

**T**HE METHODOLOGY OF  
STUDYING “SPONTANEOUS”  
STREET ACTIVISM (RUSSIAN  
PROTESTS AND STREET CAMPS,  
DECEMBER 2011–JULY 2012).  
*Summary*

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### THE LOGICS OF DESCRIBING THE RUSSIAN PROTEST

The street protest movement that began in large Russian cities immediately after the parliamentary elections of December 4, 2011, has become an unpredictable and euphoric experience for both participants and observers. Mass mobilization was taking place for the first time after a twenty-year hiatus, during which street protests attracted at most a few hundred participants. Therefore, the main post-election question, embodying both sociological and political interest in the new phenomenon, was: who and why has come out to protest? The mass media and its “darlings” in the political opposition were quick to pronounce that the Russian streets had become the stage for a “revolt of the middle class,” “rallies of the [political] opposition,” and a “revolution of the creative class.” In late December, media feeds were supplemented with data collected by large polling agencies highlighting the “oppositional” electoral preferences of the protestors, their demographic characteristics, and a distorted typology of their professional identity.<sup>1</sup> In February 2012, when pro-government rallies were organized as counterprotests, media on both sides of the symbolic “barricades” began to actively exploit the paradigm of the “two Russias”: the pro-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, according to a closed-question questionnaire of the Levada-Center, 46 and 36 percent of the protestors on December 24, 2011, and February 4, 2012, respectively, were “specialists,” or “professionals.” This is problematic because, in contrast to English-speaking societies where “professionals” comprise a stable social and labor market category, Russian labor nomenclature lacks a precise equivalent. Therefore, respondents of very different professional positions and ranks could identify themselves as “specialists.”

Putin “popular” Russia and the oppositional “creative” Russia, seemingly representing two disjointed and conflictual social worlds. These hasty and simplified interpretations considerably distorted the meaning of the events as experienced by participants or replaced it with ready-made political clichés.<sup>2</sup>

The Independent Research Initiative *NII mitingov*, a self-governing group of researchers and activists, was guided by a fundamentally different logic in our work. What set us apart was our interest in first-time protesters, who previously stayed away from politics, and in the meanings and biographical circumstances that these spontaneous activists brought to the protest movement. The group’s activity is marked by a dual—academic and activist—interest; it consists of not only professional sociologists and sociology students but also of other young professionals, including an artist, a manager, and a rocket scientist. At two of the rallies, while conducting the interviews, the researchers distributed a booklet of participants’ (and not media “leaders”) first-person testimonials about protests, collected at previous rallies, and a leaflet urging demonstrators to discuss amongst themselves the same questions that were in the researchers’ interview guide. In general, the group’s activism can be characterized as aimed at empowering the protesters vis-à-vis self-appointed spokespeople and at consciousness raising about social issues and direct democracy.

For methodological considerations, the most “tempting” question—“Why did you come to the rally?”—was from the very beginning excluded from the interview guide, because it assumes that the motives are transparent to the participants themselves. In a saturated field of media interpretations, the probability of getting answers that would mimic the nominal agenda of protests—“election do-overs” or demands for “honest government”—was too high. At the same time, answers to less directed questions about motives have revealed a high degree of uncertainty, even when explaining one’s own involvement: “Well ... *frankly speaking, I expect a continuation*” (Moscow, December 24, male, approx. 25 y.o., higher ed., cableman); “*By and large, I do not expect anything, unfortunately. And yet, I dream of magic that will change something*” (Paris, December 24, female, approx. 45 y.o., higher ed., graphic artist). The most common responses expressed the most vague expectations: “[I expect that] *people will finally wake up and feel that their word means something*” (Moscow, December 24, female, approx. 40 y.o., higher ed., project manager); “... *that the regime will react in some way*” (male, 40–50 y.o., biologist). One of the most frequently expressed intentions behind their own participation was to make “the authorities to finally listen up.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The extended Russian-language version of this article has a separate section devoted to the analysis of media interpretations of the Russian protest movement. It highlights fundamental differences between protestors’ self-identifications and the identities that the Russian and international media have imposed on them (in particular, by identifying the rallies’ participants as the “middle class”).

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to juxtapose this desire with the term “political alienation,” which was developed empirically in American and British political sociology of the late 1950s–1960s (Thompson and Horton 1960; Gamson 1961; Parkin 1968). According to these studies, it is self-

Inclusion in interviews of topics outside of the oppositions’ nominal demands—about participants’ social belonging or spontaneous social agendas—has proved worthwhile. It was precisely these questions that allowed us to show that an absolute minority of interviewees identified with the “middle class” and that even those who did, did so with reservations: “Well, I suppose, theoretically, we are probably the middle class” (Moscow, December 24, female, approx. 55 y.o., higher ed., translator) or “I hope to belong to the middle class, but, to be honest, I have only a vague notion of what it is” (male, approx. 25 y.o., higher ed., PR-manager).<sup>4</sup> These questions have also revealed that coming out together against the corrupt government does not lead to a harmonization of views on social policy and does not problematize, for example, the alliance of advocates of the welfare state and those who wish the poor to “croak in the gutter” (Bikbov 2012a).

At a total of nine “anti-government”<sup>5</sup> and four pro-government rallies (from December 24, 2011, through June 12, 2012), as well as in street camps *Okkupai* (from May 7 to early July 2012), *NII mitingov* collected about 500 individual and group (usually couples) interviews, lasting from 90 seconds to 90 minutes.<sup>6</sup> Sampling during the protests was not based on any illusion of statistical representativeness. Rallies, marches, and street camps are all dynamic environments with opaque mechanisms of social zoning. In addition, the research group was captured by activism as much as by research, and therefore the situational selection of interviewees remained an appealing (and difficult to censor), albeit peculiar, opportunity to participate fully in the collective action. The selection of each respondent occurred on the spot, amidst the action, and was based on spontaneously defined social contrasts: alternating interviews with men and women, old and young, fashionably and poorly dressed, singles and couples, bystanders and deeply engaged participants, those in the thick of things and those on the periphery, participants with signs and without, under banners of political groups, with white ribbons or without any identifying symbols, and so on.

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powerlessness and alienation from decision making at local and national levels that could be the main factor in the protest vote and activism and could lead to an increased awareness of one’s role in social life.

<sup>4</sup> For more about the fictitiousness of the term “middle class” as the main category of mobilization for these rallies, see Bikbov 2012b.

<sup>5</sup> These include seven large rallies/marches, some of which took place at the same time in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Izhevsk, Saratov, and Paris. Anywhere between ten and over a hundred interviews were conducted at each of these events.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Amerkhanov, Alexander Bikbov, Alexandrina Vanke, Ksenia Vin’kova, Anna Grigoryeva, Svetlana Erpyleva, Anastasiya Kalk, Carine Clément, Georgii Konovalov, El’vira Kul’chitskaia, Pavel Mitenko, Olga Nikolaeva, Mariia Petrukhina, Egor Sokolov, Irina Surkichanova, Arsenii Sysoev, Denis Tailakov, Ekaterina Tarnovskaia, Aleksandr Tropin, Alexander Fudin, and Dar’ia Shafrina have been involved in the collection and analysis of the data at various times.

## INTERVIEWS FROM STREET ACTIONS: THE STATUS OF THE DATA

Studying professional or traditional political mobilizations, the researcher always has somewhere to go for interviews in between street actions—whether it is the headquarters of a party or an association, or a gathering of an activist or professional group. A peculiar feature of the current Russian protests, with the rare and nonrepresentative exception of the movement of electoral observers, is the lack of institutional structures for mobilization—that is, venues of collective action other than the rallies and street camps themselves. This makes interviews during street actions the preferred, if not the only, opportunity to access a broad and representative circle of participants. The technical and environmental circumstances of street interviews have had distinct effects on the data set: 25-degree cold (in December–February) limiting the duration of interviews; participants’ desire to pay closer attention to what was going on at earlier rallies; conversations interrupted by an approaching police contingent (at rallies and camps in May); the necessity to maintain a sufficient distance from the main stage so that the amplified voices of speakers would not record over the interviewee’s, which shifted the spontaneous selection of respondents to the periphery of rallies. In addition, interviewing during protests, less detached than a usual journalistic interview or a pollster inquiry, constructed a tacit pact of collaboration when the researchers engaged their interlocutors as one participant to another. Euphoria and the extreme openness of the protesters were expressed through the willingness of respondents to answer questions in great detail.<sup>7</sup> However, the same emotional high and novelty of the collective emotions might put certain question marks over the quality of the data.

Interviewing during protest actions has a number of advantages over the post-factum reconstruction of events. In the margins of her retrospective study of American social movements, Francesca Polletta notes the risk of asynchronous “filtration” and fragmentation of data in the participants’ memories (Polletta 2002:237). But interviews undertaken during an event are not immune from similar methodological problems. Academic discussions have questioned the interviewing practices of *NII mitingov* pointing, in particular, to the fragmentation of responses due, this time, not to forgetfulness about previous events but to the “in the moment” intensity of the experience. In fact, the euphoric openness of the protest participants did not distort interviewees’ responses about their professions and educational backgrounds. But it might indeed color their answers to questions that were more closely linked to the collective emotions experienced during the interviews. This can be seen, in particular, in overly positive and optimistic expectations of a swift social change: “[What do I expect?] *That everyone becomes accountable. That the laws simply worked, that courts were fair, the army was strong ... Well, that is, that all worked and functioned normally*” (Moscow, February 4, male, approx. 30 y.o., higher ed., engineer); or in welcoming all tactics and opponents within a single protest movement: “*It is as*

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the only notable exceptions were the representatives of nationalist organizations, who regularly answered the “wrong” questions or abruptly disengaged from the conversation.

*though the whole [political] spectrum is represented here and all kinds of people stand peacefully shoulder to shoulder. This is how a normal society should be organized"* (Moscow, December 24, female, approx. 50 y.o., higher ed., chief accountant).

Juxtaposed with this positive homogeneity is the question of self-reflexive memory work pointing to critical circumstances surrounding the decision to participate in the protest: *"Somewhere during the summer [of 2011], probably, we realized that it was time. Simply, Naval'nyi and also Chirikova and the entire structure of their organization decided to do it and brought people out into the street through the Internet, through Facebook. Yes, we went to the rally [organized] by PARNAS [in April 2011]... Yes, and [the case of] Magnitsky, of course"*<sup>8</sup> (Moscow, December 24, male and female, approx. 25 y.o., higher ed.; male—an employee of a website design company). In this category also belong detailed lists of sources of information about the rallies. Among other things, the interviews have shown that social networks, which are often juxtaposed with mainstream media as mobilizing mechanisms, did not in fact play an exclusive role in coordination of the protests. They, alongside the mainstream media, were primarily a source of information about the time and place of the rallies and a forum to discuss street protests' ideological issues and ethical codes.

A third pole in the data set is represented by quasi-expert opinions about social issues (education, health, taxes), about which the respondents often pointed to their own lack of authority to discuss, or to the fact that they had never previously thought about these issues. Such reservations are also evidence of self-reflexivity, which allow us to treat these replies as quite credible preferential expressions: not as clearly articulated political views on social issues but as spontaneous social sensibilities, closely linked to the social position and trajectory of the respondents.

Thus, the statements of participants interviewed at the rallies are affected by their emotional experience of unity—the pole of current events—and often also by a clear and differentiating self-reflexivity—on the pole of the biographical experience. The point of convergence of these poles are answers to the question: "When/how did you first decide that you were going to the rally?" They revealed that the demonstrators experienced the protest movement and their own involvement in it in a very peculiar way. Regardless of participants' actual date of joining protests, often their answers to this question began with the words: "always," "long ago," "I go all the time," "at once," "from the very beginning." This experience of the time of mobilization as an infinite moment, in part due to participatory euphoria, indicates the immediate and easy identification by demonstrators as the protagonists of massive, non-violent, legally organized actions.

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<sup>8</sup> These are references to (much smaller) street actions prior to mass rallies of late 2011–2012. Aleksei Naval'nyi is a well-known blogger and initiator of crowdsourcing projects against corruption; Evgeniia Chirikova has become famous for her eco activism against construction of a highway that would cut through a forest outside of Moscow; PARNAS (Party of People's Freedom) is one of the oldest "liberal" parties in Russia; and Sergei Magnitsky was a lawyer who in 2008 discovered massive embezzlement of tax revenue, was imprisoned on fictional charges, and died in detention in 2009 under highly suspicious circumstances.

### **“SPONTANEOUS” ACTIVISM BETWEEN ANGER, IRONY, AND OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW**

Nonviolent street protests happening under the banner of “no revolution” and not organized by any one of the existing groups or movements,<sup>9</sup> have become a site for the spontaneous gathering of citizens who had never met before but who, due to their numeric and symbolic advantage over militant protestors, claim to represent legality and “honest” stability.<sup>10</sup> Such involvement is inseparable from a desire to “just go out to see how many people support the same point of view” (Moscow, December 24, female, approx. 25 y.o., higher ed., researcher); “to see the mood of the masses, what led them out [on the streets]” (female, approx. 70 y.o., higher ed., political functionary); “to listen to the speakers, to see how many people turn out, just to be there” (female, approx. 25 y.o., secondary ed., IT worker). This further emphasizes the nature of participation in the mobilization as an epistemic act (rather than as strictly politically or electorally motivated actions), with all the uncertainty of its possible outcomes.

The nature of the protest is determined not only by the dispositions of participants but also by the rallies’ framework. The legal status of street actions is the most important component of such framework as it directly affects the number and composition of the protestors. Even long before the December 2011 mass mobilization, activists’ internal communications highlighted that the phrase “the rally is permitted [by the city authorities]” in press releases and announcements on social networks was a crucial invitational signal to potential non-activist participants, who usually feared being detained by police. From this perspective, the 2011–2012 mass protests in Russian cities are clear examples of a compromising, and therefore especially interesting, formula of participation, which is reproduced from rally to rally.

For example, a liberal opposition group, *Solidarnost’*, had scheduled (two weeks in advance) a permitted rally for 300 participants<sup>11</sup> to take place on December 5, 2011, the day after the parliamentary election, to protest presumed electoral fraud. Information about the rally was broadcast as a paid advertisement by the popular radio station Echo of Moscow and, on December 5, was picked up by some opinion leaders in their blogs. According to various estimates, the rally was attended by two thousand (police data) or ten thousand (*Novaia gazeta* newspaper) people. A similar mobilizing scheme was replicated at the next mass rally. A permit request for 300 people had been filed before the election by members of two informal organizations, *Solidarnost’* and the Left Front. However, during the permit negotiation, the political representation of the opposition shifted: the Moscow mayor’s office started

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<sup>9</sup> Judging by public statements and blog posts, prior to December 4, 2011, media and political personalities who found themselves in the foreground of the mobilization had not anticipated and were not prepared for a potentially “dangerous” mass street action.

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the corrupt “stability”—the key (in critics’ opinion) definition of the current political regime in Russia.

<sup>11</sup> According to Russian law, the authorization of street actions is always given for a maximum number of participants, and if this number is exceeded, the applicants are subject to fines.

negotiations for a new venue and a different number of expected participants not with the initial applicants but with a group of more prominent opposition politicians, who, in turn, created a committee that negotiated with the authorities about all subsequent large protest actions. As a result, the December 10 rally was given a permit for 30,000 participants but in a different location than first requested. It was attended by 25,000 (police data) or 80,000 people (according to the organizers). Organizers of the February 4, 2012, rally in Moscow applied for a permit for 15,000 people while the number of actual participants was, according to various estimates, between 36,000 and 120,000. The fiction of applying for a permit for 300 or even 15,000 people while scores more actually turn out is, for the majority of participants in these rallies, less of a problem than taking part in a spontaneous, unpermitted event or the refusal of militant participants to negotiate with "crooks," including Moscow city administration, which is inevitably tainted by electoral fraud. Even the minimal compliance of the protest with the law trumps much of the distrust and fear triggered by "illegal" actions and completely autonomous self-organization.

Leitmotifs of the protests' moderation and compliance with the law find the most clear expression in the following statements: "We do not need a revolution" and "I'm against violence," which are repeatedly voiced in electronic media and in interviews at rallies and which, among other things, imply a contrast between the cultured protest and the crude regime. Some protestors put an extra-positive and overoptimistic spin on their own actions, emphasizing their legality: "*I believe the opposition should exist, but I would not spoil my ballot because it is a law-defying act*" (Moscow, December 24, female, approx. 30 y.o., higher ed., lawyer); "[What can I do personally?] *I can do the right thing* [laughs]. *Abide by the laws, be good to the people around me. Anybody can do that*" (female, approx. 25 y.o., secondary ed., IT worker). A similar disposition exists in street camps, where the core participants are concerned with abiding by the formal requirements of the law and take initiative to ensure that attendees stay off the lawns and do not bring protest signs. The obviously pragmatic nature of this collective self-control—a reluctance to give the police any excuses for arrests—ties in with the utopian legalism of some participants who wish, for example, to register the entire social movement as a single legal entity or to receive authorizations from the mayor's office for every *Okkupai* assembly, which, in their opinion, would make the assemblies' decisions more significant and, at the same time, stop provocateurs already at the metal-detectors<sup>12</sup>.

The protest participants' public expressions of anger became a response to the communicative game played by some opinion leaders (journalists and bloggers) who, in the beginning, took it upon themselves to express publicly their disgust for Russia's current regime. For several months prior, they had been offering or reproducing

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<sup>12</sup> All street actions in Russian cities that receive municipal authorization are, as a result, "ghetto-ized" within the urban space. Police cordons are organized to "protect the security of the participants" and, obviously, to isolate them from passersby. For the same "security" reasons, metal-detectors are installed at the entrance to the rally and attendees' personal belongings are examined; therefore, in most cases the action is securely cut off from any accidental participants and from routine urban life as a whole.

emotionally labeled, subversive descriptions of the regime: election fraud as “vote theft,” the ruling party as unpunished “crooks” who “have frazzled everybody out,” police as “boorish persecutors,” and so on. When such a language of anger and humiliation is used not by socially dominated groups but by media personalities and gossip columnists, it only boosts its paradoxically subversive-legitimizing effect. Therefore, when respondents report at the rally, “*And I came out [to the protest] because I got fed up. Law enforcement agencies don’t exist [here], nor do fair courts or the state. It’s a mess here!*” (Moscow, December 24, male, approx. 60 y.o., housing-maintenance worker); “*Swine don’t leave their trough voluntarily*” (male, approx. 50 y.o., higher ed., test flight pilot); and so on, they operate within established and publicly licensed emotional and discursive frameworks.

The irony complementing this public anger is more often demonstrated by young protestors and is a reaction to the actions or statements of senior government officials. It most clearly manifested in the playful nature of protest signs, which, despite their seeming lightheartedness, laid a claim to power over reality (Maiofis 2011). To a large extent, these playful signs are also the result of prior “rehearsals” in online forums and communities. Therefore, public irony has become a mode of protest in which political criticism shifts away from the “serious” and thus the dangerous signified (i.e., the regime) to the manipulation of the signifier. The latter shifts political appeals to the powerful opponent into a space of a competitive repartee “between friends” to see who is funnier.

In general, the rejection of violence, which is to be expected of people holding one or two university degrees and employed in the non-material sector (who were overrepresented in the protest movement), as well as the somewhat playful and deliberately law-abiding nature of protest, fueled by mass participation, clearly separates the current wave of protest from the agenda of radical change that typified the mass movement in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s–early 1990s which expressed not only substantively different expectations but also different forms of anger and hope.<sup>13</sup>

## THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH ON THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

There are factors that provide a better explanation for participation in street activism than the resonance of demonstrators’ social characteristics of age, education, occupation, or their social alignment with the rallies’ nominal agenda as voiced by self-appointed organizing committees or by speakers on the stage. The majority of protestors have higher educations, which they value. Also significant is the participation of people with “nonlinear” social trajectories, for example a janitor who used to be a librarian with a specialized secondary education, who for many years has continued her self-education and “meditations on life” thanks to her access to library collections. The juxtaposition of the “culturedness” of the protest and the “stupidity” and “boorishness” of the regime, the collective admiration of the “soulful

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<sup>13</sup> The photographs that accompany the original Russian version of the article (pp. 130–163) highlight in more detail the atmosphere of current protests.

faces" of the rally goers, the thesis about the role of protests in the "restoration of human dignity," as well as the hyper-intellectuality of homemade protest signs, express skepticism about the world of institutionalized politics through a moderately subversive language of angry irony and optimistic obedience to the law. All of these are different expressions of the same disposition: the insistence on the role of education and intellect in an "honest" social system. The supremacy that protesters give to culture and rules over politics and struggle is reminiscent of the German urban/bourgeois principle of *Bildung*, an individual self-construction via practicing culture, which, according to its most consistent interpreters from Arthur Schopenhauer to Thomas Mann, lacks a political dimension (Bruford [1975] 2009:228–230).

The street protests did not have a clear social agenda and did not produce a new political unity expressed in a social (or class) representation. However, beyond the general, socially indeterminate demands we can detect another, more fundamental principle of mobilization that unites a large part of the interviewees. It is the experience of governing their own lives: searching for employment, freelancing or entrepreneurship, involvement in research or teaching, frequent travel abroad and within the country, participation in online or neighborhood community organizations. In some cases, interviewees had been occasionally involved in charity and volunteer projects, local environmental initiatives, or served as election observers, all of which allowed them to exercise a form of power over themselves and others. This practice of being in charge of their lives, projected from the level of finding employment and participating in local initiatives to the level of mass rallies and even more so of street camps, which have become new urban spaces of communication and cooperation, has been an important factor in their experience of protests outside of the framework of personalized political leadership. The formula "We did not come here for you," which participants of self-organized groups address to the opposition "stars" on the rallies' stage, reflects both the current distrust in institutionalized politics in general and an unambiguous claim of protesters to self-representation.

The precedence of intelligence over politics, of personal experience over institutional representation, and of the rule of law over radical changes have devalued the narrow electoral meaning of protests as opposition to rigged elections. Supporting a particular oppositional group or personality, protesters have often been guided by the principle of the lesser evil ("anyone but Putin," "for anyone but the United Russia [Party]<sup>14</sup>"). In this sense, pundits' calculations of the 2011–2012 electoral preferences as voters' individual and responsible choices suffered from serious methodological errors, as would the reduction of the entire street mobilization to a demand for fair elections. Like the painstaking scrutiny of votes cast, which was largely a critical test of dishonest state bodies privatized by bureaucrats to influence outcomes, demands for election do-overs represent much deeper and somewhat utopian expectations: the belief in an honest society, honest stability, and the opportunity to govern one's own life. Further examination of the transformation of social sensibilities during the

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<sup>14</sup> United Russia is the "party of power," which has a majority in the Russian parliament and has served as the base for the reelection of Vladimir Putin as President and, more generally, for the succession of the political regime created in the early 2000s.

entire period of street mobilization, detriivialization of “obvious” corruption and lawlessness, development of practices of individual and collective autonomy, and a reverse projection of the experience of mass mobilization to the level of local (including professional) interactions are the most promising directions for future research.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Anna Paretskaya*

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