exceptions to the rule can yield a better understanding of the rule itself. According to Patton (2002, p. 232), such unusual or extreme case purposeful sampling approach helps to learn lessons about the outcomes that are relevant to improving more typical conditions such as other cases of political campaigning. Therefore, my study uses the extreme case purposeful sampling approach because it helps to observe unusual patterns of contentious political campaigning.

I realised that Navalny and the Anti-tax organisations were the two units for analysis that fit the research design and goals of my project well. When the spring of 2017 came,

---

[3] A number of large-scale protest mobilisations happened in Belarus and Russia during and immediately following the events of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement in 2010-2012. The mobilisations in Belarus and Russia were partly inspired by those events (Bulhakau & Dynko, 2011; Karatzogianni, 2015).

I immediately seized the opportunity and went first to Belarus and then to Russia to explore the two organisations. I was lucky because the periods of my visits appeared to be the peaks of the campaigns' activities. This subsequently made the spring and the summer of 2017 the most active periods of my fieldwork.

To the author's knowledge, the organisations have not been systematically analysed in the social movement or digital politics literature so far. To address this gap, I chose descriptive cases study as the main approach to the analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 447) of the organisations. The case study approach fits the goal of a focused, detailed investigation of the two movement-like organisations well. Snow & Trom (2002, p. 147) define case study as

> (a) investigation and analysis of an instance or variant of some bounded social phenomenon that (b) seek to generate a richly retailed and "thick" elaboration of the phenomenon studied through (c) the use and triangulation of multiple methods or procedures that include but are not limited to qualitative techniques.

When studying SMOs, the research design based on case study can help to "generate richly detailed and holistic accounts of" such movements, their actions, events organised by them and their communication processes (Snow & Trom, 2002, p. 151). My research project is focused on several cases that are bounded by a common theme of digitally-enabled political campaigning in non-democratic settings. It examines the nature of the activists' organising and interactions within a limited period in relation to several social phenomena such as state censorship, persecution, surveillance and platformisation of politics. The project triangulates several methods that, according to Snow & Trom, allows a detailed and holistic understanding of the studied phenomena. Therefore, my research strategy contains all the main elements of the case study approach that follows Snow & Trom's definition.

Case study is often associated with inductive research (Lofland, 1996). As it became evident from my literature review, the central aspects of this research project – the practices of the backstage use of digital media for organising and communication – have not been theorised extensively enough for the circumstances of an authoritarian regime. This means a solid theoretical basis that could be tested through a deductive approach is not available in my case. Therefore, my approach to the study is necessarily inductive. Inductive research can contribute with a theory that evolves from the previous case studies of similar phenomena and other theories within social movement studies, digital politics and platform studies.

3.2 Choice of methods, data collection and analysis

In this section, I discuss the choice of each method of my study and demonstrate how I used them. Despite the variety of the literatures on digital activism, knowledge about the use of digital media by activists and dissidents in non-democracies is scarce. My inquiry into the use of digital platforms was one of the first such studies related to the Anti-tax and the Anti-corruption campaigns of 2017 in Belarus and Russia. Therefore, fact-finding and description were needed before I could take the challenge of exploration (King et al., 1994, p. 15). The choice of my methods is directed by this need for descriptive inference. My interesting in activist backstage practices are directed by the debates on the role of formal organisation and on the ways to address censorship and surveillance. Hence, I hoped to gain insight into the backstage workings of the activist communities, revealing, when possible, hidden layers of their organisational processes, communication infrastructures, as well as strategies and tactics of dealing with the challenges of authoritarian communication space and of promotion of pro-democracy ideas.

Specifically, I was interested in gaining insights into the process of organising, which is often a more difficult object to study than organisation. Moreover, taking into account the environment where the campaigns were conducted, organising is also a secretive process. I tried to reveal this process as much as possible, taking into consideration the ethical issues and my own safety.

Following the suggestion of Snow & Trom (2002, p. 153) for the case study research, I stayed open and flexible to the adoption of different methodologies depending on the exigencies of the field. From the beginning of my project, I intended to employ several research methods. The use of multiple or mixed methods is "a recommended strategy both for studying new media and for investigating social movements" (Kavada, 2007, p. 98). When the data gathering opportunity opened in the spring of 2017, I adopted a predominantly qualitative research strategy that would suit the inductive and explanatory nature of my study. This strategy should also allow me to examine complex political processes associated with the two organisations and to focus on their core members. In general, a more qualitative approach is typical for the studies of the core members of social movements (Kavada, 2018). Therefore, the choice of methods derives both from the research questions and the most appropriate approaches to the study of the field.

In terms of chronological order, I employed the methods in the following way. First, I searched for the pages of the two organisations on social media platforms to identify their internal communication and organising spaces as well as pages that broadcasted their messages to their external audience. During this stage, I also tried to determine the movements' possible core activists to contact them later for interviews. This allowed me to select the platforms and activist pages for the analysis. Second, I started monitoring those pages closely, making fieldnotes and identifying possible key users of the pages. Third, I used this information, along with the data from preliminary expert in-depth interviews that I started recording at this stage, to determine the final sample of content to analyse as well as an initial sample for in-depth interviews. I then collected social media data and started looking for contacts of people identified in my sample during the previous steps. Fourth, during the fieldwork, I conducted interviews as well as some participant observation when possible. Finally, upon returning from the fieldwork, I collected supplementary materials to perform features, textual and network analysis as well as analysis of documents.

3.2.1 In-depth interviews

I chose in-depth, qualitative interviews with activists involved in the coordinating and disseminating information about the two organisations as a key method of gaining insight into their internal workings. Specifically, I focused on the core activists responsible for the overall organisation nationally and locally, as well as on people who managed digital platform accounts of the two organisations. I also included in the sample rank-and-file activists involved in the dissemination of information on social media.

In-depth interviews are useful in studies that attempt to explore, discover and interpret complex social processes. They permit the emergence of themes and meanings that are not anticipated by a researcher (Blee & Taylor, 2002, p. 94). Along with other qualitative methods used in my project, qualitative interviews are common in studies that are focused on practices of digital activism (e.g. Mattoni, 2013), affordance of digital platforms (e.g Lokot, 2016) and organising (e.g. Toepfl, 2017). While quantitative methods are "difficult to use for the purpose of collecting information in nondemocracies settings," qualitative methods, interviews, in particular, might be easier to conduct in such settings (Reny, 2016, pp. 910–911). For instance, when studying protests, the scholars interested in non-democracies often do not have access to detailed and transparent police reports or other unbiased data about protests (Reny, 2016, p.

915). In these circumstances, interviews with witnesses of protests might be the only way scholars can get limited access to alternative narratives.

In relation to my research, interviews open a path for the exploring activists' perceptions, motivations, strategies as well as obtaining data about their organising and information dissemination processes. By analysing interviews, I hoped to learn how activists perceive and explain their organisational and platform choices, the development of their communities, how they engage in the communication with the public online. Interviews also informed about the general architecture of the activists' online campaigns. Information biases that might be associated with interviews are reduced by the mixed-methods design of this research. In addition, I tried to make the sample of interviewees as comprehensive as possible and representative of potential interpretations. For example, when seeking to confirm information received from several public leaders of the movements, I also tried to receive separate accounts from rank-and-file activists who had different levels of practical knowledge and skills about the same events or phenomena. This helped to increase the validity of the data.

I conducted in-depth interviews in two stages. First, I organised a number of pilot expert interviews and several interviews with rank-and-file activists. The expert interviews were preliminary in nature with a reduced set of questions asked. "Pilot projects are often very useful, especially where data must be gathered by interviewing," suggest King, Keohane, & Verba (1994, p. 22). The pilot interviews were aimed at understanding the background of the studied processes, national media and political contexts and building the sample for the second, main stage of interviewing as well as for other methods. I used pilot expert interviews to find new contacts and to improve my contextual understanding of the political and media environments of the two counties. Specifically, I focused on the interviewees' perceptions of the state's control of the online realm. I also asked about possible activists' response to the state's strategies and tactics to control it. This data substituted the missing links between the literature review, mostly based on the studies of other political contexts, and the practices of digital dissidents in Belarus and Russia. I also used these pilot interviews to alter the research questions and to design interviews with campaign participants. Following each interview, I revised the interview guide to reflect new issues revealed during the previous conversations. Thus, during this stage of interviewing, I was able to shape the research design of the fieldwork.

Nine expert interviews with media professionals, political analysts, ICT security and NGO experts from Belarus and Russia helped me to map the field and the context of digital media, political system and the recent history of local social movements. I selected participants for expert interviews through purposeful sampling based on my prior knowledge of their background, their knowledge of the media and political contexts of Belarus and Russia and recommendations of other experts. This first stage involved the experts who have worked with media, civic and political organisation in Belarus and Russia for more than 10 years. They all had experience as activists, but, at this stage, I approached them as experts. Most of the experts interviewed for this sample followed the Anti-tax and the Navalny organisations closely.

The second stage of the interviewing process was the main set of interviews. I started it when I obtained enough data from the participants in the first stage of interviews. As I have already noted, interviews may be easier to conduct in non-democratic settings than most of the other methods. Nevertheless, it was still difficult to access some activist interviewees. Several strategies helped me to gain this access. First, my position as an insider to the field, especially in the case of Belarus, helped me a lot. For example, when communicating with potential interviewees, I used the Belarusian language rather than Russian. The users of this language are considered to be marginalised and oppressed group in Belarus (Belarusian Language Society, 2012)[4]. Lokot (2016, p. 89) notes that when doing research of activism in the post-soviet area, the choice of a native language instead of Russian can help to demonstrate to interviewees that a researcher "understands many of the contextual cues easily." My language also served as proof of my independent credentials.

Second, in Russia, in contrast to Belarus, I represented myself as a foreign researcher from the UK only. Reny (2016, p. 918) suggests that oppressed groups in non-democratic societies are more likely to be open when speaking with a foreign researcher "than the ones who are fully co-opted by the political system." Indeed, the status of a foreigner and my accent gave me an opportunity to present myself as a neutral novice in Russian politics.

Third, following another advice by Reny (2016, p. 918), I tried to make some of my communication more informal. Informality also helped me to build rapport with people who previously went through painful experiences in other interviews. When I came for

---

[4] I am also a user of this language.

the interview with one of the Anti-tax activists who spent several years in a Belarusian prison for his political activity, it seemed like the activists first felt very uncomfortable when talking to me. For the first time in many years of conducting interviews, I felt like a policeman questioning a suspect. This situation required turning the conversation towards a more natural direction, which resulted in a successful interview.

Fourth, the location of the interviews was also vital. Many of them took place not in Belarus or Russia but in Lithuania. This allowed me to build trust with the interviewees as many of them often travel to Lithuania and consider this country a safer place where sensitive meetings can take place. I took part in a few of these meetings in Lithuania. Finally, I was persistent in attempts to access organising structures. For instance, I tried to connect with the coordinators of the central social media team of the Navalny organisation for a long time. It was at the height of its campaigning and a busy time for these people. The campaigners casually refused interview requests from the leading world media during that period. Only after attending several events organised by the core activists and interviewing its less prominent members, did I receive a chance to communicate informally with the key coordinators who, after all, finally agreed to give me an interview.

When selecting the participants for the main stage of the interviews, I used a snowballing approach to sampling, which is a typical sampling technique when interviewing activists in non-democracies (Art, 2016). Snowball sampling is an effective strategy when members of a small and defined community know each other, but are hard to reach (Mosca 2014, p. 409), can hide their identities and are less formally institutionalised (Blee, 2013, p. 624). Probability or random sampling could have been more representative and generalisable. However, this type of sampling was hard to envision in the circumstances of a small overall population of potential interviewees. In addition, my goal in doing interviews was not generalisation as much as an in-depth understanding of the organising practices and informal contexts. Combining the interview data with other data sets and other studies later helped me to extrapolate results (Weiss, 1995). Thus, my sampling approach to the interviews was purposeful snowball sampling.

This strategy of sampling suggests an initial selection of a small group of activists in accordance with specific criteria. To identify this group, I used the expert interviews, my personal network, the analysis of publications in media as well as campaign materials. Personal communication with activists from this small group helped me to

add to my sample further. At the end of each interview, I asked all the individuals I interviewed about their suggestions for potential interviewees. That is how the snowball sampling helped to reach less prominent activists. Table 3.1 introduces the affiliation of the interviewed persons.

Table 3.1

Anonymised name	Date of the interview	Affiliation
Respondent 1	March 13, 2017	A leading human rights advocate and political activist, a leader of a human rights organisation. Before 2015, they spent almost five years in prison for his activism.
Respondent 2	May 30, 2017	A researcher of a Ukrainian origin. They have been studying the use of social media by Russian and Ukrainian political activists during 2011-2013 protests in these countries, was part of a large social movement, and now is an expert in the Belarusian civil society and works for a large regional NGO.
Respondent 3	January 17, 2017	A digital security expert and a researcher who works with NGOs in non-democratic countries. Their experience involves working with Belarus, Ukraine and Central Asian countries.
Respondent 4	May 19, 2017	A political scientist, legal program coordinator a large NGO in Belarus. They specialise in the study of freedom of associations and were part of several dissident movements.
Respondent 5	January 18, 2017	Head of a large NGO. They are a person with a long-term experience of international human rights advocacy with a focus on Belarus
Respondent 6	August 7, 2017	A media activist and a monitoring specialist. They work for probably one of the most prominent human rights organisations in Russia. They monitor judicial proceedings that can be qualified as political persecution. In particular, they focus on the cases related to people who participated in anti-government rallies and were

persecuted for political posts on VK. They are also involved in a unique news website officially blocked in Russia and whose editor is located in Paris. This site is in the top-3 most influential news sites blocked in Russia. They were part of several prominent dissident movements.

Respondent 7	August 4, 2017	Co-chair of a prominent movement that played a crucial role in the previous waves of the protests in Russia
Respondent 8	January 21, 2017	A digital and media expert, editor-in-chief and co-founder of a prominent web-magazine. They consulted many Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian NGOs as to their online presence and security and was part of several dissident movements.
Respondent 9	March 13, 2017	A digital security expert who consults and teaches Belarusian and Russian activists. They travel to consult activists as far as Chechnya in Russia
Respondent 10	September 6, 2017	A member of the REP and the UDP. They are an activist from a small town in Belarus where they collected signatures to abolish the tax. They were one of the first activists who started the signature collection, and, as a result, contributed to the creation of a horizontal network of campaigners in the provinces. They also organised several large political actions related to the campaign.
Respondent 11	May 24, 2017	An activist, journalist, dissident. They spent several years in the Belarusian prison and were released from prison following Lukashenka's attempt to improve relations with the EU. They are one of the leaders of an anarchist movement in Belarus. They actively took part in the Anti-tax campaign, both in protests and online activities.
Respondent 12	September 9, 2017	One of the first and most popular political YouTube bloggers in Belarus. They took part in many gatherings of the Anti-tax campaign. Following the campaign, they

		were arrested and spent about 45 days in jail on different charges.
Respondent 13	September 7, 2017	A veteran journalist, they worked together with another interviewed activist. They participated in many rallies of the Anti-tax campaign and were detained when a crackdown on the campaign started.
Respondent 14	January 1, 2018	An administrator of the "Parasites" and "Social Dependents" group (PASD) on VK, which became one of the most prominent groups on social media dedicated to the Anti-tax movement.
Respondent 15	May 18, 2017	Press-secretary of one of the organisations that were part of the Anti-tax organisation
Respondent 16	September 5, 2017	One of the former leaders of one of the key organisations that contributed to the Anti-tax campaign. They were brutally detained by the police and spent the last 15 days of the campaign in jail. They were also one of the most active politicians who used the internet for political campaigning in Belarus since 2004.
Respondent 17	May 18, 2017	The head of one of the prominent organisations that contributed to the Anti-tax movement and one of the most prominent activists of the Anti-tax campaign. They were detained for a number of days following their participation in one of the demonstrations of the campaign.
Respondent 18	September 6, 2017	An activist of the Anti-tax campaign and the movement of the Belarusian election observers. They also a member of one of the key organisations of the Anti-tax movement. They actively worked online to promote the Anti-tax campaign and participated in its rallies
Respondent 19	September 7, 2017	The most prominent pollical blogger on YouTube in one of the provinces of Belarus, and one of the most prominent in Belarus. They were detained during the

		Anti-tax campaign, which he actively covered on his blog.
Respondent 20	April 24, 2017	A political activist, journalist and social media platforms specialist at one of the media that covered the Anti-tax campaign. They were located in Minsk and were responsible for the media's content coverage on digital platforms during the Anti-tax campaign
Respondent 21	September 1, 2017	They call themselves a "civic-social" activist. They were one of the key figures behind the platform infrastructure of the Anti-tax movement. They were also involved in many other civic projects in Belarus and Ukraine.
Respondent 22	September 2, 2017	A human rights defender, a lawyer of a prominent Anti-tax organisation and a legal organisation which focuses on human rights defence and advocacy in the legal dimension.
Respondent 23	August 14, 2017	A volunteer who was responsible for the YouTube content of one of the offices of the Navalny organisation. They coordinated the efforts of the local campaign in video production such as weekly programs and small news features.
Respondent 24	April 24, 2017	An activist from one of the local towns in Russia who coordinated the organisation of the 26 March Anti-corruption rally in that town. This town became one of few places where the Anti-corruption campaign rallies were officially agreed with the local authorities.
Respondent 25	June 11, 2017	The head of the Navalny campaign in one of the Russian provinces during the protest campaign of the 26th of March. Besides working with Navalny's organisation, they were also involved in the issues of political prisoners in Russia and human rights campaigning in Belarus. They worked and volunteered for different NGOs in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

Respondent 26	August 14, 2017	The head of a local Navalny office in one of the Russian provinces, an activist for his political campaigns since 2013
Respondent 27	August 14, 2017	The social media specialist of a local Navalny office in one of the Russian provinces. They were responsible for the social media pages of a local campaign. They joined the organisation in February 2017.
Respondent 28	August 10, 2017	The coordinator of the Navalny campaign in one of the Russian regions. They are a close associate of Navalny since 2012. They came with the idea of the first regular YouTube show of the campaign.
Respondent 29	August 10, 2017	The deputy coordinator of the Navalny campaign in one of the Russian regions
Respondent 30	August 15, 2017	A leader of the Navalny organisation
Respondent 31	August 15, 2017	A leader of the Navalny organisation
Respondent 32	May 25, 2017	Head of the Navalny organisation in a Russian province
Respondent 33	May 25, 2017	Head of the Navalny organisation in a Russian province

When I started the snowball sampling of activists, I first turned to experts and practitioners related to the media industry and campaigning. This allowed me to start with a broader picture and then try to build a more in-depth depiction of their organisational structure. After this, I focused only on the population affiliated to the two organisations such as its public leaders, regional coordinators, social media specialists or rank-and-file activists.

The type of an actor and their perceived direct knowledge of coordination and social media operations of the organisations served as primary criteria for the selection of interviewees. Besides experts, I aimed at including three types of activist actors. Table 3.2 presents their classification. I included in the sample at least three representatives of

each type. These types of actors represent different levels of a possible organisational hierarchy, as well as diverse levels of engagement with digital platforms. Still, all of the interviewed activists were related to the organising or dissemination of information through digital platforms. I also ensured that I included major actors associated with the organisations. In this respect, the structures of the samples for the Anti-tax and the Anti-corruption campaigns were different due to the differences in their organisational models. The Anti-corruption campaign initially looked like a vertically integrated organisation with easily identifiable coordinating structures.

By contrast, the Anti-tax campaign was more fluid and indefinite in its organisational model. It made the task of identifying its coordinating structures much harder. Therefore, I initially tried to interview representatives of all the actor types involved in the Anti-tax campaign and then focused on less institutionalised actors such as local vloggers or more covert groups such as anarchist communities. These less institutionalised actors appeared to be specifically active in information dissemination. I also interviewed the representatives of the key organisational members of the initial Anti-tax coalition (the United Civic Party and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) and the Movement for Freedom), which was the only formal structure emerging during this campaign (Appendix 4). Overall, my interviews of the participants of the Anti-tax campaign involved representatives of seven organisations and groups.

Table 3.2

Types of the interviewees

Type of actor	Examples
Leader of an organisation/branch/ office	- The coordinator of the Navalny organisation in a Russian province; - One of the leaders of the Movement for Freedom (Belarus).
Social media coordinator	- The social media coordinator of the Navalny organisation in a Russian province; - Social media coordinator of an organisation that was part of the Anti-tax campaign; - Head of the social media unit of the Navalny organisation.
Local digital activist of an organisation	- An activist of the Anti-tax campaign in a Belarusian province; - An activist of the Navalny organisation in a Russian province; - A popular political YouTube vlogger and one of the most prominent activists of the Anti-tax campaign in South Belarus.
Media and/or political expert	- A media activist, journalist and human rights expert from Moscow; - A digital security expert who consults Belarusian and Russian activists; - Head of a human rights NGO.

After fulfilling these minimum criteria, I proceeded with the interviews until I realised that the interviewees started providing similar information and narratives as the previous ones. After the final interview showed that the topic was saturated (Blee & Taylor, 2002), I stopped the interviewing process.

In terms of geographical representation, I specifically focused on the diversity of the Russian case. Russia is a very big country with different media patterns of the

population depending on the region. Thus, the Navalny organisation sample included activists from six regions across Russia: St Petersburg in Northern Russia, Rostov-on-Don in Southern Russia, Moscow and Nizhniy Novgorod in Central European Russia, Ufa in the Ural region on the border between the European part of Russia and Siberia and Chelyabinsk in Siberia.

The resulting sample consists of 33 interviews with the leaders of both organisations, ordinary activists who collaborated with the organisations, as well as experts and professionals. It includes 13 interviews with the representatives of the Anti-tax organisation, 11 interviews with Navalny organisation's representatives and nine expert interviews. The interviews lasted from 20 to 110 minutes. Interviews were conducted between January 2017 and January 2018. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Russian or Belarusian languages face-to-face as part of the fieldwork in Belarus, Russia (the summer of 2018) and in Lithuania. The interview venues were usually chosen by the interviewees. I recorded the interviews using a digital voice recorder. The identity of the interviewees was not disclosed to protect them. Verbal consent was received from all of them and was recorded using a digital voice recorder. I did not ask for written consent, as this procedure could jeopardise the security of my interviewees. Therefore, while the written consent form was prepared prior to the fieldwork (Appendix 2), I did not use the form and explained the issue of consent verbally. See Table 3.1 for the full list of the anonymised names of the interviewees.

Based on the literature review and some preliminary analysis of the activists' communication materials, I designed a semi-structured interview guide that I followed during the interviews. Depending on the level of an interviewee's involvement in an organisation, the questions in the guide were tailored prior to each interview to emphasize the particular aspect of their practices and experience with an organisation (see Appendix 1 for the indicative interview questions). My guide was enriched with new issues emerging from previous interviews.

My questions were focused on the personal background of activists, their involvement in the groups, as well as practices of their use of internet platforms. I aimed at gathering more information to explain how the use of social media platforms by activists contributed to the outcome of their campaigns. I asked the interviewees about their perception of their main challenges; their strategies of overcoming those challenges; their use of digital platforms; their organisational structures and involvement in the protest organisation; their perception of the outcomes of those protests; their personal

experiences, motivations and backgrounds. I also asked whether they followed the other studied organisation and what other potential interviewees they can recommend. A typical interview included my self-presentation, explanation of the research, discussion of consent and the request for permission to use a voice recorder.

The transcripts of all the interviews were prepared based on the need to extract data from the interviews and the attitudes of the interviewees to the discussed problems. The interviews were transcribed in MS Word. The transcripts are not included in the thesis but could be provided upon request. The transcripts were uploaded on NVivo software and analysed using thematic analysis. The main categories for the analysis were identified based on the literature review and were enhanced and improved by each new interview coded. I began analysing data as "it is being collected" (Blee & Taylor, 2002, p. 110), which provoked corrections in the interview guide, the direction of sampling and the themes and categories of the analysis.

I followed the coding guidelines for inductive social movement research advised by Mattoni (2014) in relation to the study of social movements. These guidelines allowed a more systematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This approach to coding involves three coding methods: open coding, axial coding and focused coding. First, during the sessions of open coding, I broke down the texts into small segments. Each segment received several codes based on the theoretical themes emerging from my study. Second, when my research entered a more advanced stage, I recombined the segments into a broader grouping around the same analytical category. These broader groupings can be generalised into four theoretical categories presented in many studies: "conditions, interactions, strategies/tactics and consequences" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The use of the NVivo software helped me to perform this second method of coding. Third, I moved to another level of abstraction and elaborated more general categories that acquired a significant role in my analysis.

For example, after open coding of some of the interview transcripts with the Russian digital activists and experts, I realised that the Telegram platform has facilitated specific interactions between actors who were looking to develop strategies and tactics to overcome the challenges of authoritarian political communication. Therefore, I focused on the different codes associated with the use of Telegram. I was already aware that Telegram facilitates a different style of interaction than other platforms. However, it was only during axial coding when "the interactions on Telegram for organising" emerged as a relevant concept. This concept helped me to link public attention that this

platform received recently to coordination and information circulation. "The interactions on Telegram for organising" later emerged as a core category of my study that described the linkages between different groups of the Navalny organisation as well as a category that explained many of its practices. Therefore, during the focused coding process, I elaborated a more general category as one of the core categories of the research that otherwise might not be emphasized.

3.2.2 Participant observation

The use of digital platforms is at the centre of my research. Both organisations were active users of multiple platforms ranging from conventional and well-known in western countries, such as Facebook and YouTube, to more local platforms OK, VK and Telegram. I aimed at getting a comprehensive picture of the organisations. Therefore, to understand how they work together, I had to study the key practices associated with this variety of platforms. Van Dijck (2013b, p. 26) suggests that "if we restrict our perspective to one or two specific elements or one or two specific platforms […] - we can hardly grasp the mutual shaping of social media." She suggests applying "integrative analytical approach" to the study of the variety of platforms used by political actors. Hence, I analysed the platform pages of the two organisations as part of their digital communication infrastructures with the methods that could help to build an integrated picture of their use and would require fewer resources.

One of the methods that help to build an integrated picture of platform use is participant observation. This approach usually requires a physical presence in the field. However, my research is focused on the organisations that are significant political phenomena happening in primarily online settings of digital platforms. Thus, in addition to physical locations, my research field is digital platforms as well (Hine, 2012). These considerations led me to the research design that combines offline ethnographic observation with my virtual presence on the platforms of the studied organisations. Therefore, before the interviews, I conducted short periods of informal observation of online activities of the two studied organisations and, during the fieldwork, physical observation.

This online participant observation and the fieldwork in Russia and Belarus lasted for seven months before, during and after the protest of February - September 2017 in both countries. I chose the offline sites for observation based on the locations of the campaign offices in the case of Russia and on the opportunity to observe the actions of the activists related to the Anti-tax campaign in the case of Belarus. The online sites for

observation were chosen according to the criteria discussed in Section 3.2.3 of this chapter.

I studied this online field remotely based on my previous experience in local communities that are managed by activists. This online observation approach has recently become more widespread (Postill, 2017) as technologies offer new ways of engaging with the emergent research environment (Pink et al., 2016). For instance, Gray (2016) discusses "following" rather than "researching" the protest movement in Russia in 2011-2012 by means of text, images and video materials. That is how she describes her experience as an anthropologist who followed the protests online:

> I could see through their photos and videos, I could perceive through their descriptions, and I could triangulate among their tweets to get depth perception around the action as it unfolded. And beyond this, I obtained an assemblage of interpretations that are culturally informed, rich testimonies to the creative ways that Russians use irony and humor, literary and historical allusion. (Gray, 2016, p. 508)

This remote approach is not just about the opportunity to access a field, often in real time, which is otherwise not available physically due to reasons like the safety of doing research in possibly hazardous locations. Remote fieldwork often helps to observe familiar things from a different perspective. This approach creates a more productive engagement with objects of our interest (Gray, 2016). At the same time, I followed the basic conventions of participant observation such as "watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions" (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 2) but "in mediated contact with participants rather than indirect presence" (Pink et al., 2016, p. 3). Watching thus became digitally tracking of activist infrastructures while listening happened mainly through reading and making sense of communication (Pink et al., 2016, p. 3). Thus, remote observation aided the process of studying the specifics of communication spaces where activists interact every day.

Observation also opened a way for collection of both qualitative and quantitative data such as basic metrics of the activists' platform presence (Patriarche et al., 2014, p. 154). In addition, it allowed me to explore contexts, to gain an in-depth understanding of the organisations' internal workings and made it easier to find people to interview. Moreover, following observation and interviews, remarkable textual and visual fragments of campaign materials were identified in order to be analysed by supplementary methods.

I started my observation of the Anti-tax campaign in February 2017 when its first collective action happened and finished in March 2017. I started observing the Navalny organisation three weeks after the launch of the Anti-tax campaign when the activists published a video investigation that contributed to the mobilisation for its rallies. The observation of the Navalny organisation lasted until the end of my physical fieldwork in September 2017 with breaks in May, June and July. I observed and recorded the content published on the accounts of the two organisations on digital platforms. The detailed discussion of these accounts and their content is presented in the following section. During the process of observation, I kept fieldnotes about the observed platform interactions. In addition, based on the recommended practices of online observation (Hine, 2012, p. 46), I archived those interactions making screenshots. I discuss the process of making screenshots in the following sections. All the collected text and visual data were saved and archived during the period of the study.

Online observation was conducted on VK, OK, Telegram, YouTube and Facebook. The offline observation was conducted in Moscow, St Petersburg, Minsk, Vilnius, Brest, Homel and Nizhny Novgorod. I used every opportunity to meet a person of interest when they became available, so I travelled extensively. I observed and participated in some of the campaigners' meetings, workshops, informal discussions and events. Still, my offline observation was limited. For security reasons, I could not observe public events such as rallies or other interactions of the campaigners with the public outside of their offices. Thus, in Russia, I conducted my observation inside the campaigners' offices. In Belarus, the Anti-tax organisation had no offices, and few formal structures were available for physical observation. Therefore, in the case of this country, I restricted my participation almost exclusively to the online space. Still, I observed a few organisational meetings of the actors related to the Anti-tax campaign in Vilnius, Lithuania. This was done for my preliminary informal observation.

Based on the data received from participant observation such as fieldnotes, as well as the lists and tables of relevant communities and platforms features observed, I was able to proceed with the analysis of the organisations using other methods. I used the tables and lists organised during my observation to design the use and samples for content analysis. Observation, thus, became a first step in the analysis of the studied phenomena and contributed to the description of the process for case study. I used the fieldnotes to produce an in-depth case study description (Patton, 2002, p. 438) of the backgrounds and organisational operations of the two organisations. This description helped to open up a world where the activists live and act. The observation data also helped me to

describe and analyse their collective action, and the Navalny campaigns' organisational culture. The episodes I recount through the dissertation and all the quotations without references come from many hours I spent as a participant-observer with the campaigners in Belarus and Russia.

3.2.3 Content analysis: Features analysis, textual analysis, analysis of documents and social network analysis

The methods that involve analysis of content - features analysis, analysis of documents and social network analysis - provided supplementary datasets. I discuss their choice, design and sample less extensively than the other two methods that were more central to the research. I approached the analysis of content through both qualitative and quantitative methods to study media.

I analysed the content of the activists' pages on digital media to explain some findings of the previous stages of the study, namely the role of platforms in the process of organising, to trace organisational linkages and to follow the flows of information. I also analysed social media content to examine the online context of the interviewees and clarify some of their assumptions and statements. Since I study essentially political organisations, some of the interviewees might act like politicians during the interviews, presenting reality in light of what they believe suits them best. Content analysis helped me to clarify and double check some of their statements and perceptions.

3.2.3.1 Selection of platforms

In summer 2017, it was relatively easy to identify what platforms the Navalny organisation used, who its public leaders were and what time period I should focus on. The names of its leaders were published elsewhere in the media, while the organisation advertised on its website all possible public accounts on social media platforms – VK, Twitter, OK, Facebook and YouTube. It was a bit more challenging to determine their platform(s) for internal communication and organising. I realised that Telegram was important for the organisation for the first time when I tried to reach out to its leaders to interview them. I soon figured out that Telegram was the best way to reach these people: once you had their mobile numbers (which were often available in the public domain), you could find them on Telegram. The activists of the organisation were quick in their response to my requests on Telegram – in contrast to usual communication on email or other messengers. Thus, I added Telegram to the scope of my research in Russia.

The time frame of the Navalny organisation that I analyse covers the period from 2 March 2017 (the date when the anti-corruption investigation was published in Russia) to 17 March 2018 (18 March 2018 was a day of the most important political event of the period – the presidential election in Russia). I specifically focus on the first stage of Navalny's campaigning that year – the Anti-corruption campaign between 2 March 2017 to 25 March 2017 (the last day of the preparations for its first series of national rallies on 26 March 2017).

The Anti-tax campaign in Belarus looked more cryptic. As I discuss in the results chapters, this campaign was dubbed as "leaderless" by the media, many of its activists and some experts. It was also not clear from media publications how the information about it was circulated. It had neither a website nor easily identifiable pages on social media. I had to "reverse engineer" that campaign online to understand its origins and its main organisational mechanisms. I used search engines to determine the scope of the analysis and the sample of social media pages, activist groups and individuals to include in the study. These search engines were Google, Yandex, as well as those embedded in social media platforms. For instance, I used search services like Google Image Search to locate the sources of campaign materials such as images, texts and discussions of the campaign. These services helped me to identify users and groups that initially discussed the possibility of protests online.

This approach helped to determine the scope of the analysis of the Anti-tax campaign, the platforms OK, VK and, to a lesser extent, Facebook, as well as the period of the study, from 19 January, when the preparations for the first protest rally were announced by one of the campaigning groups, to 24 March, the last day of preparations for the last big rallies of the campaign. Later, the interviews confirmed the relevance of my sample. Still, my sampling strategy primarily relied on search engines results rather than on public or experts' opinion. According to Earl (2013), this strategy provides insight into examples of activism that are less noticeable in media and literature. The strategy was helpful because I was aiming at revealing the internal workings of the campaigns rather than reproducing their public images that could be carefully engineered by their leaders.

3.2.3.2 Features analysis

First, I analysed the social media pages of the two organisations as part of their digital communication infrastructures using features analysis. Features analysis is the examination of the features of digital platforms. It "focuses on recording the occurrence of particular features or characteristics" of platforms (Kavada, 2012, p. 36) and helps to

study the development of digital activists' and their campaigns' representation from the perspective of the design and architecture of digital platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Foot & Schneider, 2006). Features analysis also allows describing the process of engagement of activists with their audience. Interactive features "enable people to do things pertaining to engagement with the protests beyond the basic" reading or navigating pages (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 67).

A feature of a platform is a unit of analysis. The examples of the features are links, opinions polls, forums and discussions. These features were considered as an artefact that mediated the relationship between a user and a campaign. In addition, the relevant content like texts or images about the purpose of use of the features, as well as the interaction of users about them, were collected and examined where this helped to understand how the features were used. Thus, features analysis allowed collecting data about the appropriation of the design of digital platforms by activists.

In the circumstances when the access to the internal organising documentation of the campaigns was restricted for security purposes, features analysis provided an opportunity to aggregate data about their internal organising. In addition, I primarily worked with platforms that were relatively rarely studied by scholars of digital platforms. Few automatic instruments of data collection were available for these platforms. The advantage of features analysis is its reliance on manual coding.

The scope, the sample and the study periods of features analysis reflect the protest phases of the Anti-tax and the Anti-corruption campaigns. Features analysis was focused on four platforms: VK, OK, Telegram and Facebook. The features were analysed based on the snapshots of the campaign pages that were collected using Zotero and NVivo software. These snapshots depict the full timelines of the OK, VK and Facebook pages and groups linked to the organisations. The features of Telegram were studied without snapshots since Telegram groups or channels could not be viewed in an internet browser.

The sample of features analysis contains the snapshots of 95 pages (see Table 3.3). One snapshot covers all the posts of a page over the studied period. The Russian Anti-corruption campaign VK page sample was collected on 25 March 2017, which was the day prior to the 26 March rallies. I tracked the organisation pages from the page "Navalny Team" on VK[5]. This was the main page of the Anti-corruption campaign on

---

[5] https://vk.com/wall-55284725_272730

VK. VK was the only platform where the anti-corruption campaigners have built that extensive network. Other platforms, as I later learned during the interviews, were not consistently used across different regions of Russia. For instance, Facebook might be more popular in the European part of Russia, while OK is popular in Siberia. Each page advertised an Anti-corruption rally in one location in Russia. After coding the VK pages, I removed seven of them because their administrators announced the cancellation of the Anti-corruption rallies in their locations. Most of them were later deleted from VK. Thus, the working sample of the Anti-corruption organisation contained 88 VK pages. This analysis also helped to determine the exact number of cities where the anti-corruption rallies took place on 26 March.

The subsample of the Anti-tax campaign contains 5 pages that represent the three main groups of the Anti-tax campaign on three key digital platforms. These main groups were determined based on the observation of the campaign, search on Google and platforms, as well as independent media publications. This sample was later confirmed with the activist and the experts during the interviews. These materials were collected and archived on 24 March 2017 except for the REP trade union pages. This was the day prior to the last large-scale protests of the Anti-tax campaign. The pages of the REP trade union were collected between 27 March and 8 April 2017. I collected the REP pages after I identified the significance of this organisation for the campaign. The first post of the Anti-tax dataset for every page is 16 February 2017 – a day prior to the first large rally of the campaign in Minsk.

Table 3.3

The sample of features analysis

Case	Belarus	Russia
Period of analysis	16.02.2017 - 24.03.2017 (37 days)	14.03.2017 - 25.03.2017 (12 days)
Estimated number of posts	1 800	2 100
Pages	• The PASD VK • The Party of Parasites FB • REP OK • REP VK • REP Facebook	• 88 VK pages dedicated to the 26 March rallies
Examples of features analysed	• Type of a page • Discussion options • Links to other pages	• Type of a page • Discussion options • Links to other pages • Possibility to post as a user • Specific features of the design

It was essential to collect this data prior to the rallies as a police crackdown on the campaigns was possible and the pages, partly or totally, could be removed. Indeed, a day after I collected the data, the counter-terrorism police searched the Navalny federal organisation office in Moscow and confiscated its servers. In addition, almost all the posts of the REP trade union that I have collected were later removed by the administration of the OK platform. Moreover, I could not predict the outcome of the campaigns and did not know whether any additional rallies or other collective action would take place later.

Later I learned that I covered all the extent of the active protest stage of the Anti-tax campaign in my sample. At the same time, the Navalny organisation continued for more than a year with four additional series of protests. The use of digital media during other series of protests was not very different for the Navalny organisation except for the diminished role of VK and the extensive use of the Telegram messenger. I explain the design of the textual analysis of Telegram messages in the next section. Therefore, one of the advantages of this dataset is that it is not retrospective. Retrospective datasets are common in the analysis of political interactions on digital platforms. However, as I

demonstrated, if I relied on a retrospective dataset, a substantial part of the sample would not be available for the analysis.

These two sets of pages from the two organisations can be constructed because they represent the period when the organisations started active mobilisation for their first rallies. During the analysed periods, both organisations started emerging in some or another configuration. This emerging status made the organisations look similar – more similar than perhaps in any other periods of their development. After 26 March 2017 – the day of the first rally of the Anti-corruption campaign when my sample ends - the organisation switched its focus and attempted to build a more permanent and centralised structure. Thus, I analyse the two organisations during the periods when they were considered by the public as emerging phenomena.

The design of a codebook for features analysis was based on theoretical sampling and the results of the previous stages of case study. Kavada (2012) used features analysis to record the display of connections of platform pages. I adopted a similar focus but directed my analysis towards the connections between the pages of the same organisation. I also recorded the occurrence of other features of the platforms to capture the campaign's organisational and content strategies. I analysed three types of platform artefacts or their features: types of content, interactive content and types of actions. The examples of the studied features include the elements of page walls, discussions and external links sections. Features analysis also helped me to quantify some elements like the number of links to analyse the linkages between the pages of the organisation and to build a sample for network analysis. Thus, the codebook contained 18 variables with mostly dichotomous measures that mainly assessed a function of content. The coding of the pages of the Anti-tax campaign was simple and straightforward since its sample contained only five pages.

I used features analysis of the organisations' pages to build case studies of their public representation and the affordances used by them. I also used this method to analyse the linkages between the segments of organisations to conclude on the nature of their organisational structures. Finally, I used features analysis to demonstrate how the figures of less visible leaders like page administrators shape the collective voices of a digitally-enabled movement (Kavada, 2015).

3.2.3.2 Textual analysis

The second supplementary method I used was textual analysis. This method was employed to analyse some textual fragments of the cross-platform content produced by

the campaigners and their supporters. It also helped to describe the process of engagement of the activists with their audience. I built three samples for textual analysis.

First, to analyse the content of the Anti-tax campaign, I collected posts from five OK, VK and Facebook pages (Table 4.6) (1 800 posts) for the period from 16 February 2017 to 24 March 2017. I collected these materials on 25 March 2017 and, for the REP trade union, on 8 April 2017.

Second, to analyse the content of the Navalny organisation across different platforms, I focused on two hashtags - #Navalny2018 and #strike. While the former was used for the whole period of campaigning by the organisation, the latter emerged in December 2017 to advertise the #strike campaign of the organisation. I collected all the public posts that contained these hashtags dated from 14 March 2017 to 16 March 2018 on 17 March 2018 across two platforms - VK and Instagram. The core activists identified these platforms as key social media for the #strike content dissemination. 27 898 posts were collected.

The firth and second samples were collected with the Popsters commercial framework (popsters.us), which allows accessing APIs of VK, OK, Instagram and Facebook to store the following metrics for any page: the numbers of shares (for VK, OK and Facebook), comments and likes (classes), as well as the type of the content of each post collected.

The analysis of these posts was straightforward. I calculated the natural logarithms of the volumes of the posts and shares for the two samples (Figures 6.6 and 6.11). This allowed me to identify the critical periods of information dissemination activities for the campaigns. These periods were defined based on the maximum volume of the posts during the period.

The last sample focused on the use of the Telegram platform by the Navalny organisation (Belarus' activists did not use it extensively). I was not able to locate examples of studies that used content analysis approaches to research Telegram and explained their methods in detail. A few studies that approached the subject with this approach did not explain their process of codebook design and other features of their methodology (e.g. Prucha, 2016; Shehabat, Mitew, & Alzoubi, 2017). Indeed, the platform has only recently emerged as a significant tool of political communication in a

few countries by the time of my fieldwork. Therefore, the scarcity of research on the matter rendered experimentation an absolute necessity.

I collected the sample of Telegram messages posted in the period from 6 October 2017 to 17 March 2018. To collect data, I joined 12 Telegram groups and channels created by the coordinators of the Navalny organization in the studied Russian provinces, so the Telegram textual analysis sample mirrored the interview sample. I also collected the posts of the main channel of the organisation (the "Navalny Team"). This sample, however, represents only a fraction of the Navalny organisation's Telegram accounts. The links to these public channels and groups were available on the campaign profiles on VK and other public pages of the organization. Rostov-on-Don's Telegram group was private, so I excluded it from the sample. I informed the coordinators of the local offices of the organization about my intention to read the content of the channels and groups before I started data collection.

To store the selection of posts, I created my own Telegram channel. The Telegram platform allows sharing posts from groups in own channels. Hence, my channel became a private depository of the collected texts, images and videos posted by the followers and the coordinators of the campaign. The information shared on these channels also includes .doc, .pdf and .xls files. I collected all the available documents from these channels.

Due to time constraints, I did not read and analyse all the posts appearing on the selected channels and groups. Instead, I focused on the critical periods of the campaign activity, after August 2017 when most of the Navalny offices established their presence on Telegram. I chose the wave of protests on 7 October 2017 as an exemplifying critical event to analyse with textual analysis because it was related to the presidential campaign, was not the largest but a more "routine" one. Thus, the third sample comprised the posts appeared on the 12 Telegram groups and channels between 6 and 7 October 2017 (the day before a protest and during it). The sample included 4 144 posts – normally short chat-style messages, so it was not difficult reading them all.

I undertook a close reading of these materials and took notes about the posts, identified their main themes and thematic patterns in the text as well as its sources (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, pp. 111–112). I focused on the following themes: the perception of Telegram affordances, the discussion of organizing in the Navalny campaign, visibility of the leadership and coordination during protest events. This approach allowed me to isolate the practices of the Telegram used by the campaigners and to build the topology

of the groups and channels. Thus, I analysed how collective action was coordinated by the Navalny organization, who coordinated it and what their public representation on the messenger was.

3.2.3.3 Analysis of documents

I also collected all the available documents and statements of the organisations. Most of those documents were produced by core activists. These documents included, for instance, statements of the initial coalition of the Anti-tax campaign or electronic files collected during the analysis of the Telegram groups and pages of the Navalny organisation.

I also watched all the YouTube shows called "Stab" (Headquarter) and "Navalny 20:18" produced by the Navalny organisation in the period of my observation. These two shows were hosted by Leonid Volkov and Alexei Navalny – the official leaders of the Navalny organisation. Since I did not interview them, almost 96 hours of those videos helped me to document the perceptions and attitudes of those two leaders and to obtain valuable information about the organising. For instance, "Stab" focused mostly on the everyday organisational operations of the campaign. In their shows, the leaders discussed the organisation matters openly and regularly as a way of coordinating their supporters. In addition to these two programs, I also watched 30 hours of other YouTube shows prepared by Navalny's campaigners and posted on their YouTube channels. These shows discussed such issues as the cybersecurity of their operations, the strategies of avoiding persecution and surveillance, the campaign's agenda, the events related to its local offices, its anti-corruption investigations and other issues relevant to the research framework of my dissertation.

I documented the selected episodes of the watched shows and transcribed them in my research diary. I also documented several blog posts prepared by the Anti-tax leaders, as well as media reports about the campaign. Finally, I subscribed to the main email list of the Navalny organisation and some of its Telegram groups where the supporters discussed organisational matters. The information obtained during the analysis of documents contributed to my observation of the campaign operations.

3.2.3.4 Social network analysis

Finally, social network analysis (SNA) was used to analyse mutual connections between the sampled pages of the Anti-tax campaign and other protest-related pages on the VK platform. SNA allowed me to trace the connections or "links" between these pages. The analysis of "linked" pages and groups is a common way to examine the network of

digitally-enabled social movements (Zhang & Lee, 2018). Such links can influence information exchange between the groups (Kavada, 2018). Network analysis allows illustrating how social movement actors create new linkages that, in turn, can influence "the subsequent development of protest" and other activities (Diani, 2002, p. 175). The shape of a network "can tell us a lot about the nature of a movement at a given point in time" (Diani, 2002, p. 174). The primary purpose of analysing online content with SNA was to reveal the links between the pages of the Anti-tax campaign on VK and to observe the attitudes and interests of their administrators.

I focused SNA on the PASD group of the Anti-tax campaign on VK. It was easier to trace these links on VK rather than on other platforms such as OK or Facebook due to the architecture of the platforms. I traced the links to other VK pages from the "Links to other pages" section of the PASD group based on the screenshot saved in April 2017. This period of data collection is chosen based on the logic of and preliminary analysis of the data related to the Anti-tax campaign. I collected the data for SNA immediately when I realised this data could help me to analyse the campaign. The PASD group was the only Anti-tax campaign page on VK that had an extensive list of links in this section. I traced the connection between nodes up to the third level. Then I built a graph using the Gephi software. The graph depicted the links between the pages of VK affiliated with the PASD. I triangulated the results of the analysis of the graph with the interview of the PASD administrator to analyse the segmentation in the campaign.

In summary, this mixed-method research design reflects the research questions and the main categories identified in the literature review. The design allows approaching the objects of the study from different angles and producing a focused, detailed investigation in the tradition of theoretical discovery. The chosen methods were first used to describe the campaigning phenomena and the main limitations of the context and then to analyse the response of the studied actors to those limitations. It allowed looking at strategic organisational practices of the two campaigns and explaining their consequences both from the perspectives of the platformisation of political process globally and the local pro-democracy struggle.

3.3 Triangulation of the national cases

After collecting and analysing data, I triangulated them. Triangulation is "testing for a hypothesized relationship among the same variables with a variety of methods" (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 38). The triangulation of methods allows for more detailed and

multivocal analysis than any single methodology (Snow & Trom, 2002). "Triangulation of methods ultimately produces stronger theories than multiple replications and permutations of the same method," suggest Klandermans, Staggenborg, & Tarrow (2002, p. 319). I started with a qualitative exploration of the topic before using some quantitative methods. Such design allows generalising qualitative findings to a sample gathered during the quantitative phase (Ayoub et al., 2014). Therefore, the design of the triangulation in my project is exploratory.

The methods of interviews, participant observation and content analysis are commonly used in different disciplines like media studies, political science and other social science disciplines. This diversity of methods helped me to draw on the analytical apparatus of the mentioned disciplines to build multi-layered models based on the collected data. However, as van Dijck (2013b, p. 43) notes, vocabularies and methodologies of these disciplines are often mutually incompatible. This incompatibility complicates matters of such an interdisciplinary approach. In addition, it can be challenging to synthesize data collected through different methods. To avoid the complications associated with the multi-disciplinary and multi-method design of my study, I remained conscious of which type of data every method generates and on what level of analysis it focuses.

3.4 Methodological implications and challenges

The research project employs the case study approach to the enquiry into digital campaigns conducted by political movements. Movements are often difficult to study because they can represent an amalgam of groups of various structures with different ideological positions and fluid membership. In her study of the use of the internet by social movements in the 2000s, Kavada (2007, p. 97) suggested that to study "the internal processes of such an inherently chaotic and mutable actor" is a challenging process. Nevertheless, the major methodological challenges of my project are associated with other issues. The first challenge was the primary method of the data collection for the case studies, which is interviews, a method that requires building trust and getting personal information about the participants. The second challenge was the locations where many interviews and participant observation took place, Belarus and Russia. When addressing both challenges, I had to be, as Kavada (2007) suggests, both resourceful and experimental.

Many scholars of social movements that were reviewed in this dissertation conduct their studies in western democracies where movements rarely face the challenges similar to

those discussed in the research. Authoritarian states are often challenging locations to examine politics and media. The project design required several trips to Belarus and Russia, meeting respondents who can be under surveillance, under types of repression or be agents of the regime themselves. These respondents may conceal their opinions about the regime and political process for fear of repression or violence. Moreover, their communication can be influenced by the fear of regime surveillance or ordinary paranoia (Goode & Ahram, 2016, p. 826). In addition to this, seemingly simple tasks such as getting in the country or observing informal processes out on the streets can become obstacles (Goode & Ahram, 2016, p. 824). These and other potential obstacles make investigating authoritarian regimes a task that forces difficult choices upon the researcher with regards to their own and their informants' safety. These choices, as Goode & Ahram (2016, p. 828) argue, are similar to those faced by people doing an investigation in countries in the midst of civil war.

The experience of contemporary students of authoritarian regimes suggests that the use of multiple forms of data from open sources, careful observation and awareness of opportunity help to tackle these challenges (Markowitz, 2016). Ahram and Goode (2016) suggest adopting a reflexive approach to the study of authoritarianism. Reny (2016) argues that qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews and ethnographic research are especially valuable methods in these circumstances since authoritarian regimes tend to falsify statistics and other data often used in quantitative studies. These methods help to immerse in the relevant communities, find reliable collaborators and develop creative ways of collecting information (Reny, 2016, p. 909). In other words, as Art (2016, p. 975) put it, "scholars of authoritarian regimes need to think more like detectives."

My previous experience of working with and living in the studied countries gave me an advantage in this detective-style endeavour. This experience allowed presenting myself more like a local or an insider rather than an outsider when required. I did not necessarily know people I wanted to engage with before my project started. However, I knew some people who might have known other activists. This knowledge also made it easier to navigate the complex network of power relations in these countries and to get into the relevant communities of activists. This was especially true in the case of Belarus, where I have been involved in media, student and human rights communities over an extended period of time. In Russia, it was more difficult for me to navigate media and activist networks as I had relatively little experience in this country before. In addition, I had personal connections with some groups of activists in the studied

countries that were established during my previous research and work in the field. Nevertheless, as I discovered during the fieldwork, while getting access to core activists of the Navalny organisation was not that difficult, accessing some covert leaders of the Anti-tax campaign in Belarus was a more challenging task. The insider status and experience helped me to develop trust and rapport with my interviewees.

For example, I used my insider status to gain access to the leader of the "Parasites" and "Social Dependents" group (PASD) of the Anti-tax campaign. It had the largest number of followers compared to other Anti-tax pages and became one of the most prominent groups on social media dedicated to the campaign. The leader's social media profile was hidden under the name of "Robin Good." Only after the police identified him and attempted to persecute him seven months after for the Anti-tax campaign stopped, did I have the opportunity to meet the leader of the group. Still, I could not contact him directly because I knew that his electronic devices were controlled by the police. I was thus afraid to send him direct messages as I thought his accounts might be monitored as well. Instead, I wrote a request to a person with whom he had established a security line. Shortly after this, I was informed that he would contact me. On 1 January 2018, I received a call from a person who told me that he was the admin and he was ready to meet me. He gave me a time and place of the meeting. It all indeed looked a bit like a detective story at times.

To gain more access to and understanding of the internal workings of the opposition and dissident groups in Russia and Belarus, I attended and observed several meetings and events organised by such groups. I do not name these meetings and events for security reasons because their organisers often tried to protect the places where they took place and the names of its participants. Since I intend to keep this manuscript in the public domain, I do not disclose the details of these meetings. These contacts helped me to get in touch with potential interviewees.

My local experience and knowledge made it potentially more difficult to maintain a critical distance from the objects of my study. On the one hand, I continually emphasised my methodological protocol to keep this distance. I also maintained a temporal distance when, upon returning from the fieldwork, I disconnected myself from the studied campaigns. I also attempted to remain objective and avoid normative engagement – a common fault when studying non-democratic regimes (Goode, 2016). To sharpen my awareness of my possible bias, I kept a research diary during the fieldwork. The diary helped me to reflect on this dialectic between being an insider and

an outsider. I also used it during the analysis of the data. This, combined with an honest approach to my interviewees, helped me to maintain a critical distance from the study objects.

At the same time, scholars recognise that it is hard to keep a distance in places similar to the ones I study, especially when the proximity to actors can bring additional benefits in terms of contacts and data. Indeed, an insider-outsider dialectic is an issue that might be observed in many types of social research (Blee & Taylor, 2002, p. 97). Therefore, maintaining a balance between objectivity and engagement is the strategy that can bring a maximum benefit for the research in the circumstances of a non-democracy.

3.5 Research ethics

This study is primarily focused on the internet. Consequently, when designing the study, I followed the recommendations on research ethics in digital space. In particular, I followed the recommendations of the Association of Internet Research on ethical decision-making (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). When presenting, analysing or discussing data, I used only public information. Fuchs (2017) suggests that several codes of ethics consider information public if its producers, e.g. users, cannot reasonably expect to remain unobserved. The regulation of the studied platforms, e.g. Facebook Data Policy (Facebook, 2016), normally defines such information as any information open to anyone. Therefore, I expected that the studied activists perceive the information they published on VK, OK, Facebook and Instagram as open to anyone, as well as any discussions following this information such as social media posts as public. Information published by ordinary participants in semi-public groups might be perceived a bit differently by their authors. To address this issue, I decided not to cite any information published by ordinary users on those groups. I studied only those groups that were associated with the branches whose leaders I interviewed. They were aware of my interest in their groups and did not express any concerns.

To protect ordinary users who discussed or reacted to this information online, their identities were anonymised. This helped to prevent tracing the study data back to users' private information and to protect their confidentiality during the dissemination of the results of the study. I also ensured that any data related to them was secured and stored on encrypted drives.

I anonymised all the sources who had relation to dissident movements in Belarus and Russia to protect them. I also provided an option for the participants of the study to

withdraw from it at any moment until its results were published or presented publicly. In addition, if any participant expressed concern associated with my study, I was prepared to remove any mentions of them. No such requests were received though.

Chapter 4 Political organisation in authoritarian settings

The dissertation analyses how the use of digital media influences the forms of organisation and leadership and the mechanisms of information distribution in anti-authoritarian movements. It focuses on how the activists of anti-authoritarian movements respond to attempts of the state to control the online realm through surveillance, persecution and censorship. To trace this response, the dissertation analyses two key elements of activists' practices: how they organise and how they distribute alternative information by using digital platforms. This chapter seeks to analyse the forms of organisation and leadership that emerge in anti-authoritarian movements that rely on digital media.

The following three chapters present and analyse data on the Anti-tax and Navalny campaigns in Belarus and Russia. I focus on crucial points of its campaigning in 2017 and early 2018, the periods when these organisations spread throughout many Belarusian and Russian provinces and were a force behind the largest waves of political protest in the countries during that period.

Chapter 4 consists of three sections. In the first section, I present the background of the campaigns. I base this presentation on the data obtained during participant observation and interviews. In the second and third sections, I discuss the organisational structures that were adopted by campaigners and their perception by the media, the authorities and the public. This analysis is based on interviews, textual analysis of the materials that were disseminated by activists, as well as SNA and features analysis of their VK communities.

4.1 The background of the Navalny and the Anti-tax organisations

4.1.1 The Navalny organisation: three campaigns in one year

4.1.1.1 Alexei Navalny and his team

Prior to 2017 – the year I cover in this chapter – a 40-year Russian lawyer Alexei Navalny had tried his hand at different areas of political activism and media. He was a popular political and anti-corruption blogger, a public policy adviser for a local government, a leader of an unregistered party, even a television host (Kramer, 2012; Lenta.ru, n.d.). He also ran as a candidate for the 2011 Moscow major election, finishing second that race (Englund, 2013).

Plenty of people have joined Navalny. Some of them, like the prominent Russian civic activist Leonid Volkov, first joined him before the Moscow major election (Respondent 28, personal communication, August 7, 2017). Others did so after following several years of his anti-corruption campaigning (Respondent 28, personal communication, August 7, 2017). Many of those experienced activists came to the 2017 campaign from an organisation called the Anti-Corruption Foundation ("Fond Borby s Korruptsiey" or FBK in Russian) (Respondent 30, personal communication, August 15, 2017). Established by Navalny and his fellow activists in 2011 (*Anti-Corruption Foundation*, n.d.), the Foundation became prominent in Russia for its work revealing the corruption and other unlawful behaviours of the top politicians and business figures (Lokot, 2018).

What unites this core team of Navalny is its members' experience of digital campaigning and organising of protest movements. One these movements, the 2011–12 "For Fair Elections" protests, was inspired, followed and organised mainly through the web with a particular focus on Facebook (T. Balmforth, 2011; Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2015; Toepfl, 2017). Though the movement largely failed (Gabowitsch, 2017), Navalny, Volkov and other core members of the studied campaigns gained experience and skills of digital platform campaigning during those events. These people enhanced their skills further when they joined other political or civic campaigns. For example, Volkov ran for local elections and attempted to build a political party following the failure of the 2011 protest movement. Navalny expanded his media experience and continued his anti-corruption investigations. Respondent 28, who later became the head of the Navalny campaigning in one of the Russian regions, participated in several elections as both a manager and a candidate (Respondent 28, personal communication, 9 August 2017). These and other people joined Navalny's campaigning in 2017 to create his core team.

4.1.1.2 Three campaigns

The 2017 year should have become the most prominent and ambitious year in Navalny's campaigning when he raised the profile of his activities. That year, he and his supporters launched three successive campaigns (Table 4.1). It all started when the core of Navalny's activists increased the efforts of the FBK (the Anti-Corruption Foundation) to conduct their investigations and to demand an end to the government corruption. In March 2017, the FBK published a video about the unregistered properties of the Russian prime minister. This video became the media cornerstone that was used by the campaigners to mobilise and organise protests on 26 March 2017, just three

weeks after its publication. In geographic reach, these protests were the largest that Russia has seen since the early 1990s (Kara-Murza, 2017). I refer to this campaign as the *Anti-corruption campaign*.

Second, the organisation launched a grassroots campaign that demanded to register Navalny in Russia's March 2018 presidential election. By the end of June 2017, the *Navalny 2018 nomination campaign* or the presidential campaign became the sole campaign associated with the Navalny organisational structures. It aimed to promote Navalny's figure in this election. However, both campaigners and independent observers had doubts about Navalny's prospects to be included on the ballot (Respondent 6, personal communication, August 7, 2017; Respondent 32, personal communication, May 25, 2017). Soon after the announcement, the election authorities reported that they would probably bar Navalny from running on the grounds of his suspended prison sentence — on what Navalny claimed was a trumped-up charge. At the beginning, the campaigning staff was hardly different from the FBK people. Moreover, until April 2017, it was difficult to distinguish the presidential campaign from the Anti-corruption campaign.

Third, after the presidential bid of Navalny failed in December 2017, the Navalny presidential campaign was transformed into the *Voters' #strike campaign*. This boycott campaign aimed to discourage citizens from voting in the presidential election. By doing so, the voters would diminish the election and their expected winner, Vladimir Putin. They would also protest the refusal of the election authorities to register Navalny as a candidate. To further delegitimise the election, the #strike campaign asked its followers to become election observers to monitor the procedures on voting day (Albats, 2018a). These observers would register any violations and falsifications of the election procedures and publicise them. This would prove that the election was fraudulent, and the resulting new presidential term of Putin would in effect be illegitimate. Ultimately, the #strike campaign was a proactive way to boycott the election. It could also help to improve the voting procedures if enough observers would turn to the polling stations.

Table 4.1

The three campaigns of the Navalny organisation in 2017

Name of a campaign	Period	Dates of protests	Demands
1. Anti-corruption	March 2017 – June 2017[a]	26 March 2017 12 June 2017	Oust the prime minister and other "corrupt" officials
2. Navalny 2018 nomination	April 2017 – December 2017	12 June 2017 7 October 2017	Register Navalny in the 2018 presidential election
3. Voters' #strike	December 2017 – March 2018	28 January 2018	Free and fair elections

Note. [a]The anti-corruption activities of the advocacy NGO FBK continued after this period (Lokot, 2018), but the Navalny organisation did not focus on them as much as in spring 2017.
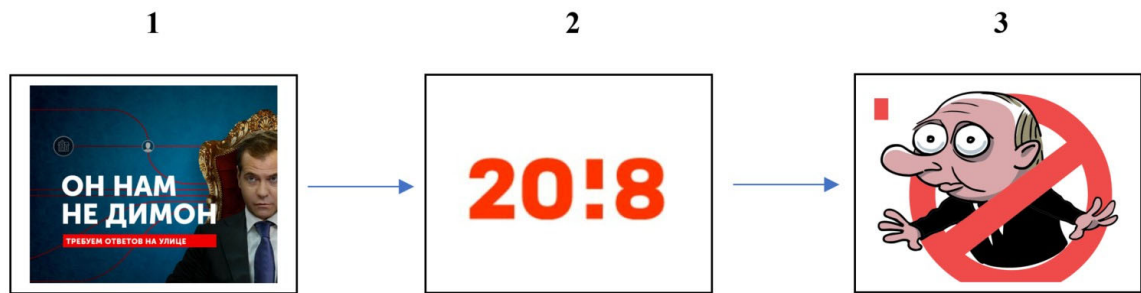
Figure 4.1. The main symbols of the three campaigns of the Navalny organisation in 2017-18

Table 4.2

The four protest waves of the Navalny organisation in 2017-18 before the presidential election

Date	Localities involved	Main claim	Participants in total	Detained
26.03.2017	88[a]	To investigate the corruption allegations against the prime minister	37 000 - 88 000[b]	1666-1805[b]
12.06.2017	154[c]	To investigate the corruption allegations against the Russian elites	50 000 - 98 000[c]	1769[c]
07.10.2017	80[d]	To investigate the corruption allegations against the Russian elites including president Putin	2 560 - 21 520[d]	321[d]
28.01.2018	46-118[e]	Organize fair elections	5 000 - 88 000[e]	350[e]

Note. For the discussion of the author's research on the number of localities, see the features analysis section in Chapter 3.
[a]Author's research. [b]Meduza (2017a). [c]Meduza (2017b). [d]Meduza (2017c). [e]Yunanov (2018).

Out of these three campaigns, in this chapter, I mainly focus on the period when the Anti-corruption campaign gave momentum to the next Navalny 2018 election nomination campaign in March 2017. It was one of the crucial moments for Navalny's supporters as they managed to gather at least 37 000 people nationwide, according to the police (see Table 4.2). The presidential bid of Navalny was noticed by the public when, during the four weeks of March 2017, the number of registered supporters grew almost two-fold, and the number of people who were ready to nominate him for the presidential bid grew from about 130 000 to 272 000 (Volkov, 2017d). To be registered as a candidate, Navalny needed 300 000 signatures. Thus, this period between the Anti-corruption and the election nomination campaigns was a crucial time frame when numerous branches of his organisation proliferated around the country. I study how these campaigns gained momentum and steadily evolved from a group of several people located in an office on the outskirts of Moscow to an organisation that included more than 70 offices. When discussing "the Navalny organisation," I refer to the people and structures associated with these three campaigns.

At first glance, the Navalny organisation looked like a hierarchically centralised group. The centre of the campaign was located in Moscow and was called "the federal headquarters" or "the federal office." The headquarters were based in the office of the

FBK and had developed from its unit. Since December 2016, it has grown into a large structure. Navalny's chief-of-staff Leonid Volkov headed the structure. Volkov was the author of the campaign strategy. He hired the regional coordinators and organised their work. He also coordinated fundraising activities and financial operations. Volkov spent around half of this working time every day doing those tasks (Volkov, 2018e). The federal headquarters consisted of several teams including a video team, a social media team, lawyers, finance managers, designers and an IT team. These people gathered together in the federal office at least once a week to discuss and to plan the tactics and tasks.

Before the protests of 26 March, the campaign had opened around 15 regional offices with paid staff (Respondent 30, personal communication, August 15, 2017). The offices were initially needed for the second stage of campaigning – to demand Navalny's registration as a presidential candidate and to collect signatures for his candidacy around Russia (StopDesign, 2018). They were also expected to coordinate local organising and mobilising citizens for rallies and election observation in March 2018 (Respondent 32, personal communication, May 25, 2017). After the attempted presidential bid of Navalny turned to be unsuccessful, the offices received another main task: to mobilise people for the #strike campaign. When I started visiting Navalny's offices in August 2017, the 2018 presidential campaign was represented in 74 locations (Figure 4.2). Most of them had from two to four people of paid staff, but some were run exclusively by volunteers. These volunteer-run offices were called the "people's offices." In Figure 4.2, the people's offices are marked with a red circle. Offices with paid staff are marked with a red pin.
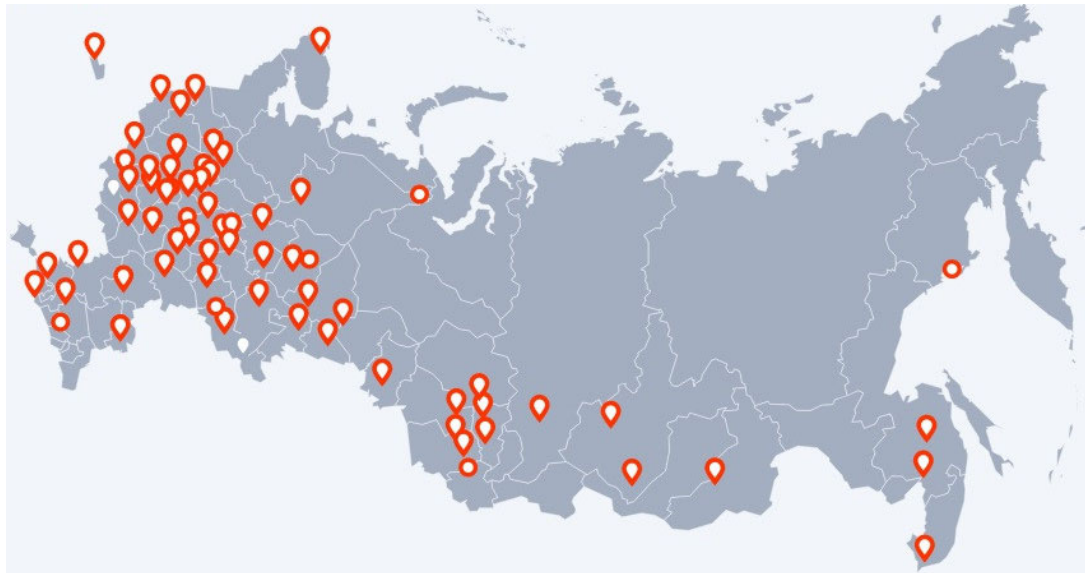
Figure 4.2. The map of the Navalny offices and the boundaries of the eighty-five federal subjects of the Russian Federation as of August 2017. Source: Navalny.com

In terms of geographical reach, the three campaigns of Navalny proliferated beyond the typical centres of the pro-democracy protest movements (Gabowitsch, 2017) – the cities of Moscow and St Petersburg. Russia is a vast country located across 11 time zones and consisting of 83 federal regions. Almost all of its political life is centralised in Moscow. The Navalny organisation mobilised populations of many regions when its offices and the series of protests expanded across all but a handful of them. Guardian journalist Walker (2017), who has lived in Russia for many years, observed that this kind of "enthusiastic, grassroots campaigning […] has been absent from Russia in recent years." Figure 4.3 demonstrates that the Navalny organisation became even more local with time. At the beginning of his campaigning, 35% of all of those registered on the main website of the campaigns, Navalny.com, as his supporters (ready to nominate him for the election) were living - Moscow or St Petersburg. By the end of its presidential campaign in December 2017, this number dropped to 15%. This shows that the Navalny organisation's support grew primarily by means of the smaller towns.
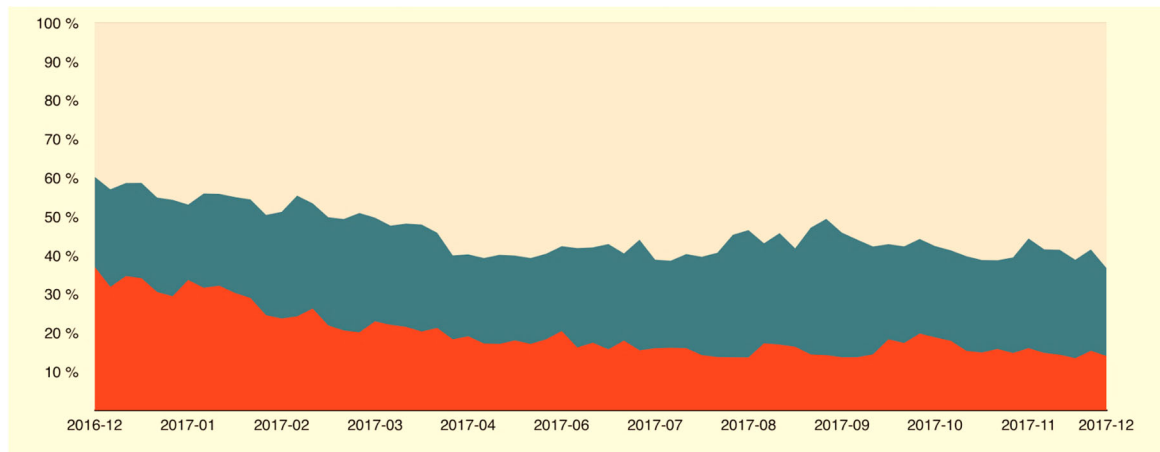
Figure 4.3. The location of Navalny's supporters who registered on Navalny.com: Moscow and St Petersburg (red – lower level), 20 largest other cities (blue – middle level) and other regions of Russia (grey – upper level). Source: the Navalny organisation.

4.1.1.3 People of the campaigns

A person who approached the locations of the Navalny campaign in the summer of 2017 could see its staff and volunteers – normally young people in their mid-20s – working together in a large bright room designed as an open space. Activists had almost nothing on the tables but laptops and smartphones. Occasionally visitors could come in; they were other activists engaged in campaigning or other supporters of Navalny. They often wore white t-shirts with a Navalny campaign logo. Visitors would receive campaigning materials, get instructions from the coordinators and be sent "on the ground" to disseminate those materials. Nevertheless, in general, it was calm and peaceful in the offices.

Every office had at least two or three paid positions: a coordinator, a lawyer and a social media specialist. Larger cities had more than six paid positions (Respondent 32, personal communication, May 25, 2017). The coordinator of an office was selected through a competition organised by the federal headquarters. These people often worked till late, "six days a week, almost 11 hours a day[6]" (Respondent 32, personal communication, May 25, 2017). At the height of the second – the presidential campaign – there were more than 350 campaign coordinators and staffers across the country whose average salary was $475 (Volkov, 2018e). The average monthly wage in Russia in June 2017 was about $700 (Trading Economics, n.d.).

---

[6] This and further interview quotes were translated by the author.

The numbers of unpaid supporters – volunteers – were much larger. Volunteers were people who agreed to help the campaign. Twenty days after the anti-corruption protests of 26 March, the campaign had 89 093 registered volunteers. By August 2017, about 140 000 people registered as volunteers associated with one of its 74 offices (Navalny, 2017d). By the end of the campaign in December 2017, 200 000 people joined as volunteers and 706 000 "supported" Navalny as a candidate in the upcoming election. The core team received $5.2 million in donations with a median donation of about $9 in this period (Osborn, 2018). These numbers were constantly highlighted by the Navalny campaign "to show that there are hundreds of thousands of people who support him in Russia" (Respondent 29, personal communication, August 10, 2017). Therefore, the campaign was built around a clear plan that involved the construction of a regional network. However, the plan has never been entirely fulfilled since many unexpected factors, such as the detentions of activists, interfered with the process.

4.1.2 The Anti-tax campaign: Two months of rallies and repression

The Anti-tax campaign in Belarus is another example of digital activism in authoritarian settings that represents an exception to the rule of pro-democracy campaign failure. This campaign aimed at abolishing a new tax popularly known as the tax on "social parasites." The tax targeted officially unemployed people (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 90). The campaign used digital platforms to disseminate information about its cause, to spark discussion, to mobilise individuals for actions like signing petitions and, finally, to encourage followers to join protest rallies.

Just as in Navalny's campaigns in Russia, protest rallies were the main public manifestation of the Anti-tax campaign (Crabtree et al., 2017). Following about two months of the campaigning that focused on signature gathering for the petitions to abolish the tax on unemployment, the involvement of lawyers and human rights defenders, as well as viral discussions and videos posted on digital platforms, the first protest rally of about 2 500 people erupted in Belarus' capital Minsk. In two days after the Minsk rally, the protests spread to five other cities (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

The Anti-Tax rallies in February-March 2017. Sources: Shmygov (2017), Author's research, Crabtree, Fariss, & Schuler (2017)

Place	Date	Number of participants	Place	Date	Number of participants
Minsk	17-02-2017	2500	Brest	12-03-2017	100
Homel	19-02-2017	2000	Babrujsk	12-03-2017	650
Mahileu	19-02-2017	400	Minsk	15-03-2017	1750
Hrodna	19-02-2017	100	Mahileu	15-03-2017	500
Brest	19-02-2017	100	Hrodna	15-03-2017	1000
Vitebsk	19-02-2017	300	Mazyr	18-03-2017	30
Homel	21-02-2017	300	Kobryn	18-03-2017	30
Vitebsk	26-02-2017	3000	Svietlahorsk	18-03-2017	25
Brest	26-02-2017	300	Slonim	19-03-2017	300
Babrujsk	26-02-2017	400	Baranavichy	19-03-2017	70
Baranavichy	26-02-2017	300	Minsk	25-03-2017	3000
Brest	05-03-2017	1000	Homel	25-03-2017	500
Maladzyechna	10-03-2017	1000	Hrodna	25-03-2017	150
Pinsk	11-03-2017	350	Brest	25-03-2017	200
Rahachow	12-03-2017	300	Vitebsk	25-03-2017	100
Vorsha	12-03-2017	1000	Minsk	26-03-2017	100

These first rallies happened on the deadline of the payment of the tax. The tax targeted citizens who had not worked in the past six months and not paid other taxes. The payable amount was about $230 a year, which was about 60% of an average monthly salary at the start of 2017 (Belarus in Focus, 2017). According to the tax authorities, 470 000 people out of 9.5 million citizens of Belarus should have paid the tax, but most of them refused (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017b). Many citizens considered the requirement to pay the tax on the unemployed unlawful or impossible to fulfil.

The tax affected different groups of society, many of whom lived in smaller towns, where the level of unemployment was worse than in big cities (Erickson, 2017). The requirement to pay coupled with the country's economic problems developed over the years, as well as the failure of the state to support the living standards (Erickson, 2017). These long-term economic troubles contributed to triggering of the protest.

As Table 4.3 demonstrates, the campaign manifested itself in the form of at least 32 rallies that covered 16 cities. In addition to the abolishment of the controversial tax, the protesters gradually started demanding the improvement in living standards and political changes. In response to the political demands, president Lukashenka, who had ruled the country for 22 years by the time of the first rally, declared that the campaign was part of a plot against him. Consequently, the campaign became associated with extensive state repression unseen in this country for several years (Miller, 2017). By 31

March 2017, 941 cases of detention and other forms of persecution related to the campaign and its protests were recorded by human rights defenders (Spring96, 2017). The Anti-tax campaign became one of the most significant political events of the country that year.

4.2 Traditional structures and organisational narratives

In this section, I discuss the organising process in Navalny's Anti-corruption campaign in Russia and the Anti-tax campaign in Belarus. Organising is one of the most significant aspects of the political process, which is, however, relatively rarely studied (Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Karpf, 2012). The Anti-corruption campaign and the Anti-tax Coalition of parties and NGOs were the first stages of organising by the two structures when they emerged as sources of collective action that challenged the Russian and Belarusian authorities in February and March 2017. Their analysis shows how the campaigns had to build its networks in hostile circumstances beyond their countries' political centres.

4.2.1 The emergence and decline of the traditional organisation – the Anti-tax Coalition

In Belarus, to coordinate the actions and progress the cause of Anti-tax campaigning, several political structures that were critical of the government tried to organise in a traditional form of a political coalition (Table 4.4). All interested "more or less active subjects of political life" were invited to join (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017).

In January 2017, the representatives of the Coalition gathered at Respondent 17's office (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017). The Coalition had no formal membership and structures (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017). The position of Respondent 17 seemed to allow him to coordinate some of the activities of the emerging coalition informally and to determine, for example, the place of its first meeting. Most of the organisations involved called themselves political parties. However, as I discussed in Chapter 1, the border between a civic organisation and a political party is blurred in Belarus. This means that sometimes there is a little difference between a group of dissidents, a civic association concerned with political issues and an opposition political party. Therefore, the legal status of an organisation in question is less important than its position towards a contentious policy.

Table 4.4

The founding members of the Anti-tax Coalition in January 2017. Source: Author's research, IK (2017b)

Name[*]	Organisational status	Legal status
The Belarusian Independent Trade Union of Radio-Electronic Industry Workers (REP)	Trade Union	Registered
The Belarusian Christian Democracy (BChD)	Political party	Unregistered
The Belarusian Left Party "A Just World"	Political party	Registered
The Belarusian Party of Workers	Political party	Unregistered
The Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada)	Political party	Registered
The Belarusian Women's Party "Nadzeya"	Political party	Unregistered
The Greens Party	Political party	Registered
The Movement for Freedom	NGO	Registered
The "Our House" campaign	NGO	Unregistered
The United Civic Party (UCP)	Political party	Registered

Note. [*]See Appendix 4 for the background of the organisations

At its first meeting, the Anti-tax Coalition decided to collect signatures for the petition demanding to abolish the contentious tax. In the following six weeks, the Coalition collected at least 47 000 signatures (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017d). The petitioners submitted them to the authorities but received no reaction (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017b). Despite this, Respondent 17 considered the petition gathering process "a massive success" (personal communication, May 18, 2017). Activists from other organisations also observed a high level of interest in the anti-tax petition (Karnievich, 2017).

Analysing the dynamics of signature gathering, the involved organisations started thinking that protest was inevitable. The activists attempted to direct possible collective action in order, as they say, to take care of the security of those who might protest the tax. "We took a fundamental decision that we would submit the applications" to receive

the authorities' approval for the Anti-tax rallies. "This was a question of people's security," said Respondent 17 (personal communication, May 18, 2017).

Participation in any anti-government political campaign in Belarus poses significant risks for the people and organisations involved. Participants may be detained or persecuted in other ways (Novikau, 2015). Indeed, the previous experience of large-scale collective action in Belarus was quite painful for many politically active people. For example, following the post-presidential election protests of 2010, riot police arrested at least 600 people, including seven of the nine candidates that ran against president Lukashenka (Ash, 2014). During the rallies against election rigging four years earlier, at least 700 detentions were recorded during the six days of the protests (Ash, 2014). In 2017, "the risk of losing a job or going to prison is quite high for any potential rank-and-file protester, let alone a committed opposition activist" (Moshes, 2017, p. 2). The law criminalises the announcement of an intention to hold the protest via the internet before official approval. Violations are punishable by up to three years' imprisonment (United States Department of State, 2019a). Therefore, many individuals were involved in the organised of the Anti-tax campaign could potentially violate the law and risk their freedom.

Some organisations that have joined the campaign were not registered with the authorities (Table 4.4). To be unregistered and still perform activities like gathering signatures, mobilising people for protests or any other type of public campaigning was a criminal offence in Belarus until June 2019 (The Human Rights Center 'Viasna', 2019). At the same time, many civic groups remain unregistered because the authorities often refuse pollical and civic organisations that are critical of the government legal status. This restriction on campaigning represents one of the main challenges of political organising in Belarus.

Initially, Anti-tax activists addressed this challenge by attempting to receive the authorities' approval for the planned collective action, thus, legalising it. This would give the emerging movement more credibility in the eyes of its followers and would protect the followers from state repression. Therefore, one of the first tasks for the Anti-tax organisation was to receive an authorisation for their rallies.

Defying the government ban on the rallies was a watershed moment for the Anti-tax Coalition, and this decision led to the split within it. The founding members of the Coalition have never met again to discuss the campaign (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017). The split resulted in the disappearance of a structure

that could produce a hierarchy within the Anti-tax campaign. Consequently, the protest stage of the campaign was not coordinated on the national level by any central office.

Despite the split in the capital, in some localities, members of the organisations that were part of the Coalition continued working together. For example, in Homel, the members of the UCP party worked together with the REP trade union, the largest independent from the state union (Kazlou & Alfer, 2012), as well as the Movement for Freedom, to gather signatures and to provide legal support. This local mini-coalition also organised unifying actions such as a small demonstration in front of the court on 17 February 2017 during the trial on a person who was asked to pay the tax but refused to do so (see Appendix 3). In Brest, the leading local opposition organisation, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada), cooperated with the UCP and the Movement for Freedom (see Appendix 4) to promote collective action (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017). Hence, the former Anti-tax Coalition still partly functioned on the local level supplying organisational forms with cross-group linkage.

Such cross-groups linkages were previously reported in some other suppressed movements. In an organisation where there is no central office through which information and authority can be channelled, such linkages can tie the whole into a potentially flexible network along with other mechanisms such as personal ties (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 63). I explore how these linkages worked for the Anti-tax movement in the following sections.

4.2.2 The challenge of mobilising for collective action in authoritarian settings

"Don't Call Him Dimon," also known as "He Is Not Dimon to You," was a 45-minute investigation video which featured Alexei Navalny as a narrator. The video revealed the corrupt financial links of Dmitri Medvedev, the prime minister and a former president[7] of Russia (Figure 4.4). Navalny was presented to the audience as "the author of the video" rather than an activist or a politician. The head of the Navalny campaign in Moscow Nikolai Lyaskin (Kreml i glemrok, 2017) says that "When we were working on 'Don't Call Him Dimon,' Alexei told me 'Dimon will take it all! It will get an Oscar!'" The video indeed received a decisive attention of the Russian internet audience.

---

[7]"Dimon" is a variant for Dmitri

The video was published at the beginning of March 2017 on YouTube and disseminated through Navalny.com, which later became the main website of the campaign. Only on YouTube, the video had been viewed more than 26 million times as of September 2017. This is a significant number since Russia was a country of no more than 50 million YouTube users at that time (We Are Social; Hootsuite, 2018, p. 132). At the same time, YouTube rather than television was the primary source of news for young Russians by this time (Goncharov, 2017). The video entered the IMBd database with a rating of 9.2 of 10 and voted by 2,619 users (IMBd, n.d.). In total, every third Russian adult had heard about the video according to a research centre independent of the government (Levada-Center, 2017). "Dimon" had become the largest investigation of Navalny's anti-corruption organisation in terms of viewership by 2017.

Figure 4.4. The feature image of the "Don't Call Him Dimon" investigation video.

Activists and observers suggest several reasons for the "Don't Call Him Dimon's" success. First, the record viewership might become possible because the audience that has access to YouTube in Russia grew rapidly in the years before the video's publication. In recent years, fast and cheap internet became much more accessible in the Russian provinces.

Second, the video narrative was convincing and simple. Its language could be described as informal and direct. "This film speaks the language of a consumer. It is simple, easily assimilable," said one of the first regional activists that joined the core team of Navalny Respondent 25 (personal communication, June 11, 2017). Indeed, the content of the video was immediately turned into memes (Figures 4.5, 4.6), "the viral units of digital

communication that flourish on user adjustment and replication" (Karatzogianni et al., 2017, p. 108). Navalny's organisation has been practising meme creation for a long time (Karatzogianni et al., 2017). For example, Medvedev's sneakers allegedly bought on corrupted money and a yellow duck (Figure 5.1) from his alleged undeclared house in Italy became the symbols of the prime minister's illegal property. These convincing and simple symbols were widely featured in the online discussions of the Navalny followers as well as during the subsequent anti-corruption rallies.
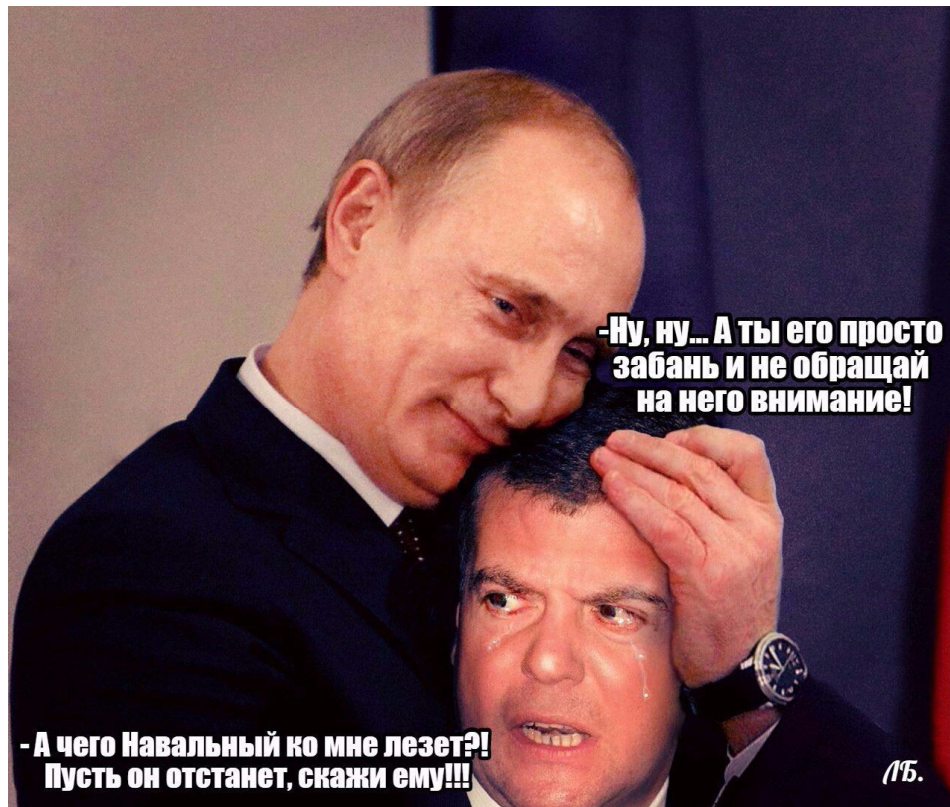
Figure 4.5. A meme published in the VK Anti-corruption campaign page for Stary Oskol on the day when the 26 March protests were announced. It reads "- Why does Navalny bully me? Let him get off my back, tell him!" "- That's ok… Just ban him and don't pay attention"

Figure 4.6. A picture used as an avatar of the Anti-corruption campaign page for Ryazan.

Finally, the video focused on corruption rather than on more contentious issues like the democratic deficit, the president's powers or the nature of the Russian authoritarian political system. The discussion of corruption is often an accepted way to criticise civil servants, primarily local, in some authoritarian states (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Hence, raising the corruption problematics might attract a large audience that perceives the anti-corruption struggle as apolitical. Such less contentious problematics can even help to create a successful political movement (Bennett et al., 2017) like the currently ruling party Five Star in Italy (Politi & Roberts, 2017). Halupka (2014) notes that the level of politicisation of an issue is determined by the context in which it is viewed. The issue of corruption can be placed in a purely economic context, depicting corrupt officials as greedy individuals. At the same time, located in the broader context of other corrupt politicians from a ruling party, corruption can be placed in a contentious political context.

The Navalny core campaigners gradually placed corruption in the context of other problems of the political system, claiming that it is not just the prime minister who is corrupt, but that the system promotes corruption. For example, at the beginning of the Anti-corruption campaign, Navalny's communication linked the revealed corruption to the prime minister and other prominent top politicians and business figures. However, president Putin was mentioned in this context as a somewhat neutral judge who should "give answers" and "respond" to the corruption allegations. However, in summer and autumn of 2017, the rhetoric of the campaign became harsher, while the link between corrupted Russian officials and Putin became more apparent from the communication of campaigners. The campaign website Navalny.com started publishing articles with the

titles like "Putin and prosecutors guard Swiss bank accounts" (24 August 2017) or "Putin-Chaika-Agalarov-Trump" (11 July 2017) (Chaika and Agalarov were accused of corruption by the FBK). In his blogs on the website, Navalny discussed "The workshop by V. V. Putin on how to steal" (9 June 2017). This contextualisation of the corruption stories politicised the audience that followed the campaign communication.

The simplicity and less contentious nature of the narrative, its meme-making potential as well as the growing internet audience in Russia have helped to increase the attention to the "Dimon" investigation. The publication of that video signified the launch of the Anti-corruption campaign to oust the prime minister. By relying on the anti-corruption agenda and directing their media message to a younger audience, the Navalny campaign turned to their "base first," which is a technique commonly used by campaign professionals in democracies (Powell & Cowart, 2003, p. 74). The video was tightly integrated into campaign communication and was published with additional links that could direct potential supporters to the campaign network. For example, a copy of the video published on VK contained a periodically updated list with links to about 100 local protest campaign pages. The "Dimon" investigation helped the Navalny campaign to reach a wider audience beyond traditional gatekeepers of the Russian media system, mainstream TV, and to mobilise followers for the series of collective action.

On 14 March 2017, 12 days after the publication of "Don't Call Him Dimon," the campaign posted another video and text where Navalny (Komanda Navalnogo, 2017) announced the protests planned on 26 March.

> 13 million people watched the FBK's investigation of the corruption schemes of the Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev. This is 9% of the country's population. And what kind of reaction did we see from the authorities? Medvedev banned Navalny on Instagram. The press secretaries for Putin and Medvedev say they do not want to comment on the claims of a criminal. In any developed country, the publication of such information would lead to the resignation of the government and numerous arrests.
> Well, then, we should walk out and become a little more visible.
> On 26 March, we go to marches and rallies to demand clear public answers regarding the corruption of Russia's top officials.

In the video, Navalny justified the necessity of the protest by focusing on the authorities' "silence" (Putin and Medvedev's photos appeared on the screen at this moment) and the need to "claim at least some answers as to the corruption allegations of the prime minister" (Navalny, 2017b). In his eight-minute speech, Navalny mentioned that after the first video was published, he and "9% of the Russians" who watched the

video have been claiming those answers from Putin and his government "on the internet." Instead, Medvedev banned him on Instagram after "Dimon" was published (Navalny, 2017b). Thus, it was the time to claim the answers "in the streets."

Figure 4.7. The screenshot from the video announcing the 26 March protests.

Similar to Anti-tax campaigners, the anti-corruption activists in Russia quickly faced a typical limitation on collective action in authoritarian states - the difficulty of organising public rallies. For example, during the #strike campaign of Navalny that started nine months after the Anti-corruption rallies, many activists including Navalny and his head of staff Volkov were arrested for the violation of "the Law on Assemblies […]." This law also landed Lyaskin, who was restricted from leaving Moscow by the criminal investigation related to the previous election campaign he helped to run, in jail. Lyaskin just retweeted a video with Navalny which invited citizens to come to a rally. The post contained 19 words "Watch this great video. Our numbers are growing, and we are better. Let's just meet and talk more. 28.01." The court considered this cryptic retweet as "the violation of the procedure of arranging a demonstration." For a 19-word tweet, Lyaskin spent 15 days in jail.

Knowing about the limitations on collective action, the Moscow campaign staff tried to protect themselves and to seek the authorisation of local authorities when organising the Anti-corruption rallies. This was a challenging task for two reasons. First, the core team of the campaign was in Moscow and had a relatively small network beyond the capital at that moment (Respondent 30, personal communication, August 15, 2017).

Second, the authors of the protest event applications could face coercive response of the authorities such as arrests and long prison sentences, a response that is common in Russia following the 2011-12 protest movement (Gabowitsch, 2017, p. 246). For example, one of the volunteers who applied for the authorisation for the rally on 26 March in the city of Taganrog in the Russian South later cancelled his application. "He was intimidated. He withdrew and removed" the page about the rally created by him on VK (Respondent 25, personal communication, June 11, 2017). As a result, the rally in Taganrog was cancelled. In neighbouring Rostov, some local activists were afraid of joining the campaign of Navalny as they had been fined for protest activities before. In another big city, the applicants for a rally were taken by the police from their homes and jailed following the second Anti-corruption rally on 12 June (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). Thus, local activists in Russia could fear higher fines or even jail terms associated with an attempt to organise a rally.

Just like in Russia, the Belarusian authorities tries to prevent the spread of protest activities through society. In the 1990s, they introduced the preemptive policy of leader's "disappearance" (Silitski, 2005). These days, political and civic leaders still disappear from the Belarusian political arena by force. The example of the REP independent trade union is notorious. The REP seemed to be the most radical in terms of repertoire among the organisations that launched the campaign. It was one of the first to announce the protests: "If […] the people's voices will remain unheard," the head of the union Hienadz Fiadynic said in an interview after the union had started collecting signatures for the petition, "There will be just one way out – we will prepare a mass street action" (Charter97, 2017a).

Fiadynic suggested that the aim of the signature gathering operation was to give people a chance "to self-organise […] But we will do nothing from above" (Drakakhrust, 2017). In addition to signature gathering, the REP provided legal advice to many hundreds of people who planned to contest their obligation to pay the tax bill (Respondent 22, personal communication, September 2, 2017). The vision of the trade unionists was that the REP should provide an environment to inspire others for action that would not be controlled by anyone but the people themselves (Drakakhrust, 2017). Therefore, Fiadynic presented his organisations' role in the campaign as a supportive one.

It seems that the government recognised the role of the REP in the Anti-tax campaign and used its traditional preemptive policy to isolate its leaders. Three months after the

movement faded but the controversial tax was still discussed in the government, the police arrested several officers of the trade union including Fiadynic, its head. The trade union activists were accused of tax evasion.

Consequently, Fiadynic along with another member of the union was found guilty of tax evasion. He was sentenced to four years of restriction of liberty without imprisonment, which trade unionists described as "de facto imprisoned in their flats" (Ivanou, 2019), and forced to step down as chairperson of the REP. The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a group of the World Organisation Against Torture, described the trial of Fiadynic as "politically motivated" (Human Rights Defenders, 2018). Respondent 21 was detained for 10 days in connection to the Anti-tax rallies in April 2017. In total, union members spent 225 days in jail as a consequence of the Anti-tax campaigning (Ivanou, 2019). Some observers (e.g. Smok, 2017) and trade unionists (Ivanou, 2019) suggest that the authorities performed these moves against the REP to remove the leadership of the union, so it could not contribute to further protests. The Belarusian authorities slightly delayed their preemptive policy this time, but they seemed to be determined to ensure that the leadership of the trade union is isolated from political life in case trade unions start posing a serious challenge again.

4.2.3 "Leaderless" and "ordinary citizens'" movements

A possible strategy for dealing with the preemptive policy is to present a civic campaign as horizontal, leaderless and spontaneous thus protecting its real leaders from persecution or even death. Indeed, just as many recent social and political movements in authoritarian states, the Anti-tax campaign was dubbed as "leaderless" by the media, many of its activists and some experts. That is how, for instance, a journalist of the English version of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty described the initial stages of the protests:

> The protests that broke out in Minsk and other cities in February were, by all appearances, driven not by Belarus's traditional opposition but by genuine grassroots anger. (Whitmore, 2017)

In other words, the journalist alleged that the mobilisation had nothing to do with Belarusian dissidents. The extensive journalistic account of one of the first campaign protests in Vitebsk on 19 February (Matveyeva, 2017) makes us feel what it was like to be part of something "leaderless":

> There were no specific [...] organisers of the action. People [...] simply stood and got frozen, not knowing what to do next. Many admitted that they attended a street demonstration for the first time. People asked each other: "So what?! We will stand for a while and then break up, and that's it?"

The interviewed participants of the Anti-tax rallies from other towns also had an impression that the campaign "was not controlled by the opposition" (Respondent 19, personal communication, September 7, 2017) and, "in contrast to the previous protests, was not organised from above" (Respondent 13, personal communication, September 7, 2017). That was how dissident Respondent 1 (personal communication, March 13, 2017) perceived the rallies in smaller towns like Pinsk:

> Take a look at our [rallies]. Indeed, people are gathering. But there are no leaders. There are simply no local political structures, trade unions, nothing. Drat! People are gathering, and this is bloody hell, like in Pinsk. What's going on? Where are all the activists?

Respondent 18's experience of the first Anti-tax rally in Brest:

> No one really said: Let's go to the square [to protest]. This was not planned at all. How did we all get there? […] It was unexpected because we got used to the fact that nobody participates in anything. We did not intend to participate [in the rally] as a party - each [of our party activists] came on their own when they were available.
>   It was fun because, when you approached the location, you realised that something was happening there: a lot of people were around somehow. I inspected the corners of out Lenin Square [the location of the rally], I was interested. […] Near each exit [of the squire, I saw] people who just stood and looked at the square. These were clearly not just passers-by. They were at least sympathetic. (Respondent 18, personal communication, September 6, 2017)

Respondent 18's group was one of the largest opposition organisations in that province. It later contributed to further protests there.

Other activists also suggested that the campaign had no organisational structures and was as spontaneous as one can imagine (Respondent 12, personal communication, September 9, 2017; Respondent 22, personal communication, September 2, 2017). The REP trade union coordinator Strizhak (2017a) formulated the view of many Anti-tax activists:

> The structures of the opposition, civil society and political parties played an important role in the development of the protests, but they were not their initiators and coordinators. We [traditional politicians and activists] could ride this wave, but that does not mean that we had the strength to raise it.

The leaders of the political parties that were part of the former Anti-tax Coalition and some civil society experts expressed quite the opposite view. In the interviews, they did not reject the leaderless narrative of several rallies in places like Vitebsk or Brest. However, they claimed that the campaign organisation was based at large on the existing organisational structures of various political groups like the Hramada or the REP. For instance, Respondent 17 (personal communication, May 18, 2017), who was instrumental in organising the signature gathering phase of the campaign by the Coalition, highlighted the role of the party structures and the unions in organising the campaign. Respondent 4, a program coordinator at one of the largest coalitions of NGOs in Belarus, (personal communication, 19 May 2017) suggested that these conventional structures were interested in supporting a myth about the leaderless representation of the protests:

> All those who look at them [the Anti-tax rallies] from a distance, they just believe in this representation of the rallies as spontaneous. In this sense, the organisers have achieved their goal. That is the positioning of the protest as spontaneous. [This was] a campaigning trick.

According to the "myth" camp, the conventional political structures did not highlight their significant role because they tried to avoid state pressure and a preemptive policy. It should be noted that I interviewed the mentioned participants of the campaign after it was basically stopped and dissidents like Anatol Liabedzka were jailed and then released from the prison. Thus, they had little reason to continue supporting the opposite narrative about a leaderless movement.

Despite a common perception, I argue that the Anti-tax campaign was not controlled and coordinated by any bureaucratic structure during either its protest or pre-protest stage. Before the protest stage, the main activity of the campaign was mainly concerned with collecting signatures. In fact, there were several petitions and several groups of activists who collected signatures to abolish the "tax on social parasites." The signatures for different petitions were gathered by the local branches of the UCP, the REP, the Socialist Hramada party and local activists like Respondent 10, who lived in one of the large regional centres of the country (Respondent 10, personal communication, September 6, 2017; Respondent 18, personal communication, September 6, 2017; Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017). Moreover, each of those large structures had several petitions created by different local groups.

For example, Respondent 10 (personal communication, September 6, 2017) drafted a petition and started collecting signatures independently from the REP and the UCP despite being a member of both:

> I have already decided that something needs to be done. But how to fight? Attract some attention. But how? To go the streets with a poster? […] But I knew that it might provoke some sanctions from the police. I decided to go the streets to collect signatures for the abolition of the decree. I drew the attention on social media […]. Journalists saw [posts about me on Facebook and did an interview]. And then it went like a snowball. […] My phone was ringing nonstop. I received calls from the all over the country: "Where to sign? We oppose this decree!"

By the time Respondent 10 created the petition, similar petitions were drafted by local activists in other places including Mahileu, a city nearly 400 km away from Respondent 10's town (Respondent 10, personal communication, September 6, 2017), and in Ivacevicy, a town 80 km to the south of Baranavichy (Respondent 19, personal communication, September 7, 2017). Ten days after Respondent 10 launched the petition, the REP trade union in Homel drafted another one with similar demands and started gathering signatures nationally (Dascynski, 2017; Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017). Different petitions addressed the same government structures. This diversity of petition gathering initiatives demonstrates that the activists of the Anti-tax campaign were not bounded by one central authority and focused their initiative primarily on the sectors where they happened to be local leaders. At the same time, these activists were united by fundamental beliefs regarding the tax on social parasites.

Like the signature gathering phase, the protest phase of the campaign was influenced by several groups with different visions of how mass protest mobilisation should look like. Some of them like the "Tell the Truth!" campaign, an opposition organisation that was not part of the Anti-tax Coalition but supported the idea of the cooperation with the government, organised the meetings in halls instead of rallies on the street or participated in only those rallies that were officially authorised (IK, 2017a). Other organisations were more radical and ready to defy the protest ban. For example, the very first rally of the campaign, the "March of Outraged Belarusians" in Minsk, was jointly announced by the REP trade union and prominent dissident Mikalai Statkevich, who was released from prison less than two years before these events (Respondent 4, personal communication, 19 May 2017). Finally, some members of the Coalition whom I could not name due to the concerns for sources' safety tried to work together

(Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017) to apply for an authorisation for rallies in the provinces such as Homel and Brest (AJA, 2017).

The formal groups that were at the core of the Anti-tax campaign (see Appendix 4) could not be viewed as united under a single organisational framework for at least four reasons. First, the campaign had no card-carrying members or any sort of formal membership. The Anti-tax Coalition was a fluid structure that received different configurations over the course of the events. Different publications of the same media organisation, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, reported the varying configurations of the Coalition on different days of January 2017. Moreover, the Coalition itself ceased to be a significant player before the start of the protest phase, and it was not replaced by any structure that would attempt to unite the groups involved with the Anti-tax campaign.

Second, none of the leaders of the aforementioned organisations knew about all the local or platform-based groups that considered themselves as participants in the campaign. For example, some of the interviewed leaders of the Anti-tax campaign did not know about the most prominent VK page of the campaign that attracted more followers than any other page that focused on the campaign agenda (Respondent 10, personal communication, September 6, 2017; Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017). Similarly, some prominent local activists of the campaign such as Respondent 12, who streamed live video from one-fifth of all the Anti-tax rallies, became known to political leaders of the UCP and the BChD only after the first collective action (Respondent 12, personal communication, September 9, 2017).

Third, the leaders of the different groups quite clearly disagreed on the methods of collective action organising. "Each structure had its own vision" of collective action, said one of the local leaders Respondent 10 (personal communication, September 6, 2017). While more radical organisations such as the REP trade union were ready to defy the protest ban, more moderate groups such as the Tell the Truth! tried to act only if authorisation was received (IK, 2017a). The same town could witness several Anti-tax protests on the same day. For instance, in Brest, one of the Anti-tax rallies was driven by the Socialist Hramada, and another Anti-tax rally organised by an anarchist group started at the same location immediately after the previous rally finished. Respondent 18 (personal communication, September 6, 2017), who participated in the rallies, described those two events:

> [The leader of the local branch of the Hramada party] Maskousky said [to come] at 12 pm, and we came at 12 [for a rally]. […] Other groups of activists also [decided to come] at 12. And they all later met in one place. […] While the anarchists decided: "Oh, we shall come at 13". And they came later.

Fourth, none of the leaders or groups could speak for the campaign as a whole. During just one day on 17 January, four different organisations, the UCP, the REP trade union, the Movement for Freedom and the Tell the Truth!, independently announced four different actions related to the campaign such the gathering of signatures, collective or legislative actions (Dascynski, 2017). In particular, the 17 February rally in Minsk was announced by only two structures, the REP trade union and Statkevich's allies. Simultaneously, the organisations like the Movement for Freedom and the BChD decided to draw the Minsk citizens to another rally planned almost a month later, on 15 March. Both actions eventually took place.

These four reasons demonstrate that, from its launch in January 2017, the Anti-tax campaign was far from a centralised framework. Instead, it looked like a fragmented, many-headed structure (Gerlach & Hine, 1970) whose temporal unity was a function of an external political opportunity (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Political opportunity structure – an aspect of a regime that offers activists an opening to advance their claims – was favourable because of the economic situation in Belarus. Following the collapse of the oil price and commodity markets in 2015, Belarus' economy experienced a decline (Foy, 2018). This decline also affected living standards, which may have resulted in growing dissatisfaction with the authoritarian policies of the government. Following several weeks of collective action, the campaigners started demanding not only the abolition of the contentious tax but also a solution to the socio-economic crisis and even Lukashenka's resignation (Miller, 2017). Therefore, the Anti-tax activists utilised a political opportunity and used their individual initiative and leadership capacity, rather than any centralising organisational framework, to attempt to change the government policies and advocate for pro-democracy changes.

In Russia, the Navalny movement emphasised that it was also not led by any centralised leadership as well. Just 11 days before the March 25 Anti-corruption demonstrations, Volkov, the head of staff, did not expect many people to come: "If 20 or 10 people join, it will be still good" (Volkov, 2017b). Seven days later, when the scale of the upcoming rallies became apparent to the core activists, Volkov called the protests "unprecedented" and the "largest since 1991" – the collapse of the Soviet Union (Volkov, 2017c). Indeed, most of the interviewed provincial activists noted that their cities have rarely

seen collective political action of such a scale. "Our [normal] max level [of an anti-governmental demonstration] is 500 people," says Respondent 26, who was a coordinator in one of the largest Russian cities (personal communication, August 14, 2017). During the 26 March protests, at least 1 500 people came to support the campaigns' anti-corruption agenda in that city (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). In total, at least 37 000 people came to the streets of 88 Russian cities that day (see Table 4.2). This shows that the core activists of the Navalny organisation were surprised with the scale of their first collective action.

Following the first protest episode of March 2017, the Navalny movement gradually has referred to its organisational structures as "ordinary citizens' movement." For instance, Volkov (2017h) claimed that the movement was "strong because of our self-organisation and *horizontal* network" [emphasis added]. This allowed, according to Volkov, to avoid a collapse of the campaign following the detentions of its core activists. Even in jail, the leaders tried to take part in the groups' interactions. They do not reveal how exactly they did it, but leaders like the chief-of-staff Volkov managed to send messages to their followers from jail. These words were signed by Volkov and were distributed on the Telegram channels of the presidential campaign on 12 March 2018:

> They stupidly believe that the work of the headquarters [the local offices of the campaign] can be hindered by sending Volkov, Navalny, Lyaskin […] or whoever else to jail. They do not understand that the *headquarters are all of you* [emphasis added]. And that everyone cannot be put in jail anyway. (Novosti Shtabov Navalnogo, 2018)

The Navalny organisation might have needed the "headquarters are all of you" rhetoric to represent the organisation as a people's movement or a movement of "ordinary citizens" rather than of core paid activists. Nevertheless, the principle of Navalny's "ordinary citizens'" movement could contradict practice as it often happens in organisations that heavily rely on digital communication to organise (Poell & van Dijck, 2016; Shaw & Hill, 2014). In addition, the perception protests as unexpected and spontaneous is often a prevailing narrative in characterising many contemporary movements like the Arab Spring or 15M in Spain, as well as earlier actions such as student sit-ins in the US in the 1960s (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). Journalists and observers might describe the protests as spontaneous because such events often do not have visible or recognisable organisational structures.

As in Russia, the publicly cultivated organisational narratives of the Belarusian Anti-tax movement were problematic. None of the interviewed activists recognised the presence of an observable bureaucratic organisation that would fully control and coordinate the protest stage of the campaign. In addition, the independent media of Belarus and the interviewed activists alike did not mention the presence of a charismatic leader that would alter the dynamics of the campaign. In the minds of many observers, the only alternative to a leader-centred or a bureaucratic organisation is no organisation at all (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 33). That was perhaps how the myth of a leaderless Anti-tax movement could emerge.

I argue that journalists and the local authorities did not detect an organisation behind the Anti-corruption and Anti-tax rallies initially, and both campaigning groups used this myopic view for their advantage. Instead of following this myopic view, I propose to characterise the campaigns during their protest stage as a third type of organisation, which is contrasted to the leaderless and the bureaucratic types. This third type of organisation used the narrative of a spontaneous and leaderless movement to address the limitations on political organising in an authoritarian environment. In the following sections, I discuss the two features of this third type: segmentation and pseudonymous leadership.

4.3 The growth and the segmentation of the movements

4.3.1 Features analysis of the 26 march protest pages

Analysis of rally organising by the Navalny organisation helps to reveal the structure of an anti-authoritarian movement. The Russian local authorities initially authorised the 26 March anti-corruption protests in most of the 88 Russian cities (Table 4.5). Most of the permissions for those protests were requested by ad hoc leaders who might have never met and talked to the Navalny core team before and had no previous connections with the campaign (Respondent 30, personal communication, August 15, 2017; Respondent 25, personal communication, June 11, 2017). Having no previous experience of rally organising, many of these new local leaders were guided by a simplified explanation of the Russian law on rallies posted online by the Navalny organisation.

> Local activists "self-organised and created [VK] pages themselves. They checked
> out how pages were created in cities where there were offices. [They] copied
> pictures, the names of a group. This is not difficult - you do not need any special
> knowledge" (Respondent 24, personal communication, April 24, 2017).

The local volunteers who tried to organise Anti-corruption rallies focused on the two goals: obtaining official permission from the authorities and building their base on digital platforms. They created pages on VK and other platforms about the coming protests and gathered social media teams to support those pages. These teams could include as much as five people. They became the page's administrators and, where no other Navalny's representatives operated, local spokespeople for the protest movement because they communicated with their potential participants on behalf of the movement.

Gerbaudo (2017c, p. 186) notes that "[s]ocial media teams constitute an intriguing object of study, because they allow exploring the important but largely invisible organisational structures." This is partly because such teams often remain "a sort of half-secret known only to those deeply involved in the activist community" (Gerbaudo, 2017c, p. 192). Another reason for the elusive character of social media teams in an activist organisation is their wish to remain anonymous. The organisers of 33% of the 26 March VK protest pages anonymised themselves. I discuss the anonymity arrangement of the local ad hoc leaders of the Anti-corruption campaign in the next Chapter. The investigation into the network of social media teams helps to map on the organisational structures of the Anti-corruption campaign and to explain its remarkable growth prior to the 26 March rallies.

Table 4.5

Features analysis of the 26 March protest pages

The Anti-corruption pages	Total	% of the sample (see Note)
Overall numbers		
Anti-corruption pages created by the Navalny organisation staff	32	36
Design features		
Non-administrators can write on the wall of a page	43	49
The discussion feature is enabled (known as VK forums)	25	28
Pages which contained additional features (e.g. a modified header image, avatar, additional sections enabled such as "music")	22	25
Rallies		
Anti-corruption rallies authorised as of 25 March 2017	11	13

Note. 88 (N) pages of the Anti-corruption campaign were analysed with features analysis. There were the pages that did not announce the cancellation of a local Anti-corruption rally by 26 March 2017.

The hardly recognisable protest network sparked by the Anti-corruption campaign grew rapidly. A day after the protests were announced, the campaign community already consisted of about 50 VK pages. Each distributed information about local rallies. Thus, a day after the FBK disseminated a call for the 26 March protests, 50 new campaign pages emerged across Russia. By 22 March, there were 95 such working pages in total, which meant 95 campaign segments from Vladivostok near Japan to Kaliningrad on the Baltic sea were involved in the campaign. Across this vast space, the Navalny organisation had only seven offices by the time when it announced the Anti-corruption protests (Volkov, 2017b). Several paid coordinators were hired in other provinces, but their offices were not functional, and social media teams were not gathered yet. According to my analysis, the campaign staff created only up to 32 of the pages dedicated to the Anti-corruption local protests in the provinces (Table 4.5). While some of the protest pages disappeared or their administrators failed to deliver a rally, many remained active after 26 March.

If one managed to trace this elusive collection of protest pages around the largest Russian social media platform, they would observe a quite coherent network with similar content and design. Most of the content posted on the Anti-corruption campaign pages was information about Navalny's investigations and the practicalities of the upcoming rallies. Regarding design features, many Anti-corruption VK pages contained links to the guidelines on protest organising, discussions about protest events and a board where users debated politics.

The local activists received no formal advice or instructions as to how to design the public pages of the rallies (Respondent 30, personal communication, August 15, 2017). Still, local pages reposted many images and texts that were distributed through the main VK page administered from FBK's office in Moscow. Prime minister's memes and collages were the main features of those images. Some of those images and other materials were localised and personalised by local organisers by adding to them, for instance, the name of a town where a rally should take place. Only 25% of the pages from the Anti-corruption VK network contained specific features of the design such as an unusual page header, a section with music files or a name of the page that contained no link to the Anti-corruption process (see Table 4.5). Despite no formal advice being received from the federal office, local Anti-corruption activists managed to maintain a largely coherent organisational image across its local campaign pages.

In SPIN theory terms, the proliferation of the Anti-corruption pages on VK and groups associated with them can be viewed as the initial segmentation of the Navalny organisation in the regions of Russia. While the core campaign team in Moscow felt unprepared, unofficial segments that supported the Anti-corruption campaign and the 26 March mobilisation started proliferating independently from the centre of the campaign in the places where the Moscow core team had no formal representation. Most of these local segments were initially not subordinated to and controlled by the core team in Moscow (Respondent 30, personal communication, August 15, 2017). The choice of a format of collective action, the repertoire of action, the fundraising and other organisational activities were left to local activists (Respondent 25, personal communication, June 11, 2017). Thus, the resulting organisational campaign network can be described as segmentary.

The core team chose to rely on local activists, who were largely unknown to them, to organise the anti-corruption rallies. Following six weeks after the publication of the video, the campaign attracted 50 000 new volunteers (Volkov, 2018a). Ultimately, these

people became the main force of Navalny's presidential bid – the second campaign of his organisation in 2017, while many segments of the Anti-corruption campaign were turned into central cells of this second campaign. This was one of the remarkable consequences of the success of the FBK's YouTube materials and the use of digital media affordances. The segmentation allowed the campaign to create a scarcely traceable initial organisational network structure. This might explain why both journalists and local authorities that sanctioned the rallies perceived the 26 March protests as spontaneous. Instead, the scale of the protests was a partial result of segmentation and proliferation of the units of the Anti-corruption network triggered by the investigation that was being prepared by the FBK for many months.

4.3.2 Features analysis and SNA of the Anti-tax campaign pages

In contrast to the case of the Navalny network, the cells of the Anti-tax campaign formed around the local branches of civic and political organisations like those that were part of the Anti-tax Coalition, as well as anarchist groups and platforms pages that covered the campaign (Table 4.6), both nationally and locally. These pages could represent an organisation that was part of the Coalition, like in the case of the REP trade union pages, or they could be independent of any previously known organisation. In this section, I examine the process of segmentation in the Anti-tax campaign based on its representation on social media platforms.

The prominent participants of many rallies of the campaign such as Respondent 21 (personal communication, September 1, 2017) or Respondent 12 (personal communication, September 9, 2017), one of the most popular political bloggers at the time of the protests, believed that platforms were its central organising mechanism. Table 4.6 demonstrates that the design of the campaign on three out of five of its main digital platform pages (for discussion of the sampling strategy, see Chapter 3) contained few unifying features.

In particular, all of the pages associated with the Anti-tax campaign had different titles, header images and avatar images. Some of them had the discussion option enabled, some of them did not. Some of the pages contained additional features such as a music section or reviews by users, while others looked very basic and minimalist. They were also branded differently (Table 4.6). Some of the administrators adopted pseudonyms or anonymised themselves, while others did not. The pages' administrators hardly ever made any effort to represent the campaign as a united and coherent organisation.

Instead, on digital platforms, the campaign looked more like a combination of seemingly unrelated civic groups.

Table 4.6

The design features of the five main Anti-tax campaign pages as of April 2017

Name of the Page	The Party of Parasites	PASD	The REP trade union (3 pages)		
Platform	Facebook	VK	Facebook	VK	OK
Number of followers	4785	6202	4047	881	2795
Type	Page/community	Page/community	Page/community	Page/community	Group
"Links to other pages" section	Not present	59 links to other VK pages (a link to the REP VK page)	Not present	7 links to pages and sites of the same organisation	Not present
Discussion options	"Community posts"	Discussions enabled	Disabled	Discussions	N/A
Non-administrators can write on the wall	N/A	No	N/A	No	No
Additional features	Reviews by users	No	No	Documents Music	No
Administrators adopted pseudonyms/hidden identities[a]	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Note. [a]The architecture of Facebook did not allow accessing the names of the administrators as sometimes VK and OK did. Thus, I assumed that the administrators of the Facebook pages anonymised themselves unless their names were stated in the "About" sections of the pages.

Table 4.7

The front design of the five main Anti-tax pages

The Party of Parasites (Facebook)	PASD (VK)	The REP (Facebook)	The REP (VK)	The REP (OK)

To trace the ties of the main pages of the campaign to other possible cells and a wider organisation network, I used the "Links to other pages" section. The "Links to other pages" section is important because it is one of few platform footprints that can show the ties between the cells. In contrast to OK and Facebook, this section is a default design feature of any VK page. VK was the leading digital platform in Belarus in terms of registered users in 2017.

The sample contains two Anti-tax pages on VK. First, the "Links to other pages" section of the REP VK page that covered the campaign from the perspective of worker and human rights. It contained only seven links that led to the REP own website and pages on other platforms (Table 4.6). The REP network did not demonstrate ties to other Anti-tax groups.

Second, the "Parasites" and "Social Dependents" group (PASD) page, which had the largest number of followers compared to other sampled pages, contained a list of 51 links to VK pages. The PASD page was a predominantly Russian-speaking political community that existed before the campaign under a different name. Then, it had had around 200 followers and focused on other contentious political issues, according to the PASD administrator (Respondent 14, personal communication, January 1, 2018):

> There was a page called «Vybory – duryboly» [Elections are Scam]. On its avatar, there was a motto: "2015 Elections, are there elections?" By that time [of the Anti-tax campaign], it has already outlived itself […], and I reshaped it into the "Parasites."

At the beginning of January 2017, an administrator of the community changed its name and chose a new and single aim for the page – "to oppose the tax" on social parasites (Respondent 14, personal communication, January 1, 2018). The community shared news about the campaign and other political information related to Belarus. It also informed about the actions of the campaign. The PASD contained an extensive amount of links to other pages on VK concerned with political issues. I focused on this page to trace possible ties between the Anti-tax cells on the VK platform.
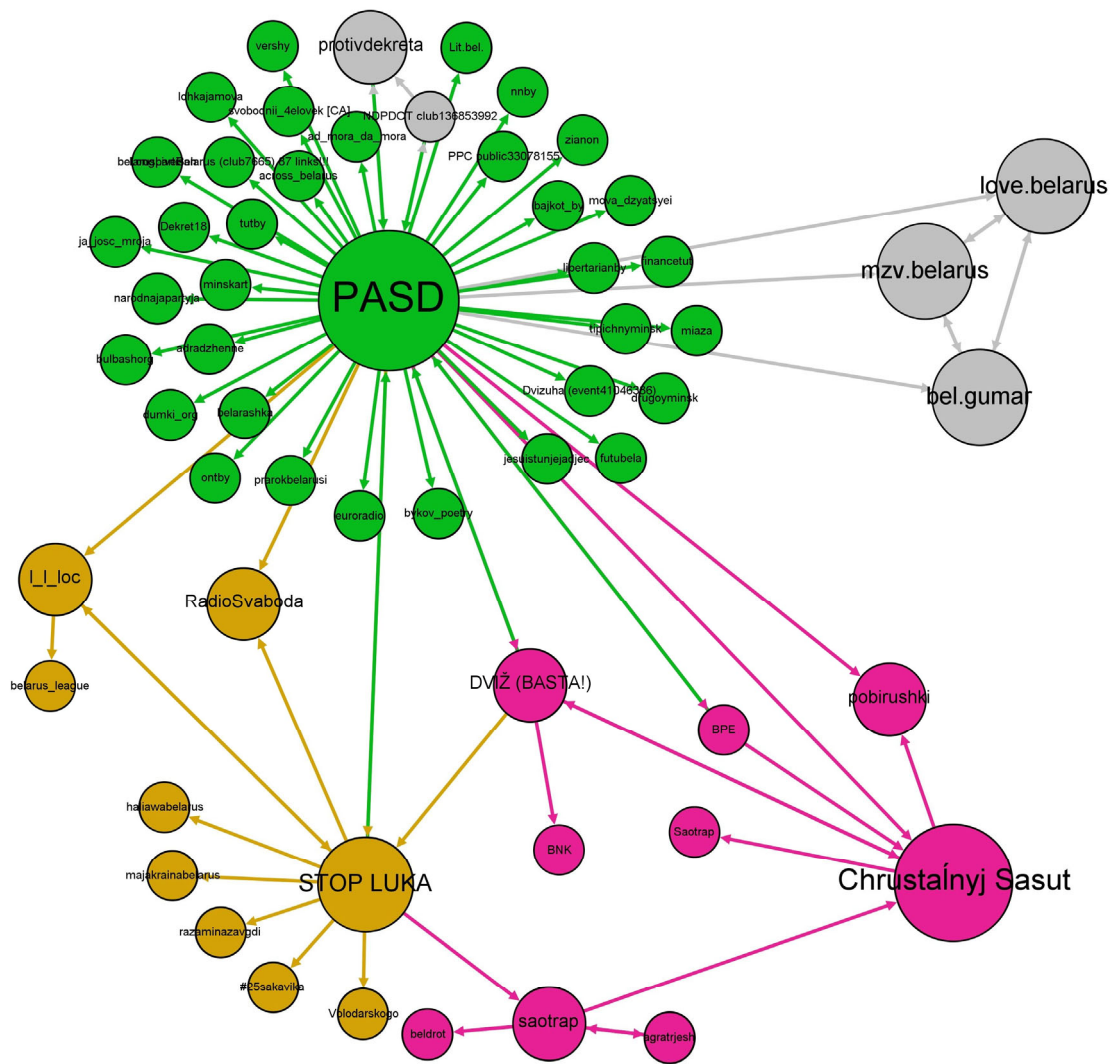
Figure 4.8. The SNA analysis of the linked pages to the PASD group.

Figure 4.8 and Table 4.8 present the results of the Social Network Analysis (SNA) of the PASD links according to the state of the network by the end of the campaign in April 2017. Nodes are pages listed in the "Links to other pages" section. Edges are links directed to a linked page.

Table 4.8

The pages linked to the PASD group with the highest degree value

Page	VK handle	Administrators' visibility[*]	Description	In-degree	Out-degree	Degree
The PASD	tuneyadci_i_izhdevenci	Pseudonymous	The most followed page on VK dedicated to the issues of the Anti-tax campaign exclusively	5	46	51
STOP LUKA	stopluka	Real names/ Pseudonymous	A highly politicised community critical of the authorities. "Luka" is a nickname for LUKAshenka	3	9	12
Chrustalnyj Sasut	belsasut	Anonymised	A political page critical of the authorities with many memes and entertaining content	4	3	7
DVIŽ (BASTA!)	dvizh_bel	Pseudonymous	A page linked to anarchist groups many of whom were active during the protest phase of the campaign	2	4	6
The community of pidgin language poets	saotrap	Real names/ Pseudonymous	A page that posts political satire in the form of poetry critical of the Belarusian authorities	2	3	5
We support independent Belarus	mzv.belarus	Anonymised	A political page that covers broad issues, critical of the government	3	2	5
Belarusian fun and comix	bel.gumar	Anonymised	A page posts fun pictures that cover the news related to Belarus	3	2	5
I ♡ Belarus	love.belarus	Anonymised	A patriotic page with the picturesque images of Belarus	3	2	5
Only SHOS[1]	l_l_loc	Anonymised	A page that covers political news.	2	2	4

Table 4.8 shows that most of the pages had no more than 9 connections to other pages and groups. Besides their critical stance towards the authorities, the pages had several similarities. First, all pages but the Belarusian fun and comix and I ♡ Belarus covered the Anti-tax campaign by posting news, photos and videos related to it. I determined this by using the native search engine of VK. Second, all of the pages had ties with other politicised VK page that were often critical of the authorities. However, the level of in-degree of the pages related to the Anti-tax was not higher than five. That means that the pages were reluctant to demonstrate their ties with other VK pages publicly.

At the same time, the administrators of the pages established private, undisclosed linkages. For example, the administrators of DVIŽ (BASTA!) and Chrustaĺnyj Sasut "constantly sent messages" to the administrator of the PASD regarding content distribution (Respondent 14, personal communication, January 1, 2018). The PASD administrator also exchanged messages with the administrators of other pages from his network about the content to share. In addition to the private linkages with mostly anonymous or pseudonymous administrators of the anti-government VK pages, the administrator of the PASD had pre-existed links to one of the key public organisations of the Anti-tax campaign, the REP trade union. Respondent 14 was the union activist during the 2016 presidential elections (Respondent 14, personal communication, January 1, 2018). Thus, the personal linkages between the administrators of the VK pages that distributed campaign content and pre-existing linkages to the major Anti-tax groups seemed to be stronger than the administrators displayed publicly. In other words, the administrators of the most connected pages of the PASD network tried to downplay the ties between their pages.

While all of the pages that were central to the PASD network were critical of the government and seemed to be supportive of the Anti-tax campaign, there is no evidence that they formed a political network or a coalition. Instead, the pages remained essentially independent units that exchanged the campaign content – the process

coordinated privately, as the network analysis and the interviews suggest. Hence, similar to the case of the Russian anti-corruption movement, these pages represented formed a segmented organisational network used to share political content.

4.3.3 Dynamic segmentation as a successful organisational strategy

Despite being segmented, neither the Anti-tax campaign in Belarus nor the Anti-corruption campaign in Russia completely fulfilled all the criteria of a segmented social movement in SPIN terms. For instance, the Navalny campaigns segmented mainly before or during collective action. During later periods of the normal flow of events, the organisation was a rather bureaucratised structure that would be described by the SPIN model as more traditional. Nevertheless, this model is a theory of social movements acting in the pre-platform media environment. In other words, the model's original form does not accommodate all the features of digitally-enabled organisation such as the opportunity to reinforce the ties between different segments by using the linking features of platforms, like the "Links to other pages" section on VK. Moreover, the SPIN model suggests that the recruitment process in movements "flows along the lines of pre-existing, significant social relationships" (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 97). However, the two studied organisations were able to recruit new participants even if they had no significant social relationships to the core activists. This disparity between the SPIN model and the empirical observations indicates the need for move advanced conceptualisations of organising in digital authoritarian settings.

When the Navalny organisation entered its second phase of campaigning, the presidential campaign, its network was transformed. The federal campaign office bureaucratised the administration of the campaign pages. At the same time, the local offices began receiving greater support, as well as additional resources and tools from the federal office. In exchange, the local offices partly lost their autonomy and were unified under the brand of the Navalny presidential campaign. Schneider (2019, pp. 12–13), who has studied local governments, uses the term recentralisation to describe a similar process on the state level when devolved local authorities lose powers in exchange for resources.

The last episode of the Navalny organisation's campaigning in 2017-18 that was studied in this dissertation, the #strike campaign, also contained elements of dynamic segmentation. As I show later, by this time, Telegram, an encrypted messaging platform, superseded VK as the main platform used to coordinate Navalny's networks.

The network's coordinators considered Telegram as a safer organisational tool due to its features and architecture. This new coordination network remained partly segmented, especially during critical events, as Figure 5.8 illustrates.

Initially, segmentation helped the Navalny organisation to proliferate quickly in the provinces, avoiding the persecution of its new local leaders. Following this, the organisation recentralised its segments as it accessed resources needed for the Navalny presidential campaign and distributed these resources across the local segments. During protest events, the network segmented again because the organisation's public leaders were often isolated and local segment administrators had to take control of coordination. Thus, this research suggests that the focus on "the strong hierarchy inside his campaign" (Dollbaum et al., 2018) within the Navalny organisation might be misleading because this hierarchy can be transformed quickly.

Finally, after the period of the presidential elections ended in March 2018, the network of the Navalny organisation became segmented again, waiting for further political opportunities. Half a year later, in September 2018, this network consisted of around a half of the original "Navalny offices" ('Shtaby Navalnogo', n.d.) that continued "campaigning on regional political" issues (Volkov, 2018d). They pursued a relatively autonomous political agenda. These offices were also "free to choose any topic to campaign on […] and to find resources for it." Volkov (2018d) believed that this localisation of the campaign was its main outcome:

> Our regional political network is our main outcome. […] No one believed that anyone would hand out leaflets on the streets of Komsomolsk-on-Amar, join a rally in Murmansk and march to protest in Kaliningrad.
>   [The current] strategy is to find the points that are the most problematic for the authorities and to create pressure there. The pressure would push the authorities to make mistakes, which would grow our political capital and make the life of the authorities more difficult.

The statements by the movement's leaders suggested that, in spring 2018, the Navalny organisation became much less controlled from the federal office than it had been in 2017. In the morning after the presidential election, Alexei Navalny (2018b) posted on his website: "These 'elections' are one of the episodes of the struggle. We realised this earlier and concentrated on building a structure. And we created it despite enormous pressure." That was how Volkov (Kanygin, 2018) presented the main outcome of the campaigning in 2017:

> Before the launch of the campaign, we did not have a regional network, and everyone thought that all politics could only take place in Moscow […]. We have demonstrated hundreds and thousands of bright political activists in the provinces who are absolutely self-directed, independent, self-sufficient, who carry out absolutely stunning creative, inventive, strong, bold actions.

The core activists of the Navalny organisation planned to carry on with their pollical activities further, i.e. by contesting local elections when the political opportunity arises, and considered the remaining offices as the ground for these activities. Thus, the Navalny movement's organisational structure was not completely centralised or segmented but was hybrid and dynamically adaptable to the current goals and circumstances. In other words, the hierarchical and network forms of organising coexisted (Karatzogianni, 2015, p. 14) in the Navalny case.

In contrast to the Navalny organisation, the Anti-tax movement was not organisationally dynamic and failed to develop the institutional capacity to struggle for real power and, thus, to build a "sustainable organisation" (Bennett et al., 2014). Instead, after its basic claim was fulfilled, it had largely dispersed under the pressures of state repression and other factors by April 2017. By 31 March 2017, 941 cases of detention and other forms of persecution related to the campaign and protests had been recorded by human rights defenders and journalists (Spring96, 2017). None of its later claims, including demands to resolve the socio-economic crisis and calls for Lukashenka's resignation (Miller, 2017), were addressed by the authorities. The Anti-tax campaign achieved the policy change it demanded but did not adapt its organisation dynamically and failed in the long run.

Chapter 5 Political leadership in authoritarian settings

In this chapter, I focus on the issue of leadership in the Anti-tax movement Navalny's presidential campaign. I discuss how their leaders approached the challenges of surveillance and persecution by managing their visibility on social media and coordinating collective action. This analysis is based on interviews, textual analysis of the materials that were disseminated by the campaigners and their conversations on the Telegram messaging platform, as well as features analysis of campaign communities on VK and participant observation.

In the first section, I discuss how the activists of the organisations perceived and approached the issue of surveillance. By analysing the communication in their campaigns, I isolate the notion of a segment leader, as well as its denomination – a pseudonymous segment leader. In the second section, I analyse who the multiplicity of leadership, as well as a canny use of platform affordances, helped the two anti-authoritarian movements to address the issue of persecution. In the third and fourth sections, I examine the role of the single charismatic leader of the Navalny movement, as well as its organisational culture.

5.1 Surveillance

5.1.1 The emergence of segment leaders

On the first day of my fieldwork in Moscow, I rushed into the local office of the Navalny presidential campaign. It was located on the ground floor of an ordinary apartment complex quite far away from the city centre. Before this moment, I followed the campaign online for many months. I also knew that the activists had to change the location of their Moscow office several times as the police put pressure on the owners of the buildings where the offices were located. On my way to the office, I was carefully looking around me: where could the agents of the police that might be spying on the office be placed? Would they record my face and add me to their database of Navalny's supporters?

The office had white walls and white furniture that reminded of simple IKEA-style design. On one of the walls, there was a large sign "Navalny 2018." Upon arrival, I was met by the volunteers who immediately tried to register me on their supporters' database. I told them that I was not a Russian citizen and came here to learn about their campaign rather than to join it. The volunteers, who were mostly in their early twenties,

received my request with surprise and suspicion: "If you cannot be a volunteer, what are you doing here?"

Suddenly, more people started arriving in the office. They were mostly young males who looked like students. New visitors were registered in the database and then invited to take a chair. In about ten minutes, the training event had started. It was about the election observation. The suspicious volunteers forgot about me, and I started listening to a trainer who talked about the fun of election monitoring in Russia. Soon I received a chance to break the barrier with the volunteers and to talk to their leaders who appeared more welcoming. They agreed to an interview with me for the next day and allowed me to stay in the office for a while to observe. I did not blame these people for their suspicion for I knew how challenging it might be to avoid surveillance in an authoritarian state.

During my observation of the Navalny organisation in the summer of 2017, I also noticed that its activists had almost never used their smartphones to talk. The Moscow office of the organisation is a good example. I spent about eight hours a day for three days in this office and found that no one made calls using a mobile network or a landline.

> I know that my phone calls are wiretapped. We all assume that everything is audible here [in the office]. Completely. If we have something very important [to discuss] [...], no one speaks out. We all leave our telephones inside [the office] and go out to discuss stuff on the street to avoid phone surveillance. (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017)

The report by a local human rights group supports the concerns of the activists. "The Russian state had, in recent years, organized a complex system of monitoring and surveillance of civic activists, independent journalists and the political opposition" (Gainutdinov & Chikov, 2017b). As a consequence, when activists call each other using a mobile network, they fear the Russian special services might wiretap them.

Just like in Russia, the Belarusian government is one of those regimes that have implemented a complex system that enables state surveillance of internet traffic (Freedom House, 2016a). This system is partly developed by Russia and China and is used to filter or to suppress political content on the internet (Åström et al., 2012). Belarusian political activists are aware of these practices. For example, Respondent 10, an activist of the Anti-tax campaign from a local town in Belarus (personal

communication, September 6, 2017), believed that he was constantly watched, especially before and during the critical days of collective action:

> I feel they are wiretapping me. I do not know how. But I believe they control me somehow. I am hundred per cent sure that they are watching me on social media. […] But I am ok about that.

I heard such worries from several Anti-tax activists, which makes me believe that Respondent 10 was not just paranoid about surveillance. They did not take any actions to tackle this. According to an experienced activist and journalist Respondent 11, who spoke at the first Anti-tax rally in Minsk, digital security negligence is a common attitude among politically active people, who "do not know what TOR is, do not know what VPN is, and who pays for this. They are fined, their pages are hacked, and KGB's hackers are doing anything with them" (Respondent 11, personal communication, May 24, 2017).

Digital security expert Respondent 9 (personal communication, March 13, 2017) said that organisations were more reluctant to improve their security practices to avoid surveillance than individual activists. The expert also observed that those who witnessed how the state can use digital surveillance to persecute activists were often more interested in learning about digital security. Another prominent digital security expert Respondent 3 (personal communication, January 17, 2017) argued that political activists were more worried about losing access to pages they administered or inability to promote their content due to the commercialisation of digital platforms rather than their privacy and possible surveillance or other forms of repressive politics.

A few Belarusian activists, like Respondent 21 (personal communication, September 1, 2017), did address the issue of surveillance by following the advice of security specialists: "I do care about my safety […]. I monitor the situation with access to my accounts, change passwords, complex passwords." Many activists simply tried to avoid email and social media platforms associated with Russia: "We do not use anything that has 'Ru' [Ru is the domain zone for Russia]" in its name, like VK or Mail.ru, said Respondent 19, a political vlogger who used YouTube to mobilise citizens for protests (personal communication, September 7, 2017).

The activists of the Navalny organisation also "realised" that if they exchange messages on VK, "they can be read everywhere" (Respondent 31, personal communication, August 15, 2017). They were afraid of surveillance on this platform that is owned by

Alisher Usmanov, a Russian businessman who maintains close connections with the government. Usmanov was featured in "Don't Call Him Dimon" investigation several times as a businessman who allegedly bribed the prime minister. The activists also criticised him later using memes and other content. Still, the campaign used VK actively for its public communication. The campaigners explain this public role of VK by its popularity among young Russians: "The Navalny movement is a youth movement. Thus, VK is a natural choice for the Navalny network" (Respondent 31, personal communication, 15 August 2017). Respondent 31 also added that VK was the primary platform for public communication of the Anti-corruption campaign.

Still, surveillance was one of the major concerns of many activists. As I have demonstrated earlier, the Russian local authorities could not initially identify an organisational structure behind the few novice individuals who applied for a sanction for a small anti-corruption rally in their town in March 2017. Segmentation helped the Anti-corruption campaign to solve temporarily one of the dissident's challenges – restrictions on freedom of assembly such as persecution of protest leaders. However, in many places, the local governments recalled their authorisations for rallies several days after they were issued. For example, this post on the Anti-corruption VK page in Kostroma announced the recall in this way (Figure 5.1):

Figure 5.1. The post on the VK anti-corruption page in Kostroma that announced that the authorisation for a rally was recalled.

Translation:

> ATTENTION ATTENTION!!!! maximum repost!
>
> This is the organiser!
>
> As you know, our application for a rally was denied, I don't have the right to call you for anything, but, I can and will offer to walk past the lonely protestors [a picket-person]!
>
> Tomorrow, at 16:00 on October Square, we are going for a walk!
>
> According to the "rumours", there will be a picket with a banner, consider them a mark.
>
> (According to rumours, there will be protestors on Susaninskaya Square and on Mira ave.)
>
> VERY IMPORTANT: DO NOT BRING ANY FLAGS, POSTERS ETC. OTHERWISE!!!!!
>
> THE WALK WILL END UP IN THE LOCAL POLICE STATION!
>
> Also, the organisers look for several not shy people who can stand up for themselves.

Only 15% of all rallies announced by the campaign VK pages were authorised as of March 25 (Table 4.5). Thus, the campaigners had to post similar announcements in other groups too. It seems like the federal government of Russia realised that the novices were the activists of a large emerging movement – an organisation whose nature they perhaps could not yet understand, but they felt it could pose an important challenge to the authorities.

Still, the government could try to identify, monitor and, consequently, persecute only some of those novices – activists who applied for an authorisation for a rally. Some of those people were indeed key organisers in local campaign segments. For example, the official applicant for the 26 March rally in one of the Russian cities was Respondent 26, the paid coordinator of the Navalny organisation. Being part of Navalny's campaigns for years, Respondent 26 formally joined the Anti-corruption campaign just a month before these events (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). The authorities refused to authorise the rally and, following its success with about 1 500 people attending, tried to detain Respondent 26. The process of securing authorisation for a rally could help the authorities to reveal the identities of local campaign leaders.

Three months later, when preparing the second rally of the campaign on 12 June 2017, Respondent 26 did not apply for an authorisation. Instead, Respondent 26 found rank-and-file activists for this role, so Respondent 26 "would not be excluded from the campaign" as a result of possible detention. "If you are put in jail, we do not work" – Respondent 26 explains the logic behind this approach (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). By contrast, the Respondent 26th rank-and-file activists were later detained.

Another official local coordinator of the Anti-corruption campaign, Respondent 25, asked two activists who joined the protests groups "after they watched the video of Navalny" (personal communication, June 11, 2017) to apply for the authorisation for a rally in this city. After a successful rally, the two activists were brought to court and fined with about $200 fines. Respondent 25 was not prosecuted. Such division of labour between real leaders and organisers on paper was typical for at least some other Russian regions where the campaign proliferated.

Many leaders of the campaign segments managed to avoid persecution during the preparation for the 26 March rallies and after them because the authorities might not realise their significance. These leaders were vital figures of the campaign because they

were the administrators of its segment digital platform pages. I define these figures as independent *segment leaders*. Segment leaders are the administrators of campaign pages that recruit new followers and connect central and local leadership with followers. I discuss these two functions of segment leaders in the following sections. In some regions where the campaign managed to launch its offices before the 26 March rallies, the role of segment leaders was played by paid regional office coordinators. However, in the majority of Russian regions, their role was taken by volunteers who had no formal link to the core Navalny team in Moscow. In both cases, segment leaders were real local leaders of the Anti-corruption campaign. Finally, in a few locations, the role of a segment leader was delegated to paid office staff.

The critical feature of a digital segment leader of the Anti-corruption campaign was their knowledge of and ability to use the affordances of digital media to protect their identity and to avoid surveillance. Figure 5.2 depicts a typical section of a VK campaign page featuring the digital segment leader and other personalities of a local segment. This section contains names and links to the profiles of the administrator and other users related to the segment in Arkhangelsk. Ivan Ivanov, the administrator, is most certainly a fake identity. Their profile picture (Figure 5.3) is a cat, their page contains only one post, which is a repost of the photos from the protest rally, and the name of the administrator is the most typical Russian name. The profile has no photos, and it was not updated after March 2017. By contrast, a user described as "a rally organiser," Valeri Shpiakin, was not an administrator as his name was not part of the section "Organisers.[8]" Shpiakin did not conceal his identity. He was a person who applied for authorisation and could be prosecuted first if the police chose so. Thus, Shpiakin had no reason for hiding his identity behind a nickname as the local authorities and, therefore, the police had known it already.

---

[8] In the section "Organisers", the design of VK displays a link to the profile of the "owner" of a page. Only the owners have full administrator's rights. Section "contacts" could be filled with the links to the profiles of any other users who may or may not be administrators.

Figure 5.2. A fragment of the Anti-corruption campaign page in Arkhangelsk and its translation [with my comments].
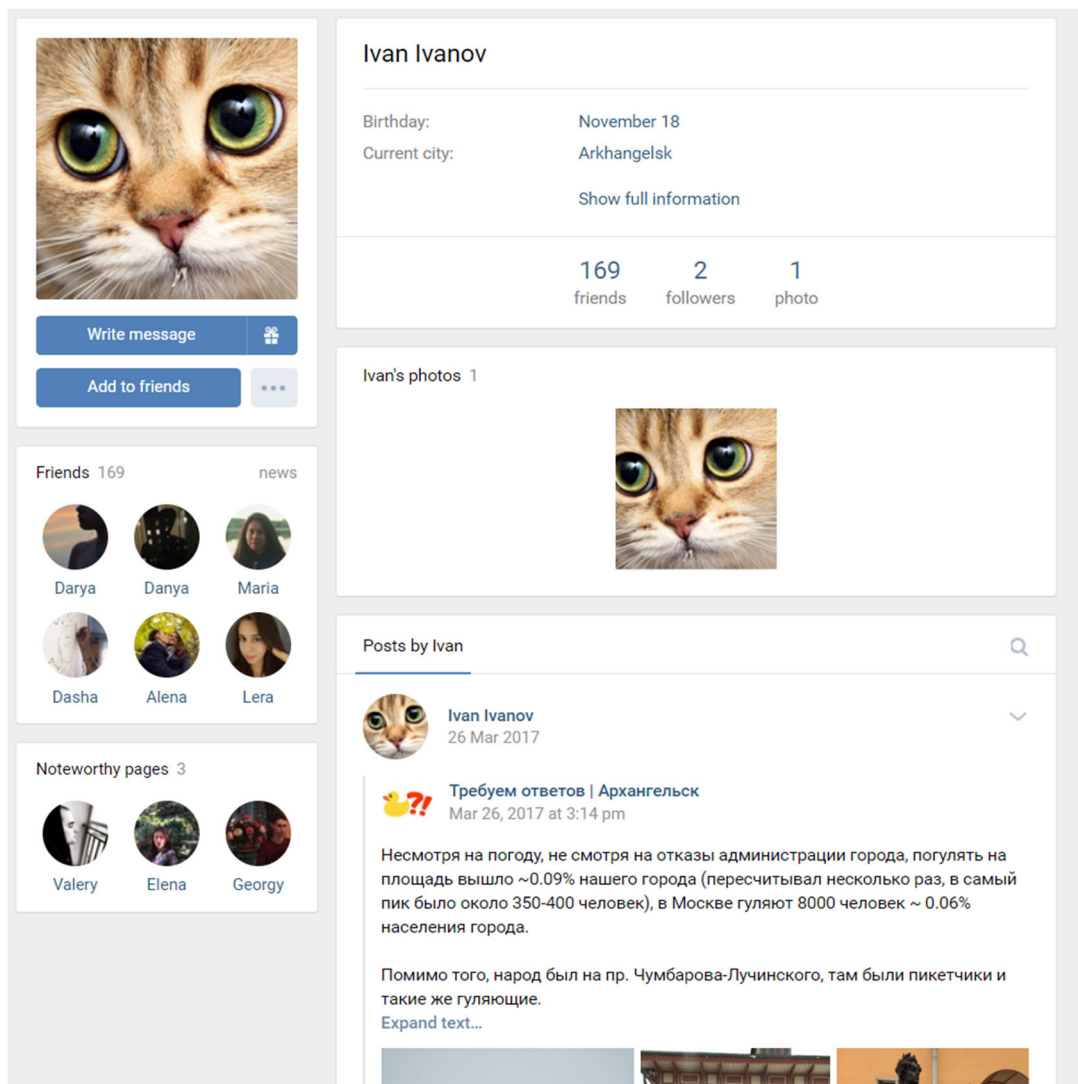
Figure 5.3. The profile of Ivan Ivanov, probably, a fake identity of the digital segment leader of the Anti-corruption campaign page in Arkhangelsk.

Ivan Ivanov is an example of an independent segment leader who was identified as an administrator of a campaign page but concealed their identity by adopting a nickname or a pseudonym. Up to 33% of segment leaders concealed their identities in a similar fashion. Therefore, many of the digital segment leaders of the Anti-corruption campaign should be characterised as *pseudonymous* leaders. Some of these pseudonymous segment leaders adopted several additional practices to protect their identities. They used VPNs when accessing VK and "fake" phone numbers that could be purchased on the internet for several dollars to register their pseudonymous accounts on VK. The adoption of visibility management affordances allowed the pseudonymous segment leaders of the Anti-corruption campaign to reduce the impact of state surveillance.

Just like the administrators of the March 26 Anti-corruption VK pages, some activists of the Anti-tax campaign addressed the issue of surveillance by negotiating their online visibility. An administrator of the PASD group Respondent 14 is an example of a campaign leader who carefully negotiated his visibility. Respondent 14 was not a publicly known figure. In addition, Respondent 14 was not a member of any political organisation that formed the Anti-tax Coalition in January 2017, although he had been involved in the election monitoring organised by the REP union. Moreover, Respondent 14 (personal communication, January 1, 2018) neither claimed a leadership role nor agreed to call himself an activist:

> I don't like to be singled out. […] People do not want to say that they are, for example, somehow involved [in the Anti-tax campaign]. I thought for a long time why do we have the only politician like that - Lukashenka. [It is because] many [potential civic leaders] are just afraid to show their worth.

As the pseudonymous page administrators of the Anti-corruption campaign in Russia, administrator Respondent 14 concealed his identity by using a pseudonym. Respondent 14's pseudonym was Robin Hood (Figure 5.4). Respondent 14 used this name to log in VK and to administer the PASD page. The PASD's information section contained contact details of only one person – Robin Dobry [Robin Hood]:

> Robin's page is just like an image, like a character. For me, the character of Robin
>
> Hood is clear to everyone. This was the man who struggled against the regime.
>
> (Respondent 14, personal communication, January 1, 2018)

Figure 5.4. The profile of an administrator of the PASD page.

Deseriis (2015, p. 168) argues that pseudonyms are an experimental form of subjectivity on the internet. By using the pseudonym, Respondent 14 (personal communication, January 1, 2018) concealed Respondent 14's identity to avoid surveillance and persecution:

> I realised that this is a system. First of all, we have these people who somehow stick out, organisers of [campaigns] like me, they are constantly being pushed back, trampled down. That is why many are just afraid to declare themselves. [Dissident] Statkevich speaks out, and he is being sent to prison and so on.

Some other administrators of the Anti-tax pages also concealed their identities. For example, the administrator(s) of the *Party of Parasites* on Facebook, another prominent page of the campaign, did not reveal their identities for a long time (Respondent 4, personal communication, 19 May 2017). As of February 2019, their identities were still unknown to the public, although the page continued to function. It now focuses on other contentious issues like the security situation in the region. The administrators of another Facebook page dedicated to the Anti-tax cause in Maladzyechna, a town 100 km from Minsk, also preferred to hide their identities more than a year after the events. I managed to identify one of the persons behind the page. Maladzyechna was their native town. I contacted the person, but after accepting an interview request and confirming their role as an administrator, they later stopped answering my messages. Thus, many administrators of the campaign pages such as Respondent 14 tried to avoid the fate of dissidents like Statkevich, who spent years in prison.

The persecution-cautious administrators did not "declare themselves" publicly either by adopting pseudonyms or by staying anonymous. As with the leaders of Navalny's Anti-corruption campaign, I suggest that these people were pseudonymous or anonymous independent segment leaders of the Anti-tax campaign. It seems that the administrators of social media pages were the largest division in the population of campaign segment leaders. It is possible that there were segment leaders who did not administer any page and were not using social media to post public content or work with the audience. However, this study cannot reveal this layer of segment leadership due to the limitations of its design and focus on the digital aspects in the Anti-tax campaigning and mobilisation.

Other administrators of the campaign pages did not actively manage visibility. Such leaders often shared information on their own account rather than using pseudonymous profiles. The case of Illia Mikulic is notorious. He administrated a regional page of the Anti-tax campaign in a town of Niasviz in western Belarus. This page had just about 35 subscribers. The page shared information about the campaign such as the announcements of a rally planned in his town. Mikulic's real name was stated in the section "contacts" of the page. Following the announcement of the rally, he was briefly detained by the police (AT, 2017). According to independent media reports, the police asked him to remove his VK page or to give up his administrator password. Mikulic, a 26-year-old unemployed activist who was not a member of any organisation (AT, 2017), refused to follow the order and was charged with organising an unlawful protest

event. This administrator, who refused to hide his name, was later forced to leave Belarus. Those little-known local administrators of smaller pages who revealed their names could be tracked and prosecuted more easily. I define this type of administrators as *public segment leaders*.

Many pseudonymous and public segment leaders of the Anti-tax organisation, just as new leaders of Navalny's Anti-corruption campaign, were never part of any political organisation before. Experienced political activists Respondent 11, who spent many years in prison on political charges, noted that the Anti-tax protests "produced many grassroots, ad hoc leaders" (personal communication, May 24, 2017). This ad hoc character was one of the defining features of segment leadership in both cases.

5.2 The visibly management and persecution

5.2.1 2000 days in jail

Following the organisational success of the Anti-corruption campaign and its mobilisation in Spring 2017, the Navalny structures transformed into a large organisation. Many of the segments that emerged during the preparation for the anti-corruption rallies were absorbed into a new campaign that demanded the registration of Alexei Navalny as a presidential candidate. At this stage, the authorities might try to reveal the real identities of pseudonymous segment leaders by monitoring the organisation's activities closely. However, by this time, the organisation moved its coordination from VK, a platform highly exposed to surveillance, to Telegram. This messenger platform contained elements of social media and was considered as the most secure popular digital platform in Russia in 2017.

"Better do not go with us – we do not want you to be arrested!" These words I heard from Respondent 28 when I first met him at the Navalny office in one of large Russian cities in August 2017. The presidential campaign was in full swing. Fortunately, Respondent 28 allowed me to stay in their office and observe the campaigners for some time. Still, I did not do it for as long as I would have liked to. I knew about the risks of attacks on the offices. Campaign premises were raided by the police, pro-Putin activists or provocateurs from time to time. I also never followed activists outside when they tried to distribute campaign materials on the streets or to organise an event to attract people's attention. I was not paranoid about state security. Though I realised that if the campaigners did not want to see me following them on the streets, they had a good

reason for it. A couple of weeks after I finished my observation and left that city, something bad happened to Respondent 28 that I cannot describe so not to identify him.

Physical intimidation and violence against the leaders of the Navalny organisation were a common practice by the time of my visit. This is, for example, the experience of Respondent 26 (personal communication, July 8, 2017), who was the main organiser of the protests of 26 March in one of the Russian towns:

> After [the protests of] 26 March, when they jailed [Navalny's chief of staff] Leonid Volkov [...], I was at home. I had helped the detainees. I had sat with the phone, called, texted. A good friend of mine wrote to me: '[Respondent 26], they'll come for you now, leave.' I got dressed, and there was a knock on the door - it was very scary. [...] I thought: 'Oh my god, there is a child with me, 13 years old.' I did not open the door. They were police officers.

On that day, Respondent 26 believed that they escaped the arrest. But they were detained later, along with other 21 out of some 70 regional coordinators of the Navalny presidential campaign, following the rallies on 7 October 2017.

Five out of six of the regional coordinators of the Navalny organisation I interviewed were detained at least once during their campaigning in 2017. Detentions were normally associated with collective action. Alexei Navalny – a person whom authorities saw as a central figure of the organisation – also spent some 60 days in jail in 2017 according to my calculations based on media reports. Volkov spent 65 days in jail the same year according to the federal office. By the time Navalny was officially barred from the presidential election, the staff of his organisation had spent more than 2 000 days in jail and were fined more than $170 000 in total (S. Walker, 2017). Public leaders of activist groups are often the first targets for persecution in Russia.

5.2.2 The functions of segment leaders

Volkov and other leaders of the Navalny organisation liked to emphasise that despite the numerous arrests of its official leadership, the presidential campaign was not halted. They explained it by the "horizontal" nature of their organisation. Contrary to what the core leadership implied, I found that the Navalny organisation was directed by a limited circle of individuals rather than by "all of you," as Volkov (Novosti Shtabov Navalnogo, 2018) claimed.

First, many VK pages of the 26 March protest network created by independent segment leaders had been gradually absorbed into a centralised structure controlled from

Moscow. These VK pages became entirely controlled by Respondent 31 (personal communication, August 15, 2017). This happened when, after the success of the 26 March protests, the Navalny organisation increasingly became dominated on local levels by regional office coordinators, who were appointed by Volkov's appointees (Volkov, 2017h).

Second, the main reason for establishing control over the content and administration of VK pages was, according to the core Moscow activists, the fear that independent segment leaders might publish controversial content that could provoke a scandal in the pro-government "propaganda" and damage the reputation of the whole network. Such a scandal, according to Respondent 31 (personal communication, August 15, 2017), happened in the city of Volgograd. On 22 March 2017, a local segment leader published a meme picture (Figure 5.5) on their VK page. This happened after unknown people thrown green liquid into Navalny's face:

> This happened just before we opened an office [in Volgograd]. There was a public page [of the 26 March protests] in Volgograd which we had not fully controlled […]. Accordingly, the content was not agreed with us. […] People published a seemingly harmless [picture] of the Motherland [The Motherland Calls is part of one of the most venerated Russian Second World War memorials] in green colour, with the context that She expresses her solidarity with Alexei Navalny, solidarity with the fact that the lawlessness things are happening in the country […]. But the media covered [the story] upside down, saying that we supposedly do not respect the monuments.
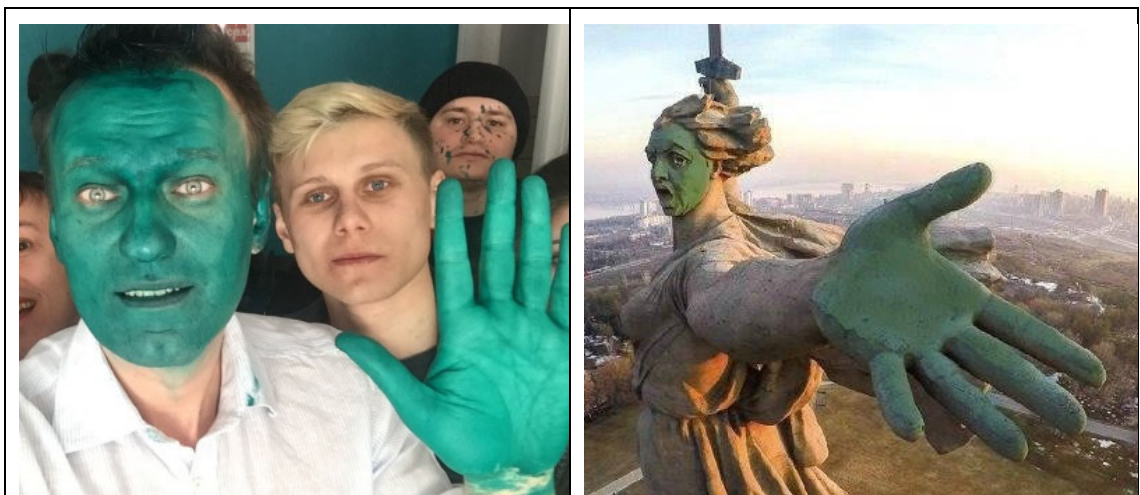
Figure 5.5. Alexei Navalny after an attack on him and the meme of the Motherland Calls sculpture published on the Volgograd 26 March VK page.

The case of the Motherland Calls meme shows that the administrators of its digital infrastructure shaped Navalny's "ordinary citizens'" movement.

Third, the examples of such formations as Avaaz or Toronto's 2014 WorldPride suggest that administrators of social media pages can play the role of organisation's spokespeople, and this role enhances the administrator's visibility and power (Kavada, 2012; Poell & van Dijck, 2016; Shaw & Hill, 2014). Spokespeople are individuals who communicate with the external population on behalf of an organisation. Spokespeople combine one of the most powerful figures in digitally-enabled movements (Gerbaudo, 2017c; Kavada, 2012; Poell et al., 2016). Similar to spokespeople for other movements, many of Navalny organisation's segment leaders performed such tasks as writing, editing and scheduling posts on social media pages. Many of them also helped to produce additional media materials, attracting new followers to the media pages, administrating content on those pages by editing or removing texts and photos including users' comments. Finally, depending on a platform, just like movement spokespeople, segment leaders had powers to remove a user from a conversation using their admin rights. In doing so, they ultimately shaped the communication and consequences of anti-authoritarian movement.

Effectively, many of the activists of the Navalny organisation who had admin rights became its local spokespeople. Thus, many segment leaders had additional functions that made them influential connectors of the presidential campaign by communicating its messages, connecting its different parts, administering its social media accounts and, finally, recruiting new followers. This means that the segment leaders of the Navalny organisation were responsible for a large amount of organisational work conducted on an interjacent, middle organisational level, connecting its often absent (or imprisoned) federal leadership with the local follower base.

For example, one of the activists of the Moscow headquarters Nikolay Kasyan had often introduced himself to people who would like to join the presidential campaign simply as an "administrator of five Moscow Telegram chats." The campaigners created these chats or groups to administer the ongoing tasks in different areas of Moscow, which is a city of more than 10 million people. Kasyan's role as an administrator of those groups turned him into a spokesperson for the Navalny organisation in the locations he was responsible for. The administrator/spokesperson continued recruiting and coordinating the campaign volunteers when his own coordinators – Respondent 28 or Volkov – were unavailable since placed in jail. Thus, the functions of segment leaders included recruitment of new volunteers, as well as connecting central and local leadership to followers.

Therefore, the Navalny organisation was not directed by horizonal people's structures. Equally, it was not a movement fully managed by few core activists located in Moscow. I argue that the administrators of social media pages, whom I defined as segment leaders, played a key role in leading this organisation during both initial and later phases of its development.

5.2.3 Three levels of leadership in an anti-authoritarian movement

5.2.3.1 Core leadership in the Anti-tax campaign

Alongside the Russian case, the Anti-tax campaign contained a level of leadership that consisted of prominent civic and political activists. I defined them as core leaders. Core leader managed platform pages but also represented the campaign and negotiated with the authorities. By contrast to most of segment leaders, public leaders were often well-known to journalists and the police before the campaign. They had immense experience in organising, information distribution and appealing to the audience. Moreover, such leaders did not just focus on one segment like Mikulic on Niasviz or Respondent 10, a pioneer of the signature gathering stage. These public leaders travelled extensively to take part in local collective action across different segments.

Table 5.1

The types of leadership in the Anti-tax campaign

Leadership level	Example	Visibility	Time of the first detention	Role in the campaign
Core leader	Anatol Liabedzka	Public	March 2017	- reinforce the ties between segments through travelling - administer platform pages - represent a campaign in the media - negotiate with the authorities - coordinate collective action
Independent segment leader	Illia Mikulic	Public	March 2017	- administer platform pages - reinforce the ties between segments
	Ihar Kleshyk	Pseudonymous/anonymous	December 2017	- administer platform pages - reinforce the ties between segments (privately, when discussing content through messaging)

Anatol Liabedzka, the chairman of the UCP, was one of the most prominent representatives of the category of core leaders. Liabedzka was a member of the last parliament elected in free and fair elections more than 20 years before these events (Respondent 15, personal communication, May 18, 2017). In 2010-11, Liabedzka spent 108 days in probably the worst prison in the country, the detention centre of the KGB, where he was tortured. Liabedzka acted as a "journalist and a media personality" in "a changing media landscape" (Respondent 15, personal communication, May 18, 2017). Some journalists believed Liabedzka was one of few top opposition politicians who were successful on social media (Drakakhrust, 2017b). Liabedzka claimed that he manages his social media accounts on his own, constantly experimenting with the ways of building a larger audience. One of the most popular posts he produced during the

campaign advertised the signature gathering process[9]. This OK post received about 18 000 comments.

Just as pseudonymous and anonymous administrators of the PASD and the Party of Parasites, Liabedzka administered several platform pages that were prominent during the initial protest period of the campaign. For instance, one of the announcements of the first local campaign rally in Homel was placed on his personal accounts on OK and Facebook a day before it had been scheduled to happen (Figure 5.6). The announcement contained a photo of the recent Anti-tax demonstration in Minsk and the words: "HOMEL, Sunday – 19 February, 12.00, the Uprising square. *The march of non-parasites. Come together!*" This announcement quickly attracted one of the largest audiences associated with any post about this rally, according to my extensive search for similar announcements using Google, Yandex and the native search engines of VK, OK and Facebook. The Homel rally subsequently became the most attended local collective action of the campaign (see Table 4.3). The skill of administering platform pages was pivotal for all the types of leaders in the Anti-tax campaign.
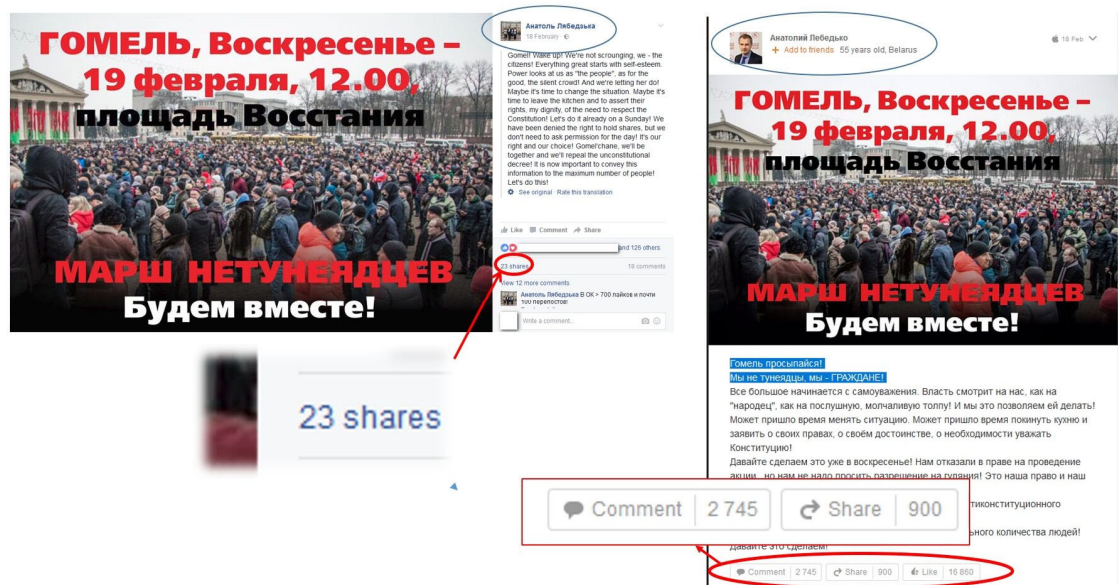
Figure 5.6. Two of Liabedzka's posts announcing the Homel Anti-tax rally. Facebook (left) versus OK (right). The screenshot was taken on 28 February 2017 by the Author.

The Anti-tax campaign held their collective action in different locations throughout Belarus (Table 4.3). Public core leaders of the campaign such as Liabedzka or a vlogger Maksim Filipovich travelled widely to participate in, often to talk at and cover those

---

[9] 18 January 2017. Available from https://ok.ru/profile/571712101017/statuses/66395687461017

collective gatherings. Invitations to visit the rallies were often coming from previously unknown people. That is how, for instance, Respondent 17 (personal communication, May 18, 2017) was invited to participate in the rally in Pinsk, one of few anti-government rallies the town had witnessed since the country's independence:

> These were people who contacted us through social media. They were not activists of political parties. However, they expressed a desire to do something, to organise something. […] They wrote to me:
> "Anatol, would you visit us?"
> "Yes," I replied to them, "I can come, but if you start doing something there."
> "What can we do?"
> I told them that there you had a banner to advertise a rally which you could share on your social media network we did not know much about.

Perhaps one of the most recognisable public leaders of the campaign, popular vlogger Filipovich had visited about a fifth of the gatherings of the campaign in a short period and was prevented from further travelling only by the detention that lasted until the protests faded. During his visits, Filipovich conducted YouTube live streams from the rallies. Just as Filipovich, other public leaders like Respondent 19 and Respondent 21, streamed from the rallies they attended. Such video streams by public core and segment leaders became the major source of information about the campaign events for many users, said Respondent 2 (personal communication, May 30, 2017), who is an expert in political activism in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The streams by journalists also informed a large audience. For instance, just three streams of the first rally of the campaign in Minsk by three independent media on 17 February attracted more than 1 million views in total on YouTube (NN VIDEO TV, 2017; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017c; TUT.BY, 2017).

The YouTube streams also helped to coordinate participants on the ground (Respondent 1, personal communication, March 13, 2017; Respondent 9, personal communication, March 13, 2017) and became a factor in the choreography of Anti-tax gatherings (Gerbaudo, 2017a). Many of ordinary participants who wanted to speak up during the gatherings surrounded the streamers as there no stages or sound equipment during those unauthorised rallies normally. This generated large crowds around d those with cameras (Bylina, 2017). The streams by travelling core leaders, along with journalists' Live broadcasts on YouTube, helped to coordinate and choreograph the gatherings of the Anti-tax campaign.

Therefore, core leaders performed the roles of platform page administrators and spokespeople for the campaign. In addition, these leaders also reinforced links between different calls/segments of the campaign when they travelled to support protest rallies. The SPIN theory defines such extensively travelling leaders of a segmented organisation as *travelling evangelists*. Their function is to articulate and reinforce the ties between the organisation's cells (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 57). The travelling evangelists of the Anti-tax reinforced the ties between the campaign segments.

By contrast, the pseudonymous segment leaders seemed to be not particularly interested in shaping the choreography of assembly by sharing streams from rallies on their pages. For instance, out of 103 posts shared on the Party of Parasites Facebook page, only two contained a video stream, content analysis showed. The PASD page on VK shared no streams at all. Perhaps segment leaders did not want to increase the chances of compromising their identities. Still, some pseudonymous segment leaders did travel to attend some of the rallies. Here is, for instance, the testament of the PASD's administrator who was then totally unknown to the police:

> I participated in the 17 February [rally] in Minsk. First, I really like the parades of that kind, because they have some kind of energy. […] You understand that you are not alone in this fight. It helps very emotionally too. […] I was also at the 25 [March rally] at the time of crackdown, when people were arrested. I saw people being dragged away [by the police]. These are terrible things […] ... just awful. And I also went to Pinsk. I have a friend there. But I will not talk about him - I do not want to set up. (Respondent 14, personal communication, January 1, 2018)

It was difficult to trace all the leaders of the Anti-tax campaign for several reasons. First, some of these leaders, like the administrators of the Party of Parasites, approached the challenge of surveillance seriously and tried to conceal their personal identities. Second, there was no formal membership or structures that could produce any hierarchy within the campaign. Third, there was no single campaign website or a list with all the links to the campaign pages like in the case of the Navalny organisation. These three reasons also meant that it was more difficult for the authorities to identify some leaders. Segmentation and pseudonymous visibility helped to protect the identities of some of the leaders.

5.2.3.2 Visibility of segment leaders

During my observation, I realised that Telegram group administrators such as Kasyan gained a relatively high level of prominence in the local Moscow office of the Navalny organisation. Groups and channels are the two most common ways of public interaction

on Telegram. Groups look similar to the 1990s-style internet chats where the administrators are just one voice among many others. The only difference between an administrator and ordinary Telegram users is that the former can block, add or remove a user from a group. This effectively meant that Kasyan could decide whether a person joins the campaign or not. Therefore, the role of an administrator of Telegram groups gave activists like Kasyan specific powers.

Table 5.2

Summary of the administrating features of Telegram groups and channels

Feature	Channel	Group
Administrators are automatically anonymised	Always	Sometimes
Followers can post	No	Yes
How to contact administrators	No contact options provided	Most often contact is possible

The voices of the administrators of Telegram public channels are even more dominant due to the design features of the platform (Table 5.2). Channels turn Telegram into social media as they function similarly to a page on Facebook though users normally cannot comment or like the posts on a channel. A user can establish their own public or private channel to share information with an unlimited number of anonymous subscribers. Platform design often presents the administrators of a social media page or a group as authoritative and distinct personalities that shape the voice of the organisation (Kavada, 2015). This is perhaps unavoidable as the design of platforms shapes people's interaction (van Dijck, 2013b). On Telegram, the default settings facilitate the exclusive domination of administrators over their channels.

The design of Telegram does not allow other users to comment and to like posts or to write anything on a channel. The rules also do not allow contacting the administrators of a channel. This broadcasting style of communication (Kavada, 2013) makes Telegram function similarly to video-sharing platforms like YouTube rather than to more interactive social networks like Facebook. On YouTube, a user cannot post a video on another user's channel. Comments under videos could also be switched off by a channel administrator. By contrast, Facebook default settings allow every user to post private messages to the administrator of a page and to comment on its newsfeed. Therefore, the

design of Telegram encourages a broadcasting style of communication in contrast to two-way interactions that are characteristic of some other popular social media platforms.

The figure of Kasyan demonstrates that the administration features of Telegram are associated with the rearrangement of power relations. The communication power relations within the Navalny organisation were asymmetric, which is a common feature of social movements (Melucci, 1996). The administrators of Telegram groups were less visible but were empowered by the ability to add or to remove users from the groups. By contrast, the administrators of channels were loud and dominant anonymous broadcasters who did not engage in any conversation with their followers. The administrators of Telegram channels broadcast posts to its audience without any feedback. This makes the voice of those segment leader who played the role of a spokesperson on Telegram even louder and more dominant than on other platforms.

Segment leaders should reconcile their amplified voices with the challenge of leaders' persecution. Preserving anonymity could be one of the solutions to the challenge of persecution (Youmans & York, 2012). However, many popular social media like VK cooperate with the Russian government and might provide information about its users upon a government's request. The Telegram owners were aware of this policy as they have encountered tracking and surveillance by the Russian government themselves. The owners have mastered an image of Telegram as a trusted space where leaders could remain anonymous if they want to. In contrast to other platforms, Telegram claims that it has never supplied the national states with information about its users (Rowan, 2016). In addition, the administrators of all Telegram channels are automatically anonymised. This means that the authorities might not identify a spokesperson for a specific channel easily. Respondent 31 (personal communication, 15 August 2017) suggested this:

> Telegram became popular in Russia precisely because of the recent laws [the legislature that made monitoring and surveillance more widespread and easier to be organised by the special services]. People have realised that their messages can be read elsewhere, and Telegram is the only platform that guarantees complete anonymity at the moment.

The campaigners perceived Telegram as a safer and more secure communication space where segment leaders could be anonymised or hide behind a pseudonym and could act effectively as the leaders of the organisation. Indeed, compared to multiple reports about the arrests of the organisation's leaders, little is known about the detention of the local

Telegram administrators during the presidential campaign. The database on digital persecution and internet freedom in Russia by Agora, a leading monitoring organisation, contains only one criminal case associated with the use of Telegram in 2017: a man was posting "terrorist propaganda messages" on a private group called "Revolution-Kaliningrad" (International Agora, 2018). By comparison, the database of 950 entries contains at least 90 mentions of criminal and administrative persecution for posts on VK and more than 50 mentions of Twitter in the same context. Therefore, Telegram seemed to be a more secure space for anti-authoritarian movements than other popular digital platforms.

In contrast to the Anti-corruption campaign pages on VK, it is hard to quantify the anonymity level of Telegram group administrators in the Navalny presidential campaign due to the difficulties in the analysis of data on messaging software. Nevertheless, we know that the administrators of the Telegram *channels* of the presidential campaign were anonymous by default. In addition, many administrators of local Telegram *groups* were pseudonymous.

Ufa case The visibility management strategy depended on the position of a leader in the organisational structure. Figure 5.7 demonstrates the difference between approaches to visibility by the two administrators of the Telegram group of the Navalny presidential campaign in Ufa. Liliya Chanysheva, a regional office coordinator, was well-known to the authorities and did not need to conceal her identity. From September 2017 to May 2018, the police detained her three times for 50 days in total, according to the media reports. Another admin of the same group, @FredSM, called themselves Fedor with no further information presumably available to track him.

Similar to the pseudonymous segment leaders (PSLs) of the Anti-corruption campaign, many segment leaders of the presidential campaign like @FredSM concealed their identities. These pseudonymous administrators, some of whom also played the role of spokespeople for the organisation during critical events, were found in all the groups of the offices of the Navalny organisation that are part of the sample (for the case study of five offices, see Table 5.3). This image of the pseudonymous users contrasted with the majority of ordinary followers of the groups and channels that used the credentials which seemed real.
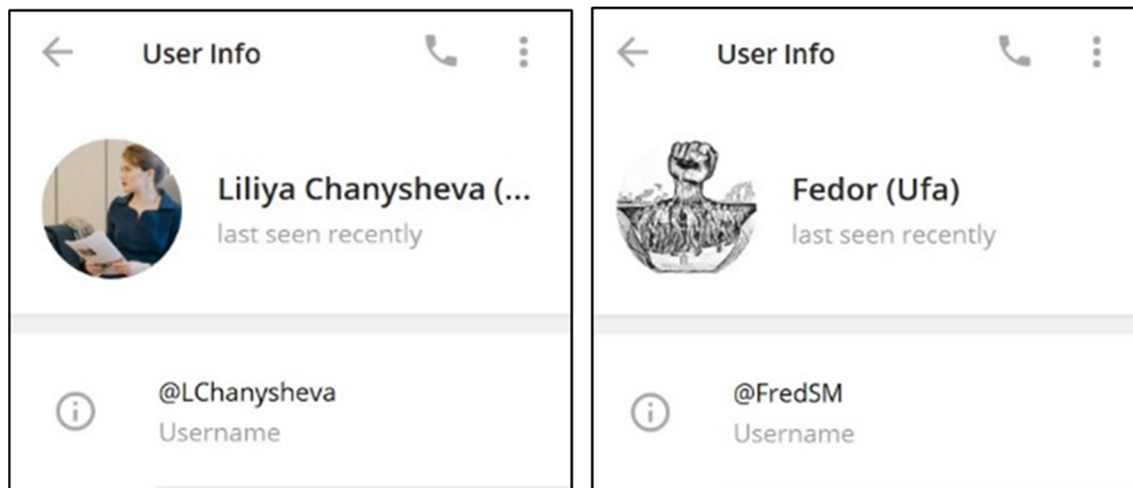
Figure 5.7. The two administrators of the Ufa Telegram group: a regional office coordinator with a public profile (left) and a pseudonymous segment leader (right).

One of the key functions of segment leaders in the Navalny presidential campaign was to coordinate and to interact with followers of the campaign Telegram network. This network consisted of hundreds of groups and channels operated by some 70 local offices of the Navalny presidential campaign. The links to these public channels were available on the campaign profiles on VK and other accounts of the local offices. These channels also posted information about public events like lectures, the meetings of volunteers, meetings with core activists, content about the campaign in other regions, as well as general news often critical of local and federal governments (Figure 5.8).

First, every office had a *main channel* that published its news. Second, offices established public *working chats* for followers and volunteers, "where people could write, share opinions and communicate" (Respondent 28, personal communication, August 10, 2017). Links to these chats were circulated on offices' channels so everyone could join. In addition, *private working chats* were established for a more secure interaction among selected volunteers. Finally, *flood chats* were designated as spaces for discussing all matters not related to the campaign such as politics.
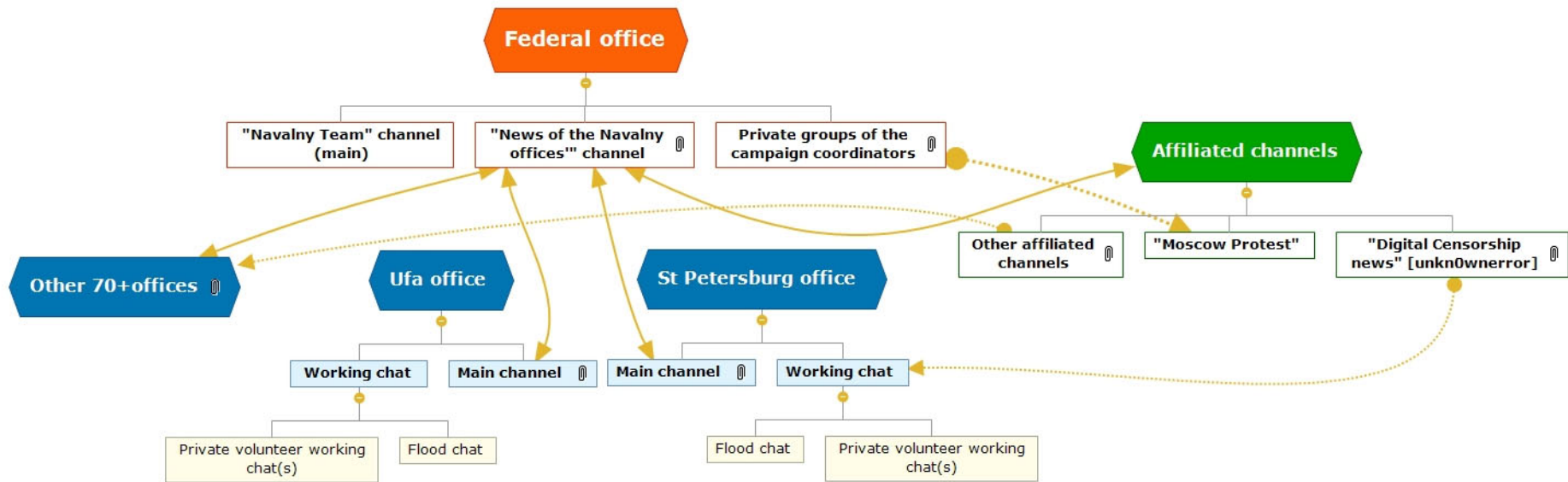
Figure 5.8. A section of the Navalny network on Telegram. The edges reflect the flow of content between the channels.

Table 5.3

Coordination of the supporters of the Navalny presidential campaign on Telegram during the collective action on 7 October 2017

Office	Was a rally authorised[a] by local authorities?	Example of a PSL (a name and a nickname)	Example of the messages sent by PSLs during the 7 October 2017 rallies	Other coordinating mechanisms on Telegram
St Petersburg	No	no name @rulezz	"Do not break the police ranks – turn away and move along."	St Petersburg protest channel[b]
Moscow	No	Dmitry ViperAnry @ViperAnry	"break up" [to announce the end of the collective action]	Moscow protest group[b]
Ufa	No	Fedor Ufa @FredSM	"This is what one should write in the witness' account in case they are detained."	N/A
Nizhny Novgorod	Yes	Fossil @FossilOwl	*	The main channel of the Nizhny Novgorod office
Chelyabinsk	Yes	barck @barck	*	N/A

Note. This table focuses on the Telegram groups of five offices; though, in this dissertation, I analyse the work of six offices. I could not access Rostov-on-Don's Telegram working group because it was private.
[a]According to the Russian law, all protest rallies should be authorised by local authorities. The Navalny organisation always attempted to do so, but their applications were often rejected, which effectively made a rally illegal. This case study includes the offices in three cities out of six studied where the rallies were not authorised but still went ahead.
[b]A group or a channel was administered by segment leaders related to a local office.
*The PSLs of this office mostly posted photos. That was perhaps because the rally was authorized, detentions were not expected, and the collective action did not require coordination by a PSL.

These numerous channels and groups were connected in a network through

hyperlinks and sharing mechanism (Figure 5.8). The office level groups and

179

channels often posted links to each other that would allow volunteers to join them and, thus, become part of the presidential campaign. The federal level channels shared posts from office channels. Then, the posts were further disseminated across channels and groups in other regions, thus exposing followers in different localities to campaign issues and news from across the country, uniting them under one brand of the "Navalny team."

Local working chats were crucial during critical events like campaign rallies. The federal leaders and local coordinators were often isolated in jail during such events. The police also detained many regional office coordinators before or during the rallies. Using push notifications, PSLs tried to coordinate collective action (Table 5.3). For instance, on 7 October 2017, the police raided the campaign office in one of the Russia towns. Respondent 26, the head of the office, and other core town activists were isolated before and during the rally. However, the rally went ahead though the public leadership of the campaign could not coordinate it. In response, PSLs assumed the coordination of the collective action.

PSLs used Telegram channels to inform the rally participants about the police's movements. The following texts by "no name," a pseudonymous segment leader, that was posted on the St Petersburg presidential campaign Telegram working chat on 7 October 2017 illustrate the communication related to this coordination of collective action. When the detentions of the public leaders of the protest in St Petersburg started, "no name" reacted in the following way:

> **no name**
> Логика ясна. Выбивают всех кто может так или иначе скоординировать действия на митинг 7 числа.   16:58
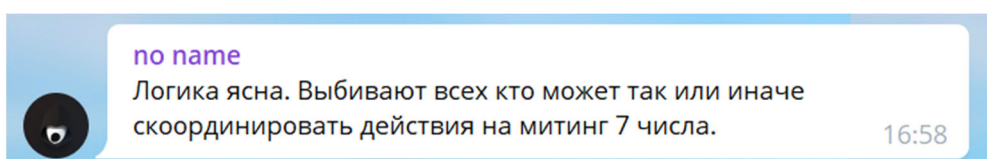
"The logic is clear. Knock out all who can somehow coordinate actions for the rally on the 7th." Source: https://t.me/navalny2018spb/8382

On 7 October, "no name" became the leading coordination voice on the St Petersburg working chat:
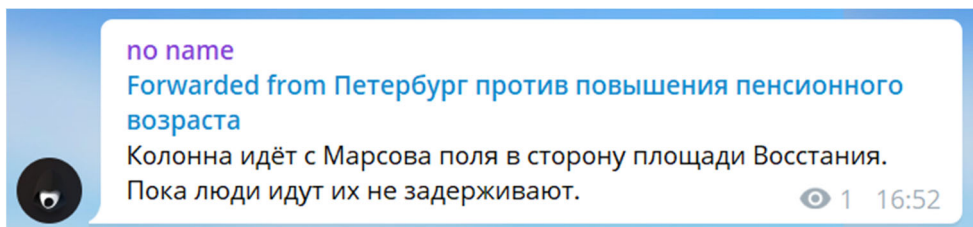
"People are marching from The Field of Mars to Vosstaniya square[10]*. While people are walking, they are not detained."* Source: https://t.me/navalny2018spb/10479
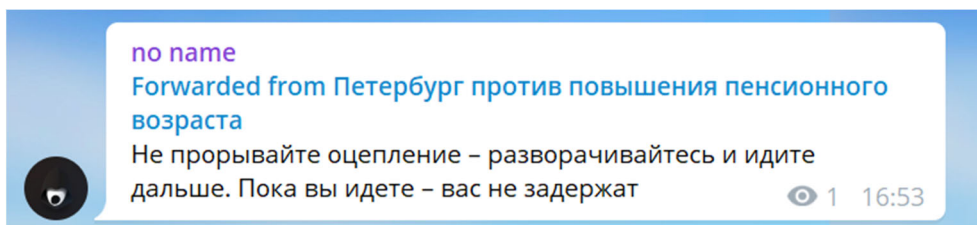
"*Do not break the police ranks – turn away and move along. While you are walking, you are not been detained*" Source: https://t.me/navalny2018spb/10488
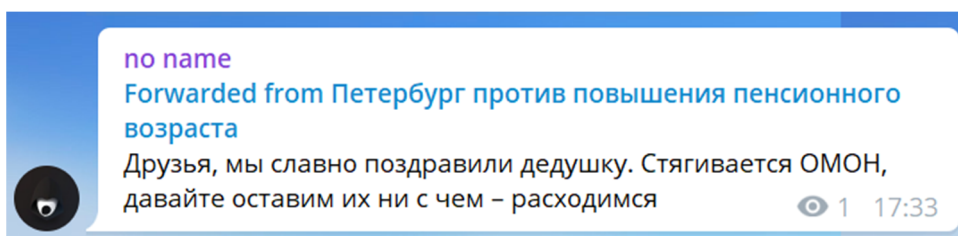
"*Friends, we had a great time congratulating the grandpa*[11]*. Special police forces are concentrating, let leave them with nothing – break up*" Source: https://t.me/navalny2018spb/10592

---
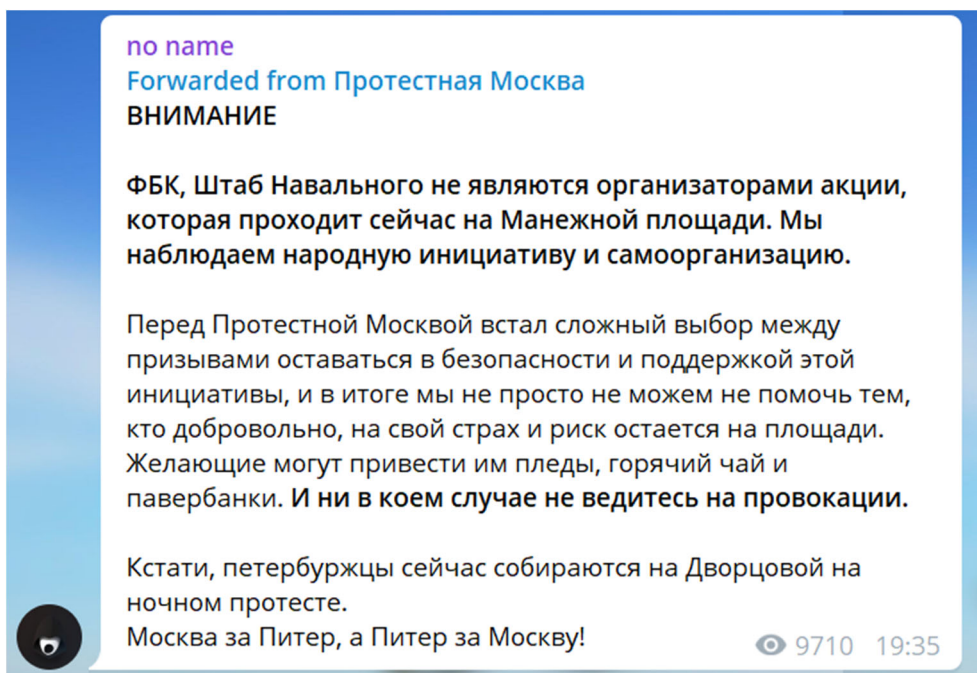
[10] Curiously, the name of this square in the centre of St Petersburg is translated as "Uprising Square."

[11] 7 October, the day of the rally, was Putin's birthday.

*"ATTENTION FBK, the Navalny office are [sic] not the organisers of the action which is taking place on Manezh Square now. We are witnessing people's initiative and self-organisation. […] Those who are interested can bring them blankets, hot tea and powerbanks. **And in any case, do not fall for provocations**. By the way, Petersburgers are now gathering at Palace square for a night rally. […]"* Source: https://t.me/navalny2018spb/10848

After analysing these and similar conversations on Telegram groups during the critical events of 7 October 2017, I offer the following observation: PSLs such as "no name" played a role of collective action coordinators on Telegram. Similar to the segment leaders of the Anti-corruption campaign, these leaders concealed their identity and played the functions of the administrators of the Navalny organisation's pages before and during its collective action.

During the normal flow of the events, another, *public* type of local leaders was more visible and dominant than pseudonymous segment leaders. These public leaders such as regional office coordinators could also play the role of a segment leader though I believe it was unlikely. The analysis of the leadership visibility in the Navalny presidential campaign are summarised in Table 5.4. It demonstrates that the presidential campaign had three levels of visibility of its leaders as a protective measure against surveillance. From the studied cases, it was unclear if any member of the federal leadership or office leadership of the campaign played the role of a segment leader or, indeed, had any influence over pseudonymous or public segment leaders during critical events.

Table 5.4

The leadership in the Navalny presidential campaign

Level	Example	Visibility	Symbolic role	Functional role
Federal leader	Alexei Navalny	Eponymous	Charismatic personality[a]	- contribute strategically
				- reinforce the ties between segments through travelling
Core activists of the federal office	Respondent 30	Public	The face of the campaign when the federal leader is absent	- reinforce the ties between segments through monitoring
				- oversight of the administration of platform pages
				- communicate with federal media
				- coordinate collective action
Regional office coordinator	Respondent 26	Public	Represent the campaign on the local level	- local level everyday organising tasks
				- negotiate with the authorities
Independent segment[b] leader	Nikolay Kasyan (Moscow)	Public	Unite followers	- administer platform pages
				- recruit new followers
				- connect central and local leadership with followers
	@FredSM (Ufa)	Pseudonymous/anonymous	Unite followers during critical events	- administer platform pages
				- coordinate during critical events
				- connect central and local leadership with followers

Note. [a]For the discussion of the symbolic role of the federal level leader, see Section 5.3.

[b]Independent segment leaders, normally volunteers, could coordinate and administer pages related to a Federal region of Russia, like Moscow, or just cover a portion of this region, like a district of Moscow. They might also specialise in one or many platforms. By contrast, office coordinators were responsible for the whole region, were almost always paid, and should oversee all the platform operations in all the segments in the region they covered.

5.2.3.4 The limitations of the visibility mechanisms

Still, the visibility mechanisms have their limitations. One of them comes from the physical surveillance done on behalf of the special services. Few days before the launch of Navalny's #strike campaign, Vitali Serukanov, deputy coordinator of the Moscow office of the campaign unexpectedly dropped off the organisation. From a fierce supporter of Navalny, Serukanov momentously turned into his prominent critic. In December 2017, he started accusing the organisation of financial manipulations, lying to supporters and building a "bureaucratic" "sect" (Azar, 2018). The organisation responded with a suggestion that Serukanov might be an agent of the FSB, the Russian special service. As of November 2018, Serukanov's name continuously appears in the publications of pro-government media where he criticises Navalny. He also writes a book about his time in the Navalny organisation. I personally met and interviewed Serukanov during my fieldwork four months before he defected. The story of this Navalny's core activist who was accused of the cooperation with the special service demonstrates that the affordances of digital platforms can hardly prevent physical surveillance once the target is known.

Like in Russia, the leaders of the Belarusian Anti-tax campaign did get persecuted. Just as the public leaders of the Navalny organisation, almost every interviewed anti-tax activist was persecuted in relation to the campaign. Core and local leaders became the first targets when the crackdown started. In March, a car with Respondent 17 was stopped by the police on his way to Brest where they planned to attend a rally. Respondent 17 was not arrested but was forced to continue to the destination, about 300 km, by hitch-hiking in order to get to the rally on time (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017). However, Respondent 17, along with the leaders of the Movement for Freedom and the BChD (see Appendix 4), was detained later when they attended a rally in Maladzyechna, 100 km from Minsk, on 10 March 2017. That was how these three public leaders were isolated until the end of the campaign.

After the Maladzyechna rally, the government started implementing its preemptive policy (Silitski, 2005) by actively detaining and persecuting the leaders and rank-and-file activists (Figure 5.9). Both real and perceived core leaders were targeted. Respondent 16 (personal communication, September 5, 2017), who was a former leader of a key coalition member was beaten and detained by the policy a few days

after the detentions in Maladzyechna. "They took me not as an organiser of the protests of social parasites. I was detained because I was […] a recognised public figure. And such people are detained," said Respondent 16. Indeed, Respondent 16 played a minor role in the campaign since Respondent 16 had just lost the internal elections for the position of the chairman of the coalition member and left the organisation. Respondent 16 was also preparing for their parental leave as their son was due in two months. The Belarusian authorities implemented a preemptive policy in relation to public leaders or those who might replace those leaders, targeting core leaders first.
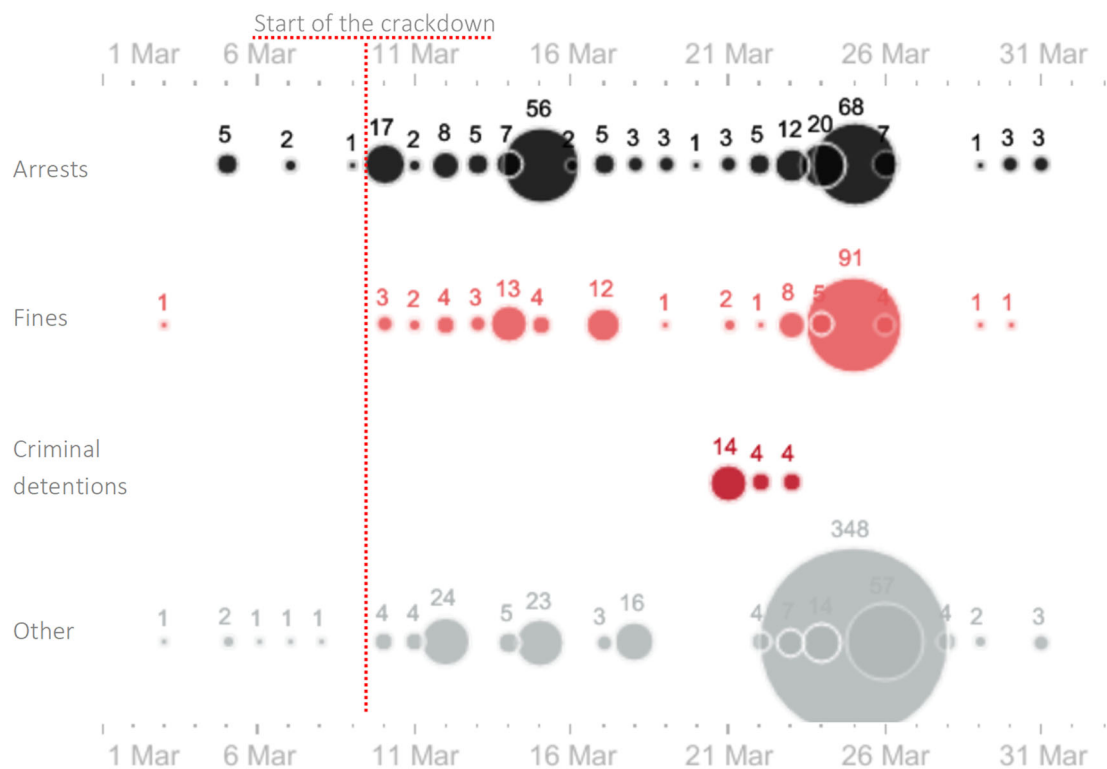
Figure 5.9. The persecution of the activists and the participants of the Anti-tax campaign rallies in March 2017. There were rallies early in February with few arrests that are not reflected here. Source: Shmygov (2017).

Pseudonymous leaders like administrator Respondent 14 who did not want to be recognised as the leaders of the campaign managed to avoid persecution during the collective action phase. In fact, some of them, such as the administrators of the Party of Parasites page, seemed to have never been identified by the police. Other more discrete administrators such as the REP trade union activists were also not persecuted in contrast to Respondent 21, who was a well-known public figure

(Respondent 4, personal communication, May 19, 2017; Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017).

Respondent 14's identity was revealed in December 2017, eight months after the campaign faded, the police came to their house and seized all his electronic devices. Respondent 14 was accused of selling drugs on the internet. This approach to intimidate critical citizens is spread in authoritarian states. For instance, the anonymous administrator of "one of the most popular Telegram channels in Russia," StalinGulag, had to reveal his identity after the police accused him of making a fake bomb threat and searched his house (Soshnikov & Reiter, 2019). In summer 2019, Ivan Golunov, an investigative journalist, was has been charged by the Moscow police with attempting to distribute drugs in large quantities. However, after several days of public pressure, his case was shut down due to a lack of evidence (Meduza, 2019). Administrator Respondent 14 was later called for a police interview where they were pressed to recognise that Respondent 14 was an administrator of the PASD page.

Almost immediately after this, Respondent 14 agreed to an interview with me. It was the first long interview they gave as an administrator of the PASD. By the time we met, Respondent 14's case was still investigated, and Respondent 14 was worried about his future, thinking about emigrating. Crucially, pseudonymous visibility helped Respondent 14 to keep administering one of the key campaign pages in February and March 2017, while many of the public leaders had already been isolated.

In addition, visibility management on social media could hardly help to avoid physical surveillance. A year after the Anti-tax campaign ended, then 20-year-old secretary of the REP trade Union Yuliya Yukhnovets recognised that she had been a paid agent of the Belarusian KGB and had reported about the Union activity during the Anti-tax campaign (Tolkacheva, 2018). Such physical surveillance practices seem to be inevitable.

5.2.4 Types of leadership in anti-authoritarian movements

Based on their functions, the leaders of the two movements can be broadly divided into three types (Table 5.5). First, both organisations had public core leaders known across the country. They were normally located in the capitals and represented the campaigns in the media, reinforced the ties between their segments and coordinated

collective action during critical events. Second, the main role of independent segment leaders was to administer the platform pages of a campaign. These leaders could be both known to the public and the authorities. They could also be secretive, anonymous or pseudonymous users of social media. Finally, the eponymous leader, who was also public, was present only in the Navalny organisation.

Table 5.5

Leadership in the Navalny organisation and the Anti-tax campaign

Leadership level	Visibility	Paid as an activist?	Role in the Navalny organisation	Role in the Anti-tax campaign
Federal leader	Eponymous	Unpaid[a]	- contribute strategically - reinforce the ties between segments through travelling	N/A
Core leader/ Core activist of the federal office	Public	Paid	- reinforce the ties between segments through monitoring - oversight of the administration of platform pages - communicate with federal media - coordinate collective action	- reinforce the ties between segments through travelling - administer platform pages - represent a campaign in the media - negotiate with the authorities - coordinate collective action
Regional office coordinator	Public	Paid[b]	- local level everyday organising tasks - negotiate with the authorities	N/A
Independent segment leader	Public	Mostly volunteers but some paid	- administer platform pages - recruit new followers - connect central and local leadership with followers	- administer platform pages - reinforce the ties between segments
	Pseudonymous /anonymous	Predominantly volunteers	- administer platform pages - coordinate during critical events - connect central and local leadership with followers	- administer platform pages - reinforce the ties between segments (privately, when discussing content through messaging)

The core activists of the Anti-tax and the Navalny organisations may endorse an image of a spontaneous, horizontal, leaderless or ordinary citizens' movement as a method of protection of its pseudonymous segment leaders – the powerful administrators of social media pages and groups whose position lied in-between the federal leadership and the base. In other words, the narratives of the "ordinary citizens" along with the visibility arrangements on Telegram and its anti-surveillance affordances helped to protect these segment leaders from persecution, thus adapting to another challenge faced by digital dissidents.

The leaders of the Navalny and the Anti-tax organisations also varied in their public visibility and prominence. I identified two types of visibility for these leaders. First, some leaders remained highly prominent on digital platforms and during offline collective action and were well-known to the public and the police. I defined such leaders as public. Well-known dissidents and politicians such as Anatol Liabedzka, the chairman of the UCP, or Respondent 21, the coordinator of another prominent organisation, did not hide their identities when disseminating information. They serve as examples of the core leaders of the Anti-tax campaign. Many of these leaders were among the first to be persecuted by the authorities. In contrast to public leaders, the second type of leaders – pseudonymous or anonymous – actively managed their platform identities. These leaders were platform page administrators who did not "declare themselves" publicly and instead adopted pseudonyms or stayed anonymous because of surveillance concerns. Such pseudonymous independent segment leaders controlled two of the five key platform pages of the Anti-tax campaign. In the Anti-corruption campaign of Navalny, about one-third of the administrators, located mostly in the regions, adopted pseudonyms or anonymised themselves, as features analysis demonstrated. The emergence of pseudonymous and anonymous segment leaders was an organisational arrangement observed in both studied cases.

Pseudonymous or anonymous segment leaders were especially active during critical events such as protests. For example, the Navalny organisation maintained the

capability to administer its digital platforms without interruptions during these events. The use of pseudonyms or anonymised platform profiles also helped to ensure a constant supply of new leaders, should the police isolate any. For instance, Respondent 14, an administrator of the PASD, was supported by a few other anonymous administrators and so, if he were isolated, other administrators could continue updating the page. In addition, the same profile could be used by several segment leaders if needed and, therefore, visibility management by segment leaders helped them to provide effective coordination for collective action.

The theories of digital politics and social movements help to explain the multiplicity of leadership in the two organisations. First, the studies of digitally-enabled political and civic organisations suggest that the administrators of platform pages of such organisations will likely emerge as spokespeople or informal leaders in their communities (Gerbaudo, 2017c; Kavada, 2015; Poell & van Dijck, 2016). The algorithms, design and affordances of platforms facilitate this leadership emergence. Indeed, in both organisations, most of the leadership positions at the segment level were associated with the administration of platform pages. Similar to many other organisations that rely on digital platforms, platform affordances amplified the voice of the administrators. This amplification of administrators' voices and subsequent power redistribution is a common feature of digitally-enabled organisations (Kavada, 2015; Poell et al., 2016). In other words, platform administrators used the affordances of digital media to facilitate the redistribution of power and the refashioning of relations with core leaders, thus multiplying leadership types.

Second, independent segment leaders, those who assumed the function of collective action coordinators or spokespeople for the movements, were not in charge all the time. During the normal course of events when no collective action was happening or imminent, other types of leader coordinated the everyday operations of the organisation. In the Navalny campaign, local office coordinators were responsible for the everyday tasks of the regional offices. They also assumed another important function: conducting negotiations with the authorities. Such negotiations might involve seeking an authorisation to organise a rally or the registration of local structures. In the Anti-tax campaign, the core leaders negotiated authorisation for

rallies with the local authorities. Hence, both organisations required a pool of leaders to sustain them during different periods of their activities.

5.3 Charisma

In this section, I use social movement theories to discuss the symbolic role of the federal level leader of the Navalny organisation. I found that Navalny was not a bureaucratic but rather an inspiring leader who exercised a special type of charisma. This and next section are not matched by data gathered about the Anti-tax movement because this movement did not have a recognisable charismatic leader, and its settings did not provide for an opportunity to observe its organisational culture.

5.3.1 Limitations of the traditional understanding of charisma

Alexei Navalny spent in jail around 20% of his public campaigning time in 2017. Nevertheless, both the Anti-corruption and the presidential nomination campaigns were able to function and organise collective action. How does his absence correspond to many media reports that portrayed Navalny as the main factor that altered the dynamics of organisation's activities and the whole pro-democracy movement in Russia? For example, Russian pro-government media focused their coverage of the Anti-corruption campaign on the single figure of Navalny though reporting often ignored the campaign or portraited it negatively (Osborn, 2017). Moreover, foreign media such as NPR describes how Navalny "runs his nationwide opposition network from a desk" in his Moscow office (L. Kim, 2018). Al Jazeera (Ragozin, 2018) called Navalny "super-efficient" and "charismatic." Charisma was a common quality attributed by the media and observers to the figure of Navalny.

The stereotypical model of a charismatic leader attributes the success of a movement to a single charismatic leader who controls everything (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 39). Such a leader is like "the hub of a wheel with the spokes as inner circle disciples and the rim as the larger circle of followers" (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 39). The Russian personalistic authoritarian regime perhaps also based its actions in relation to Navalny on the stereotypical premise that Navalny was that charismatic "hub" crucial to the everyday operations of the organisations' "wheel." And if a hub is removed, a supposed leader-focused organisation will be broken. This premise can explain Navalny's multiple jail terms.

As Gerlach & Hine (1970, p. 39) point out, many studies of political groups and social movements "have been hindered by the limitations of this [stereotypical] model." Governments might share a similar view and try to suppress social movements by jailing or overwise removing their single charismatic leader. Nevertheless, as Gerlach & Hine note, such persecution can only enhance leaders' importance by making them a martyr. In addition, Snow (1987, p. 161) demonstrates that movements based in part on this stereotypical charismatic authority "run the risk of diluting that very authority […] as they expand" and their operations become more complex. I argue that this simplistic notion of a single charismatic leader was also used to portrait the leadership in the Navalny organisation.

First, Navalny was not involved in the majority of everyday bureaucratic operations of the Anti-corruption or presidential campaign. He was instead taking part in strategic decision-making, convincing and "inspiring" others. For instance, it was Navalny who insisted on the organising of the successful rallies on 26 March 2017, although many core leaders did not believe in their success (Respondent 31, personal communication, August 15, 2017). However, Navalny did not take part in internal organising like weekly meetings of the core activists (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). The staff management such as appointing or firing regional office coordinators was performed by the chief-of-staff Volkov rather than Navalny (Volkov, 2017g). Thus, in terms of everyday bureaucratic operations, Navalny was not the most important personality of his organisation.

Second, charisma in the Navalny organisation was not a static attribute of one person. It looked more like a communicable quality that exists on an interpersonal level. According to Gerlach & Hine (1970), who drew on the work of Emmet (1958), this type of charisma can be conveyed from a "charismatist" to another follower via an act of communication. This communication inspires that other follower to work on their initiative to move a campaign further; for example, to recruit new members to an organisation. Therefore, I follow Snow (1987) and Gerlach & Hine (1970) to define the type of the charisma exercised by Navalny as communicable.

5.3.2 Communicable charisma

Communicable charisma is a feature of some social movement organisations. Snow (1987) demonstrates how communicable charisma was distributed in Nichiren

Shoshu, the Buddhist movement active in the United States of America in the 1970s. As Nichiren Shoshu grew geographically, some of its new followers could not access its central charismatic leadership personally. To address this communication issue, the principal movement's leadership would travel to communicate with the leaders of movement sub-groups. The meeting with the principal was supposed to empower local leaders "with a degree of moral authority that they would not have otherwise" (Snow, 1987, p. 161). The closer a sub-group leader approached the principal leadership, the higher the degree of their empowerment was.

Communicable charisma was also spread in the Black Power Movement in the US in the 1960s. According to Gerlach & Hine (1970, pp. 40–41), many participants of the Black Power, which constituted diverse groups including the Black Panther Party, fitted the definition of a charismatic leader. Many of those future leaders assumed ad hoc leadership first during crisis events like rallies and demonstrations. An unexpected demonstration could lead to the emergence of an ad hoc leader who remained in the centre of a local movement group for a long time after the crisis. Communicable charisma helps to enhance leadership in emerging geographically diverse movement-like organisations such as the Navalny organisation.

Similar to the Black Power, many leaders of the Navalny organisation raised to high ranks after organising a local anti-corruption campaign in March 2017. Such new leaders were often not active politically before but were inspired by the communication of Alexei Navalny in his videos and writing (Respondent 25, personal communication, June 11, 2017; Respondent 23, personal communication, August 14, 2017). Navalny's communicable charisma, which was a product of work of many people in Moscow including the investigative and video teams, was distributed with the help of digital platforms and empowered the local leaders of the organisation.

Following the exposure to the media materials in March 2017, the new local leaders tried to organise an anti-corruption rally in their city. After organising the rally, many of these ad hoc leaders stayed with the Navalny organisation for the presidential campaign as independent segment leaders. By this time, a formal office of the presidential campaign would be established by the federal headquarters with a subsequent visit of Navalny. Navalny tried to pay a visit to every local office. This

would often become the only occasion when he participated physically in the activity of that specific branch and interacted with his local followers personally. Like in the case of Nichiren Shoshu, the segment leaders of the Navalny presidential campaign could be empowered by meeting Navalny in person. This was how communicable charisma was physically distributed across the network of the organisation.

Most of the leaders of the Navalny organisation can be broadly divided into two types depending on how they raised through the ranks. The first type is people who often joined an ad hoc leader or volunteers during crisis events and viewed its campaigning as a struggle. Respondent 23 is an example of the first type of people. Respondent 23 joined the Anti-corruption campaign after watching the video about the corruption of the prime minister. Thus, Respondent 23 followed an act of communication of charisma. Eventually, Respondent 23 himself became the leading figure of the organisation's local YouTube channel in one of large Russian cities. He viewed the Navalny campaigning as a *struggle against the authoritarian regime*:

> In many respects, I might not agree with Alexei [Navalny]. But at the same time, I perfectly understand that Alexei's struggle is not the struggle between Navalny and Putin. This is not the struggle of the opposition against power structures. It is the struggle of civil society against the authoritarian regime. (Respondent 23, personal communication, August 14, 2017)

People like Respondent 23 seemed to be ready to go to jail, to experience all kinds of pressures and deprivations to achieve campaigns' goals. This type of "struggle" activists might not be around just because they followed the communication of Navalny – though many seem to have been affected by his communicable charisma – but because they believed that political changes in Russia were possible, and they could contribute to them. Some of these "struggle" activists seemed to believe that Navalny was the person who could bring those changes.

The second type of organisation activists is normally paid staff who obtained status in the campaign hierarchy as professionals such as social media specialists or lawyers. They were selected through submitting CVs, an interview process and other typical ways of recruitment. These "bureaucratic" people normally had some level of commitment but seemed to approach the campaign as just another job. "I am a professional and want to help the campaign on a professional level," said the social media coordinator of one of the Navalny offices (Respondent 27, personal

communication, August 14, 2017). She is an example of the professional or bureaucratic type of activist. Both types of leaders co-existed together within the campaign structures.

A coordinator of a regional office should often combine both the qualities of the "bureaucratic" and "struggle" activists. To get to the top of the local hierarchy of the organisation, a person should first be selected based on merit. The ability to demonstrate leadership qualities was one of the requirements for the regional office coordinators (Respondent 25, personal communication, June 11, 2017; Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). At the same time, all of the interviewed coordinators had previous experience in civic organisations and anti-government political struggle in Russia. Similar to "struggle" activists, office coordinators were often attracted to the organisation not by the personal qualities of Navalny but because he was the symbol of the radical political change:

> I want to see changes in Russia - yes. And Navalny, of course, is not an ideal candidate, there are some moments there that many may not agree with, but [he is] changes. […] It is important that people understand that they can influence. And they can change Navalny if he does not like him. (Respondent 25, personal communication, June 11, 2017)

The organisation had invested in the charisma of its coordinators. Navalny would mention some of them in his public communicative acts like VK posts. The coordinators of the offices also accrued communicative charisma when, for instance, they had taken the roles of the hosts of regional YouTube shows filmed by many offices. This charisma helped office coordinators to organise their local campaigns.

I suggest that in the hierarchy of the Navalny organisation (see Table 5.4), Alexei Navalny occupied the position of an *eponymous leader* who gave his name to the organisation that emerged from the FBK at the beginning of 2017. *Eponym* is an ancient Greek word that means "giving one's name to a thing or person" ('Eponym, n.', 2018). Navalny's main role in that organisation was symbolic rather than functional though he occasionally contributed to strategic decisions. He was a charismatic figure who became the source of communicable charisma that was distributed by means of digital media such as YouTube and through travelling across the country. Navalny's charisma gave the authority to future segment leaders who

joined the organisation during its rapid growth following the Anti-corruption campaign.

The studies of startup companies argue that the idea that the success of a startup is primarily associated with a stereotypical charisma of a single "superstar" leader is a "moribund myth" (Ensley et al., 2006). These studies show that another type of leadership often dominates in such organisations. This type is called "shared leadership" – "a simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team" that is characterised by the emergence of official as well as unofficial ad hoc leaders (C. L. Pearce, 2004, p. 48). Similar to startups, the case of the Navalny organisation demonstrates that stereotypical charismatic leadership is not a necessary precondition for success. Instead, it is communicable charisma that can empower political activists, such as the local leaders of a movement, to attract and coordinate followers.

5.4 Not least a struggle: a startup culture in the Navalny organisation

In this section, I analyse the organisational culture of the core activists of the Navalny movement. Analysis of this culture helps to explain some of the campaigners' practices and to clarify why the anti-authoritarian movement of Navalny stood out ideationally and organisationally.

36-year-old former IT professional Leonid Volkov was at the centre of the hierarchy of the Navalny organisation as its chief-of-staff. He performed many duties traditionally assigned to several people in organisations with a similar purpose (Powell & Cowart, 2003) such as the campaign manager, the field director, the finance director and the IT-director. Volkov normally conducted interviews with candidates for the positions of regional offices coordinators. He also could dismiss regional leaders, a right he used quite often. Other core activists describe him as "a very technical man" who "organises production process brilliantly" (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). Volkov has a PhD in Computer Science and an experience of running one of the largest Russian IT-companies. It was not a surprise when, at some point, he started calling the organisation "a political startup."

Leaders with a business or IT background are common in many areas of activism. For instance, Wael Ghonim, one of the brightest leaders of the Egyptian revolution of 2011, a man who established the page "We are all Khaled Said," writes that marketing and business skills were "vital to his online activism" (Ghonim, 2012). Similar to Volkov, Ghonim spent many years in IT companies as a manager. Just like Volkov, he was an enthusiast of new technologies from his early days "always seeking ways to develop and innovate" (Ghonim, 2012). Prior to the Egyptian revolution, Ghonim worked for Google as a regional head of marketing. He later started applying many aspects of this leading internet company's philosophy to his political activism. Other core activists of the Navalny organisation like Respondent 32, the office coordinator in one of the largest cities of Russia, also had an experience of running a large business. Respondent 32's business, which they left in 2011, employed about 300 people (Respondent 32, personal communication, May 25, 2017).

There is also an unmistakable taste of corporatist philosophy and marketing spirit in the production process facilitated by Volkov. In his texts and vlogs, he compares the Navalny movement to "a large fast-growing corporation," constantly talks about business-processes, managerial positions and people's donations as investments. Similarly, Respondent 26 compares the organisation to a McDonald's chain. Like the American fast-food chain, Navalny's offices are run according to a single plan, they are branded similarly and organised based on a model of a "franchise", says Respondent 26 (personal communication, August 14, 2017). Volkov seems to be a technocratic entrepreneur who believes that there could be one single rational solution to any campaigning challenge. One just needs another hackathon or more programmers to find this a solution. Volkov believes in the capability of e-democracy to overturn the anti-democratic trajectory of the political process in Russia. In 2011, he co-authored a book about e-democracy in Russia titled "Cloud Democracy." The book outlined how technologies can improve the control of the election process by citizens. Volkov, thus, may be described as a rational techno-optimist who adheres to many techno-libertarian principles (Gerbaudo, 2017c).

In 2012 in Russia and one year later in Iran, Volkov had the opportunity to implement his ideas about the election process in practice. He coordinated the

alternative electronic voting systems designed to rate the leading opposition politicians in their respective country (Toepfl, 2017). The Russian opposition used this voting system to elect the "Coordination Council of the Russian opposition" to sustain the Russian protest movement of 2011-12. Volkov was the man behind the technological side of the system. Those alternative elections to the Coordination council were financed by other IT-entrepreneurs like one of the founders of Yandex platform (often described as "Russian Google"), the late Ilya Segalovich (Toepfl, 2017). However, most of the Russian opposition Council members were prosecuted within a year after it was established. Some of them were jailed, some left the country, one – Nemtsov – was killed.

Volkov now calls many of his views presented in his "Cloud Democracy" book as overly optimistic and naive. According to him, new forms of organisation enabled by technologies associated with the ideas of e-democracy still has prospects in Russia. However, they should be discussed in association with the idea of overcoming the state propaganda machine and reaching the citizens using the internet (Volkov, 2017f).

Similar to its chief-of-staff, many core activists of the Navalny organisation believed in a rational solution to almost any policy problem. Several examples illustrate this belief. First, when the authorities decided to block their websites, the activists sought a rational technological solution to this challenge. As described in Chapter 6, they turned to the creative IT-specialists who looked for breaches in the internet protocols and to members of IT-community who, despite working for the government, might covertly support the organisation. Second, to overcome the pressure of pro-government trolls and bots, the organisation turned to new tools developed by its supporters to show the evidence of that pressure. When Navalny's video started disappearing from the Trending section of YouTube, the organisation used the specially designed framework to demonstrate the attacks of bots on the organisation video streams. Third, one of a few occasions when a public event was held in the main federal office was a hackathon – a gathering of IT-specialists who volunteered to design the organisation's technological infrastructure. This obsession with technological solutions accompanied Volkov and his core-team in organising a large-scale experiment of political engagement which the Navalny organisation represents.

Navalny, the Yale-educated lawyer and former "stock market analyst," shares many of Volkov's meritocratic and optimistic views on technologies (Gabowitsch, 2017). Navalny also supports an idea of e-democracy (Toepfl, 2017), though it seems that it mostly means for him that the elections are organised with the employment of the internet and digital platforms.

Core activists of the Navalny federal office were quite reluctant to define themselves as "activists," "politicians" or dissidents. "We are who we are – the team of Alexei Navalny," says Respondent 30 (personal communication, August 15, 2017). At the same time, people who coordinate the organisation explain their motivation to work for Navalny despite the pressure from the government in rather individualistic and pragmatic terms. That is how Respondent 30 explains his way to activism:

> It all started in university. […] I was confronted with the fact that there is no *natural selection* happening at my university [emphasis added]. For example, people who have money but do not have brains […] were placed in better positions. They do not even study; they just go to college. […] They just give money to their teachers, pass the exams and get the best jobs. At the same time, people who grind away at their books - they understand that it is a bit unfair and that in a normal country it should not be so that a person who is not created for work in the economic sector would work in the economic sector. I was knocked down by this injustice a little bit, and I began to listen to those people who opposed it, in particular deceased Boris Nemtsov (personal communication, August 15, 2017).

Respondent 30 is not the only member of the organisation who shares these meritocratic views on society. Respondent 31 (personal communication, August 15, 2017) says that he, as well as many people around him, wants "to make difference for oneself" to make his country a better place to live and to create a family, to raise his children. Respondent 31 says that the alternative to this sort of pragmatic activism is emigration from Russia – a thing he thinks about quite often. Thus, it seems that the commitment of the members of the core team of Navalny was mostly associated with a pragmatic and individualistic position as to their own and country's future.

Technological optimism was a prominent feature of the leadership in the Navalny organisation. The combination of technological optimism, a startup-like culture and marketing techniques of its core activists made the organisation stand out

ideologically and organisationally. These characteristics define their organisational culture. Consequently, when developing its internal structures, the leadership seemed to be more concerned with building a startup culture rather than with emphasising the struggle for power in an authoritarian regime.

Chapter 6 Information distribution and censorship

The Anti-tax and the Navalny organisations found ways to address the challenges of persecution and surveillance of their followers. Still, the campaigners had to face the third significant authoritarian challenge – censorship.

Wilson (2005, p. 43) argues that the authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe persist, among other things, thanks to a culture of information control. This control is mostly wielded on traditional mainstream media. For example, the Russian government controls and restricts dissemination of political content on the most popular traditional media in the country: television and radio (Fredheim, 2015). Russian national television largely ignored the figure of Navalny and his organisation (Osborn, 2017). Due to this control, pro-democracy activists were "forced" online (Albats, 2018b) to reach citizens by circulating information on the internet. Activists who resist the authoritarian regimes also experience self-censorship and the filtering of their websites.

This chapter focuses on how anti-authoritarian activists faced censorship on digital media. Specifically, I discuss the choice of digital platforms for information distribution. In the final section, I turn to the mechanisms of information dissemination invented and used by activists. This discussion is based on the interviews with leaders and rank-and-file activists, participant observation, features analysis and textual analysis.

6.1 Communication infrastructure and analytic activism in the Navalny presidential campaign

Communication infrastructure is the combination of public and private communication spaces used by the activists to organise, coordinate, unite followers and disseminate their messages. The communication infrastructure of the Navalny organisation ranged from YouTube channels with thousands of political streams to hundreds of local groups on Telegram. The organisation has meticulously created and used these pages and groups to connect with its followers. The website Navalny.com aggregated some links to the pages and groups thus uniting them in a network. In addition to links on other pages and groups, the website published the investigations of the FBK, as well as some other political videos and posts signed by

Alexei Navalny. Navalny.com also provided followers with access to newsletters by collecting followers' emails. The resulted email lists also became part of the communication infrastructure of the organisation. The core activists used data collected through Navalny.com, as well as across the country through the regional offices, to feed the analytic component of its infrastructure. Thus, accounts, pages and groups on social media and messaging platforms, websites, email lists, as well as analytic data-gathering and analysis, comprise the communication infrastructures of the Navalny organisation.
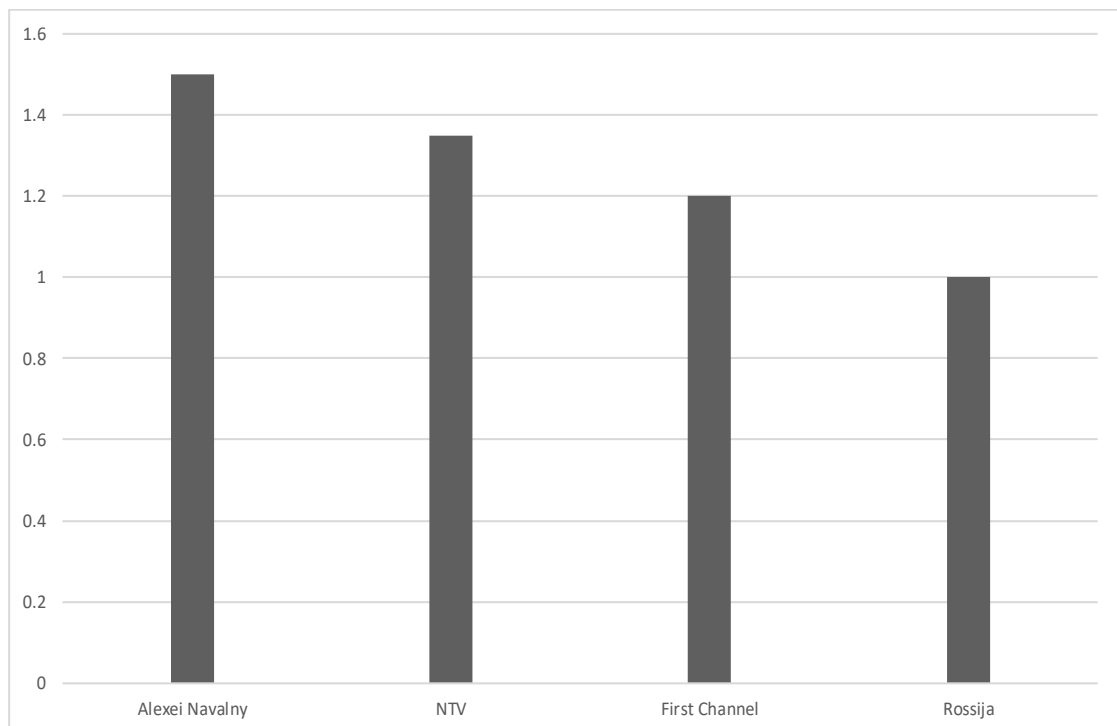
Figure 6.1. Subscribers of the main Russian television channels on YouTube and of "Alexei Navalny" YouTube channel as of 15 November 2017, in million users.

The pages and groups that were part of this infrastructure had at least 1 million followers in total by the end of 2017, according to the author's calculations. For instance, Navalny's YouTube channel had more subscribers than the YouTube channels of major Russian television stations in 2017 (Figure 6.1). That number placed Navalny in the top of Russian social media celebrities. Navalny referred to the organisation's channels on YouTube as an "underground television" that his organisation "is forced to produce" (Albats, 2018b). Otherwise, he would be "much happy to [talk] on a 'normal' television" (Albats, 2018b).

YouTube and other platforms like Telegram were needed to overcome the traditional media censorship by reaching out to the audience, to cover organisation's activities and to mobilise this audience (Respondent 30, personal communication, August 15, 2017). According to Navalny, his organisation aimed at addressing and mobilising the majority of citizens of Russia who "has had no [political] knowledge because of the total censorship in the media and the silence of the government" (Navalny, 2017c). The use of YouTube accounts is an example of how the Navalny organisation used platforms to overcome censorship.

Before discussing Navalny organisation's approach to censorship in detail, I explore how its presidential campaign collected and analysed information. To conceptualise the organisation's approach to information, I use Karpf's (2016) idea of analytic activism. I demonstrate that Navalny's presidential bid was a case of analytic activism and of the extensive use of big data to monitor activities and people. The discussion of analytic activism helps to examine information dissemination and communication infrastructure in anti-authoritarian movements.

Poell et al. (2016) link technological solutions in activism and the growing importance of technologically-savvy campaign spokespeople to marketing strategies employed in business. These spokespeople rely on feedback from their followers to "pre-structure" and "anticipate" followers' actions (Poell et al., 2016, pp. 1009–1010). The practices of receiving feedback and listening to followers in order to understand how to act better are spread among large NGOs in the US and some western countries (Karpf, 2016). Karpf describes such listening practices as "analytic activism." The theories that discuss marketing and analytic strategies do not explain whether these styles of activism develop primarily from the actual need of organisations to use marketing and to listen to their followers or simply because some of activists possess necessary skills and capacity to analyse the data, as well as to build their campaigning around marketing techniques. The use of marketing techniques and big data analytics by the Navalny organisation throw light on this uncertainty.

The Navalny organisation was enthusiastic in exploring the opportunities for analytic activism – one of the first in Russia and perhaps in the region of Eastern Europe. The capacity to develop analytic activism in their organisation was related to the profiles

of some of its key figures. The chief-of-staff, for example, has a background in marketing and IT. The organisation has also attracted several prominent IT professionals like a security expert Vladislav Zdolnikov. In total, up to 15 people have worked on IT projects in the organisation at different stages. The organisation's reliance on IT professionals explains why it has progressed on the path of analytic activism.

The main data framework of the presidential campaign of Navalny was nicknamed the "Long-awaited" or "Divine Analytics". This framework was created by the IT team and combined several tools to collect and analyse data about people who registered on Navalny.com. The organisation used Navalny.com to recruit the supporters and register them by collecting their data like a name, an address, a phone number and an email. More than 430 000 people out of 109 million voters have registered as those who wanted to support Navalny's candidacy for the election by the end of 2017 (Figure 6.2). The Divine Analytics was used to measure the efficiency of the campaign staff over time.

Figure 6.2 demonstrates what some of the analytical tools of the campaign looked like. The one pictured has tracked the registration on Navalny.com. It shows that the organisation distinguished between volunteers (179 949 "available"), signatories (those who were ready to put a signature for Navalny's candidacy – 431 686 "available") and people who shared their emails with the organisation when, for instance, signing for a newsletter (732 453 "confirmed").
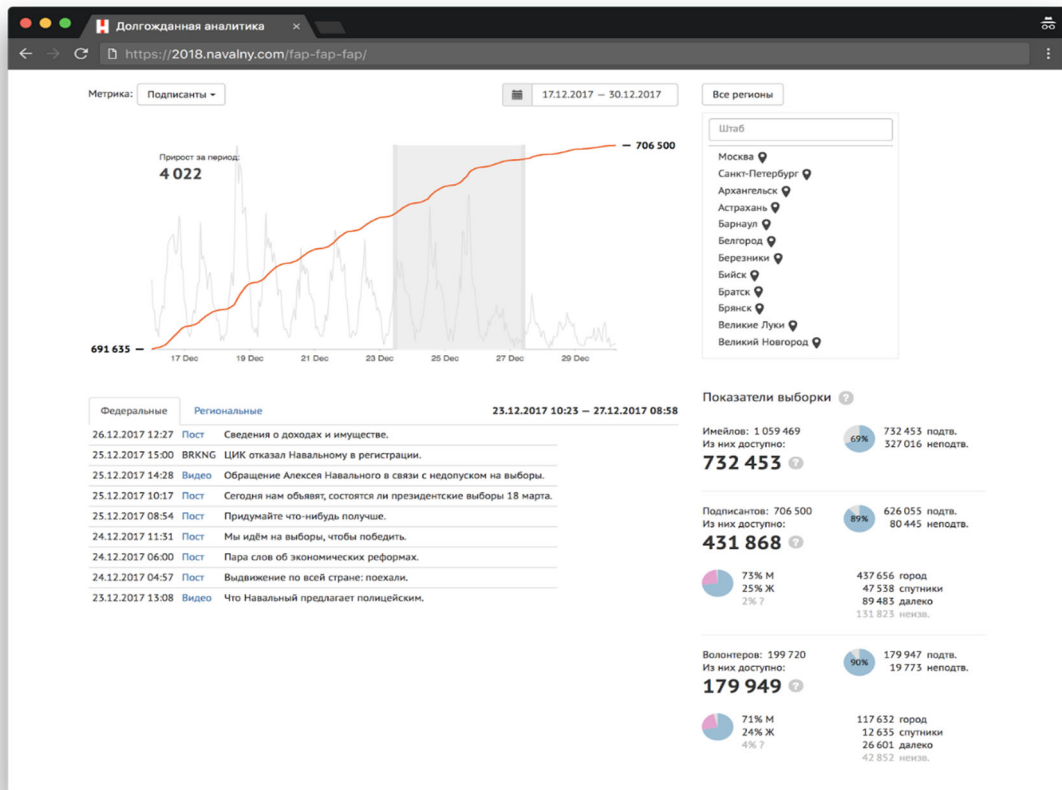
Figure 6.2. A screenshot from the analytical framework demonstrates the growth of the number of users who registered as Navalny's supporters between 23.12.2017 and 27.12.2017. Source: StopDesign (2018).

The analytical tools helped to plan the office network and campaigning events (StopDesign, 2018). These tools were also used to compare the growth of the network following critical events. "This allowed us to determine which [campaign] events were successful, and which were not; what has attracted new followers and volunteers," explained Volkov (2017e). Based on this data, the core activists found out, for instance, that the publication of new anticorruption investigations on YouTube led to the highest spikes in the growth of the registration on Navalny.com (StopDesign, 2018). The ability to build the analytic framework allowed the Navalny organisation to understand their followers and to plan their actions.

The activists also used the Divine Analytics to monitor the progress of office coordinators. Regional coordinators used the tool to submit administrative returns every week. These returns included the numbers of new registered followers, applications for collective action submitted to local authorities, physically distributed

materials and information about other activities (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). Hence, the "data" analysed by the federal office of the organisation was not just clicks and phone numbers but also information about the world beyond the internet.

Finally, the Divine Analytics tracked the fundraising process. Based on the tracking, the chief-of-staff published a report on his private site every month about the income and spending of the organisation. From these reports, one could conclude, for example, that the third largest source of campaign funds was bitcoin. The fundraising reports (Figure 6.3) were published to emphasise openness and to encourage crowdfunding.
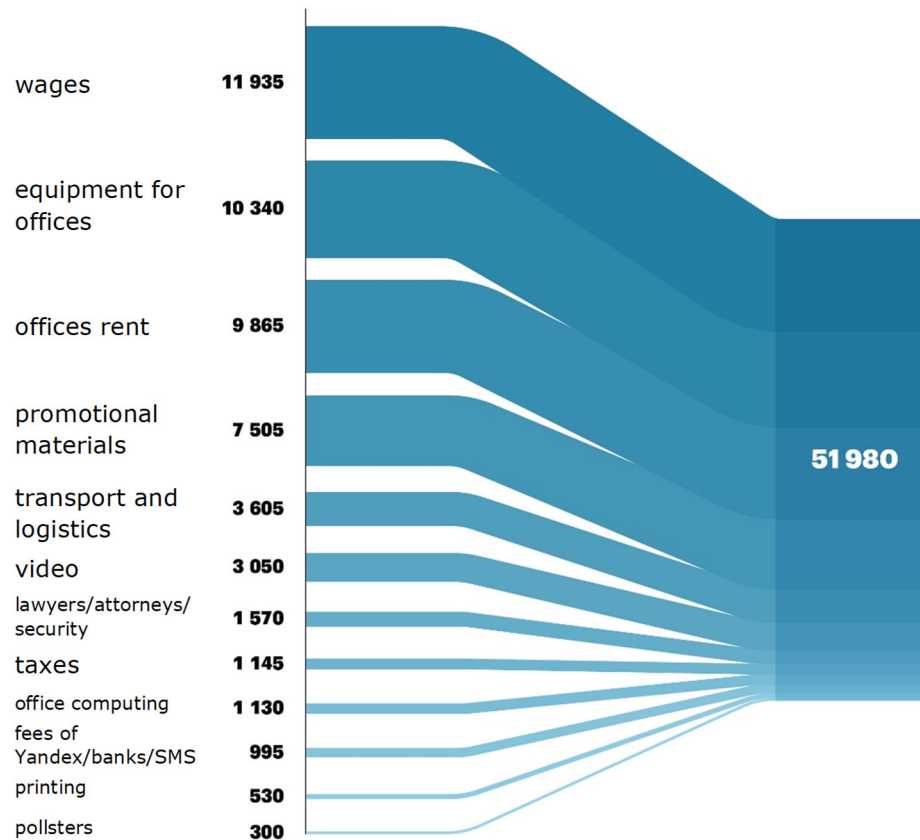
Figure 6.3. The spending of the Navalny organisation from the beginning of the year to May 2017 in thousand Russian Rubbles (100 Rubbles = $1.75). Source of data: the Navalny presidential campaign.

The organisation had also received donations via a popular in Russia service Yandex.Money until, according to the Navalny activists, the service was pressured by the government and the organisation's accounts on it were blocked (Navalny, 2017a). Around 12% of all the donations received by the organisation up until June

2017 came from this service (Volkov, 2017a). After this, the Navalny organisation started emphasising other ways to donate including the bitcoin (Volkov, 2018e). The bitcoin donations constituted about 25% of the total donations received by the organisation for its Anti-corruption and presidential campaigns in 2017 and 2018 (Volkov, 2018e). In contrast, during the early period when Yandex.Money was still available, the bitcoin income constituted around 16% as of June 2017 (Volkov, 2017a). This use of innovative donation schemes demonstrates that organised digital dissidents in non-democratic environments can benefit from technological affordances in the areas where governmental control is still not established firmly. This emphasis on analytic platform development reinforced the image of the leadership of the Navalny organisation as progressive, technologically-savvy new leaders that refuse to follow the conventional bureaucratic approaches or play by the rules of the political establishment.

Bennett et al. (2017) analyse the platformisation of political parties' infrastructure in mature democracies. They argue that parties, primarily leftist, increasingly use platforms to organise and to listen to their supporters because of these supporters' demand and pressure. Thus, the platformisation of political organisation, according to their theory, is driven by an idealistic image of an organisation as a more horizontal structure with many leaders or no leaders at all.

Similarly, some of Navalny's executives like Volkov had an idealistic view of political organisation driven by a version of the deliberative democracy ideal where everyone has an electronic voice that might influence decision-making in real time. However, the platformisation of the Navalny organisation has not resulted in an amplified voice of its ordinary supporters. By contrast, with the growth of the organisation and the development of its analytic tools, its regional leaders were monitored more extensively by the federal office, as I discussed earlier. It seems like only the Federal office had full access to the analytics data, at least in August 2017 (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017). The federal office used the data to analyse the actions of local offices, track their results in terms of new supporters recruited (Respondent 26, personal communication, August 14, 2017) as well as their spending, as Figure 6.3 demonstrates. Therefore, the citizens' demand argument does not explain the development of the analytic infrastructure.

I propose to link the development of an analytic infrastructure to an organisational culture and the structure of anti-authoritarian movements. First, the Navalny organisation required a framework to track its regional offices as well as their overall performance. It is hard to imagine that more decentralised structures like the Anti-tax campaign can strategically benefit from the analysis of its overall audience on YouTube. But such analysis potentially benefits more centralised organisations like the Navalny presidential campaign. Second, data analytic tools are powerful alternative platforms that could hardly be affected by the surveillance of the government during the timing of the Navalny campaigning. Third, a startup-like culture that was informed by Volkov's theory of "Cloud Democracy" could drive the organisation towards the development of its analytic tools, even when they were not really needed or used. Thus, the organisation might employ analytic activism largely because its key leaders had relevant skills and had a specific set of values, though more practical considerations such as challenges of security could have played their role.

6.2 The choice of platforms for information circulation

6.2.1 Surveillance, audience and affordances

In 2017, the World Press Freedom Index assigned Belarus the 153rd place out of 179 countries (Reporters without Borders, 2017). State censorship is one of the main reasons for this state of media freedom in Belarus. Though private web-only outlets enjoy relative freedom, the report on freedom of the press by Freedom House (2016b) claims, self-censorship is widespread among journalists of those outlets and ordinary citizens alike (Freedom House, 2016b; Miazhevich, 2015). "All the media work in a self-censorship mode to some extent. Even the independent ones. All political parties work in a self-censorship mode. The question is where this boundary [between reporting the whole story and self-censorship] is," says the chairman of one of key organisations involved in the Anti-tax campaign (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017). For Respondent 17, censorship was also associated with the persecution of people who posted political information online:

> People are now on trial for sharing a photo on social media. It is because they
> [the authorities] understand that one can go to the street [to protest], and you
> will be seen by hundreds of people in an hour. But you can publish [a post

about how one got out on the street] on social media and, if it is presented creatively or interestingly, [the post can be spotted] by thousands and dozens of thousands of people.

One of the main analytical challenges in studying the Anti-tax campaign was to determine how exactly the information about it was circulated despite censorship. In particular, it was not clear from the interviews and analysis of media publications how the time and location of the Anti-tax rallies were communicated, especially in smaller towns. Most often, the interviewees mentioned two sources of information – word of mouth and social media platforms.

First, word of mouth – neighbours, friends, colleagues – is a dominant source of information for Belarusians. According to an opinion survey funded by the EU, 80% of the population name word of mouth as a source of general information (Ecorys, 2017, p. 19). Second, many interviewees emphasised the importance of "the internet" and "social networks" for the dissemination of information (Respondent 4, personal communication, May 19, 2017; Respondent 11, personal communication, May 24, 2017; Respondent 12, personal communication, September 9, 2017; Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017). For instance, Respondent 17 was very confident about the role of social media. While in jail in Maladzyechna he interacted with other people who were detained during the same rally or for other reasons unrelated to the campaign (Respondent 17, personal communication, May 18, 2017):

> 90% of the [dissemination] work has been done by social networks. I specifically asked my fellow jailmates how they had received information [about the protests], and almost all named social networks.

Respondent 17 expressed a common belief in the circles of activists and experts that people received information about the Anti-tax protests primarily from social media.

This was a bit unusual because more innovative channels such as social media platforms have not been used that massively by Belarusian political activists recently (Bulhakau & Dynko, 2011; Respondent 9, personal communication, March 13, 2017). When asked about their choice of social media platforms, the Anti-tax activists mostly focused on three considerations: the security of their electronic communication, the audience and platform features.

First, some core and segment leaders of the campaign chose not to use the social media platforms which they considered as dangerous in terms of surveillance. For instance, Respondent 11 (personal communication, May 24, 2017), a journalist and one of the leaders of the anarchist movement in Belarus who spent many years in prison on political charges, described VK as "pigs' [*musarskaja,* a jargon word to refer to the police] social media." They suggested that "the main security threat of using centralised social media is that you just send your data in an unknown direction and the elites use this for their own benefit." Respondent 12 (personal communication, September 9, 2017) said that they did not use OK and VK because "OK as well as VK are Russian social networks. Any data about your account, including your login and password," could be easily obtained by the Belarusian police. For this reason, the activist feared that the police could read his private messages. By contrast, Respondent 12 (personal communication, September 9, 2017) actively used Facebook because they trusted this US company:

> The servers of Facebook are located in the territory of the US only. And the information about your account is not given to our special services by the US. Only in extreme cases such as terrorism, murders. […] Therefore, I am not on OK, and my wife has long deleted it too, and we will never use [it].

Still, some groups that were involved with the Anti-tax campaign, maintained their public representation on less secure Russian social media. Respondent 4, a legal expert and political scientist (personal communication, May 19, 2017), thought that this was due to the attitude regarding issues of security and publicity:

> Opposition structures […] say that they are not covert structures, they are not plotting: "all our activity is lawful, [they say] […]. That is why we [the opposition] are not afraid of anything. And all that the authorities do to us is a violation. And this is one of the reasons why we are struggling against these authorities. We publish everything openly on the internet. When the authorities bring to trial our activists because they publish information on VK, this demonstrates that they are wrong, and it should be changed," [says the opposition].
> Maybe, from the political point of view, this is a wrong strategy for organising any protest. But there is a feeling that this is natural.

Thus, even though the police monitored VK and persecuted for the content posted there, digital dissidents kept using the platform, along with OK. This demonstrates a strategic vision of transparency and publicity by opposition activists as something

that can potentially protect them. This strategic attitude to transparency can also explain why none but one of my Belarusian informants asked me to conceal their identity. At the same time, the activists tend to use platforms like Facebook or Telegram, which were perceived as more secure, for internal communication.

Second, the Anti-tax leaders believed that the composition of the audiences on OK, VK and Facebook was different in terms of age, education level and social status. For instance, many activists perceived Facebook as a place for the better educated urban population (Respondent 10, personal communication, September 6, 2017). VK was considered to be populated by a younger audience interested in entertainment (Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017). OK was contrasted with these two platforms.

> "I mostly relied on OK when I informed about the campaign. There are more ordinary citizens of my age on OK. Young people are on VK. And there are few people who use Facebook in Baranavichy," said 43-year-old segment leader Respondent 10 (personal communication, September 6, 2017), who was a driving force of the campaign in Baranavichy, a town of around 180 000 people.

	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-74
Facebook	146,718	289,914	165,945	122,362	107,523
OK	271,413	468,210	388,829	250,979	219,663
VK	962,343	852,945	458,227	374,705	82,696
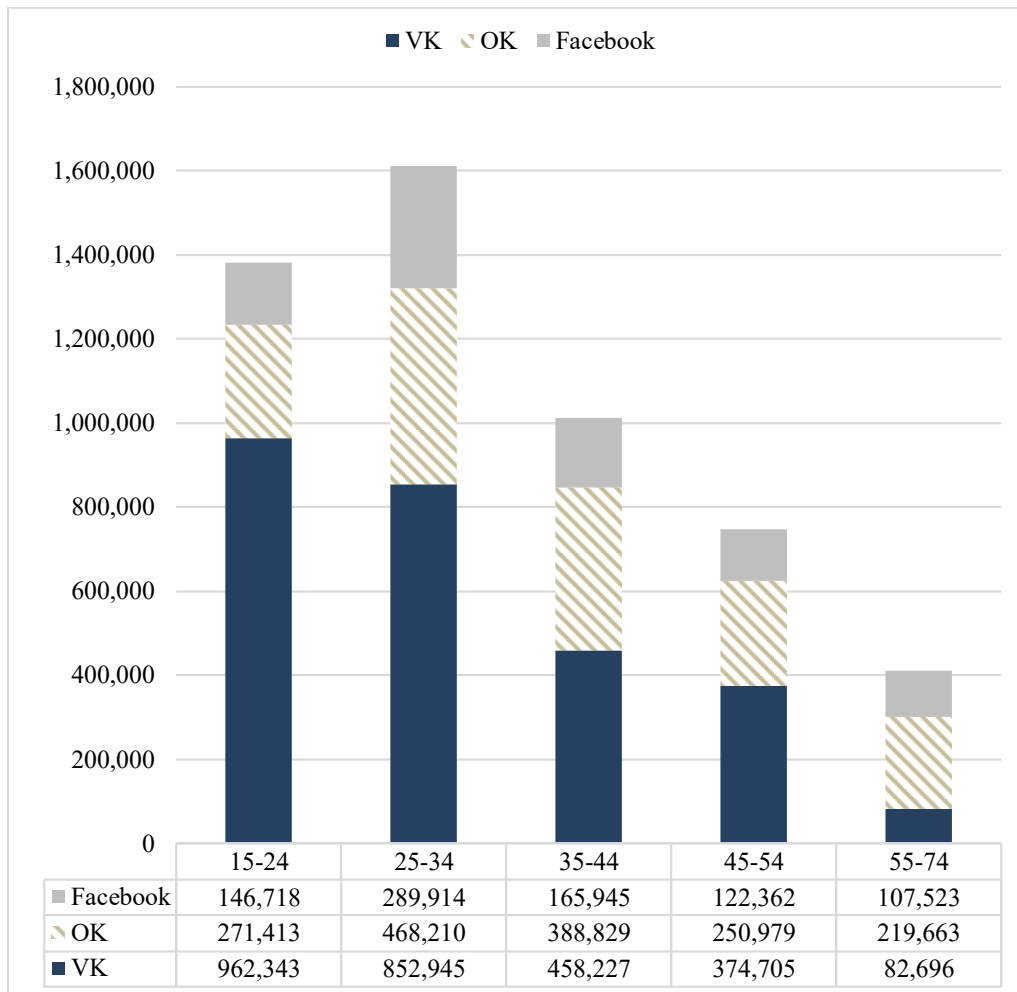
Figure 6.4. The cumulative audience of social media platforms in Belarus in December 2016 according to age. Sources: Gemius (2017).
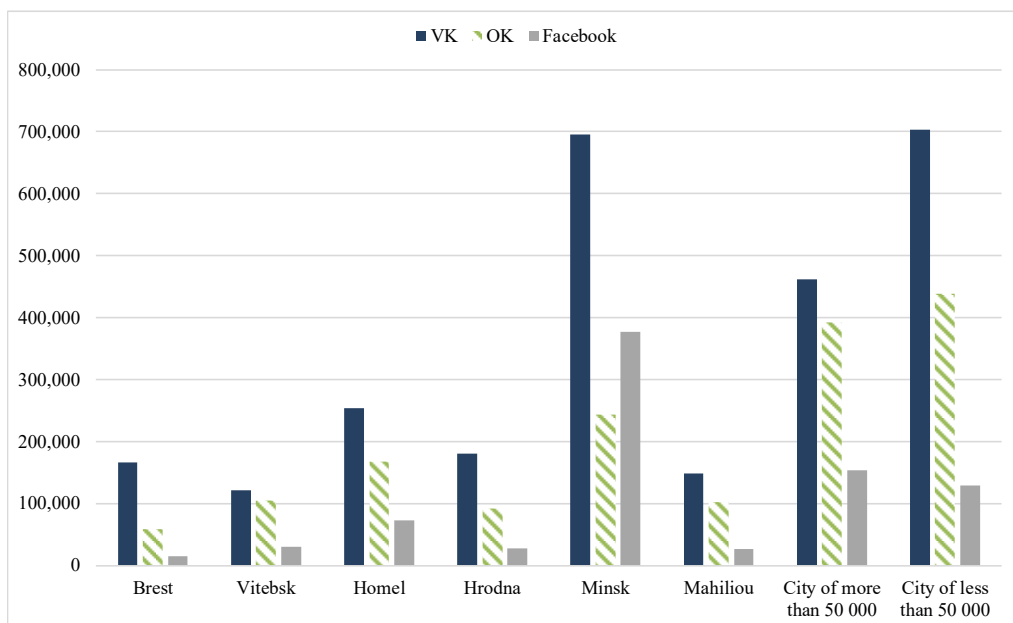
Figure 6.5. The audience of social media platforms in Belarus in December 2016. Source: Gemius (2017).

Indeed, the audience of OK was also older than the average audience of VK in Belarus (Figure 6.4). According to Gemius (2017), OK is the most popular social media platform among people older than 55. For instance, the largest portion of the audience of the OK page of one of key media that covered the Anti-tax campaign page was 40-55 years old (Respondent 20, personal communication, April 24, 2017). Their VK and Facebook pages had younger audiences (Respondent 20, personal communication, April 24, 2017). In addition, OK was relatively more popular in the smaller towns (Figure 6.5). In general, this older audience tends to use digital platforms differently from the younger generation (Rogers, 2016).

Just as their OK audience was different from the audience on Facebook, the demographics of the Anti-tax rallies was also different from what activists in Belarus used to observe at traditional large-scale protest events (Erickson, 2017). The activists highlighted that many of the protesters came from social groups and lived in the cities that typically supported the current regime.

> In Babrujsk and Pinsk, 40% of those [who joined the protests were] of a very great age. An enormous number of pensioners came. (Respondent 12, personal communication, September 9, 2017)

Pensioners are traditionally considered to be the stronghold of Lukashenka's support (Zarakhovich, 2005). However, it seems like the contentious tax had affected different groups of society, many of whom lived in smaller towns where the level of unemployment was worse than in big cities. The requirement to pay the bill coupled with the country's economic problems developed over the past three years (Erickson, 2017). The failure of the state to support living standards might gradually make many of those who previously supported Lukashenka's policies angry.

In addition to the age and the geographical structure of the OK audience, the activists emphasised its receptiveness towards more emotional messages. That is how Respondent 21 (personal communication, September 1, 2017) described it:

> On OK, as it turned out, our audience is more prone to the emotional approach. And many things, especially if they concern suicides[12], some tragic stories [...], make people much more outraged than on Facebook. On Facebook, according

---

[12] In December 2016, the media reported (Kasmach, 2017) the death of 60-year old Ajvar Jaskevic from Asipovicy, who left a suicide note that read: "I have never been a parasite."

to my observations, people perceive and attempt to discuss all these [stories] more rationally. On OK, such discussions are very emotional, as a rule.

This outrage and anger can help the prospective participants of a protest movement to overcome the fear of persecution and come together (Castells, 2013). The affordances of OK that emphasised these emotions were noticed by the Anti-tax activists.

Third, when comparing the affordances and features of different platforms, the activists emphasised that OK is easier to learn and use than, for instance, Facebook.

> I think Facebook is the most advanced network. It is very difficult to use. It is the most inconvenient compared to OK. There are a lot of functions, there are a lot of settings […]. But when you learn Facebook, it becomes incredibly cool. OK is for dummies. It is that easy, so one does not need to customise any [settings]. Facebook has very serious security settings; you can turn off and on a lot of things. In Facebook, everything is adjustable: who will see your posts, your messages, who will not see [them]. Even by category. (Respondent 12, personal communication, September 9, 2017)

Some segment leaders specifically highlighted one feature that was common across different platforms. The leaders used the Like button to attract more attention to their content. In Brest, Ihar Maskouski led the group of the activist of the Hramada party. That was how Maskouski coordinated the digital efforts in the Brest local segment of the Anti-tax campaign:

> After this first rally, it was decided that everything was so great and people participated [in the rally], so let us develop [the movement] next weekend. And our Maskouski gathered us all in the office, and said: "I understand everything, guys, risks and everything else, but let's work on the Internet." He immediately did a short workshop: "If you shared content on Facebook [or VK or OK] and [your] content is liked and shared within 15 minutes, then the coverage will be greater." (Respondent 18, personal communication, September 6, 2017)

Respondent 18 also told me how Brest Hramada activists used Skype to exchange links to the social media posts that they created, so everyone could like each other's posts. They also used a comment section on local news websites to mobilise readers for the upcoming rallies and other actions. A comment on those sections could be made more visible if more users "liked" it. The Brest local activists posted comments under pseudonyms and then liked each other's comments to raise their visibility.

Notably, the Hramada activists did not coordinate this digital campaigning with other campaign segments in the Brest regions or across the country.

6.2.2 Cultural factors and communication infrastructure

Security of electronic communication, the audience and platform features were not the only variables included in the digital dissents' calculations when choosing platforms for organising and information circulation. I use the example of the Telegram messenger to show how cultural factors might have played a part in this choice. I already mentioned that the activists of the Navalny campaign perceived Telegram as a secure communication space suitable for coordination and message dissemination. I use the example of Telegram to argue that the choice of platforms can be linked to the values and the ideas of platform owners, as well as to the affordances of a platform.

Core activists enjoyed using Telegram. The coordinator in one of large Russian cities, Respondent 25, called Telegram channels "an amazing world" (personal communication, June 11, 2017). Respondent 28, who had 15 years' experience in activism and politics, called Telegram "a great invention" that "helps a lot" (personal communication, August 10, 2017). Respondent 26 called Telegram "God's gift" (personal communication, August 14, 2017). These experienced core activists highlighted such affordances of Telegram as self-erasing conversations (secret chats) and anonymous political channels where many aspects of Moscow's political life were discussed and "all kinds of insights revealed" (Respondent 31, personal communication, 15 August 2017).

In terms of coordination affordances, the interviewed activists highlighted the design of the Telegram architecture that allowed for quick coordination.

> We realized that we need to coordinate the actions of people somehow. It is possible [to coordinate] on VK, but it is simply not as fast [as through Telegram]. On Telegram, a person immediately receives a notification, and he instantly sees [it]. (Respondent 27, personal communication, August 14, 2017)

The coordinator referred to the push notification mechanism. The default settings of Telegram allow any message or post addressed to a user to be signalled on a user's device through this mechanism. This means a user can receive several messages

every hour if they are subscribed to several popular live channels. On other platforms, usually, public posts are not signalled through default notifications. Push notifications allowed for a quick response from the participants of the St Petersburg's rally as well as on many other occasions (Respondent 27, personal communication, August 14, 2017). Thus, the choice of Telegram is also linked to the platform affordances that help to speed up the process of coordination.

The values and beliefs of Telegram owners also might explain why the Navalny organisation relied on this platform so extensively. A Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov founded Telegram in 2014. Eight years before this, Durov founded VK, a social network which mainly copied Facebook, then largely unknown in the predominantly Russian speaking countries. When his influence grew, Durov was pressured by the Russian authorities. In 2011, when pro-democracy protests erupted in Russia, Durov refused to remove one of the pages of Navalny from VK (Rowan, 2016). Three years later, he refused to provide the Russian security agencies with information about people who supported the 2013-14 pro-European protests in Ukraine. The Russian authorities fiercely opposed the Ukrainian protest movement as they feared it might spread to Russia. Not long after that refusal, Durov mysteriously resigned, sold his stake in VK and fled to the US (Maney, 2014). In the US, he turned into "an outspoken critic of Putin's regime" (Rowan, 2016).

This is when Durov also launched the Telegram platform. The idea of the platform emerged after the Russian authorities tried to pressure him in 2011. He was also inspired by Snowden's revelations (Auchard, 2015). Durov likes to be compared to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and being described as "A tech individualist for a post-Snowden world." This is a title of one of a few press articles featured on the Telegram corporate site (Telegram, n.d.). In this article, Durov was compared to Snowden with his radical views about transparency and concerns with security.

As of January 2018, Telegram is free to use, and it is positioned as a non-profit platform. It has no embedded advertisement and no subscription fees. Durov, who is a billionaire, funds it. Being a tech entrepreneur gives him a special status. He has become a global tech celebrity - a status that he can use to attract money from investors for his other projects. The status that Telegram gives its owner might be more important to him than the potential profits. Therefore, the prominence of the

platform and its user base ultimately contribute to Durov's social capital and wealth as a tech entrepreneur.

Similar to core activists of the Navalny organisation, the founder of Telegram seems to be quite pragmatic and individualistic in his views on society. Durov describes himself as a libertarian (Sindelar, 2014). In 2012, he published "the Manifesto" where he proposes to eliminate any taxes paid by citizens (but not companies), passports and the regulation of the education system (Fitzpatrick, 2013). In the Manifesto, Durov appears "to value corporate freedoms above human ones" (Sindelar, 2014). His individualistic libertarian views with an emphasis on security were reflected in the architecture of Telegram. For instance, the level of your sociability on Telegram is defined strictly by yourself. You are not encouraged to replicate your existing social ties and "to friend" as many people as possible in a manner it is done on Facebook or VK. Durov's belief in individual freedom, his anti-authoritarianism are common features of geeks and hackers' communities (Postill, 2014, p. 404).

Durov positions Telegram as an open and highly secure platform for communication. It is based on the open source code that could be monitored by any user, which is not common for large digital platforms. The open source, according to Durov, means among other things, that the Telegram code will not be tweaked to allow the state or other actors to access the users' data without publicly revealing such attempts. Open source movement is associated with a techno-libertarian principle of openness. Gerbaudo (2017c, p. 188) defines openness as the criticism of the "tendency to closure displayed by traditional organisations."

Openness was one of the key values declared by the Navalny organisation. For example, the chief of staff Volkov has hosted a regular YouTube show called *Shtab* (Headquarters). During the *Shtab* streams, Volkov discussed the upcoming events related to the presidential campaign and explained its tactics and strategy. Volkov has also highlighted that "there are no secrets in the campaign," and the show demonstrated that "we are absolutely open." If the police tried to infiltrate spies in the organisation, it would find absolutely nothing that was not already known publicly, claimed Volkov (2017d). This declaration of radical transparency seemed to be rather a precarious measure as special services still tried to spy. Instead, the

Navalny organisation might declare openness and transparency as the key values to attract more supporters. A similar strategy was used by another platform-like organisation the Five Star Movement in Italy (Politi & Roberts, 2017). However, despite the declarations of transparency and openness, the Five Star, as well as the Navalny organisation, was criticised for not revealing its internal political debates and not allowing more internal democracy.

The Navalny activists perceived Telegram as a secure and an uncensored platform with a suitable design. Both the owner of Telegram and the Navalny core activists emphasised pragmatic and individualistic views on society, openness and security. This shows that the choice of platforms is linked to the values and the ideas of platform owners and users.

6.2.3 Five factors explain the puzzle of platform choice

Among the public online domains where the two movements operated, email lists and data frameworks are the two elements that are common in the media ecologies of civic activists, especially in the organisations of a larger scale (Karpf, 2016). Therefore, their presence in the infrastructure of the Navalny organisation was not surprising. By contrast, the Anti-tax campaign did not have a centralised email list and did not use a data analytics approach. This can be explained by the scarcity of resources (Karpf, 2016) and skills (Postill, 2018) available. However, the choice of local rather than global platforms was more puzzling and contrasted with previous waves of pro-democracy political protests in Russia and Belarus in 2010-2012. During those waves, pro-democracy activists mostly relied on Facebook (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016; Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015) rather than on local platforms. I was puzzled about why the activists of the Anti-tax and Navalny campaigns, many of whom led the previous waves of pro-democracy protests, switched from global to local platforms.

I found that five factors help to explain this puzzle of platform choice. These factors are platform affordances, the composition of the audience, the level of censorship, the level of surveillance and organisational culture.

First, certain affordances of digital media played an important role in the process of information dissemination. They are the "Like", "Share" and push notification

mechanisms. The universal features of digital platforms, including the "Like" and "Share" buttons, are proliferating around the web and help to increase user traffic (van Dijck, 2013a, p. 42). On the OK platform, the Class content-sharing mechanism combined the affordances of the "Like" and "Share" buttons on Facebook. It allowed activists to disseminate their alternative messages across the OK platform relatively quickly by reaching the people who were not subscribed to their pages. The mechanism also played a role in emphasising the audience's emotional reaction. Just like the "Share" button, the "push notification" feature has been adopted by many platforms. The Telegram messenger that was popular with the Navalny activists had a default setting that "pushed" every post to the mobile devices of every follower who subscribed to one of the hundreds of Navalny channels and groups. The push notification affordances helped to speed up coordination and message dissemination.

Second, the campaigners considered the composition of the audience on different platforms. The Navalny organisation tried to expose a broader audience to the political content produced by its core and local activists, building on the audience of YouTube users who watched the anti-corruption investigation about the prime minister in March 2017. The Anti-tax activists tried to approach and engage the previously apolitical audience dissatisfied with the "tax on unemployment."

By experimenting with the use of OK and Telegram, the activists of the two organisations accessed a new audience that was also receptive to their messages. During the Arab Spring, similar attempts to innovate saw Egyptian pro-democracy activists using Facebook, then a relatively little-known platform in the country, to build support among younger people (Ghonim, 2012). The activists of the Navalny and Anti-tax campaigns benefited from exploring newer audiences of relatively novel platforms.

Third, censorship is one of the key mechanisms that authoritarian regimes implement in order to control the political process online (Tufekci, 2017). Similar to the situation in China and some other authoritarian regimes (Cairns, 2017), digital censorship in Belarus and Russia is selective, as this study demonstrates. This means that censorship is implemented in relation to a selected, narrow circle of websites and platforms.

The practices of selective state censorship are a vulnerability for any activist communication infrastructure. At different points in their political history, the governments of Russia and Belarus demonstrated that they could potentially filter any major platform. Thus, traffic on local or smaller platforms such as Telegram or OK could be filtered too. Telegram was already being filtered in another non-democratic country where it was popular. In the midst of the anti-governmental protests in January 2018, the Iranian authorities blocked Telegram (BBC News, 2017). The Russian government have been trying to block Telegram since 2017, although this effort seems to have failed so far. The chance of platform traffic being filtered is one of the limitations of the communication infrastructure of digitally-enabled anti-authoritarian movements.

Fourth, along with censorship, surveillance was another structural constraint met by digital dissidents. For example, some segment leaders of the Anti-tax campaign, such as the prominent political vlogger Maksim Filipovich, even refused to consider opening an account on VK.

In contrast to VK, some other locally popular platforms such as Telegram were perceived as safer places for activism. At the same time, despite its advertised secure architecture, the conversations held on Telegram secret groups can still be copied by any of these groups' members and leaked to the police or the media. For example, a leaked conversation among members of a secret WhatsApp group provided journalists with data revealing tensions within the UK governing party in 2018 (Spence, 2018). Thus, even the most trusted platforms have never fully protected campaign communication from third parties. The police can also confiscate or hack the phones of activists to access their conversations and other data on messenger platforms. During the Navalny campaign, the police confiscated "hundreds" of devices used by the campaigners (Volkov, 2018c). This led to multiple leaks of information. However, the campaigners managed to preserve the databases of their followers. These examples suggest that the limitations of digital platforms are associated with the risks of information leaks and surveillance.

Fifth, Kavada (2013) demonstrated the relationship between an organisation's culture, the cultural preferences of the members of the organisation, and the choice of platforms used by digital activists. My findings support the theory that

organisational culture affects the choice of platforms. Characteristics of the Navalny organisation, such as its emphasis on a startup-like culture, communicable charisma, data gathering and analysis, made the organisation look like a startup. This startup-like culture drove the organisational culture of the Navalny campaigns and its choices of platforms.

In addition, the choice of newer platforms like Telegram may be linked to the "traditional textocentricism" of Russian culture (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2015). This textocentricism has been reflected in the extensive use of the blogging platform LiveJournal by critical citizens in Russian-speaking countries (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2015), which pre-dates the dominant social media of the current generation. Longer texts are not uncommon on Telegram, as the design of its channels encourages a broadcasting style of communication. It might be that Telegram is a new LiveJournal for critical Russian citizens who prefer longer, reflective texts.

6.3 Censorship and methods of content dissemination

6.3.1 Content dissemination

Connecting different platforms of the organisation in a single infrastructure is another difficult organising task. Telegram seemed to be the most significant coordinating element in the process of connecting pages and platforms of the Navalny organisation.

Starting from the summer of 2017, the Navalny activists disseminated all types of content via Telegram. This includes links to texts, video and images. A Telegram group has a section "shared media" that contains media files that have ever been shared by the participants of a group. Segment leaders stimulated their followers to share this content on their personal pages on other social media platforms. Segment leaders provided the supporters with optional mechanisms to do this.

First, they encouraged users to write "two lines on your page" about the current topic using specific hashtags - an alpha-numeric string with a prepended hash ("#") - like #Navalny2018 or #strike. Moreover, many of the followers who registered on Navalny.com periodically received invitations on their emails to share personal

frames about a campaign in a similar manner. This one was sent on 16 March 2018 and was signed by Navalny:

> Let's flood the whole internet with our appeals. [...] 64% of Russian citizens use the internet every day, and we will easily reach them if we try, 15 minutes today, 15 minutes on Saturday. This time is enough for you to write the necessary appeals in all your social networks and groups. On local forums, in comment sections, wherever you want.

Second, segment leaders asked their followers to share materials earlier published on the VK pages of the organisation. Third, the Navalny organisation developed several tools to modify the social media avatars of the users with their branded symbols. The organisation coordinated these mechanisms of information sharing through Telegram and email lists. These mechanisms constitute the repertoire of information sharing.

At the latest stage of its campaigning from December 2017 to March 2018, the Navalny organisation tried to mobilise its followers to monitor the procedures of the presidential election. Navalny was officially banned from this election earlier on in December. The authorities in Russia are often criticized for multiple irregularities during the elections like this. At the same time, Navalny tried to discourage people from voting in the election as he called them "meaningless" and "predetermined" (L. Kim, 2018; Navalny, 2018b).

Navalny's organisation launched the #strike campaign to encourage citizens to show active voting absenteeism. The key hashtag of the absenteeism campaign was #strike (#забастовка). Segment leaders posted messages on Telegram encouraging their followers to share campaign content or to write their posts with this hashtag. Those followers who joined the #strike campaign usually contributed within minutes or hours after segment leaders had posted a call for sharing.

There were three peaks of the volume of the posts and their shares that contained the hashtag #strike on VK. Figure 6.6 demonstrates them as well as the numbers of the posts and shares with the #strike hashtag on two platforms during the #strike campaign period. The highest spike was observed on 28 January 2018. It was the day when the series of #strike campaign rallies were held to protest the unfair presidential election. On that day, the users of VK wrote 614 posts with #strike. These posts were shared more than 4 500 times (see Table 6.1). In addition, there

were about 1 463 #strike posts on Instagram. The second highest spike of the #strike campaign happened on 16 March 2018 when Navalny distributed his message I quoted above just two days before the election day. On this occasion, the third highest spike in a post volume happened on a day when the #strike campaign was launched - on 28 December 2017. Hence, these three spikes of posts are associated with the three periods of engagements with followers on platforms aimed at motivating them to disseminate campaigning materials via their private networks.
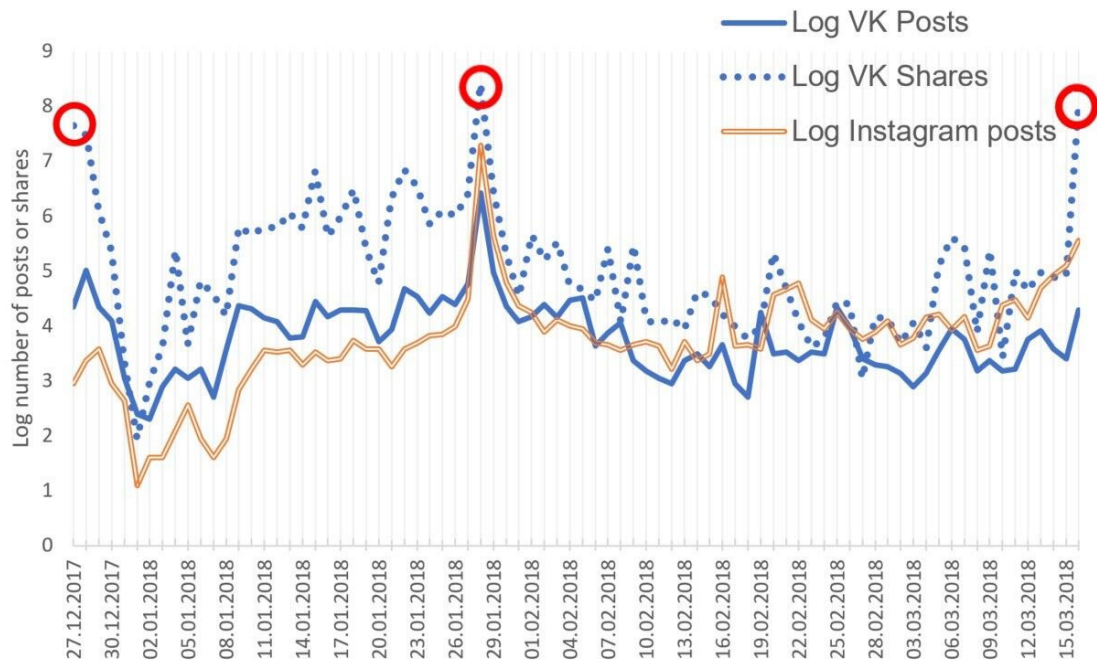
Figure 6.6. The natural logarithms of the number of the posts and shares with the hashtag #strike (#забастовка) on VK and Instagram over a period between 27.01.2018 and 16.03.2018.

The hashtag campaign was quite effective. The #strike posts were shared 27 161 times and viewed more than 10.1 million times in total. In comparison, 23 310 posts contained the hashtag #Navalny2018 (#Навальный2018), which was promoted since December 2016, a period three times longer than the #strike campaign. Therefore, there were more #strike posts than #Navalny2018 posts per day on average. It seems like the campaign has a different content dissemination strategy prior to December 2017. In particular, the activists did not rely on Telegram to ask their followers to disseminate campaign content that extensively in the spring and summer of 2017.

Table 6.1

The most prominent campaign events and the posts with the #strike hashtag between 27 December 2017 and 16 March 2018.

Date	Platform	# of the #strike posts	# of shares of the #strike posts	Event
28.12.2017	VK	151	1 754	The campaign announces the 28 January rallies; First posts with #strike
09.01.2018	VK	79	334	The campaign asks the followers to publish their photos with #strike
22.01.2018	VK	108	945	The campaign encourages followers to share information about the 28 January rallies
28.01.2018	VK	614	4 506	The 28 January rallies in 80+ cities
16.02.2018	Instagram	133	N/A	The regional offices of the campaign became especially active on Instagram a month before the presidential election
16.03.2018	VK	73	3 217	Two days before the election, the sharing campaign intensified; followers were asked to share campaign materials
Total posts over the period		4 588	27 161	
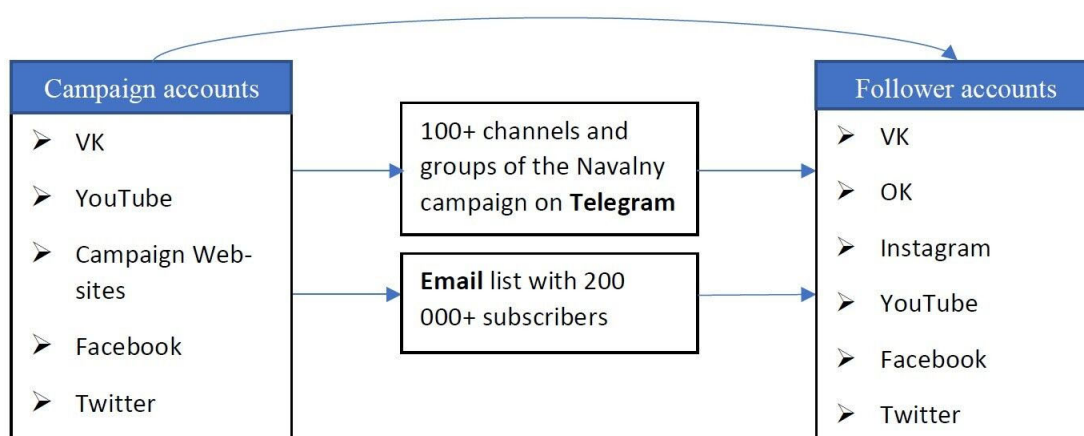
Figure 6.7. The three-step scheme of information dissemination of the #strike campaign.

The Navalny organisation used Telegram, along with other technologies like email lists, as a hub to store, to encourage and to coordinate the sharing of their content across other platforms ranging from Instagram to VK. The process of sharing included three steps (Figure 6.7). That is why I call it the *three-step scheme of information dissemination*. First, the information that was later supposed to be shared by the followers was posted on the main campaign pages on VK and other social media. Second, it was shared on Telegram groups administered by its core team in Moscow. Almost immediately, this information was circulated via the sharing feature of Telegram on hundreds of local channels and groups. Third, once released on Telegram and VK, links to campaign materials were shared further by ordinary followers.

The three-step scheme of information dissemination became a central element in the repertoire of information sharing used by the Navalny organisation. It linked campaign representations on a diversity of platforms – YouTube channels with Instagram hashtags, or VK event pages with Twitter posts. The scheme also helped to reach some people who typically receive political information via the government-controlled mainstream media, as content analysis demonstrated.

6.3.2 Digital censorship: The case of Navalny.com filtering

On 15 February 2018, the Russian internet filtering agency Roskomnadzor started blocking the main webpage of the Navalny organisation Navalny.com (BBC News, 2018). The agency cited a recent court ruling, which stated that an anti-corruption investigation published on Navalny.com *might* violate the privacy rights of the Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska (BBC News, 2018). Deripaska, who is also part of the Russian political elite (Shuster, 2018), was featured in that investigation along with the deputy prime minister of the Russian government. The agency required Navalny.com to remove the photos and videos related to the investigation (BBC News, 2018). The organisation refused. Roskomnadzor included the site on the registry of forbidden content and started blocking it.

When its filtering started, the presidential campaign of Navalny had already faded, and his organisation launched the #strike campaign to delegitimise the election. By this time, Navalny.com was a number three in the Alexa ranking of political websites and a number 545 website in Russia overall. The ranking is calculated using a

combination of average daily visitors and pageviews over the past month. The site had about 3.5 million unique users a month. During its most active period in 2017, Navalny.com was in the world Top-5000 of Alexa (Figure 6.8). In addition, the site topped the political page and the personal political page categories in Russia according to the same ranking. The Alexa ranking also shows that Navalny.com had more unique visitors during the period of the presidential campaign than many of the most popular independent mainstream media like the newspaper Novaya Gazeta and Radio Europe/Radio Liberty Russian. These numbers demonstrate that Navalny.com was one of the most prominent political communication spaces on Russian internet, and, thus, a potential target for Roskomnadzor.

Alexa Traffic Ranks
How is this site ranked relative to other sites?

Global Rank
🌐 **9,750** ▼ 587

for Jun 1
navalny.com: 4,985

Rank in Russia
545

How does navalny.com co
here to see the **Traffic (**

Figure 6.8. Alexa Traffic Rank of Navalny.com in 2017-2018. Source: Alexa.

The organisation tried to diminish the impact of filtering and overcome it. Its IT-team used several approaches: they pressured internet service providers (ISPs) with social media storms; they educated #strike campaign supporters to use VPN; they used internet-mirrors to redirect users to another working address of the website; they co-opted the staff in the regional offices of ISPs; and, finally, they implemented a sophisticated algorithm to avoid filtering.

The algorithm solution that helped to overcome the filtering was never discussed by the core activists openly. But independent IT specialists suggested that the solution was probably based on the specifics of the TCP/IP protocol (Korolev, 2018). These

specifics were not addressed in the filtering infrastructure of the Russian filtering agency. The filtering software used by the ISPs to restrict access to websites contained a breach that helped the Navalny activists to overcome the filtering of Navalny.com partially. By exploring the breaches of the filtering software and building a technical solution in advance, the campaigners ensured that their website was accessible to at least 60% of the Russian users (Figure 6.9) in the first days of filtering (Volkov, 2018b). This was a remarkable achievement for a country where many hundreds of thousands of internet addresses are filtered and could not be accessed by users without VPN.
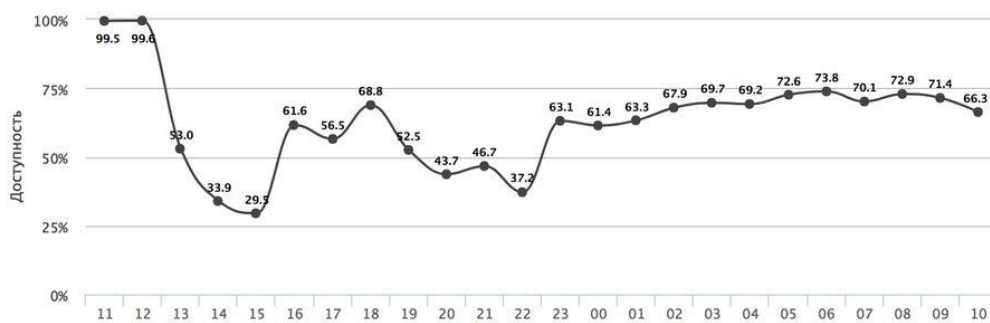
Figure 6.9. The access rate to Navalny.com (in %) after filtering started at 12:00, 15 February 2018. Source: The Navalny organisation.

Vladislav Zdolnikov was one of the key people behind the algorithm solution as well as other approaches to tackling the filtering of Navalny.com. Zdolnikov is an administrator of a popular Telegram channel in Russia "IT ugolovnyye dela SORM rossiyushka,"[13] which had about 22 000 subscribers when the organisation tried to overcome filtering. On his Telegram channel, he published a message asking local technical specialists of ISPs to contact him via a secret chat. Zdolnikov suggested that he could provide them with a solution to imitate the filtering of Navalny.com by a provider leaving it accessible to users:

---

[13] Translates as "IT criminal cases SORM Russia." "SORM" is a framework used by the FSB and other Russian agencies to monitor internet traffic. SORM was reported to be used for similar purpose in Belarus. The Telegram channel published news related to internet security, censorship and persecution for political information. Zdolnikov also used this channel to promote his paid VPN service to access Telegram.

> I know that this channel is read by a large number of specialist providers. These are sober people who support us and hate Roskomnadzor. Please do not block Navalny.com, and you will receive no transfers on the "Revizor[14]." […] If you have any insights, thoughts and ideas on how to deal with the bans, write me an email. (IT ugolovnyye dela SORM rossiyushka, 2018)

This co-option technique helped the Navalny organisation to guarantee access to its website for many users in the provinces. Zdolnikov also used his Telegram channel, as well as other social media pages of the #strike campaign, to organise a social media storm on Telegram to direct supporters' anger on the ISPs that filtered Navalny.com. He asked supporters to send the ISPs angry messages and to threaten them to leave for other companies who did not filter the whole website. As a consequence of this storm, some internet providers stopped fileting parts of Navalny.com – its subdomains – which were, as the organisation claimed, – different websites. Thus, by using advocacy techniques, the organisation partly avoided the state censorship of its website.

The filtering of Navalny.com became a prominent event for Russian internet. Roskomnadzor has blocked only a few sites of that scale so far (Volkov, 2018b). However, the filtering efforts of the Russian authorities, at least in a short-term perspective, had mainly a positive effect on the Navalny organisation. A day after the filtering started, the number of Navalny.com visitors increased significantly (Figure 6.10). At the same time, the organisation demonstrated that it is capable of overcoming filtering. Nonetheless, the Russian filtering agency also won. Three weeks after the investigation into the billionaire was published, the organisation removed the content that caused the filtering. Navalny suggested that "no one longer views that [content]" (Navalny, 2018a). The filtering of Navalny.com was stopped almost immediately (RNS, 2018).

---

[14] "Revizor" is monitoring software deployed by Roskomnadzor to check whether an ISP has blocked a website. If the software signals that the site is still not filtered, law enforcement measures are invoked. If an ISP fails to restrict access to a website that should be blocked, it faces huge fines or the revocation of its license.
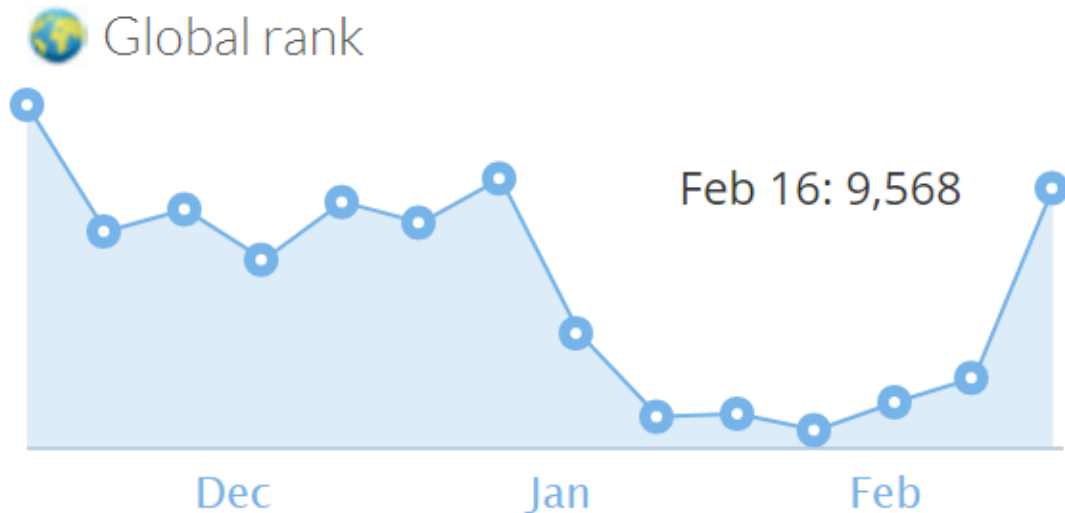
Figure 6.10. Unique visitors of Navalny.com in December 2017 – 16 February 2018.
Source: Alexa.

The preparations in combination with private and public engagement and the use of
innovative advocacy methods such as Telegram storms led to a partial success of the
anti-filtering efforts. This case demonstrates that the affordances of digital media can
be actively used by both a regime (filtering strategies via a sophisticated
technological infrastructure) and digital dissidents. It also shows that dissidents are
capable of generating solutions to new obstacles arising from the regime's use of
digital media. In contrast to the Navalny organisation, the regime' large bureaucratic
machine represented by the filtering agency could not adapt that fast to the
circumstances and the tactics of the IT activists. The filtering of Navalny.com is an
example of organisational adaptation of digital media affordances to the changing
circumstances of an authoritarian regime.

6.3.3 Politicising an apolitical platform

Similar to Telegram in Russia, OK grew as an important space for political
deliberation and anti-authoritarian mobilisation in Belarus during the Anti-tax
campaign. The OK platform as a key vehicle for sharing information was rather an
unusual choice for activists. Despite being one of the most visited social media
platforms in the country over the years, OK has hardly ever been considered as a
place for political engagement in Russian-speaking societies. Reuter and Szakonyi
(2015) found that users of this platform were less aware of facts of electoral fraud
during the 2011 Parliamentary election in Russia when compared to users of VK.

The reports of electoral fraud sparked the 2011-12 protest movement in Russia. Low levels of political participation on OK can explain why the police did not monitor this platform as actively as VK or sometimes Facebook (Meduza, 2016). Consequently, there were no known cases of persecution for political posts on OK during the Anti-tax campaign (Spring96, 2017). By contrast, the cases of persecution for political information shared on VK and Facebook during 2017 are numerous (Shmygov, 2017; Spring96, 2017, 2018). The apolitical status of OK helped the Anti-tax activists to continue their online communication without the pressure typical for other popular platforms.

The social media team of a prominent media organisation started politicising the OK audience among the first. A coordinator of this team explained this politicisation:

> We created an account on OK in January 2017. […] [We soon noticed that] any videos covering political issues, even 10 minutes long, "exploded" on OK. […] All other videos on culture, language, history were poorly received. The difference [in numbers of views between the political and apolitical topics] was 150 times. (Respondent 20, personal communication, April 24, 2017)

Soon after their discovery, the journalist shared the information about the increased political interest of the OK audience with the media team of an organisation involved in the Anti-tax campaign. This is how Respondent 15 (personal communication, May 18, 2017) reckoned that: "We took advice from the journalists […] who suggested paying more attention to OK. We realised that OK was very different from Facebook."

The communication coordinator of another organisation involved in the Anti-tax campaign (Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017) felt that "OK […] fired up totally unexpectedly for us at that moment." Just a few months before the campaign, his organisation circulated most of its information through Facebook. However, the specifics of its audience, as well as the technological affordances of OK, activists to pay more attention to it. Other media practitioners (Respondent 20, personal communication, April 24, 2017; Respondent 9, personal communication, March 13, 2017) also emphasised the importance of OK for sharing information about the campaign.

Alongside the journalists, the Anti-tax activists realised that the response of their audience to the same content was higher on OK (Respondent 21, personal communication, September 1, 2017). For example, Anatol Liabedzka, the chairman of the UCP, shared his post about the first regional rally of the campaign on two platforms, Facebook and OK. The post contained the same content announcing the time of the rally (Figure 5.6). On OK, the rally announcement received almost 40 times more shares than on Facebook.

The REP trade union was the only Anti-tax group in the sample that had representation on all the three main social media platforms. This unique quality allows comparing the relative response of its pages' audience to the Anti-tax agenda. During the campaigning period, the REP posts received a relatively higher volume of feedback on OK in the forms of Likes/Classes and shares (Figure 6.11). This Table displays the basic metrics of the posts of the REP pages that was received by automatically accessing the APIs of the three platforms. The higher level of the engagement with OK content compared to other pages is especially noticeable during the later stages of the campaign. It seems like the OK audience became radicalised as the level of repression increased. The descriptive statistics confirm the perception of the campaign activists who believed that the OK audience was more responsive.
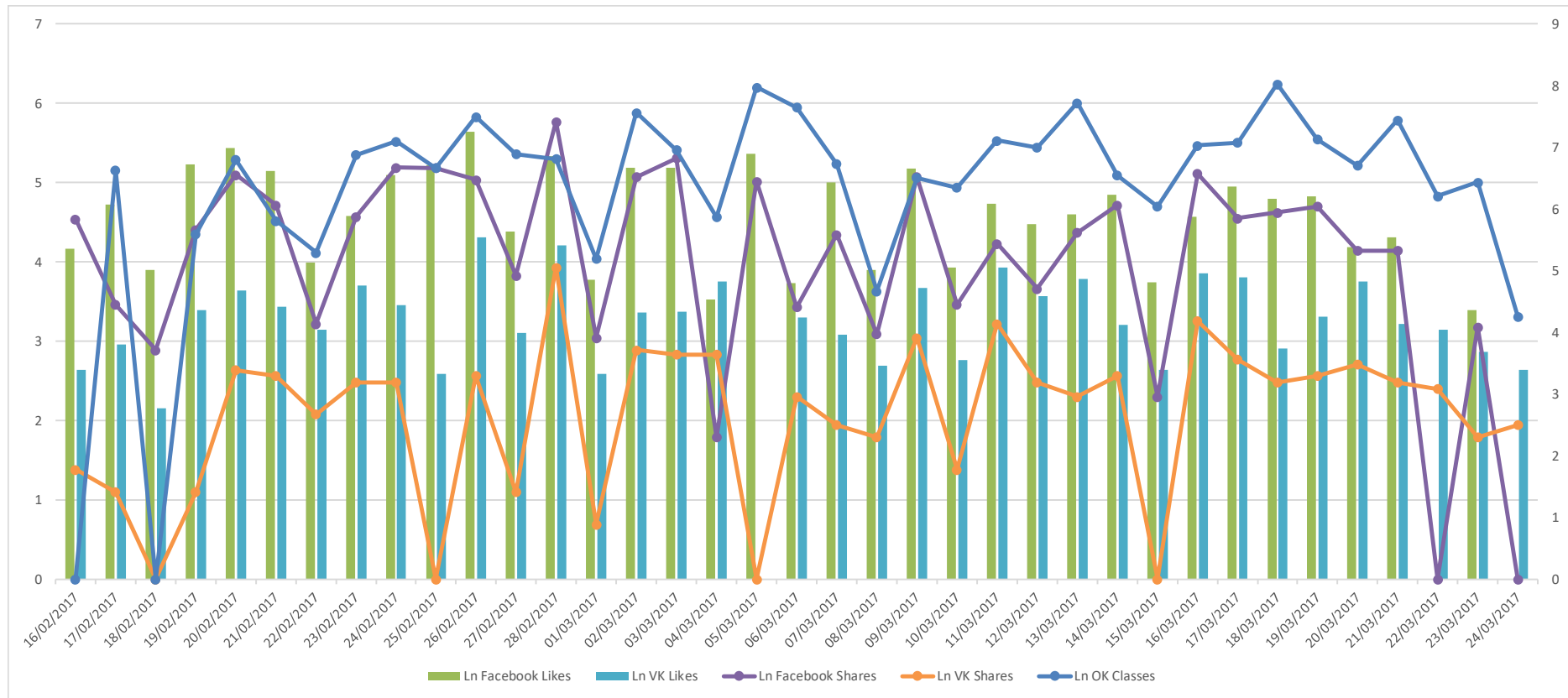
Figure 6.11. The engagement of the REP pages audience across the three platforms during the protest stage of the Anti-tax campaign.

As discussed in Chapter 1, OK has all the typical features of social networking platforms (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015). However, there are a few that are unique to the platform. One of them is the "Class" button that plays a similar role to the Like button on Facebook or VK. Respondent 21 (personal communication, September 1, 2017) explains this sharing mechanism:

> The majority of people who use OK are not very competent in the technical capabilities of their devices […]. If a person presses the "class" button [on OK], this also becomes "share" simultaneously. Information about the fact that he pressed the "class" appears on his page [so friends of the user can see it]. […] 200 likes on Facebook is not necessarily a huge coverage. [...] However, on OK, this is a very large coverage. This [coverage includes] the entire audience of [these] 200 people [who pressed 200 likes].

Respondent 15 (personal communication, May 18, 2017) shared their vision of the Class mechanism: "Every "like" [on OK] is like a share. It is visible to everyone. […] And any like on OK leads to momentous dissemination."

The Class content-sharing mechanism was discovered by the administrators of different segments of the Anti-tax campaign while they were experimenting with the process of information distribution. Some of them, like the UCP, tried this mechanism after learning about the Class button and the OK audience characteristics from the journalists a prominent media. Others, like the REP coordinators, learned about the mechanism from the leader of one of the trade union branches who started experimenting with OK earlier. The Class sharing mechanism allowed the activists to disseminate their alternative messages across the OK platform relatively quickly by reaching the people who were not subscribed to their pages. Thus, the mechanism was instrumental in partly overcoming state censorship of the Belarusian mainstream media and the self-censorship of ordinary users.

At the same time, several segments of the campaign kept relying on other platforms such as VK or Facebook to cover different audiences. The segmented structure of the campaign played a positive role in allowing anti-authoritarian activists to experiment with the configuration of their digital infrastructure. The ties between segments helped to exchange the results of those experiments.

6.4 Communication infrastructures of anti-authoritarian movements

The mainstream media did not broadcast the messages of the Navalny or the Anti-tax campaigns. These messages also faced citizens' self-censorship. In response, both

organisations turned to digital media. They attempted to build a digital communication infrastructure to disseminate their alternative messages. Activists used this infrastructure to organise, coordinate, unite followers and disseminate their messages. This conceptualisation of communication infrastructure is based on the "media ecologies of protest" approach used by Rinke & Röder (2011) to analyse the Arab Spring events. I found that digitally-enabled anti-authoritarian movements operate within five public online domains:

1. Accounts, pages and groups on social media platforms;
2. Accounts, pages and groups on messaging platforms;
3. Websites;
4. Email lists;
5. Frameworks for data gathering and analysis.

The study of these domains demonstrated that social media platforms were a key element of the communication infrastructures of the studied anti-authoritarian activists. They used predominantly local platforms to build their information circulation ecology, for example the three-step scheme of content sharing. However, the use of the same platforms, such as VK or OK, by the two protest communities resulted in different styles of online collective action. The study also reaffirmed that, if activists overly rely on digital platforms, they face limitations and risks.

The two organisations had three main goals when using digital platforms: to cover their activities, to reach out to the audience and to mobilise this audience. It seems that every major platform used by the organisation contributed to these goals. At the same time, the differences between the use of different platforms are apparent too. For instance, both VK and Telegram were used to coordinate followers, but Telegram was perceived as a more secure space to do so. Table 6.2 summarises other functions of the platforms in the communication infrastructures of the Navalny and Anti-tax organisations.

Table 6.2

The role of digital platforms in the infrastructures of the Navalny and Anti-tax organisations

Platform	The Navalny	The Anti-tax
VK	- Local network building - The primary platform for public communication - Public space to coordinate followers	- Local network building - Access the largest audience across the used platforms
OK	- Information distribution in some provinces of the country	- Access to a primarily apolitical audience - Use of the Class sharing mechanism to reach out to a wider audience ("followers' friends") - Use other affordances to emphasise the emotional reaction of the audience
Telegram	- Secure space to coordinate followers during collective action	N/A
YouTube	- To stream from collective action - To host an "underground television" network	- To stream from collective action

6.5 How the affordances of digital media shape organising and information distribution in authoritarian settings

6.5.1 Key affordances for digital information distribution

Local platforms like VK, OK and Telegram dominated the digital infrastructures of the two organisations. In addition to email lists and frameworks for data gathering and analysis, the Navalny organisation created and inhabited hundreds of social media spaces to connect pro-democracy citizens. Its infrastructure ranged from the alternative television on YouTube to the hundreds of local pages on VK and Telegram. The Anti-tax campaign adopted VK and OK, the two most popular platforms that were, however, at least partly controlled by the state. Along with less popular global platforms such as Facebook, the local platforms were used to disseminate activist messages.

The organisations used local social media such as Telegram and VK as a vehicle for information distribution. For instance, the Navalny organisation urged its followers via a newsletter and public posts to share content materials on personal social media pages using campaign hashtags and to use tools to modify their social media avatars so as to display campaign symbols. Analysis of the sharing practices of the organisation demonstrates that Telegram could be considered as a central node of its communication infrastructure. Core activists used it to store links to campaign materials to be shared further by campaign followers. This sharing process included three steps: materials were posted on the main campaign pages on VK and other social media by the core activists; then, segment leaders shared the links to the materials on Telegram groups and channels; finally, ordinary followers used links from Telegram to post them on their pages (Figure 6.7). I defined this process as the three-step scheme of content sharing. The scheme became a central element in the repertoire of information sharing used by the Navalny organisation.

An unexpected feature of the Anti-tax campaign was that it relied on OK. It was largely apolitical, but also one of the most visited social media in the country (Table 1.1). The segment leaders in the Anti-tax campaign politicised OK by using the specific affordances of the platform, such as its "Class" content-sharing mechanism. Hence, the study demonstrated that local platforms (VK, OK and Telegram) came to be used more extensively than global platforms (such as Facebook and WhatsApp) and were the key elements in the communication infrastructures of the two organisations.

To a significant extent, censorship results from self-censorship by ordinary people when they restrict their political engagement online. Users' self-censorship is often reflected in their nano-level actions (Lonkila, 2017) such as decisions concerning pressing the Like button or sharing content on their Timeline. Self-censorship is also performed at the level of micro-interactions (Milan, 2015b). A key debate is whether the current state of digital media, where censorship and self-censorship flourish, reflects the old status quo between critical citizens and a government (Filer & Fredheim, 2016) or whether there is a new dynamic compared to the periods when radio or television media dominated. If the latter is true, it would mean that political activists increase the chances of success (Tucker et al., 2017) when they reduce the impact of self-censorship and employ creative approaches to the use of the affordances of digital media (Tufekci, 2017).

I argue that the success of information dissemination by the two organisations (though, undoubtedly, there were failures in this process too) can be explained by their ability to reduce the impact of self-censorship by digital platform users. Both the Navalny organisation and the Anti-tax campaign tried to make sure that the followers would share their content in order to increase the chances of followers' friends being exposed to alternative political information. These sharing acts comprise the micro-interactions where self-censorship persists on digital platforms. However, these micro-acts of sharing and liking of digital content should be deemed political (Halupka, 2014), especially if these actions are performed in relation to the content shared by pro-democracy activists in an authoritarian country (Lonkila, 2017). The cases of the Navalny and Anti-tax campaigns show that a movement can be brought to a tipping point by micro-acts of sharing and liking on platforms (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 15) and by using multiple platforms to widen the boundaries of the political arena (Halupka, 2016). This demonstrates how digital media have broadened the definition of political action performed by the followers of anti-authoritarian movements.

6.5.2 Affordances of digital media and forms of repressive politics

Previous research has shown that the affordances of digital media can have both positive and negative consequences for digital activism. As I discuss in the following chapter, the effects of negative consequences were still manageable. The effects of positive consequences mostly reaffirm previous research and are associated with the main affordances of the internet (Earl & Kimport, 2011). In particular, activists use the internet to facilitate and coordinate their organisations at a lower cost, doing so more quickly and at a larger scale. For example, the Navalny organisation managed to scale up its Anti-corruption protest network across Russia in just a few days following the publication of the video materials on YouTube that revealed the undeclared property of the country's prime minister. Figure 4.3 demonstrates how an organisation's support grew thanks to smaller towns primarily.

In Belarus, information about the Anti-tax campaign's first regional rally in Homel quickly spread across the country's most popular social media platforms, VK and OK. The Homel rally became the most attended (Table 4.3) local collective action in the campaign. Thus, I found that both the Belarusian and Russian pro-democracy movements used social media platforms such as Telegram, VK, OK and Facebook to lower their costs, speed up organising and communication processes and increase the scale of their operations.

I also demonstrated how the many-to-many communication capacity of digital media allowed activists to perform a large part of the organisational work online. For instance, public leaders like Liabedzka in Belarus used platforms to speed up the organising of unauthorised rallies in provincial cities, attracting significant attention from social media users when announcing the rallies with just a day's notice (Figure 5.6). The core activists of the Navalny organisation could not be physically present in many locations across such a vast country as Russia, but digital media afforded their representation in many localities beyond their physical reach. However, they were still able to build their protest networks as it had been done by some earlier "square movements" such as the Euromaidan (Lokot, 2016) or 15M (Postill, 2018) that were physically settled at the same locations for much longer terms. Thus, both organisations studied benefited from the main affordances of the internet.

The study found that one of the key affordances explored by both groups of activists was the visibility management mechanisms of digital platforms. These mechanisms allowed activists to anonymise some of their social media profiles or adopt pseudonyms and, consequently, conceal their real identities. Previous research has found that the affordances of digital media enhance the visibility of a social movements' cause (Duguay, 2016; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Poell & van Dijck, 2016; Tufekci, 2017). In addition, the same visibility mechanisms can enhance hierarchies within platform-centred social movements against their expectations (Gerbaudo, 2016) since "developments in communication always bring new kinds of visibility to new forms of public" (Meikle, 2014, p. 375). The visibility affordances of platforms also help the police and other security agencies to learn the real identities of anti-authoritarian activists (Tufekci, 2017). Visibility affordances illustrate a contradiction between the intentions of activists, affordances and the context. The same affordances can both have democratic potential and become a tool in the hands of authoritarian elites.

The digital activists of the Navalny presidential campaign, the longest campaign studied in the dissertation, also used the listening affordances of the web (Karpf, 2016) to gather feedback and data from the local branches that they called regional offices. The core activists of the campaign used this data to monitor, control and improve the performance of its regional network. By using the listening affordances, the core activists learned that the publication of new anticorruption investigations on YouTube was associated with the most extensive growth in supporter numbers. The capacity of

digital media to regulate users' visibility and listen to followers allowed activists to adapt to changing circumstances.

The cases of the Anti-tax and the Navalny organisations showed that the affordances of digital media could be actively used by both authoritarian regimes and digital dissidents. They also showed that digital dissidents are capable of generating solutions to new obstacles that arise from the regime's use of affordances. For example, the Russian bureaucratic machine, represented by the filtering agency Roskomnadzor, could not adapt so quickly to the circumstances and tactics of the Navalny organisation's IT activists. This allowed the Navalny presidential campaign to maintain access to its main website for a significant proportion of users despite attempts by the filtering agency to block it. Similarly, the efforts of the state television propaganda machine (Kara-Murza, 2017) were insufficient to diminish the influence of activists on video platforms. In Belarus, the state also tried to use platform affordances to learn about the potential leaders of the Anti-tax movement by monitoring contentious VK content. The activists responded by adopting pseudonyms and moving to OK; a platform that was scarcely monitored by the police. Hence, the affordances of digital media are not monopolised by authoritarian states.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This chapter summarises the findings of the dissertation and sets out the contribution to knowledge. It also recognises the limitations of the study and outlines some directions for further research.

7.1 The contribution to knowledge

In winter 2017, the campaign to abolish the "tax on social parasites" in Belarus, a country often described as "Europe's last dictatorship," sparked a wave of protests unlike any seen since its independence. Collective action of the supporters of this Anti-tax campaign quickly spread around the country's digital realm and reached the squares and streets by February 2017. It seemed as if no one could explain what was happening: how had the activists managed to organise their protest campaign despite continuous political repression? Almost simultaneously, the team of anti-corruption activists headed by Alexei Navalny, probably the most prominent dissidents in Russia, tried to launch their most ambitious project yet: to build a long-lasting protest movement to bring about pro-democracy changes in Russia. Just like in Belarus, the Russian movement was labelled as spontaneous and unexpected.

These protest movements were born in two similar authoritarian countries but had different outcomes. The Anti-tax campaign led to the abolition of the contentious tax, but it sparked no pro-democracy change and faded quickly with more than a thousand activists detained. Navalny's movement failed in all of its main short-term goals: to oust the prime-minister, to register Navalny as a candidate in the presidential elections and to delegitimise those elections. However, the movement remained in the Russian political arena and continued challenging the authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin.

The conditions for the Navalny and Anti-tax movements are remarkably similar. The organisations emerged in similar political and media contexts in the same period of 2017 and resulted in four large-scale campaigns (the Anti-corruption campaign, the presidential campaign and the Voters' #strike campaign in Russia, or the Anti-tax campaign in Belarus). Both organisations aimed not only at political change but also at comparable end-goals of democratisation. They relied heavily on digital platforms in their communication and organising. These campaigns raised contentious issues that resonated across the two countries. The cases left us with a puzzle: what makes a pro-democracy group organisationally sustainable and able to challenge the authoritarian elite by using digital media?

To solve the puzzle of the anti-authoritarian challenge, I studied the two movements' behind-the-scenes practices of organising and information operation on digital media. I designed the study drawing on the experiences of researchers of authoritarian contexts who argue for an in-depth qualitative analysis of movement practices (e.g. Reny, 2016). An abundance of literature addresses questions of organising, leadership and message distribution in the increasingly mediatised and digitised political environment (Bennett et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2017; Poell et al., 2016; Postill, 2018; Tufekci, 2017). However, a relatively small portion of this literature discusses what happens backstage within a political organisation (Postill, 2018; Treré, 2015).

The study contributes to a debate regarding the nature of political organisation in the digital age (Karpf, 2019), specifically the importance of the backstage organisational layer of digital politics (Gerbaudo, 2017a; Karpf, 2016; Y. M. Kim et al., 2018; Treré, 2015). This debate asks how we should conceptualise the groups of people behind protests and other contentious political processes that use digital media to organise. Can we describe some of these groups as "organising without organisations" or should we rather approach them as formal organisations? If the latter is a more appropriate approach, then how can the formal political organisation adapt to the platformisation of political life? These debates paid relatively little attention to political organising in authoritarian contexts.

Unlike approaches that focus on the public face of protest organisations, such as the study of retrospective digital data, an analysis of backstage practices with qualitative methods unpacks organisational and leadership forms that were not intended to be public. The study analyses these forms by conducting extensive interviews with local leaders of the organisations. These local leaders gave the author unprecedented access in order to observe their practices and interactions. The study also examines social media content created by them. This approach allowed the uncovering of previously unidentified actors who contributed to the coordination of the movements during critical periods of collective action and the structures that emerged as a consequence of these coordinating efforts. To the best of my knowledge, this research is the first systematic empirical analysis of the organisational structures and leadership in the Anti-tax and the Navalny campaigns in 2017-18.

The study makes three sets of contribution to literature on organisational adaptations and information distribution in digitally-enabled social movements and political organisations. First, the study contributes to the discussion regarding the nature of

political organising in the digital age. In particular, it refines the SPIN model for authoritarian environments and problematises the theory of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) for repressive environments. Second, the study contributes to the literature regarding the role of leaders in digitally-enabled movements. It updates the tactical freeze theory (Tufekci, 2017) and shows how to the presence of the multiplicity of leadership can help a digitally-enabled movement to challenge powerful elites. These findings reaffirm the theories that state the importance of formal organisation for social movements (Bimber et al., 2012; Earl, 2015).

Third, the study contributes to research on the affordances of digital media. It showed that one of the key affordances explored by both groups of activists was the visibility management mechanisms of digital platforms, which the literature discusses less extensively than the main affordances of the internet (Earl & Kimport, 2011). The study also contributes to the discussion of the strategies that authoritarian regimes use to respond to and combat online opposition (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Morozov, 2011b; Roberts, 2014; Sanovich et al., 2018) by updating the classification systems for forms of repressive digital politics. I argue that this classification should emphasise the agency of an ordinary citizen rather than state actors. These findings challenge the idea that authoritarian regimes have neared full co-optation of the internet (Filer & Fredheim, 2016; Gunitsky, 2015). Instead, it should be considered as a battlefield for political influence.

7.1.1 Organisation literature

To begin my analysis of the organisational layers of the two initial protest episodes of the Anti-tax and the Anti-corruption campaigns, I applied Gerlach's (2001) model of the SPIN (segmentary, polycentric and integrated network) organisation. According to the model, the essential requirement for segmentation of organisational structures is the presence of independent, localised groups or cells which can combine to form larger configurations or integrated networks (Gerlach, 2001; Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 41). Such cells grow and proliferate unrelated to any central decision-making but do have their local leadership. This constant network rearrangement adds a dynamic to the organisation "which can be confusing to outside observers" such as the state elites (Gerlach & Hine, 1970, p. 42). In line with the SPIN model, I defined the organisational configuration of the two campaigns as segmentary.

However, the organisational layers in the two cases did not satisfy the SPIN model completely. Instead, I propose to refine the SPIN model for repressive environments

and define the two organisations as anti-authoritarian movements. The social movement literature (Chrona & Bee, 2017; Rinke & Röder, 2011; Tufekci, 2017) uses the concept of anti-authoritarian movement to discuss pro-democracy protest organisations that follow an "anti-authoritarian ethos" (Postill, 2018; Tufekci, 2017). However, the definitions proposed in the literature are often unclear, while the discussion of the concept is sporadic. I suggest the following definition of such movements: anti-authoritarian movements are sustained campaigns of claim-making by citizens that distrust authoritarian institutions and organise themselves in order to challenge authoritarian power.

After analysing backstage practices in two anti-authoritarian movements, I have found that these movements resembled an ad hoc, segmented style of organising. I also demonstrated that segmentation, if combined with the presence of more centralised structures, potentially allows entering negotiations with the authorities. However, only one movement, the Navalny organisation, dynamically rearranged its organisational structures based on current challenges. A network of VK pages linked to the Anti-corruption campaign contained close to a hundred protest pages. Each page represented a local segment of the campaign in one of the Russian provinces. The segments were integrated into a network through the mechanisms of content sharing. The organisational dynamism of the Navalny structures is one of the critical differences between the two studied cases. I suggest that an organisational dynamism that resembles the style of organising in SPIN movements is one of the factors that allow for the development of a more sustainable anti-authoritarian movement.

In the minds of many journalists, commentators and civil society experts both the Anti-tax and Anti-corruption protests started as spontaneous eruptions from the grassroots with no organisation and few (if any) leaders. Activists from these campaigns reinforced these views when they supported or at least did not reject the narratives of a spontaneous or leaderless movement. The Navalny organisation, for example, supported the narrative describing it as a movement of "ordinary citizens" before some of its protests. The narrative of a spontaneous movement was widespread and discussed in relation to both the Anti-corruption and the Anti-tax campaigns.

The literature on organisational narratives suggests that narratives about "ordinary citizens" and "spontaneous" organising are common in social movements under pressure (Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Poell et al., 2016). For example, the student sit-ins in the USA in the 1960s were often described as spontaneous or leaderless movements

(Flesher Fominaya, 2015). Similar narratives were used to describe the Arab Spring movements and 15-M in Spain (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). However, research on those movements eventually demonstrated that they have been far from spontaneous (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) and have had identifiable though often covert leaders, such as Wael Ghonim during the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt (Poell et al., 2016) or the groups of techno-political nerds during 15-M in Spain (Postill, 2018).

My research demonstrated that, similar to 15-M and the Arab Spring and contrary to the public perception, both the Anti-tax and the Anti-corruption campaigns had clear organisational structures. These structures organised the series of protests in February and March 2017 in Belarus and on 26 March 2017 in Russia, which shows that these were anything but spontaneous eruptions. Thus, the narratives of a spontaneous and leaderless protest were a "rhetorical construction" (Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Poell et al., 2016) and "fictive elements" (Postill, 2018, p. 43) rather than a reality.

In the media and public discussion regarding a social movement, these fictive elements can be a consequence of a "gulf in understanding" (Postill, 2018, p. 123) about collective action, a stereotypical perception of structures without recognisable leadership by external observers (Gerlach & Hine, 1970). Most members of the press and the general public often see a protest as an inexplicable and spontaneous event that peaks, declines and dies out (Gerlach & Hine, 1970). Flesher Fominaya (2015) argues that "spontaneity" is a common problematic concept that denies agency to social movement networks and actors. At the same time, this concept can also be "strategically deployed by social movement actors and help present grievances and claims as the popular will of the people" (Flesher Fominaya, 2015, p. 143). Similarly, the "ordinary citizens" narrative provides "an effective strategy of integration of new participants [...] and reaching out to the local community" (Flesher Fominaya, 2015, p. 144). Moreover, having no identifiable organisational structures helps digital dissidents to avoid the pressure of the authorities (Gerlach & Hine, 1970) during the organisation of a protest. Thus, activists sometimes try to represent their organisation as more dispersed and spontaneous than it really is or, at least, do not correct these misperceived narratives.

I argue that the misperceptions in the organisational narratives could be strategically deployed by activists from the Anti-tax and Navalny campaigns. The activists did not suggest that they meticulously planned and constructed those narratives, but they have not entirely rejected them until the organisations seized their respective campaigns.

Therefore, digitally-enabled anti-authoritarian movements can benefit from the consequences of a gulf in understanding of organisational structures.

Contrary to public perception and media reports, the two anti-authoritarian movements were not cases of "organising without organisations" as the connective action theory (Bennett et al., 2014) might have suggested. Neither were they horizontal people's movements with a single charismatic leader, which contradicts the line taken by many authors that discuss similar social movement phenomena (Gerbaudo, 2012). The concept of connective action emphasises individualised and personalised styles of digital politics and prompts scholars to discuss how digitally-enabled civic and political communities use platforms to self-organise and express their concerns directly. However, as Kavada (2018) points out, connective action theory focuses on crowds rather than on social movement organisations. Even though the Anti-corruption and the Anti-tax protests, as well as many other contemporary protest events, looked like crowds, I argue that both campaigns, as well as the subsequent campaigns of Navalny, had clear organisational layers and were directed by leaders. They might have looked like crowds due to a gulf in understanding of organisational structures of the two movements.

At the same time, individuals who are involved in the kind of "shadow" organising revealed in this research can benefit were the public to view them as the case of "organising without organisations" (Karpf, 2019). Karpf (2019) notes that such a view renders "invisible those networks and institutions that leave no easily-accessible digital traces." This view also discourages a more thorough investigation into the behind-the-scenes practices of social movements and political parties because, presumably, the "backstage" of connective action is only revealed through peer-production and similar network mechanisms (Bennett et al., 2014). In other words, once we assume that connective action explains an episode of protest or another process of digital politics, we become myopic about formal organising and miss the shadow structures that might lie hidden from the public eye.

If we exclude shadow digitally-enabled structures from our analysis, we risk disregarding important elements of organisational puzzle. Discussing the operations of such structures in the US, Kim et al. (2018, p. 533) argue that "the behind-the-scenes information operation on digital media is above and beyond any other operation we have ever seen in the past in terms of its scale, speed, and, most importantly, its capacity to amplify information." For example, the electoral victory of Donald Trump

in 2016 that surprised many observers becomes more comprehensible when one analyses the operations on digital media that supported the Trump campaign. In particular, we know now that anonymous political campaigners or "shadow parties" outside of the US political party system contributed to the promotion of Trump's candidacy through micro-targeting on social media (Y. M. Kim et al., 2018). These shadow parties are an example of political actors that can benefit from ideas such as connective action because these ideas allow them to keep shifting the balance between political elites and traditional parties while remaining unidentified. The "shadowing" of political organising might appear to be a long-term trend in political life in both democracies and authoritarian states afforded by the process of platformisation.

This brief overview of some theories of the platformisation of politics suggests that key features of organising in digitally-enabled anti-authoritarian movements – the emergence of dynamic, ad hoc structures that can remain invisible and perceived by the public as inexistent – cut across many concepts of digitally-enabled political organisation. By conceptualising groups of activists with anti-authoritarian ethos who rely on digital platforms for formal organisation-building as a digitally-enabled anti-authoritarian movement, we widen the theories of political organisation and the platformisation of politics beyond the narrow Anglophone and Western European contexts. We also problematised the influential collective action theory for repressive environments.

7.1.2 Leadership literature

The findings suggest that reliance on digital media enables anti-authoritarian movements to have both identifiable public leaders and hidden administrators/organisers. These leadership types are not mutually exclusive and can co-exist in the same organisational cell. At the same time, while the platform-based anonymity allows some evasion of persecution, public leadership remains under constant threat of arrests or fines.

This management of visibility of movement leadership allowed the two organisations to avoid a tactical freeze (Tufekci, 2017) – a state whereby a movement is unable to develop or agree on new paths to take. A tactical freeze is a common feature of anti-authoritarian movements that declare the intention to build leaderless structures (Tufekci, 2017). Despite the intention, movement leadership still emerges in the form of, for instance, segment leaders. However, this leadership is often unable to enter into negotiations with the authorities because anti-authoritarian movements often fail to

agree on a common strategy quickly enough. Tufekci (2017) showed that a tactical freeze reduces movements' ability to pose a challenge to powerful elites. My analysis shows that the impact of a tactical freeze can be tackled by the presence of recognised public core and federal leaders, such as those active in the Navalny organisation. Therefore, my study demonstrates that the multiplicity of leadership in a digitally-enabled anti-authoritarian movement contributes to its ability to challenge powerful elites.

The presence of local office coordinators, core leaders, as well as the federal leader, supports arguments about the importance of formal organisation for social movements (Bimber et al., 2012; Earl, 2015). Specifically, it confirms that the preparation for, and the coordination of, collective action critically requires organisation. However, this formal organisation should not necessarily remain bureaucratised, as it is often assumed (Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Karpf, 2016). Instead of bureaucratic structures, social movements can rely on a combination of several organisational levels, some of which could be decentralised while others can remain more hierarchical and centralised. The core leaders of a movement should help to reinforce ties between these elements. During the Anti-tax campaign, its core leaders travelled across the country to reinforce the ties between organisational segments. During the Anti-corruption and the presidential campaigns in Russia, Alexei Navalny, a charismatic leader who gave the organisation his name, also travelled extensively and met local segment leaders and office coordinators. The formal organisation is important for anti-authoritarian movements because leadership links a movement together.

The presence of a public eponymous leader is one of the major differences between the Navalny organisation and the Anti-tax campaign. I defined Alexei Navalny as an eponymous leader because he alone gave the movement his name. Navalny was often viewed as a charismatic personality whose presence altered the dynamics of the movement. However, as the case of the Anti-tax reminds, the presence of a charismatic personality is not a necessary precondition for an activist organisation's success. Instead, I argue, the charisma of Navalny should be viewed as a communicable asset for his organisation. Literature (Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Snow, 1987) describes the type of charisma that exists on an interpersonal, communicable level within an organisation as communicable charisma rather than as a static attribute of one person. Gerlach & Hine (1970) demonstrated that communicable charisma could diffuse through the segments of an organisation with many leaders.

Communicable charisma empowers activists such as independent segment leaders to attract and coordinate followers and helps them to glue their organisation together.

I consider these leadership visibility arrangements as "a method of survival" (Poell et al., 2016) of digital activists. One of the key physical challenges faced by activists in repressive environments is persecution of their leaders. Both Belarusian and Russian regimes fear collective action (Cairns, 2017) and use a preemptive policy of persecution (Silitski, 2005) to isolate prominent opposition political leaders. The findings demonstrate that the governments indeed used a preemptive policy in relation to the movements. Many pseudonymous and anonymous leaders from each organisation managed to avoid a preemptive policy. However, security agencies identified and persecuted many of them later. For instance, the administrator of one of the most prominent Anti-tax communities PASD was detained and interrogated by the police, which led to his real identity being revealed. In addition, it emerged that some of the core activists in the organisations may have cooperated with the government secretly. Yuliya Yukhnovets of the REP trade union, a prominent member of the Anti-tax coalition, acknowledged that she was an agent of the Belarusian KGB. Vitali Serukanov, the deputy coordinator of the Moscow office of Navalny's presidential campaign, was also accused of being an agent after he unexpectedly left the organisation during a critical moment. The cases of Serukanov and Yukhnovets demonstrate the limits of civic organisations' abilities to avoid surveillance by using digital affordances and remind us that visibility can also be imposed on people by external actors (Meikle, 2016).

7.1.3 Affordances literature

Apart from organising and leadership, the study also focused on how the affordances of digital media shape processes of political organising and information distribution in an authoritarian political context. There are two types of the affordances of platforms that shape the processes of political organising and information distribution in digitally-enabled anti-authoritarian movements. The first type includes capacities known as the main affordances of the internet, such as lowered transaction costs and many-to-many communication capacity of digital media. The second type of affordances is the visibility mechanisms and listening capacity of digital media, which was one of the key affordances explored by both groups. These affordances are often less mentioned in the literature, or its capacities became apparent only relatively recently.

The results reveal the clear patterns of information distribution with the use of messaging software and local platforms that had barely been used by the politicised public for similar purposes previously. Digital activists used local platforms like OK to reach out to a wider audience beyond their traditional base and messaging software Telegram to coordinate collective action in an environment of heavy state surveillance.

With the proliferation of the internet, authoritarian regimes learned how to use the affordances of digital media to their own advantage (Gunitsky, 2015; C. Walker & Orttung, 2014). In particular, regimes learned how to respond to the growing influence of pro-democracy digital activism. The studies that discuss how the repressive governments have responded to this type of activism (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; K. E. Pearce, 2015; Sanovich et al., 2018; Stein, 2016a; Stockmann, 2013; Tucker et al., 2017; Tufekci, 2017) demonstrate that digital political control is often implemented through one of several elements of repressive digital politics: censorship, persuasion and surveillance, as well as online engagement of the state (for example, by using bots).

The foregoing study contributes to this discussion of the strategies that authoritarian regimes use to respond to and combat online opposition (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Morozov, 2011b; Roberts, 2014; Sanovich et al., 2018) and clarifies the existing classification systems for forms of repressive digital politics. The classification adopted in this study distinguishes three key forms of repression at the disposal of regimes seeking to address online opposition – surveillance, censorship and offline action such as persecution. This classification does not, however, aim to offer a full account of forms of repressive politics. It rather evaluates the main challenges faced by digital dissidents in a repressive environment. I define digital dissidents' challenges as the forms of repressive digital politics.

In contrast to other approaches to the classification of "authoritarian response" (e.g. Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Walker & Orttung, 2014), the approach that this study propagates focuses on active citizens rather than the state. The state-centric approach relies on policy analysis and dominates studies of authoritarian countries (Glasius, 2018). The disadvantage of this approach is that it considers the actors, such as activists or journalists, merely as the functions or the objects of government media policy. By contrast, a classification based on the three main challenges faced by digital dissidents emphasises the agency of an ordinary citizen rather than a policymaker or a member of the political elite. This emphasis on agency makes the classification

described a citizen-centric framework (Dal et al., 2019) that advances the understanding of political activism in authoritarian settings from a citizen's perspective.

The findings reveal that the first form of repressive politics practised by a government, the persecution of activists, is legitimised by state policies such as laws on public assemblies. The police and other security agencies implement this form of authoritarian response. Two other forms of response, surveillance and censorship on digital media, are mostly implemented by government agencies such as Roskomnadzor in Russia and the Ministry of Information in Belarus.

The affordances of digital media that allow a government to surveil its political opponents and to censor their content are platform design, settings, algorithms and visibility mechanisms (Lonkila, 2017; Milan, 2013; Tufekci, 2014; van Dijck, 2013a). In particular, censorship and surveillance practices are enabled by platform algorithms and ISPs that are used to monitor and filter web-traffic. Market logic (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, 2013b) promotes censorship and surveillance on platforms as well (Stockmann, 2013). This shows that censorship and surveillance are closely linked, as authoritarian states often use similar infrastructures to implement both types of authoritarian response (Stockmann, 2013).

In addition, the findings contribute to the literature on social and political change in authoritarian countries. They challenge the idea that authoritarian regimes have neared full co-optation of the internet (Filer & Fredheim, 2016; Gunitsky, 2015; K. E. Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). Instead, the study shows that the internet remains a battlefield for political influence between pro-democracy activists and regimes. Successful activists continue adapting their organisational forms and information distribution mechanisms in response to the repressive environment. These adaptations help them to challenge the authoritarian elites by relying on the democratic potential of digital media.

To summarise, the study contributes to the debate by analysing the use of digital media by politically active citizens who live in authoritarian states. This discussion focuses on the pioneering ideas that help pro-democracy activists to use digital media as a means of overcoming the obstacles met in a non-democratic political system. My study reviewed the consequences of adaptation by ad hoc and segmented campaign strategies for the three forms of repressive digital politics – surveillance, persecution and censorship. Successful organisations are able to adapt to the challenges of surveillance, persecution and censorship by dispersing their organisational structures,

protecting their leaders and using local and alternative platforms to disseminate their alternative messages.

7.2 Limitations

An analysis of the backstage practices of large-scale anti-authoritarian movements poses significant methodological challenges. The case studies were organisations of different scales. The Navalny organisation had three campaigns in 2017-18, while the Anti-tax campaign was a single campaign that lasted for no more than four months. Even the three-year time frame did not allow a single researcher to collect enough qualitative data to support a full comparison of the cases.

Consequently, the study was limited in scope and focused on three aspects: organising, leadership and information dissemination mostly during critical periods of movements' activities. Hence, many aspects of the movements remained unstudied. These included identity-building within the movements, the perception of their audience, the effects of messages and a more systematic understanding of the frames used. In addition, some themes such as the use of big data, organisational culture and charismatic leadership were not analysed for the Belarusian case. This was because the Anti-tax campaign did not use big data and did not have a charismatic leader who could be compared to the figure of Alexei Navalny in Russia. Furthermore, it would be difficult to discuss any organisational culture within the Anti-tax campaign since the campaign had no physical or virtual locations, such as offices or websites, where such culture could be displayed and observed in the way that I approached the culture of the Navalny organisation.

The data collection and analysis strategies have additional limitations. First, the discussion of the organisational networks is, to a large extent, based on the assumption that communication processes mirror organisational forms. Hence, I cannot generalize findings for the whole range of digital activists' practices. Nevertheless, I can compare the findings with the existing studies of other movement and political campaigns.

Second, I could not identify and access some of the important actors of the campaigns or their internal documents. They include, for instance, the administrator(s) of the Party of Parasites Facebook page, which was one of the five groups that constituted the sample of the Anti-tax campaign. In addition, I have never accessed some materials, e.g. the initial plan of the Navalny organisation which directed its operations.

Many leaders of both organisations were later persecuted and sometimes forced to leave their countries. This points to another limitation of the study. One can suggest that the movements were large shadow structures that have not been revealed in their entirety by this research. This was because, for the sake of the security of the people involved, I did not try to map the whole structure ostensibly operating under the surface. Had I done so, then my study could cause more repression against the individuals involved. I examined several important organisational elements that were part of the formal configuration of the movement, but which have not been fully disclosed for security reasons. Therefore, due to the secretive settings of a non-democratic environment, the revealed networks of digital campaigners and activists still might be limited.

7.3 Future research

Plenty of scope remains for the study of authoritarian regimes. It is probable that many of the 90 or so current authoritarian regimes will last for generations, new such regimes will emerge elsewhere, and their digital repressive repertoire will only grow. Verifying the findings regarding the repertoire of repressive digital politics would help to understand better the strategies and tactics of the regimes. In particular, new theories to discuss the mechanisms of digital surveillance should be developed. In addition, more research should be done in the areas of digital misinformation and disinformation and, specifically, in relation to the dissemination of disinformation on messaging platforms – a domain of digital politics that proved crucial in one of the studied cases.

Further research should compare the practices of digital activists in similar contexts to verify the emergence of the observed forms of organising: pseudonymous leaders and dynamic segmentation in digitally-enabled organisations. We need to develop methodologies that would allow us to analyse power distribution within digitally-enabled movements to demonstrate how decision-making processes are organised within these movements. These methodologies might combine qualitative approaches like interviews with SNA and content analysis to systematically analyse both intentions and consequences of decision-making and power-sharing withing movements.

Moreover, the study points to the growing importance of shadow organising in digital politics. Further research should investigate the effects of shadow organising on information dissemination and political structures building on media and political

systems. It should test whether the described organisational adaptations – ad hoc, dynamic organisational segmented structures – can be developed in democratic contexts and to what consequences this development may lead.

Appendix 1 Indicative interview questions

[Start with the introduction of a person and their role in the campaign]

1. Please tell me about your role in the campaign. What are your responsibilities in relation to it?
   a. How did you join it?
   b. What are the goals and main activities of the campaign?

[This section is about the digital side of a campaign: platforms, technologies, choices]

2. Who defines the organisational strategy of the campaign? Are there any main office/definite leaders of the campaign?
   a. What is the relationship of your unit/branch/division with the main office/the leaders of the campaign?
   b. Do you receive some specific instructions as to how organise your campaign representation online?
   c. How effective do you think is your contact with the main office/the leaders of the campaign as to the digital representation?
   d. Does your campaign group participate in any coalition? What are the consequences of this participation?

3. How does your campaign work on its digital representation?
   a. What platforms do you use in your activities?
   b. Who is responsible for the digital representation of your campaign?
   c. What are the specific characteristics of their features you would highlight?
   d. What platforms do you prefer for what kind of activities?
   e. How do you attract people's attention to your campaign online? Do you specifically arrange online materials such texts, images, videos?
   f. How would you define the audience for your campaign?
   g. Do you refer to a specific audience when you plan your campaigning on a particular platform?

4. Did you or any people affiliated with your campaign/its regional branches meet any constraints imposed by the government/authorities/police/others like online censorship, hacker attacks, other online persecution?
   a. … or physical persecution?
   b. Do you think you can face this sort of constraints in the future?
   c. How much does the possibility to face these constraints affect your strategies, both online and offline?

d. Do you seek and/or follow any advice of digital security specialists, consultants, or anyone in relation to possible digital threats?

e. Has your campaign(s) been affected by trolls and bots; fake news?

f. Are there any specific constraints related to the policies or commercial strategies of the platforms you use?

5. Do you use online tools/platforms to unite people who follow your campaign/core activists?

a. Is it easy to become a member of your campaign?

b. What is the role of digital platforms in maintaining this membership?

c. Is there any formal organisation behind your campaign? Is it important to be a member of that organisation to be part of the campaign?

d. From your personal position, do you think that your campaign/civic digital activities rather unite people in your country or divide them?

6. Do you or your fellows follow the political developments in Russia/Belarus [depends on where an interviewee works]?

a. How much are these developments, especially in relation to digital practices, important to your campaign?

b. Do events that are happening in Belarus/Russia influence your campaign?

[A personal block again]

7. Did you receive any specific training to perform your activities within the campaign?

a. Do consider talent and creativity as important elements of your civic activities?

b. Do you think your organisation/campaign is concerned with the development of talent and creativity?

c. How do you define yourself? Are you an activist? A digital specialist? Maybe a media persona [*it depends to whom I am talking – and if a person constantly makes YouTube vlogs, could they be a media persona?*].

d. How often do you go abroad?

e. Do you have a large professional/personal network within your own country or outside it? Do you think it might somehow affect how you use digital platforms?

f. How do you see your future within the campaign and/or outside it?

g. How old are you?

[Snowballing]

8. What civic campaigns in Belarus/Russia do you follow as an activist to learn from them and get inspired regarding their digital activities?

9. Can I use your real name for my study, or should I better hide it?

Appendix 2 Informed Consent Letter

Informed Consent Letter

Title of the research project:

Activism on digital platforms in non-democratic settings

Contact Information:

Aliaksandr Herasimenka, University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom ales.herasimenka@gmail.com

I am a doctoral researcher at the University of Westminster. I conduct research about internet activism in Belarus and Russia. I would like to know if you would be willing to take part in my study and give me an interview about your activities. This study is concerned with digital activists who focus on political and democratic rights such as the right to free and fair elections, and media freedom or fighting state corruption. In the study, I compare examples of digital media activism on social media such as VK and Odnoklassniki.

Procedures:

In the interview, you will be asked a number of questions. I am interested in how you use social media to conduct your campaigns and what obstacles you meet in your online activity as a campaigner. You are free to omit any question if you do not want to answer and withdraw from my research for any reason at any time until the results are publicly presented or published.

Confidentiality:

All the information you provide will be strictly confidential.

Note About Voluntary Nature of Participation:

Your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or may discontinue your participation at any time during the interview. Your participation will be valuable to the research. Its results might also become beneficial for your future online campaigning.

Participant's Agreement Statement

If you agree to participate in my study, I would appreciate you signing your name and date to this form.

****

I have read the information provided above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

_____   _____

Name   Date

Appendix 3 The timeline of the Anti-tax campaign before the tax deadline

02.04.2015. President Lukashenka issues a decree that establishes a tax that became known as the "tax on social parasites."

Signature gathering phase

13.01.2017. The REP trade union announces the signature gathering to abolish the tax and suggests that protests may follow (Charter97, 2017a);

The "Tell the Truth!" campaign announces the "Working meeting of social parasites" in a large hall in Minsk (IK, 2017a).

17.01.2017. Four organisations separately announce their plan actions to protest the tax (Dascynski, 2017).

18.01.2017. The UCP's party chairman Liabedzka attempts to collect signatures in the streets of Minsk to abolish the decree (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2017a).

19.01.2017. The members of the Anti-tax coalition have gathered in the UCP office for the first time (IK, 2017b).

20.01.2017. Charter97, independent from the government internet media, publishes Statkevich's announcement of the "Marsh of Outraged Belarusians" (Charter97, 2017b).

23.01.2017. The eight members of the Anti-tax coalition announce the rally in Minsk on 15 March. The idea of the regional protests on 19 February is discussed (Hlod, 2017).

24.01.2017. The UCP and the REP trade union apply for an authorisation to hold a rally in Hrodna (Karnievich, 2017).

27.01.2017. The UCP, the BHD, Statkevich, the Just World apply for an authorisation to hold a rally in Homel (AJA, 2017).

07.02.2017. 150 000 OK users negatively react to Lukashenka's comments regarding the tax. The president suggested that only a tiny fraction of the population was disgust by the tax (AA, 2017).

16.02.2017. The Anti-tax activists in Homel receive a letter from the local authorities that their application for the protest authorisation was refused. Despite the ban, they announce the rally on 19 February.

Protest phase

17.02.2017. 2600 people attend the first rally of the Anti-tax campaign in Minsk (Shmygov, 2017).

17.02.2017. 100 people show up to a court hearing in Homel to support a person who was asked to pay the tax. The REP trade union, as well as other organisations, provide legal support and tries to mobilise people. The same day, the authorities decided to relieve the person of the tax duty.

19.02.2017. The Anti-tax protests erupt in all the province centres (voblast cities) of the country with 2600 participants in total.

20.02.2017. The deadline of the tax payment.

See Table 4.3 for the post-deadline rallies

Appendix 4 The background of key founding members of the Anti-tax Coalition

The Belarusian Independent Trade Union of Radio-Electronic Industry Workers (REP) - the largest independent from the state trade union (Kazlou & Alfer, 2012). Several months after the Anti-tax protests, the leader of the REP was accused of tax evasion and was subsequently found guilty of these charges, along with another executive of the Union.

The Belarusian Christian Democracy (BChD)

This is an unregistered party that was part of the Centre-right Coalition. One of its leaders, Vital Rymasheuski, was one of the first core leaders of the Anti-tax campaign to be detained. It has an observer status in the European People's Party.

The Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada)

This is one of three left-wing opposition parties with similar names (there are also the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaja Hramada) and just the Belarusian Social Democratic Party). All three were rather small pro-EU social democratic parties at the time of the movement. Its strongest local branch was located in Brest, where it is the largest local political opposition structure.

The Movement for Freedom

The Movement for Freedom that is part of the Centre-right Coalition. The Movement for Freedom emerged following the 2006 presidential election as an organisation of single opposition candidate Alaksandar Milinkievic. It is registered as an NGO; however, like other members of the Centre-right Coalition, it has an observer status in the European People's Party, which is the largest party in the European Parliament (The Movement For Freedom, 2018).

The United Civic Party (UCP)

The UCP is a centrist opposition party founded in 1995, the second largest registered opposition party of Belarus in terms of membership as of 2015 (Charnysh & Kulakevich, 2016). It was also the only opposition party that had a representative in the parliament during the Anti-tax campaign. Its leader, Anatol Liabedzka, was considered to be an informal leader of the Centre-right Coalition, the only active coordinating structure of opposition political parties in Belarus at the moment of the campaign (Kostyugova, 2018, p. 107).

List of references

AA. (2017, February 7). Lukashenka: «Dekretam pra darmajedaŭ aburylisia niekaĺki tysiač čalaviek». Na «Adnakliaśnikach» — boĺš za 150 tysiač [Lukashenka: 'The decree on parasites angered several thousand people.' On the 'Classmates' - more than 150 thousand]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/darmajedau-61-tysiacza/28280073.html

Aagaard, P. (2016). The Fourth Age of Political Communication: Democratic decay or the rise of phronetic political communication? *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*, *11*(3).

Acharya, A., & Buzan, B. (2017). Why is there no Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten years on. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, *17*(3), 341–370.

Ackland, R. (2013). *Web Social Science: Concepts, Data and Tools for Social Scientists in the Digital Age*. SAGE.

Ahmed, S., Bajema, N. E., Bendett, S., Chang, B. A., Creemers, R., Demchak, C. C., … others. (2018). *AI, China, Russia, and the Global Order: Technological, Political, Global, and Creative Perspectives*. Retrieved from NSI website: https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/AI-China-Russia-Global-WP_FINAL.pdf

Ahram, A. I., & Goode, J. P. (2016). Researching Authoritarianism in the Discipline of Democracy*: Authoritarianism in the Discipline of Democracy. *Social Science Quarterly*, *97*(4), 834–849.

AJA. (2017, January 27). U Homieli padali zajaŭku na «Marš niedarmajedaŭ — aburanych bielarusaŭ» [The application for the 'March of non-parasitesâ — Outraged Belarusians' was submitted in Homel]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/28263718.html

Alaimo, K. (2015). How the Facebook Arabic Page 'We Are All Khaled Said' Helped Promote the Egyptian Revolution. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2).

Albats, E. (2018a). *Alexei Navalny / Polnii Albats // 22.10.18*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrNAM5lE0QI

Albats, E. (2018b). *Polnii Albats / Ulichnyy protest 2018 [Polnii Albats / Street protest 2018]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PImztA4ZgiU

Aliaksandrau, A. (2013). *Belarus: Pulling the plug*. Retrieved from Index of
Censorship website: https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/03/belarus-
pulling-the-plug/

Altheide, D. L., & Schneider, C. J. (2013). *Qualitative Media Analysis*.

Amnesty International. (2017). *Russian Federation 2017/2018. Overview*. Retrieved
from Amnesty International website:
https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/russian-
federation/report-russian-federation/

Amnesty International. (2018). *Amnesty International report 2017/18*. Retrieved from
Amnesty International Ltd website:
https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/belarus/report-
belarus/

Anti-Corruption Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved 6 November 2018, from the Anti-
Corruption Foundation website: https://fbk.info

Aragón, P., Volkovich, Y., Laniado, D., & Kaltenbrunner, A. (2016). When a
Movement Becomes a Party: Computational Assessment of New Forms of
Political Organization in Social Media. *Proceedings of the 10th International
AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 12–21. Palo Alto, CA: AAAI
Press.

Art, D. (2016). Archivists and Adventurers: Research Strategies for Authoritarian
Regimes of the Past and Present*: Research Strategies for Authoritarian
Regimes. *Social Science Quarterly*, *97*(4), 974–990.

Ash, K. (2014). The election trap: The cycle of post-electoral repression and
opposition fragmentation in Lukashenko's Belarus. *Democratization*, 1–24.

Åström, J., Karlsson, M., Linde, J., & Pirannejad, A. (2012). Understanding the rise of
e-participation in non-democracies: Domestic and international factors.
Government Information Quarterly, *29*(2), 142–150.

AT. (2017, March 23). Sutki za reposty. Zapalochvajuć tych, chto anansuje Dzień Voli
ŭ sacsietkach [Denentions for shares. Those who announce the Day of
Freedom in social networks are intimidated]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio
Liberty*. Retrieved from http://www.svaboda.org/a/sutki-za-
reposty/28387093.html

Auchard, E. (2015, November 18). Islamic State makes Telegram messaging app a
major marketing tool. *Reuters*. Retrieved from

https://www.reuters.com/article/france-shooting-telegram/islamic-state-makes-telegram-messaging-app-a-major-marketing-tool-idUSL1N13C2YG20151118

Ayoub, P. M., Wallace, S. J., & Zepeda-Millán, C. (2014). Triangulation in Social Movement Research. In D. della Porta (Ed.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research* (pp. 67–96).

Azar, I. (2018, March 2). Razocharovaniye ili predatel'stvo [Disappointment or betrayal]. *Novaya Gazeta*. Retrieved from https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/03/01/75659-razocharovanie-ili-predatelstvo

Balmforth, R., & Makhovsky, A. (2011, July 6). Lukashenko nears crunch time, says Belarus opposition. *Reuters*. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-opposition-idUSTRE76522E20110706

Balmforth, T. (2011, December 8). Russian Protesters Mobilize Via Social Networks, As Key Opposition Leaders Jailed. *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. Retrieved from http://www.rferl.org/content/russian_protesters_mobilize_online_as_leaders_jailed/24414881.html

Baran, K., & Stock, W. G. (2015). Acceptance and Quality Perceptions of Social Network Services in Cultural Context: Vkontakte as a Case Study. *International Institute of Informatics and Cybernetics*, *13*(3).

Baron, L. F. (2014). *Social Media and Social Movements: Facebook in the interactions of social movement organisations* (Thesis). Retrieved from https://digital.lib.washington.edu:443/researchworks/handle/1773/25133

Barros, R. (2016). On the Outside Looking In: Secrecy and the Study of Authoritarian Regimes*. *Social Science Quarterly*, *97*(4), 953–973.

BBC News. (2017, December 31). Iran restricts apps used by protesters. *BBC News*. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-42529576

BBC News. (2018, February 15). Instagram submits to Russia censor's demands. *BBC*. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-43070555

Bedford, S. (2017). 'The Election Game:' Authoritarian Consolidation Processes in Belarus. *Demokratizatsiya*, *25*(4), 381–405.

Belarus in Focus. (2017, March 27). USD 500 monthly wage is unlikely in 2017 in Belarus due to economic slowdown | [Solidarity with Belarus Information

Office]. Retrieved 7 May 2019, from https://belarusinfocus.info/economy/usd-500-monthly-wage-unlikely-2017-belarus-due-economic-slowdown

Belarusian Language Society. (2012). *A review of language policy in Belarus*. Retrieved from Non-governmental organization 'Franсišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society' website: http://tbm-mova.by/monitoring15.html?lang=en

Bendix, R. (1963). Concepts and Generalizations in Comparative Sociological Studies. *American Sociological Review*, *28*(4), 532–539.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Bennett, W. L., Segerberg, A., & Knüpfer, C. B. (2017). The democratic interface: Technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation. *Information, Communication & Society*, *21*(11), 1655–1680.

Bennett, W. L., Segerberg, A., & Walker, S. (2014). Organization in the crowd: Peer production in large-scale networked protests. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*(2), 272–275.

Bennett, W. L., Wells, C., & Freelon, D. (2011). Communicating Civic Engagement: Contrasting Models of Citizenship in the Youth Web Sphere. *Journal of Communication*, *61*(5), 835–856.

Bennetts, M. (2016, February 26). Meet the activists seeking regime change in Putin's Russia. Retrieved 2 May 2016, from Newsweek website: http://europe.newsweek.com/russia-world-putin-yanukovych-ukraine-maidan-430639

Bimber, B. A., Flanagin, A. J., & Stohl, C. (2012). *Collective action in organizations: Interaction and engagement in an era of technological change*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bivens, R., & Haimson, O. L. (2016). Baking Gender Into Social Media Design: How Platforms Shape Categories for Users and Advertisers. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(4).

Blee, K. (2013). Interviewing Activists. In D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Malden, MA: Wiley.

Blee, K., & Taylor, V. (2002). Semi-Structured Interviewing in Social Movement Research. In Bert Klandermans & S. Staggenborg (Eds.), *Methods of social movement research*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Blumler, J. G., & Kavanagh, D. (1999). The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features. *Political Communication*, *16*(3), 209–230.

Bodrunova, S., & Litvinenko, A. (2015). Four Russias in communication: Fragmentation of the Russian public sphere in the 2010s. In B. Dobek-Ostrowska & M. Głowacki (Eds.), *Democracy and Media in Central and Eastern Europe 25 Years On*.

Bodrunova, S., & Litvinenko, A. (2016). Fragmentation of Society and Media Hybridisation in Today's Russia: How Facebook Voices Collective Demands. *Zhurnal Issledovanii Sotsialnoi Politiki = The Journal of Social Policy Studies*, *14*(1), 113–124.

Bohdanova, T. (2014). Unexpected revolution: The role of social media in Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising. *European View*, *13*(1), 133–142.

Boulègue, M., Lutsevych, O., & Marin, A. (2018). *Civil Society Under Russia's Threat: Building Resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova*. Retrieved from https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/civil-society-under-russias-threat-building-resilience-ukraine-belarus-and-moldova

boyd, danah. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.

Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2018). *Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation* (p. 26) [Working Paper]. Retrieved from Project on Computational Propaganda website: https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/cybertroops2018/

Bräuchler, B., & Postill, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Theorising media and practice*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Bulhakau, V., & Dynko, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Chryscennie nacyi. Masavyja akcyi 1988–2009 [The baptism of the nation. Mass actions of 1988-2009]*. Vilnius, Lithuania: Bielaruskaje histaryčnaje tavarystva; Instytut bielarusistyki; Palityčnaja sfiera.

Burgess, M. (2018, April 28). This is why Russia's attempts to block Telegram have failed. *Wired UK*. Retrieved from https://www.wired.co.uk/article/telegram-in-russia-blocked-web-app-ban-facebook-twitter-google

Bylina, V. (2017, May 4). Covering protests: A new epoch for the Belarusian media. *Belarus Digest*. Retrieved from https://belarusdigest.com/story/covering-protests-a-new-epoch-for-the-belarusian-media/

Cairns, C. M. (2017). *China's Weibo Experiment: Social Media (Non-) Censorship and Autocratic Responsiveness* (Cornell University).

Cammaerts, B., Mattoni, A., & McCurdy, P. (2013). *Mediation and protest movements*. Retrieved from http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1160345

Castells, M. (2013). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age* (Second edition). Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Charmaz, K. (2008). The legacy of Anselm Strauss in constructivist grounded theory. In *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (Vol. 32, pp. 127–141).

Charnysh, V., & Kulakevich, T. (2016). Belarus: Belarusian Political Parties: Organizational Structures and Practices. In K. Sobolewska-Myślik, B. Kosowska-Gąstoł, & P. Borowiec (Eds.), *Organizational structures of political parties in Central and Eastern European countries*. Retrieved from http://charnysh.net/documents/Parties.pdf

Charter97. (2017a, January 13). Trade Unions To Organize Mass Protest Action For Abolishment Of "Social Parasites" Decree. Retrieved 8 April 2017, from Charter 97 website: https://charter97.org/en/news/2017/1/13/237576/

Charter97. (2017b, January 20). February 17 – Outraged Belarusians' March. Retrieved 24 June 2017, from Charter97 website: https://charter97.org/en/news/2017/1/20/238333/

Chrona, S., & Bee, C. (2017). The Gezi Movement Under a Connective Action Framework: Enhancing New Forms of Citizenship via Social Media. In O. Hemer & H.-Å. Persson (Eds.), *In the Aftermath of Gezi: From Social Movement to Social Change?* (pp. 161–185).

Chulitskaya, T. (2017, July 31). *Personal communication*. Retrieved from https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/chulitskaya%40gmail.com/152c0e7e 5865998e

Coleman, E. G. (2014). *Hacker, hoaxer, whistleblower, spy: The many faces of Anonymous*. London; New York: Verso.

Collier, D. (1991). The Comparative Method: Two Decades of Change. In K. P. Erickson & D. Rustow (Eds.), *Comparative Political Dynamics: Global Research Perspectives*. Washington, DC: HarperCollins.

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, *13*(1), 3–21.

Costa, E. (2017). Social Media as Practices: An Ethnographic Critique of 'Affordances' and 'Context Collapse'. *Working Papers for the EASA Media Anthropology Network's 60th e- Seminar.* Retrieved from http://www.media-anthropology.net/file/costa_socialmedia_as_practice.pdf

Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice.* Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity.

Council of Europe. Committee of Ministers. (2018). *Supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European Court of Human Rights 2017.* Retrieved from Council of Europe website: https://rm.coe.int/annual-report-2017/16807af92b

Crabtree, C., Fariss, C., & Schuler, P. (2017, March 24). In Belarus, Europe's "last dictator" is actually allowing protest. Here's why. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/24/belarus-is-allowing-protest-because-its-authoritarian-government-wants-western-support/

Dahlberg-Grundberg, M. (2015). Technology as movement. On hybrid organizational types and the mutual constitution of movement identity and technological infrastructure in digital activism. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 21.

Dal, A., Nisbet, E., & Kamenchuk, O. (2019, May 29). *Easy to Say, Hard to Dare: Social-Psychological Dynamics of Online Political Expression in the Face of Networked Authoritarianism*. Presented at the International Communication Assosiation Conference, Washington D.C., US.

Dascynski, A. (2017, February 18). «Darmajedy» plianujuć pravieśći marš u Miensku 15 sakavika ["Social parasites" plan to hold a march in Minsk on March 15]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/28241840.html

Davies, N. (2012). *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe*. London New York Toronto: Penguin.

della Porta, D. (2002). Comparative politics and social movements. In Bert Klandermans (Ed.), *Methods of social movement research*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press.

della Porta, D. (2013). Bridging research on democracy, social movements and communication. In *Mediation and protest movements*. Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect.

della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006). Action forms, repertoires and cycles of protest. In *Social movements: An introduction* (2nd ed). Malden, Mass: Blackwell.

Dencik, L., Hintz, A., & Cable, J. (2016). Towards data justice? The ambiguity of anti-surveillance resistance in political activism. *Big Data & Society*, *3*(2).

Dencik, L., & Leistert, O. (Eds.). (2015). *Critical perspectives on social media and protest: Between control and emancipation*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Deseriis, M. (2015). *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous*. U of Minnesota Press.

Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation Technology. *Journal of Democracy*, *21*(3).

Diamond, L., Plattner, M. F., & Walker, C. (2016). *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*. JHU Press.

Diani, M. (2002). Network Analysis. In B Klandermans & S. Staggenborg (Eds.), *The Methods of Social Movement Research* (Vol. 16, pp. 173–201). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Dollbaum, J. M., Semenov, A., & Sirotkina, E. (2018). A top-down movement with grass-roots effects? Alexei Navalny's electoral campaign. *Social Movement Studies*, *17*(5), 618–625.

Doroshevich, M., & Sokolova, M. (2017). «Digital transformation»: To what extent is the country ready to embrace it? In Anatoly Pankovsky & V. Kostyugova (Series Ed.), *Belarusian Yearbook 2017*. Retrieved from https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2017/en/page16.html

Drakakhrust, Y. (2017a, January 31). Akcyi pratestu suprać dekretu ab «darmajedach»: Mety i vyniki [The protests against the decree on the 'parasites': Objectives and results]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/28270365.html

Drakakhrust, Y. (2017b, March 14). Chto kiruje bielaruskimi pratestami [Who coordinats the Belarusian protests]. In *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from http://www.svaboda.org/a/28369315.html

Duguay, S. (2016). "Legit Can't Wait for #Toronto #WorldPride!": Investigating the Twitter Public of a Large-Scale LGBTQ Festival. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*.

Earl, J. (2013). Studying Online Activism: The Effects of Sampling Design on Findings. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *Vol. 18*(4), 389-406.

Earl, J. (2015). The Future of Social Movement Organizations: The Waning Dominance of SMOs Online. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *59*(1), 35–52.

Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the Internet age*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Ecorys. (2017). *Opinion Survey 2017: Belarus* [Opinion Survey]. Retrieved from The EU NEIGHBOURS east website: http://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2017-belarus

El-Nawawy, M., & Khamis, S. (2012). Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's "Facebook Revolution" and Iran's "Twitter Uprising". *CyberOrient*, *6*(1).

Emmet, D. (1958). *Function, purpose and powers*. Bombay: Macmillan.

Emmott, R. (2016, February 15). Europe ends sanctions on Belarus, seeks better ties. *Reuters*. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-eu-sanctions-idUSKCN0VO1TP

Englund, W. (2013, September 9). Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny has strong showing in Moscow mayoral race, despite loss. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kremlin-critic-alexei-navalny-has-strong-showing-in-moscow-mayoral-race-despite-loss/2013/09/09/dc9504e4-1924-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html

Enikolopov, R., Makarin, A., & Petrova, M. (2018). *Social Media and Protest Participation: Evidence from Russia* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. ID 2696236). Retrieved from Social Science Research Network website: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2696236

Ensley, M. D., Hmieleski, K. M., & Pearce, C. L. (2006). The importance of vertical and shared leadership within new venture top management teams: Implications for the performance of startups. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *17*(3), 217–231.

Eponym, n. (2018). In *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63655

Erickson, A. (2017, March 25). Belarus had a large protest today. Is it the beginning of a movement, or the end? *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/25/belarus-had-a-huge-protest-today-is-it-the-beginning-of-a-movement-or-the-end/?nid&utm_term=.231fcc1c5a6c

Facebook. (2016, September 29). Data Policy [SNS]. Retrieved 29 October 2016, from Facebook website: https://www.facebook.com/about/privacy/

Filer, T., & Fredheim, R. (2016). Sparking debate? Political deaths and Twitter discourses in Argentina and Russia. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(11), 1539–1555.

Fitzpatrick, C. A. (2013, May 16). Where's Pavel Durov? And I Guess His Manifesto Isn't Working Out. Retrieved 8 March 2018, from Minding Russia website: http://3dblogger.typepad.com/minding_russia/2013/05/wheres-pavel-durov-and-i-guess-his-manifesto-isnt-working-out.html

Flesher Fominaya, C. (2015). Debunking Spontaneity: Spain's 15-M/Indignados as Autonomous Movement. *Social Movement Studies*, *14*(2), 142–163.

Foot, K. A., & Schneider, S. M. (2006). *Web campaigning*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Foy, H. (2018, March 16). Russia's energy sector escapes pain of sanctions. *Financial Times*.

Frantz, E. (2019, March 11). The Evolution of the Strongman. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/11/the-evolution-of-the-strongman/

Fredheim, R. (2015). Filtering foreign media content: How Russian news agencies repurpose Western News reporting. *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, *1*(1), 37–82.

Freedom House. (2007). *Belarus. Freedom on the Press. 2007*. Retrieved from Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2007/belarus

Freedom House. (2015). *Freedom on the Net 2015*. Retrieved from Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2015

Freedom House. (2016a). *Belarus. Freedom of the Press. 2016*. Retrieved from Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/belarus

Freedom House. (2016b). *Russia. Freedom on the Press. 2017*. Retrieved from Freeedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/russia

Freedom House. (2018a). *Belarus. Freedom on the Net 2018*. Retrieved from Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/belarus

Freedom House. (2018b). *Freedom on the Net 2018: The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism*. Retrieved from Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism

Freedom House. (2018c). *Russia. Freedom on the Net 2018*. Retrieved from Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/russia

Freedom House. (2019). *Freedom in the World 2019*. Retrieved from Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019

Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Fuchs, C. (2015). Social media surveillance. In S. Coleman & D. Freelon (Eds.), *Handbook of digital politics*. Cheltenham, UK ; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Fuchs, C. (2017). From digital positivism and administrative big data analytics towards critical digital and social media research! *European Journal of Communication*, *32*(1), 37–49.

Fuchs, C. (2018). Authoritarian capitalism, authoritarian movements and authoritarian communication. *Media, Culture & Society, 40*(5).

Gabowitsch, M. (2017). *Protest in Putin's Russia*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, US: Polity Press.

Gainutdinov, D., & Chikov, P. (2017a). *Russia. Internet Freedom 2016: Martial Law*. Retrieved from Agora International Human Rights Group website: https://meduza.io/static/0001/Agora_Report_2017_Internet.pdf

Gainutdinov, D., & Chikov, P. (2017b). *Russia under surveillance 2017*. Retrieved from Agora International Human Rights Group website: http://en.agora.legal/articles/Report-of-Agora-International-%E2%80%98Russia-under-surveillance-2017%E2%80%99/6

Gel'man, V. (2015a). Political Science in Russia: Scholarship without Research? *European Political Science*, *14*(1), 28–36.

Gel'man, V. (2015b). The Politics of Fear: How the Russian Regime Confronts Its Opponents. *Russian Politics & Law*, *53*(5–6), 6–26.

Gemius. (2017). *Gemius Audience*. Retrieved from http://www.gemius.by/domashnjaja-stranica.html

Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. London: Pluto Press.

Gerbaudo, P. (2014). The persistence of collectivity in digital protest. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*(2), 264–268.

Gerbaudo, P. (2016). Rousing the Facebook Crowd: Digital Enthusiasm and Emotional Contagion in the 2011 Protests in Egypt and Spain. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*.

Gerbaudo, P. (2017a). Feeds from the square: Live streaming, live tweeting and the self-representation of protest camps. In *Protest spaces online and offline: The Indignant movement in Syntagma Square*. Bristol, UK.: Policy Press.

Gerbaudo, P. (2017b). Social media teams as digital vanguards: The question of leadership in the management of key Facebook and Twitter accounts of Occupy Wall Street, Indignados and UK Uncut. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(2), 185–202.

Gerbaudo, P. (2017c). *The mask and the flag: Populism, citizenism and global protest*. London: Hurst & Company.

Gerbaudo, P. (2018). *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy*. Pluto Press.

Gerbaudo, P. (2019). The Digital Party: The Transformation of Political Organisation in the Era of Big Data. In D. Chandler & C. Fuchs (Eds.), *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data* (pp. 187–198). London: University of Westminster Press.

Gerlach, L. P. (1971). Movements of Revolutionary Change. Some Structural Characteristics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *14*(6).

Gerlach, L. P. (2001). The structure of social movements: Environmental activism and its opponents. In J. Arquilla & D. F. Ronfeldt (Eds.), *Networks and netwars: The future of terror, crime, and militancy*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

Gerlach, L. P., & Hine, V. (1970). *People, power, change: Movements of social transformation*. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill.

Ghonim, W. (2012). *Revolution 2.0*. Boston, Ney York: Houghton mifflin harcourt.

Gladarev, B., & Lonkila, M. (2012). The Role of Social Networking Sites in Civic Activism in Russia and Finland. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *64*(8), 1375–1394.

Gladwell, M. (2010, October 4). Small Change. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell#ixzz1Nk44t1aP

Glasius, M. (2018). What authoritarianism is … and is not: A practice perspective. *International Affairs*, *94*(3), 515–533.

Goncharov, S. (2017, July 17). «Televizor budushchego»: Kak videoblogery menyayut medialandshaft ["TV of the future": How videobloggers change the media landscape]. Retrieved 4 August 2018: https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/televizor-budushhego-kak-videoblogery-menyayut-medialandshaft/

Goode, J. P. (2016). Eyes Wide Shut: Democratic Reversals, Scientific Closure, and the Study of Politics in Eurasia*: Eyes Wide Shut. *Social Science Quarterly*, *97*(4), 876–893.

Goode, J. P., & Ahram, A. I. (2016). Special Issue Editors' Introduction: Observing Autocracies from the Ground Floor*. *Social Science Quarterly*, *97*(4), 823–833.

Gorham, M., Lunde, I., & Paulsen, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Digital Russia: The language, culture and politics of new media communication*. London ; New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Goscilo, H. (Ed.). (2013). *Putin as celebrity and cultural icon*. New York: Routledge.

Gray, P. A. (2016). Memory, body, and the online researcher: Following Russian street demonstrations via social media: Memory, body, and the online researcher. *American Ethnologist*, *43*(3), 500–510.

Greene, S. A. (2014). *Moscow in movement: Power and opposition in Putin's Russia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Gremalschi, A. (Series Ed.). (2017). *The Quality of Higher Education: National Endeavours in the European Context*. Retrieved from http://bolognaby.org/images/uploads/2017/01/En_QHE-22.12.16.pdf

Gunitsky, S. (2015). Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability. *Perspectives on Politics*, *13*(01), 42–54.

Hall, M., Mazarakis, A., Chorley, M., & Caton, S. (2018). Editorial of the Special Issue on Following User Pathways: Key Contributions and Future Directions in Cross-Platform Social Media Research. *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction*, *34*(10), 1–18.

Hall, S. G. F. (2017). Preventing a Colour Revolution: The Belarusian example as an illustration for the Kremlin? *East European Politics*, *33*(2), 162–183.

Hallin, D. C. (2016). Typology of Media Systems. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Halupka, M. (2014). Clicktivism: A Systematic Heuristic. *Policy & Internet*, *6*(2), 115–132.

Halupka, M. (2016). The rise of information activism: How to bridge dualisms and reconceptualise political participation. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–17.

Helmond, A. (2015). The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2).

Herasimenka, A. (2017). 2017 – ein Jahr der Proteste in Belarus [2017 – A year of protests in Belarus]. *Belarus-Analysen*, 34.

Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2008). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. London: The bodley head.

Heyman, R., & Pierson, J. (2015). Social Media, Delinguistification and Colonization of Lifeworld: Changing Faces of Facebook. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2).

Hickel, J. (2012, July 28). Book Review: Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America, edited by Astra Taylor and Keith Gessen | LSE Review of Books. Retrieved 19 February 2019, from LSE Review of Books website: https://blogstest.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2012/07/28/book-review-occupy-scenes-from-occupied-america/

Higgins, A., Matsnev, O., & Nechepurenko, I. (2018, October 18). Meet the 7 Russian Oligarchs Hit by the New U.S. Sanctions. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/world/europe/russian-oligarchs-sanctions.html

Hill, R. J. (2005). Post-Soviet Belarus: In search of direction. In S. White, E. Korosteleva, & J. Löwenhardt (Eds.), *Postcommunist Belarus*.

Hine, C. (2012). *The Internet*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Hlod, U. (2017, January 23). Marš niedarmajedaŭ pojdzie na ploščču Banhalor [The Marsh of social parasites to go to Bangalore Square]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/28251168.html

HootSuite. (2019, March 6). Digital 2019 Belarus. Retrieved 18 March 2019, from Information Policy Biz website: http://www.infopolicy.biz/?p=11460

Hornby, L., Yang, Y., & Feng, E. (2018, January 16). China disrupts global companies' web access as censorship bites. Retrieved 25 June 2019, from

Financial Times website: https://www.ft.com/content/80e50a6c-fa8a-11e7-9b32-d7d59aace167

Human Rights Defenders. (2018, August 24). Belarus: Trade Union leaders found guilty of tax evasion after a sham trial. Retrieved 28 January 2019, from Worldwide Movement for Human Rights website: https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/belarus-trade-union-leaders-found-guilty-of-tax-evasion-after-a-sham

Huntington, S. P. (1988). One Soul at a Time: Political Science and Political Reform. *The American Political Science Review*, *82*(1), 3.

Hussain, M. M. (2014). *Securing Technologies of Freedom after the Arab Spring: Policy Entrepreneurship and Norms Consolidation Practices in Internet Freedom Promotion* (University of Washington). Retrieved from https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/26059?show=full

Hutchby, I. (2001). *Conversation and technology: From the telephone to the Internet*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

IK. (2017a, January 13). «Havary praŭdu» plianuje pravieści «schod darmajedaŭ» [The 'Tell the Truth' is planning a 'meeting of soclial parasites']. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/havary-praudu-plianuje-praviesci-schod-darmajedau/28231351.html

IK. (2017b, January 19). «Maršy darmajedaŭ» mohuć prajści nia tоĺki ŭ Miensku, alie i ŭ rehijonach ["The Marches of parasites" can be organised not only in Minsk, but also in the regions]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/28243389.html

IMBd. (n.d.). On vam ne Dimon. Retrieved 29 September 2018, from IMBd website: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6679360/

Infopolicy. (2017, August 16). Okhvat sotsial'nykh setey v Belarusi po dannym mediaissledovaniya gemiusAudience [Coverage of social networks in Belarus according to gemiusAudience media research]. Retrieved 18 March 2019, from Information Policy Biz website: http://www.infopolicy.biz/?p=10015

Inozemtsev, V. (2017). The Kremlin Emboldened: Why Putinism Arose. *Journal of Democracy*, *28*(4), 80–85.

Interfax. (2017, March 7). LinkedIn stilled blocked in Russia following fruitless talks with Roskomnadzor. Retrieved 20 March 2019, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/en/news/2017/03/07/linkedin-stilled-blocked-in-russia-following-fruitless-talks-with-roskomnadzor

International Agora. (2018, February 5). *Appendix to the report of the International Agora 'Freedom of the Internet 2017: Creeping criminalization'*. Retrieved from https://meduza.io/static/0001/Agora_Annex_Internet_Freedom_2017_RU.xlsx

International Telecommunication Union. (2019, March 27). *List of countries by number of broadband Internet subscriptions*. Retrieved from https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2018/Fixed_broadband_2000-2017.xls

Ivanou, A. (2019, January 17). PROFILE: Belarusian electronics union is no stranger to struggle. Retrieved 28 January 2019, from IndustriALL website: http://www.industriall-union.org/belarusian-electronics-union-is-no-stranger-to-struggle

IT ugolovnyye dela SORM rossiyushka. (2018, February 16). V dannyy moment navalny.com, nesmotrya na blokirovku, dostupen primerno u 65-70% pol'zovateley RF. My prodolzhayem rabotat' nad [At the moment despite blocking, navalny.com is available to about 65-70% of the RF users. We continue to work on] [Telegram post]. Retrieved 23 July 2018, from https://t.me/unkn0wnerror/627

Izvestia. (2015, June 11). Sotsseti v Rossii perezhivayut krizis rosta [Social networks in Russia are going through a crisis of growth]. *Izvestia*. Retrieved from http://izvestia.ru/news/587631

Jie, J. (2015, December 17). No Internet hegemony: Xi. Retrieved 25 December 2018, from Global Times website: http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/958926.shtml

Kara-Murza, V. V. (2017). The Kremlin Emboldened: Putin Is not Russia. *Journal of Democracy*, *28*(4), 110–116.

Karatzogianni, A. (2015). *Firebrand waves of digital activism 1994-2014: The rise and spread of hacktivism and cyberconflict*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Karatzogianni, A., Miazhevich, G., & Denisova, A. (2017). A comparative cyberconflict analysis of digital activism across post-Soviet countries. *Comparative Sociology*, *16*(1), 102–126.

Karnievich, M. (2017, January 24). U Horadni padali zajaŭku na «Marš niedarmajedaŭ» [The application for the 'March of non-parasites' was submitted in Hrodna]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/u-horadni-padali-zajauku-na-mars-niedarmajedau/28255059.html

Karpf, D. (2012). *The MoveOn effect: The unexpected transformation of American political advocacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Karpf, D. (2014). Comment on 'Organization in the Crowd: Peer production in large-scale networked protests'. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*(2), 261–263.

Karpf, D. (2016). *Analytic activism: Digital listening and the new political strategy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Karpf, D. (2017, October 12). People are hyperventilating over a study of Russian propaganda on Facebook. Just breathe deeply. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/12/people-are-hyperventilating-over-a-new-study-of-russian-propaganda-on-facebook-just-breathe-deeply/

Karpf, D. (2019, May 31). *"Organizing without Organizations" and the Return of Apologetic Pluralism: A Critique*. Presented at the The 69th Annual International Communication Association conference, Washington D.C., US.

Kashin, O. (2017, October 9). Mitingi Naval'nogo: Pochemu ne povtorilos' martovskoye chudo? [Navalny's rallies: Why did the March miracle not happen again?]. *Republic*. Retrieved from https://republic.ru/posts/86866

Kasmach, L. (2017, January 30). Belarus pursues 'social parasites' at home and abroad. Retrieved 31 December 2018, from Belarus Digest website: https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-pursues-social-parasites-at-home-and-abroad/

Kavada, A. (2007). *The European Social Forum and the Internet: A case of communications networks and collective action*. University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom.

Kavada, A. (2009). Decentralization and Communication: Email Lists and the Organizing Process of the European Social Forum. In A. Karatzogianni (Ed.), *Cyber-conflict and global politics*. London: Routledge.

Kavada, A. (2012). Engagement, bonding, and identity across multiple platforms: Avaaz on Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, *28*(52).

Kavada, A. (2013). Internet cultures and protest movements: The cultural links between strategy, organizing and online communication. In *Mediation and protest movements*. Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect.

Kavada, A. (2014). Transnational Civil Society and Social Movements. In K. G. Wilkins, T. Tufte, & R. Obregon (Eds.), *The Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change* (pp. 351–369).

Kavada, A. (2015). Creating the collective: Social media, the Occupy Movement and its constitution as a collective actor. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(8), 872–886.

Kavada, A. (2018). Connective or Collective? The Intersection between Online Crowds and Social Movements in Contemporary Activism. In G. Meikle (Ed.), *Routledge Companion to Media and Activism*. Routledge.

Kavada, A. (2019). The Movement Party – Winning Elections and Transforming Democracy in a Digital Era: Reflections on Paolo Gerbaudo's Chapter. In D. Chandler & C. Fuchs (Eds.), *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*. London: University of Westminster Press.

Kazak, L. (2011, 28). Silent revolution in Belarus: Inanticipation of changes. Retrieved 21 March 2019, from Geopolitika website: http://www.geopolitika.lt/?artc=4918

Kazlou, A., & Alfer, S. (2012). Are the Independent Democratic Trade Unions of Belarus the Engine of Social Reforms? *Eastern Europe Studies Centre*, 72.

Kendall-Taylor, A., & Frantz, E. (2014). Mimicking Democracy to Prolong Autocracies. *The Washington Quarterly*, *37*(4), 71–84.

Khazraee, E., & Losey, J. (2016). Evolving repertoires: Digital media use in contentious politics. *Communication and the Public*, *1*(1), 39–55.

Kim, L. (2018, February 8). Russia Election: Putin Foe Alexei Navalny, Banned From Running, Keeps Pushing: Parallels: NPR. In *Parallels*. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/02/08/584369719/banned-from-election-putin-foe-navalny-pursues-politics-by-other-means

Kim, Y. M., Hsu, J., Neiman, D., Kou, C., Bankston, L., Kim, S. Y., … Raskutti, G. (2018). The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook. *Political Communication*, *35*(4), 515–541.

King, G., Keohane, R. O., & Verba, S. (1994). *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2014). Reverse-engineering censorship in China: Randomized experimentation and participant observation. *Science*, *345*(6199).

Klandermans, B, Staggenborg, S., & Tarrow, S. (2002). Conclusion: Blending Methods and Building Theories in Social Movement Research. In B Klandermans & S. Staggenborg (Eds.), *The Methods of Social Movement Research* (Vol. 16, pp. 146–172). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kłysiński, K., & Żochowski, P. (2016). *The end of the myth of a brotherly Belarus?: Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: The background and its manifestations* [58]. Warsaw, Poland: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia.

Koltsova, O., Koltcov, S., & Nikolenko, S. (2016). Communities of co-commenting in the Russian LiveJournal and their topical coherence. *Internet Research*, *26*(3), 710–732.

Komanda Navalnogo. (2017, March 14). 13 million people watched the FBK's investigation. Retrieved 29 September 2018, from VK website: https://vk.com/wall-55284725_256578

Korolev, I. (2018, February 20). Bresh' v sisteme: Pochemu sayt Naval'nogo dostupen rossiyanam, nesmotrya na blokirovku [Breach in the system: Why is the Navalny site accessible to Russians, despite the blocking]. *CNews.Ru*. Retrieved from http://safe.cnews.ru/news/top/2018-02-20_bresh_v_sisteme_pochemu_sajt_navalnogo_dostupen

Kostyugova, V. (2018). Parties: Exploration of new reality. In A Pankovsky & V. Kostyugova (Eds.), *Belarusian Yearbook 2018*. Retrieved from https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/get/yearbook2018en.pdf

Kramer, A. E. (2012, March 30). Navalny Presses for Inquiry Into Putin Deputy. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/31/world/europe/navalny-presses-for-inquiry-into-putin-deputy.html

Kreml i glemrok. (2017, May 1). «Ne nado terpet'. Nado uzhe zhit' normal'no». Bol'shoye interv'yu s Nikolayem Lyaskinym ["Do not tolerate it. It is necessary to live normally." A big interview with Nikolai Lyaskin] [Blog Platform]. Retrieved 8 February 2018, from Protestnaya Moskva website: http://bit.ly/31vs57c

Kuzio, T. (2015). *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism*. ABC-CLIO.

Lamb, B. (2011). *Good guide to campaigning and influencing, the.* Place of publication not identified: Ncvo Publications.

Laputska, V., & Papko, A. (2018). *Belarus: Desinformation Resilience Index.* Retrieved from Eurasian States in Transition research center (EAST Center) website: http://prismua.org/en/9038-2/

Laputska, V., & Yeliseyeu, A. (2016). Anti-Belarus disinformation in Russian media: Trends, features, countermeasures. EAST Media Review, *1.*

Lawson, C. H. (2002). *Building the Fourth Estate: Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico.*

Lenta.ru. (n.d.). Navalny, Alexei. Retrieved 6 November 2018, from Lenta.ru website: https://lenta.ru/lib/14159595/

Levada-Center. (2017). *Film "On vam ne Dimon" [Film "Don't Call Him Dimon"].* Retrieved from https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/06/film-on-vam-ne-dimon/

Levada-Center. (2018a). *Kanaly informatsii [Information Channels].* Retrieved from Levada-Center website: https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/

Levada-Center. (2018b). *The use of the Internet.* Retrieved from https://www.levada.ru/2018/01/18/polzovanie-internetom/

Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Liang, F., Das, V., Kostyuk, N., & Hussain, M. M. (2018). Constructing a Data-Driven Society: China's Social Credit System as a State Surveillance Infrastructure. *Policy & Internet*, *0*(0).

Litvinenko, A. (2019, May). *The (Non-)Adoption of Participatory Newsroom Innovations under Authoritarian Rule: How Comment Sections Diffused in Belarus and Azerbaijan (1998-2017).* Presented at the The 69th Annual International Communication Association conference, Washington D.C., US.

Lofland, J. (1996). *Social movement organizations: Guide to research on insurgent realities.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Lokot, T. (2016). *Augmented dissent: The affordances of ICTs for citizen protest (a case study of the Ukraine Euromaidan protest of 2013-2014* (University of Maryland). Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/openview/b1c3256013758590d74e1c7751363513/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Lokot, T. (2018). Be Safe or Be Seen? How Russian Activists Negotiate Visibility and Security in Online Resistance Practices. *Surveillance & Society*, *16*(3), 332–346.

Lonkila, M. (2011). *Networks in the Russian market economy*. Basingstoke, [UK] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lonkila, M. (2017). Social networks sites and political governance in Russia. In V. Gel'man (Ed.), *Authoritarian modernization in Russia* (pp. 113–127).

Lunden, I. (2017). Russia says 'nyet,' continues LinkedIn block after it refuses to store data in Russia. Retrieved 20 March 2019, from TechCrunch website: http://social.techcrunch.com/2017/03/07/russia-says-nyet-continues-linkedin-block-after-it-refuses-to-store-data-in-russia/

Lynch, M. (2011). After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State. *Perspectives on Politics*, *9*(02), 301–310.

MacKenzie, D. A., & Wajcman, J. (Eds.). (1999). *The social shaping of technology* (2nd ed).

MacLeod, H. (2009). Examining Political Group Membership on LiveJournal. *Digital Icons*, (2).

Maney, K. (2014, November 15). An Open Internet Doesn't Equal Freedom. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from http://www.newsweek.com/open-internet-doesnt-equal-freedom-284651

Mansell, R., Avgerou, C., Quah, D., & Silverstone, R. (Eds.). (2007). *The Oxford handbook of information and communication technologies*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

Margetts, H., John, P., Hale, S. A., & Yasseri, T. (2016). *Political turbulence: How social media shape collective action*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Markham, A., & Buchanan, E. (2012). *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee* (No. 2.0). Retrieved from The AoIR Ethics Working Committee website: http://ethics.iit.edu/ecodes/node/6053

Markowitz, L. P. (2016). Scientific Closure and Research Strategies in Uzbekistan*: Authoritarianism in Uzbekistan. *Social Science Quarterly*, *97*(4), 894–908.

Márquez, X. (2017). *Non-democratic politics: Authoritarianism, dictatorship, and democratization*. London: Palgrave, an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited.

Marsh, D., & Akram, S. (2015). In conclusion. *Policy Studies*, *36*(6), 640–643.

Mattoni, A. (2012). *Media Practices and Protest Politics: how precarious workers mobilise..* S.l.: Routledge.

Mattoni, A. (2013). Repertoires of communication in social movement processes. In *Mediation and protest movements*. Hobbs, UK: Intellect.

Mattoni, A. (2014). The potentials of grounded theory in the study of social movements. In D. della Porta (Ed.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Matveyeva, T. (2017, February 19). 'Situatsiya kasayetsya kazhdoy sem'i'. Okolo 250 viteblyan protestovali protiv naloga na tuneyadstvo ["The situation concerns every family." About 250 Vitebsk citizens protested the tax on parasitism]. *TUT.BY*. Retrieved from https://news.tut.by/society/532174.html

Mazepus, H., Veenendaal, W., McCarthy-Jones, A., & Vásquez, J. M. T. (2016). A comparative study of legitimation strategies in hybrid regimes. *Policy Studies*, *37*(4), 350–369.

McAdam, D. (1986). Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer. *American Journal of Sociology*, *92*(1), 64–90.

McCurdy, P. (2013). Mediation, practice and lay theories of news media. In *Mediation and protest movements*. Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect.

McFaul, M., & Treyger, E. (2004). Civil society. In *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*.

McMann, K. M. (2006). *Economic autonomy and democracy: Hybrid regimes in Russia and Kyrgyzstan*. New York; Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Meduza. (2016, May 7). «VKontakte» so sledovatelyami ["VKontakte" with investigators]. Retrieved 10 June 2018, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/feature/2016/07/05/vkontakte-so-sledovatelyami

Meduza. (2017a, March 29). Skol'ko lyudey vyshli na ulitsy 26 marta i skol'ko zaderzhali? Karta protesta [How many people took to the streets on March 26 and how many were detained? The map of protests]. Retrieved 29 March 2017, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/feature/2017/03/27/skolko-lyudey-vyshli-na-ulitsy-26-marta-i-skolko-zaderzhali-karta-protesta

Meduza. (2017b, June 13). 12 iyunya na ulitsy vyshlo bol'she lyudey, chem 26 marta [On June 12, more people took to the streets than on March 26]. Retrieved 13 June 2017, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/feature/2017/06/13/skolko-lyudey-protestovali-12-iyunya-i-skolko-zaderzhali

Meduza. (2017c, October 10). 7 oktyabrya: Protestnaya karta. [October 7: The map of protest]. Retrieved 10 November 2017, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/feature/2017/10/10/7-oktyabrya-protestnaya-karta-gde-i-skolko-lyudey-vyshlo-skolko-zaderzhali

Meduza. (2018a, June 22). Navalny's people try once again to register a political party. Retrieved 14 March 2019, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/en/news/2018/06/22/navalny-s-people-try-once-again-to-register-a-political-party

Meduza. (2018b, December 27). Yandex now censors Telegram.org search results for users in Russia. Retrieved 20 March 2019, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/en/news/2018/12/27/yandex-now-censors-telegram-org-search-results-for-users-in-russia

Meduza. (2019, June 11). Ivan Golunov to be cleared of all charges. Retrieved 11 June 2019, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/en/news/2019/06/11/ivan-golunov-to-be-cleared-of-all-charges

Meikle, G. (2014). Social Media, Visibility, and Activism: The Kony 2012 Campaign. In M. Ratto & M. Boler (Eds.), *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*. MIT Press.

Meikle, G. (2016). *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*. Routledge.

Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age*.

Meng, B., & Rantanen, T. (2015). A Change of Lens: A Call to Compare the Media in China and Russia. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *32*(1), 1–15.

Meraz, S., & Papacharissi, Z. (2013). Networked Gatekeeping and Networked Framing on #Egypt. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *18*(2), 138–166.

Miazhevich, G. (2015). Sites of subversion: Online political satire in two post-Soviet states. *Media, Culture & Society*, *37*(3), 422–439.

Miazhevich, G. (2017, November 13). *Shared Solidarities? The Limitations of Citizens Activism in Post-Soviet Media Communicative Ecologies*. Presented at the

CONNECTING TO THE MASSES. 100 Years from the Russian Revolution: From Agitprop to the Attention Economy, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Milan, S. (2013). *Social movements and their technologies: Wiring social change*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Milan, S. (2015a). From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(8).

Milan, S. (2015b). When Algorithms Shape Collective Action: Social Media and the Dynamics of Cloud Protesting. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2).

Miller, C. (2017, March 24). With 'Nothing Left To Lose,' Belarus's 'Social Parasites' Make A Stand. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-protests-antigovernment-protests-lukashenka-crackdown-russia-parasite-tax/28389254.html

Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus. (2019, February). *Respublikanskiy spisok ekstremistskikh materialov [The Republican list of extremist materials]*. Retrieved from http://mininform.gov.by/documents/respublikanskiy-spisok-ekstremistskikh-materialov/

Morozov, E. (2009). Brave New World Of Slacktivism. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104302141

Morozov, E. (2011a). Liberation Technology: Whither Internet Control? *Journal of Democracy*, *22*(2), 62–74.

Morozov, E. (2011b). *The net delusion: The dark side of internet freedom* (1. ed). New York, NY: Public Affairs.

Moshes, A. (2017). Does It Make Sense to Expect a Color Revolution in Belarus? *PonarsEuarasia - Policy Memos*. Retrieved from http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/does-it-make-sense-expect-color-revolution-belarus

Nagy, P., & Neff, G. (2015). Imagined Affordance: Reconstructing a Keyword for Communication Theory. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2).

Navalny, A. (2017a). *Polnii Albats / Alexei Navalny // 07.08.17*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_UIJMArq4g

Navalny, A. (2017b). *On Vam Ni Dimon: Trebuyem Otvetov na Ulitse [Don't Call Him Dimon: We demand answers in the street]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=autcKY_2DvY

Navalny, A. (2017c, January 23). Tsentralnyy bank prikazal Yandeks.Dengam zablokirovat sbor sredstv na moyu prezidentskuyu kampaniyu [The central

bank ordered Yandex.Money to block the collection of funds for my presidential campaign]. Retrieved 4 November 2018, from Alexei Navalny website: https://navalny.com/p/5206/

Navalny, A. (2017d, April 12). Plan patriotov: Vykhodim na ulitsu, chtoby otprazdnovat' Den' Rossii [Patriots' plan: Walk out to celebrate the Day of Russia]. Retrieved 6 November 2018, from Alexei Navalny website: https://navalny.com/p/5326/

Navalny, A. (2018a). *Dedushka propal, a krugom sploshnyye zaderzhaniya [Grandpa has gone, and there are continuous detentions]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nt9N-DV1Ccs

Navalny, A. (2018b, March 19). Obrashcheniye ko vsem, kto razmyshlyayet nad itogami «vyborov» [An appeal to all who reflect on the outcome of the 'elections']. Retrieved 19 March 2018, from Alexei Navalny website: https://navalny.com/p/5818/

Navalny LIVE. (2018). *Debaty Navalnogo i Sobchak. Polnaya versiya [Navalny and Sobchak debates. Full version]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQeAy2ytMnU

Neuendorf, K. A. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook* (Second edition). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Neumayer, C., & Svensson, J. (2014). Activism and radical politics in the digital age Towards a typology. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*.

Niadzvietski, M. (2011). The level of web activism by candidates in the local elections 2010 (Minsk city). *Belarusian Political Science Review*, *3*(01), 169–176.

NN VIDEO TV. (2017). *«Marš aburanych bielarusaŭ» u Minsku / «Marš vozmuŝjennych bielorusov» v Minskie [The March of Outradged Belarusians in Minsk / The March of Outradged Belarusians in Minsk]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RLvp2BfHsw

Novikau, A. (2015). The evolution of the environmental movement in Belarus: From Chernobyl to global climate change. *Environmental Sociology*, *1*(2).

Novosti Shtabov Navalnogo. (2018, March 16). Murmansk. Retrieved from https://tgstat.com/channel/@nnovosti/32928

Oates, S. (2008). *Introduction to media and politics*. Los Angeles, CA; London: SAGE.

Oates, S. (2013). *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere*. Oxford University Press.

On assemblies, meetings, demonstrations, marches and pickets. Pub. L. No. 54, § 10, FZ (2004).

O'Reilly, K. (2005). *Ethnographic methods*. London; New York: Routledge.

Osborn, A. (2017, June 13). In Russia, state TV and the Internet tell a tale of two protests. *Reuters*. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-opposition-protests/in-russia-state-tv-and-the-internet-tell-a-tale-of-two-protests-idUSKBN1941XJ

Osborn, A. (2018, February 21). Putin nemesis Navalny, barred from election, tries political siege. Retrieved 14 August 2018, from Reuters website: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-election-navalny/putin-nemesis-navalny-barred-from-election-tries-political-siege-idUSKCN1G50RM

OSCE. (2016). *Belarus, Presidential Elections, 11 October 2015: Final Report*. Retrieved from The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe website: http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/belarus/218981

Pallin, C. V. (2017). Internet control through ownership: The case of Russia. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *33*(1).

Pankovsky, A, & Kostyugova, V. (Eds.). (2018). *Belarusian Yearbook 2018*. Retrieved from https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/get/yearbook2018en.pdf

Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Patriarche, G., Bilandzic, H., Jensen, J. L., & Jurisic, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Audience research methodologies: Between innovation and consolidation*. New York: Routledge.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3 ed). Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

Paulsen, M., & Zvereva, V. (2014). Testing and contesting Russian Twitter. In M. Gorham, I. Lunde, & M. Paulsen (Eds.), *Digital Russia: The language, culture and politics of new media communication*.

Pearce, C. L. (2004). The future of leadership: Combining vertical and shared leadership to transform knowledge work. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *18*(1), 47–57.

Pearce, K. E. (2015). Democratizing kompromat: The affordances of social media for state-sponsored harassment. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(10), 1158–1174.

Pearce, K. E., & Kendzior, S. (2012). Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan. *Journal of Communication*, *62*(2), 283–298.

Pink, S., Horst, H. A., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Poczobut, A. (2016, September 12). How democracy could become a threat. *New Eastern Europe*, (3–4). Retrieved from http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/2119-how-democracy-could-become-a-threat

Poell, T. (2014). Social media and the transformation of activist communication: Exploring the social media ecology of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*(6), 716–731.

Poell, T., Abdulla, R., Rieder, B., Woltering, R., & Zack, L. (2016). Protest leadership in the age of social media. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(7), 994–1014.

Poell, T., & van Dijck, J. (2016). Constructing Public Space: Global Perspectives on Social Media and Popular Contestation — Introduction. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*.

Poell, T., & van Dijck, J. (2018). Social Media and New Protest Movements. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (pp. 546–561). SAGE Publications.

Politi, J., & Roberts, H. (2017, September 17). Five Star Movement: The unanswered questions about Italy's populist party. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/546be098-989f-11e7-a652-cde3f882dd7b

Pomerantsev, P. (2014). *Nothing is true and everything is possible: The surreal heart of the new Russia* (First edition). New York: PublicAffairs.

Postill, J. (2014). Freedom technologists and the new protest movements: A theory of protest formulas. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *20*(4), 402–418.

Postill, J. (2017a). Doing remote ethnography. In L. Hjorth, H. A. Horst, A. Galloway, & G. Bell (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.

Postill, J. (2017b, June). *The media practices of social movements: A critical overview of the literature*. Invited lecture presented at the The Summer School on Media

in Political Participation and Mobilization, Florence, Italy. Retrieved from https://johnpostill.com/2017/06/23/the-media-practices-of-social-movements-a-critical-overview-of-the-literature/

Postill, J. (2018). *The Rise of Nerd Politics Digital Activism and Political Change*. London: Pluto Press.

Powell, L., & Cowart, J. (2003). *Political campaign communication: Inside and out*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Prucha, N. (2016). IS and the Jihadist Information Highway – Projecting Influence and Religious Identity via Telegram. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *10*(6). Retrieved from http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/556

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2009, September 16). Tenth Anniversary Of Belarus's 'Disappeared'. In *WATCHDOG*. Retrieved from https://www.rferl.org/a/Tenth_Anniversary_Of_Belaruss_Disappeared/1824314.html

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2017a). *Marš aburanych bielarusaŭ. UŽYVUJU | Marš vozmuŝjonnych bielarusov PRIAMAJA TRANSLIACIJA [The March of Outradged Belarusians. LIVE / The March of Outradged Belarusians. LIVE]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDvUuONT5wQ

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2017b). *За 100 сэкундаў: Zbor podpisaj suprać dekretu ab «darmajedztvie» | Tuniejadcy sobirajut podpisi [100 seconds: the collection of signatures against the decree on 'social parasites' | Parasites are collecting signatures]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQW73ragxLk

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2017c, February 13). Mienš za 10% «darmajedaŭ» splacili zbor. Zastalosia siem dzion [Less than 10% of 'parasites' paid a fee. They have seven days to pay]. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.svaboda.org/a/28306320.html

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2017d, March 15). Henadz Fiadynich: Peak Of Belarusians' Activity Is To Be March 25. *Charter 97*. Retrieved from https://charter97.org/en/news/2017/3/15/243821/

Ragozin, L. (2018, February 19). How Navalny changed the rules of the game in Russia. Retrieved 4 July 2018, from Al Jazeera English website: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/winner-russian-presidential-race-180218104653257.html

Rantanen, T. (2002). *The global and the national: Media and communications in post-Communist Russia*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield.

Reny, M.-E. (2016). Authoritarianism as a Research Constraint: Political Scientists in China*: Authoritarianism as a Research Constraint. *Social Science Quarterly*, *97*(4), 909–922.

Reporters without Borders. (2017). *World press freedom index* [2017 World Press Freedom Index]. Retrieved from Reporters without Borders website: https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2017

Reuter, O. J., & Szakonyi, D. (2015). Online Social Media and Political Awareness in Authoritarian Regimes. *British Journal of Political Science*, *45*(1), 29–51.

Rinke, E. M., & Röder, M. (2011). The Arab Spring| Media Ecologies, Communication Culture, and Temporal-spatial Unfolding: Three Components in a Communication Model of the Egyptian Regime Change. *International Journal of Communication*, *5*(0), 13.

RNS. (2018, February 26). Roskomnadzor snyal blokirovku s sayta Navalnogo iz-za rassledovaniya o Deripaske [Roskomnadz stopped the filtering of the site of Navalny because of the investigation in Deripaska]. Retrieved 4 November 2018, from RNS website: https://rns.online/internet/Roskomnadzor-snyal-blokirovku-s-saita-Navalnogo-iz-za-rassledovaniya-o-Deripaske-2018-02-26/?utm_source=push

Roberts, M. E. (2014). *Fear, Friction, and Flooding: Methods of Online Information Control* (Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University). Retrieved from https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/12274299

Robertson, G., & Greene, S. (2017). The Kremlin Emboldened: How Putin Wins Support. *Journal of Democracy*, *28*(4), 86–100.

Rod, E. G., & Weidmann, N. B. (2015). Empowering activists or autocrats? The Internet in authoritarian regimes. *Journal of Peace Research*, *52*(3), 338–351.

Rogers, K. (2016, April 14). Why Do Older People Love Facebook? Let's Ask My Dad. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/15/technology/why-do-older-people-love-facebook-lets-ask-my-dad.html

Rosenberg, T. (1987). Letter from Chile. *Columbia Journalism Review*, *26*(3).

Rowan, D. (2016). *Telegram's Pavel Durov*. In *Wired UK Podcast*. Retrieved from http://www.wired.co.uk/article/episode-256

Sahm, A. (2009). *Civil society and mass media in Belarus* (pp. 49–63). Retrieved from European Union Institute for Security Studies website: www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/back-from-the-cold-the-eu-and-belarus-in-2009

Sanovich, S. (2018). Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation. In S. C. Woolley & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*.

Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Tucker, J. A. (2018). Turning the Virtual Tables: Government Strategies for Addressing Online Opposition with an Application to Russia. *Comparative Politics*, *50*(3), 435–482.

Sartori, G. (1976). *Party and party systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Schneider, N. (2019). Decentralization: An incomplete ambition. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *0*(0), 1–21.

Schwartz, S. (2015). Campaigning and contestation: Comments on politicians' Facebook pages during the 2011 Danish general election campaign. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2). Retrieved from

Shaw, A., & Hill, B. M. (2014). Laboratories of Oligarchy? How the Iron Law Extends to Peer Production. *Journal of Communication*, *64*(2), 215–238.

Shea, P., Notley, T., Burgess, J., & Ballard, S. (2015). *Entanglements: Activism and technology: Editorial*. *26*. Retrieved from http://twentysix.fibreculturejournal.org/

Shehabat, A., Mitew, T., & Alzoubi, Y. (2017). Encrypted Jihad: Investigating the Role of Telegram App in Lone Wolf Attacks in the West. *Journal of Strategic Security*, *10*(3), 27–53.

Shih-hung, L. (2018, February 10). How Apple is Paving the Way to a 'Cloud Dictatorship' in China. Retrieved 12 February 2018, from Global Voices website: https://globalvoices.org/2018/02/10/how-apple-is-paving-the-way-to-a-cloud-dictatorship-in-china/

Shirky, C. (2009). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. London: Penguin Books.

Shmygov, V. (2017). *Protestnaya vesna v Belarusi. Vse 'Marshi netuneyadtsev' v odnoy infografike [The Spring of Protests in Belarus. All the "rallies of not-parasites " in one infographic]*. Retrieved from Tut.by website: https://news.tut.by/society/535509.html

Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes*. Los Angeles London New Delhi Singapore Washington DC: Sage.

Shtaby Navalnogo [Navalny Headquarters]. (n.d.). Retrieved 20 December 2018, from Shtaby Navalnogo website: https://shtab.navalny.com/

Shuster, S. (2018, September 20). How Putin's Oligarchs Got Inside the Trump Team. *Time*. Retrieved from http://time.com/5401645/putins-oligarchs/

Silitski, V. (2005). Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus. *Journal of Democracy*, *16*(4), 83–97.

Silitski, V. (2010). "Survival of the fittest:" Domestic and international dimensions of the authoritarian reaction in the former Soviet Union following the colored revolutions. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *43*(4), 339–350.

Sindelar, D. (2014, April 24). Durov, Activists Adjust Accordingly As Kremlin Cracks Down On Internet Rights. *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. Retrieved from http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-vkontakte-durov-internet-rights/25361362.html

Smok, V. (2017, August 10). Why do the authorities persecute independent trade unions? *Belarus Digest*. Retrieved from https://belarusdigest.com/story/why-the-authorities-persecute-independent-trade-unions/

Snow, D. (1987). Organization, ideology, and mobilization: The case of Nichiren Shoshu of America. In D. G. Bromley & P. E. Hammond (Eds.), *The Future of new religious movements*. Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press.

Snow, D., & Trom, D. (2002). The case study and the study of social movements. In B Klandermans & S. Staggenborg (Eds.), *The Methods of Social Movement Research* (Vol. 16, pp. 146–172). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Soldatov, A., & Borogan, I. (2015). *The red web: The struggle between Russia's digital dictators and the new online revolutionaries* (First edition). New York: PublicAffairs.

Soldatov, A., & Borogan, I. (2016, November 29). Putin brings China's Great Firewall to Russia in cybersecurity pact. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/putin-china-internet-great-firewall-russia-cybersecurity-pact

Soshnikov, A., & Reiter, S. (2019, May 3). *This man is not afraid to troll the Kremlin*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48132193

Spaiser, V., Chadefaux, T., Donnay, K., Russmann, F., & Helbing, D. (2017). Communication power struggles on social media: A case study of the 2011–12 Russian protests. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *14*(2).

Sparks, C., & Reading, A. (1998). *Communism, capitalism and the mass media*. London: SAGE.

Spence, A. (2018, March 10). This Huge Leak of WhatsApp Chats Reveals The Full Fury Of The Tories' Brexit Split. *BuzzFeed*. Retrieved from https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexspence/this-huge-leak-of-whatsapp-chats-reveals-the-full-fury-of

Spring96. (2017). *Spis achviaraǔ pierasliedu za akcyi hramadzianskaha i sacyjaĺnaha pratestu: Na 28 sakavika - Boĺš za 900 čalaviek [The list of the victims of persecution for acts of civic and social protest: As of March 28, more than 900 people]*. Retrieved from http://spring96.org/be/news/86188

Spring96. (2018, January 3). Minčuka asudzili za repost va UKantakcie infarmacyi pra kastryčnickuju akcyju «Lancuh pamiaci» [A Minsk resident convicted of sharing information on VK about the event "Memory Circuit" in October]. Retrieved 4 January 2018, from Human Rights Center 'Viasna' website: http://spring96.org/be/news/88713

Stein, E. (2016a). Are ICTs Democratizing Dictatorships? New Media and Mass Mobilization*. *Social Science Quarterly*, *98*(3), 914–941.

Stein, E. (2016b). Information and Civil Unrest in Dictatorships. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

Stockmann, D. (2013). *Media commercialization and authoritarian rule in China*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stockmann, D., & Gallagher, M. E. (2011). Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China. *Comparative Political Studies*, *44*(4), 436–467.

StopDesign. (2018, January 23). IT-infrastruktura shtabov Naval'nogo i sbor podpisey: Podgotovka k sboru, sayt «Naval'nyy 20!8» [The IT infrastructure of the headquarters of Navalny and collection of signatures: Preparation for collection, site 'Navalny 20!8']. *Habrahabr*. Retrieved from https://habrahabr.ru/company/fbk/blog/347312/

Strizhak, A. (2017, August 26). "Nesmotrya na ochevidnost' – ischerpyvayushchikh dokazatel'stv net" - fantasticheskaya analitika v Belarusi ["Despite the evidence - there is no exhaustive evidence" - a fantastic analysis in Belarus.] [GOLOS.io]. Retrieved 20 January 2018, from Andrewswift website:

https://golos.io/ru--politika/@andrewswift/nesmotrya-na-ochevidnost-ischerpyvayushikh-dokazatelstv-net-doklad-carika-i-sivickogo-kak-novoe-slovo-v-otechestvennoi

Szostek, J. (2015). Russian influence on news media in Belarus. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *48*(2–3), 123–135.

Tarkowski, A., Fathy, B., & Melyantsou, D. (2011). *From the network to the streets: Online tools and democratization in Egypt and Belarus* (No. 5). Retrieved from Policy Association for an Open Society website: https://lawsdocbox.com/Politics/66305808-From-the-network-to-the-streets-online-tools-and-democratization-in-egypt-and-belarus.html

Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (Rev. & updated 3rd ed). Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tarrow, S. (2014). Critical Dialogue. The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics. By Bennett W. Lance and Segerberg Alexandra. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 251p. $85.00 cloth, $29.99 paper. *Perspectives on Politics*, *12*(02), 468–470.

Telegram. (n.d.). Articles about Telegram. Retrieved 22 January 2018, from Telegram website: https://telegram.org/press

The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2019). *Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy*. Retrieved from The Economist Intelligence Unit website: https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/01/31/democracy-continues-its-disturbing-retreat

The Human Rights Center 'Viasna'. (2018, January 26). Blocking of Charter-97 further attack on freedom of speech in Belarus, HRDs say. Retrieved 21 March 2019, from Viasna website: http://spring96.org/en/news/88940

The Human Rights Center 'Viasna'. (2019, January 18). Picks of the week. Retrieved 21 March 2019, from The Human Rights Center 'Viasna' website: http://spring96.org/en/news/91855

The Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus. (2019). *Svedeniya o politicheskikh partiyakh, zaregistrirovannykh v Respublike Belarus [Information on political parties registered in the Republic of Belarus]*. Retrieved from https://minjust.gov.by/directions/compare_coverage/registration/information/

The Movement For Freedom. (2018, November 6). The MFF is admitted to the EPP. Retrieved 24 January 2019, from The Movement For Freedom website: http://pyx.by/eng/news/5657/

Tilly, C. (1979). Social Movements and National Politics. *Social Organization, Center for Research on - Working Paper Series (CRSO)*. Retrieved from https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/50971

Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious politics* (First). London: Paradigm Publishers.

Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (Second revised edition). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Toepfl, F. (2017). From connective to collective action: Internet elections as a digital tool to centralize and formalize protest in Russia. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–17.

Toepfl, F. (2018). Comparing Authoritarian Publics: The Benefits and Risks of Three Types of Publics for Autocrats. *Communication Theory*. Presented at the The 68th Annual International Communication Association conference, Prague.

Tolstrup, J. (2015). Black knights and elections in authoritarian regimes: Why and how Russia supports authoritarian incumbents in post-Soviet states: Black knights and elections in authoritarian regimes. *European Journal of Political Research*, *54*(4).

Trading Economics. (n.d.). Russia Average Monthly Wages. Retrieved 9 November 2018, from Trading Economics website: https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/wages

Treré, E. (2015). Reclaiming, proclaiming, and maintaining collective identity in the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico: An examination of digital frontstage and backstage activism through social media and instant messaging platforms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(8), 901–915.

Treré, E., & Mattoni, A. (2016). Media ecologies and protest movements: Main perspectives and key lessons. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(3), 290–306.

Tucker, J. A., Theocharis, Y., Roberts, M. E., & Barberá, P. (2017). From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media And Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *28*(4), 46–59.

Tufekci, Z. (2014). Social Movements and Governments in the Digital Age: Evaluating a Complex Landscape. *Journal of International Affairs*, *68*(1), 1–18.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven ; London: Yale University Press.

Turovskij, D. (2014). Boty – novye soldaty [Bots – new soldiers]. *Afisha*. Retrieved from http://mag.afisha.ru/stories/realnosti-ne-sushestvuet/telefon-novaya-semya/

TUT.BY. (2017). *Marsh rasserzhennykh belorusov [The March of Outradged Belarusians]*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfA8RaNXcwY

Uffelmann, D. (2014). Is there a Russian Cyber Empire? In M. Gorham, I. Lunde, & M. Paulsen (Eds.), *Digital Russia: The language, culture and politics of new media communication*. London; New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

United States Department of State. (2019a). *Belarus 2018 Human Rights report*. Retrieved from United States Department of State website: https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/289351.pdf

United States Department of State. (2019b). *Russia 2018 Human Rights report*. Retrieved from United States Department of State website: https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/289351.pdf

Vaiciunaite, K. (2014). The Potential of Civil Society in Belarus. In *Belarusian Regime Longevity: Happily Ever After*. Vilnius, Lithuania: Vilniaus universitetas.

Van Dalen, A., Fazekas, Z., Klemmensen, R., & Hansen, K. M. (2015). Policy Considerations on Facebook: Agendas, Coherence, and Communication Patterns in the 2011 Danish Parliamentary Elections. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *12*(3), 303–324.

van Dijck, J. (2013a). Social Media Platforms as Producers. In T. Olsson (Ed.), *Producing the Internet: Critical perspectives of social media*. Retrieved from http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/publikationer-hela-pdf/978-91-86523-59-6.pdf

van Dijck, J. (2013b). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*.

van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2015). Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2).

van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & Waal, M. de. (2018). *The platform society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vasilkova, V., Legostaeva, N., & Radushevskii, V. (2018). Botnets as an election campaign tool: A methodology for identification and analysis of network

publication activity. *IPP2018 Conference Papers*. Presented at the The
Internet, Policy & Politics Conference 2018.

Volkov, L. (2017a). *Leonid Volkov o kampanii Naval'nogo. Efir #001, 15.03 [Leonid
Volkov on the campaign of Navalny. #001, 15.03]*. Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44M6JyUMRs&t=1851s

Volkov, L. (2017b). *Leonid Volkov o kampanii Naval'nogo. Efir #002, 22.03 [Leonid
Volkov on the campaign of Navalny. # 002, 22.03]*. Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4Z_6cFC30M

Volkov, L. (2017c). *Oblako #011. Chto takoye «oblachnaya demokratiya». Gost' —
Fedor Krasheninnikov [Cloud #011. What is 'Cloud Democracy.'
Guestâ "Fedor Krasheninnikov]*. Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LopgE-43H58

Volkov, L. (2017d). *Shtab. Leonid Volkov o kampanii Naval'nogo. Efir #020
[Headquarters. Leonid Volkov on the Navalny campaign. #020]*. Retrieved
from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jD8tq4kyJI

Volkov, L. (2017e). *Shtab. Leonid Volkov o kampanii Naval'nogo. Efir #032
[Headquarters. Leonid Volkov on the Navalny campaign. #032]*. Retrieved
from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40VPBOONO9s

Volkov, L. (2017f, January 23). Finansy kampanii: Otchet po itogam maya [Campaign
Finance: May Report]. Retrieved 4 November 2018, from Leonid Volkov
website: https://www.leonidvolkov.ru/p/213/

Volkov, L. (2017g, April 14). Chetyre mesyatsa kampanii [Four months of the
campaign]. Retrieved 14 June 2019, from Leonid Volkov website:
https://www.leonidvolkov.ru/p/201/

Volkov, L. (2017h, April 25). Kak rabotayet kampaniya +1 [How the +1 campaign
works]. Retrieved 14 April 2018, from Leonid Volkov website:
https://www.leonidvolkov.ru/p/203/

Volkov, L. (2018a). *Chto budet dal'she s regional'nymi shtabami [What will happen
next to the regional headquarters]*. Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxzwAr6QMX0

Volkov, L. (2018b, 01). Finansovyy otchet po sostoyaniyu na konets 2017 goda
[Financial report as of the end of 2017]. Retrieved 29 January 2018, from
Leonid Volkov website: https://www.leonidvolkov.ru/t/36/

Volkov, L. (2018c, February 15). V shtabe Navalnogo soobshchili, chto «slomali bez
osobogo truda» blokirovku sayta navalny.com [The headquarters of Navalny

reports that they "broke without much difficulty" filtering of the site navalny.com]. Retrieved 9 November 2018, from Meduza website: https://meduza.io/news/2018/02/15/glava-shtaba-navalnogo-soobschil-chto-blokirovku-sayta-navalny-com-slomali-bez-osobogo-truda

Volkov, L. (2018d, March 1). Personal'nyye dannyye i vnimaniye k detalyam [Personal data and attention to detail]. Retrieved 13 April 2018, from Leonid Volkov website: https://www.leonidvolkov.ru/p/273/

Volkov, L. (2018e, April 25). Finalnyy finansovyy otchet kampanii Navalnogo [Final financial report of the Navalny campaign]. Retrieved 1 August 2018, from Leonid Volkov website: https://www.leonidvolkov.ru

Voltmer, K. (2012). How Far Can Media Systems Travel? In D. C. Hallin & P. Mancini (Eds.), *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Walker, C., & Orttung, R. W. (2014). Breaking the News: The Role of State-Run Media. *Journal of Democracy*, *25*(1), 71–85.

Walker, S. (2017, December 15). *Navalny's army of young people lead his improbable challenge to Putin*. Retrieved from https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-guardian-weekly/20171215/281689730157179

Warfield, K., Cambre, C., & Abidin, C. (2016). Introduction to the Social Media + Society Special Issue on Selfies: Me-diated Inter-faces. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(2).

Way, L. A. (2005). Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Regime Competitiveness in the Fourth Wave: The Cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. *World Politics*, *57*(2), 231–261.

We Are Social; Hootsuite. (2018). Digital in 2018: Eastern Europe. Retrieved from: http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-in-2017-eastern-europe

Weiss, R. S. (1995). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies* (First Free Press paperback ed). New York: Free Press.

Wells, C. (2015). *The civic organization and the digital citizen: Communicating engagement in a networked age*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Whitmore, B. (2017, March 10). Belarus's Almost Revolution. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-almost-revolution/28362355.html

Wilson, A. (2005). *Virtual politics: Faking democracy in the post-Soviet world* (1st ed). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Xinning, S. (2001). Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics. *Journal of Contemporary China*, *10*(26), 61–74.

Youmans, W. L., & York, J. C. (2012). Social Media and the Activist Toolkit: User Agreements, Corporate Interests, and the Information Infrastructure of Modern Social Movements. *Journal of Communication*, *62*(2), 315–329.

Yunanov, B. (2018, January 29). Navalny podnyal 100 gorodov [Navalny raised 100 cities]. Retrieved 30 May 2019, from New Times website: https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/143494

Zajácz, R. (2013). WikiLeaks and the problem of anonymity: A network control perspective. *Media, Culture & Society*, *35*(4), 489–505.

Zarakhovich, Y. (2005, April 12). Where Tyranny Rules. *Time*. Retrieved from http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1137614,00.html

Zenovina, V. (2016, July 7). Prezident RF podpisal antiterroristicheskiy 'paket Yarovoy' [The President of the Russian Federation signed the Yarovaya law, the anti-terrorism]. Retrieved 25 December 2018, from Garant.ru website: http://www.garant.ru/news/782190/

Zhang, Y., & Lee, F. L. F. (2018). Examining the Connectedness of Connective Action: The Participant-Initiated Facebook Pages in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. *International Journal of Communication*, *12*.

Zvereva, V. (2016). Battlefield Internet: Young Russian SNS Users and New-Media State Propaganda. In M. Schwartz & H. Winkel (Eds.), *Eastern European youth cultures in a global context*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan UK.