

## When Life Gives You Lemons: Alexei Navalny's Electoral Campaign

By Jan Matti Dollbaum, Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

### Abstract

Since the opposition politician and anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny announced his plan to become president in 2018, his team has built one of the most extensive political campaigns in post-Soviet Russia. In the context of electoral authoritarianism, the competition takes place on a highly uneven playing field. Although it remains unlikely that he will be allowed to run in the election, the campaign's central strategy—to turn obstacles into advantages—confronts Russia's political leadership with its first real challenge in years.

### Navalny: I'm Running

In December 2016, Navalny declared his intention to take part in the 2018 presidential elections. With this decision, he substantiated his claim for leadership within the Russian non-systemic opposition. Navalny had begun his political career as an activist for Yabloko's Moscow branch, quickly climbing the party hierarchy. Yet in 2007, the party expelled him, pointing to his nationalist statements (Navalny himself asserts the real reason was his criticism of Yabloko leader Grigori Yavlinsky). After that, he founded the organization "The People" (NAROD), which called itself "democratic nationalist" and claimed to advance the interests of ethnic Russians, yet rhetorically distanced itself from radical nationalists and cooperated with democratic opposition forces. And although he removed all nationalist rhetoric from his current campaign, some liberals and leftists still uneasily remember Navalny's appearances at the "Russian Marches" until 2011 and his nationalist positions in his blog (see Moen-Larsen 2014). In the elections to the Coordination Council of the Opposition, a short-lived attempt to institutionalize the heterogeneous For Fair Elections movement in 2012, Navalny gained the most votes of all 209 candidates. His effective campaign in the 2013 mayoral elections in Moscow, where he received 27% and almost forced the Kremlin-backed candidate Sergey Sobyanin into a run-off, then finally established him as the most serious challenger to the current political system.

In parallel to his political career, Navalny became the country's best-known anti-corruption activist. As a minor shareholder of several large energy companies, he has access to some of the firms' internal documents. These form the basis of large-scale investigations into the entanglements of big business, state corporations and the administrative elite. Additionally, with a team of capable lawyers and IT-savvy colleagues, he built crowd-based mechanisms for corruption detection and automatic complaint filing. The results of this activity are brought to the public in stylish, often sarcastic video clips that hit a nerve on social media. His most successful piece, a 45-minute film on the alleged cor-

ruption of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, has been viewed over 25 million times. And indeed, absent neutral (let alone positive) coverage on state-controlled television, social media is the single most important way for Navalny to engage with the electorate.

### Khozhdenie v narod—The Regional Campaign

Equally central for his efforts to increase his popularity on the ground is the creation of a regional network of supporters. The electoral law requires presidential candidates without the backing of a party to assemble 300,000 signatures from at least 40 regions, with no more than 7,500 coming from each region. Furthermore, these signatures can only be collected after the elections have officially been called, which cannot happen earlier than 100 days before election day. If, as planned, elections will take place on 18 March 2018 (the date of the annexation of Crimea in 2014), Navalny can start collecting signatures in December and must end in late January, as the signatures have to be handed in 45 days before election day. It is obvious that in so short a time, no powerful campaign can be wielded, especially given the extended holidays around New Year. This design of electoral rules is part of a larger strategy common to electoral authoritarian regimes: while elections are the most important channels to fill political offices, the rules of the competition are skewed in favor of the established set of actors—in this case the candidates of United Russia and the systemic opposition.

The campaign openly acknowledges this structural disadvantage, and faces it head on: their strategy is to build a network of supporters *before* the signatures can officially be gathered. Thus, since February 2017, the team has been opening offices in big cities across the country, with the aim of being represented on the ground in 77 (of the officially 85) regions. In each regional "team," the campaign pays for three or four staff members. This paid core recruits volunteers for street and online agitation and collects data from citizens willing to be called upon when the signature gathering starts. At the time of writing, the campaign claims to

have collected such promises from over 630,000 people. They strive for one million—not only for the symbolic number, but also to be on the safe side: Electoral commissions are notorious for denying candidates registration on the grounds of allegedly flawed signatures.

### Turning Obstacles into Opportunities

With his regional campaign, Navalny tries to make the most out of the existing rules of the game. While the regulations are designed to keep unwelcome contenders off the ballot, they also motivate upstart opposition figures to intensively engage with the electorate: Volunteers must be found for the work on the ground, citizens must be persuaded to give their personal data to the campaign. Moreover, being able to show broad regional support demonstrates closeness to the people. While Navalny's campaign represents a liberal, digital and entrepreneurial Russia, it tries to avoid being perceived as elitist—a stigma that still undermines support for liberal politics in Russia. Hence the recurrent emphasis on crowd funding as the campaign's only financial resource,<sup>1</sup> and hence the strategic importance of a supporter base outside the capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Yet, no matter how much effort is invested, the authorities have the final say on whether Navalny will run. In February, he was convicted of fraud in the "Kirovles" case and issued a suspended five-year prison term. As the alleged crime was ruled to be "severe," the electoral law precludes him from standing for elections. The court of appeal upheld the ruling in May. Consequently, Navalny can only take part in the presidential elections if the High Court annuls the ruling (possibly as a consequence of a decision by the European Court of Human Rights, as happened before), or if the Constitutional Court, to which Navalny announced he will appeal, rules the Kirovles verdict unconstitutional. Theoretical chances exist since the constitution does not explicitly discuss the restriction of an individual's right to run for public office following a suspended sentence.

Nevertheless, neither is likely to happen. But again, the campaign's strategy is to turn obstacles into advantages. First, pretending to conduct a normal electoral campaign in highly unfavorable circumstances bolsters one of Navalny's main messages: a demand for normality. Navalny thus tries to use the environment in which he is campaigning as a framing resource—the state as a dreadful and incompetent Leviathan is set against the

vision of a modern, well-functioning set of institutions that his campaign embodies.

Second, the campaign seeks to use every instance of repression for an immediate counter-attack. Any court proceeding conducted against Navalny becomes a stage for political speeches: In his concluding remarks in the Kirovles case, publicized later, Navalny directly addressed the judges, the procurator and even the guard in the court room, arguing that they could immensely improve their living conditions if they would deny their support to a regime that benefits only a few thousand members of the elite. Furthermore, each of the many harassments against the regional campaign offices is posted and commented on via social media. Depending on the severity of the attacks, these instances are either used to lament the regime's indecency—or to ridicule it.

### Protest Politics

Yet, the campaign does not just try to capitalize on arbitrary actions by the regime: Through well-placed provocations it forces the authorities to react, which often elicits clumsy and not always lawful responses by the lower bureaucracy. This strategy is most articulate in street protests. On 26 March and 12 June 2017, the campaign organized the largest demonstrations since the For Fair Elections protests in 2011/12. Mobilizing on an anti-corruption message, the campaign brought tens of thousands to the streets—in a hundred cities across the country. The response was fierce: on 12 June, over 1,000 people were detained, more than 700 of them in Moscow, where Navalny changed plans in the last minute and called on his supporters to gather at a place that had not been agreed upon with the authorities.

The second, currently ongoing wave of large public events is framed, with ostentatious naivete, as a tour of meetings between the presidential candidate Navalny and his supporters. The campaigners plan to conduct such meetings—read: mass demonstrations—in 50 cities before December. Yet, after the first two weekends of meetings (including a rally in Yekaterinburg with several thousand participants), these plans were stalled, when local authorities started to decline the campaign's requests for conducting the events. According to the law on public gatherings, demonstrations must be registered. Yet the law only grants local authorities the right to suggest an alternative time of day or another spot in the city. It does not provide for outright rejections. Referring to this law, the campaign in turn announced that it would treat such rejections as non-answers, which are judicially tantamount to permissions. On 29 September, shortly after this announcement, Navalny and his chief of staff Leonid Volkov were arrested and charged with calling for participation in non-sanctioned protest actions.

<sup>1</sup> The campaign publicizes the sums of collected money and the way it is used, but remains silent on the sources of donations. From personal conversations with people close to the campaign, however, the author knows that financial support not only takes the form of small donations by private citizens but also comes from owners of small and medium enterprises.

They spent the next 20 days in jail. Upon release, when the series of meetings was to be continued and local authorities declined virtually all requests, the campaign changed tactics: in addition to sending out hundreds of further requests, they apply to private owners of urban space, such as central parking lots or large indoor areas, since in such cases no consultation with authorities is needed.

### Programmatic and Organizational Trade-Offs

Behind this strategy, which always claims to have the law on its side (indeed several recent court cases against local authorities have been won), stands Leonid Volkov, a former businessman and political activist from Yekaterinburg. Volkov enjoys high respect among the regional activists of the campaign for his evident organizational talent. Yet, the impressive efficiency of the campaign is made possible through strict hierarchy and division of labor. Regional offices have to meet hard targets of volunteer agitation and signature gathering, which are regularly checked in great detail by the Moscow headquarters. In a few cases, local coordinators have been fired due to inefficient work on the ground. Decisions by the center cannot be overruled. This strictness raises some eyebrows among the local staff, but it does not meet resistance. However, those outside critics who point to an authoritarian leadership style and compare the campaign to a corporate machine rather than a movement certainly have a point.

Efficiency thus has a price, and so does Navalny's effort to appeal to leftists, liberals and an unpolitical audience alike. His program (to which supporters cannot contribute from the bottom up) is vague, weak on details, and has been attacked from many sides. Leftists see the resurgence of market radicalism in his plan to abolish taxes for small businesses, while liberals hesitate to embrace his promises of increased social spending and a monthly minimum wage of 25,000 rubles. Yet, Navalny's claim for "normality" might indeed be a sensible common denominator. A "normal" government that invests in education and infrastructure, a "normal" state with functioning, non-corrupt institutions that respect political freedoms and civic rights, and a "normal" market economy, where profits are not shipped to offshore tax havens—this may not sound like an exciting program. But it is this centrism, plus his persistent rhetorical attacks on oligarchs, that makes it difficult to dismiss Navalny as yet another of the much-disliked reformers of the 1990s. His statements on foreign policy are an equally carefully designed walk on the tight-

rope: he condemns Russia's intervention in the Donbass, but only on strategic, not moral grounds, and he does not fully reject the annexation of Crimea. Instead, he demands a "normal" referendum, i.e. one that is conducted with respect to democratic standards.

The economic eclecticism and his charismatic, authoritative appearance make Navalny a candidate that is not entirely unlike Putin. This is not without reason in a situation where the current president is probably backed by a majority of the populace. Existing programmatic differences, on the other hand, are stressed aggressively: plans to conduct a major campaign against corrupt bureaucrats and oligarchs, to make the judiciary politically independent, and to liberalize the political competition are recurrent elements in his speeches and videos. Bringing home these points is important, but equally important is to undermine the population's trust in Putin as a person—as his power rests upon this trust. Therefore, the relentless series of videos exposing corruption in Putin's inner circle keep sending the same message: if Putin tolerates these excesses, he is not worth the people's support—no matter what his policies are.

### Conclusion

Alexey Navalny's campaign tries to make the best out of the regulations and practices of electoral authoritarianism. It uses every opportunity that the state must give to uphold at least a democratic facade—and provokes the regime into crossing the boundary. Repression, then, is immediately turned into a source of negative framing. The campaign shows the corruption and repressiveness of the regime on every smartphone screen, and mobilizes thousands of people who demand a choice at the ballot box. Evidently, exposing Russia's hybrid authoritarian framework, where authorities interpret laws to suit the needs of those in power, is a central part of the campaign's strategy. In a paradoxical twist, however, the campaign also tries to use this hybridity for itself: Should the Kremlin's campaign managers come to the conclusion that Navalny's participation in the elections would be in their favor—since it would lend the elections at least some legitimacy—then a way will be found to have him on the ballot. The campaign's argument is simple: if the presidential elections are to be more than a farce, Navalny must be allowed to run. The campaign's goal is to pressure the authorities into acknowledging this—even if that means one more act of interference from above.

*See overleaf for Information about the Author and Further Reading.*

*About the Author*

Jan Matti Dollbaum is a PhD candidate at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen. This publication was produced as part of the research project “Comparing protest actions in Soviet and post-Soviet spaces,” which was organized by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen with financial support from the Volkswagen Foundation.

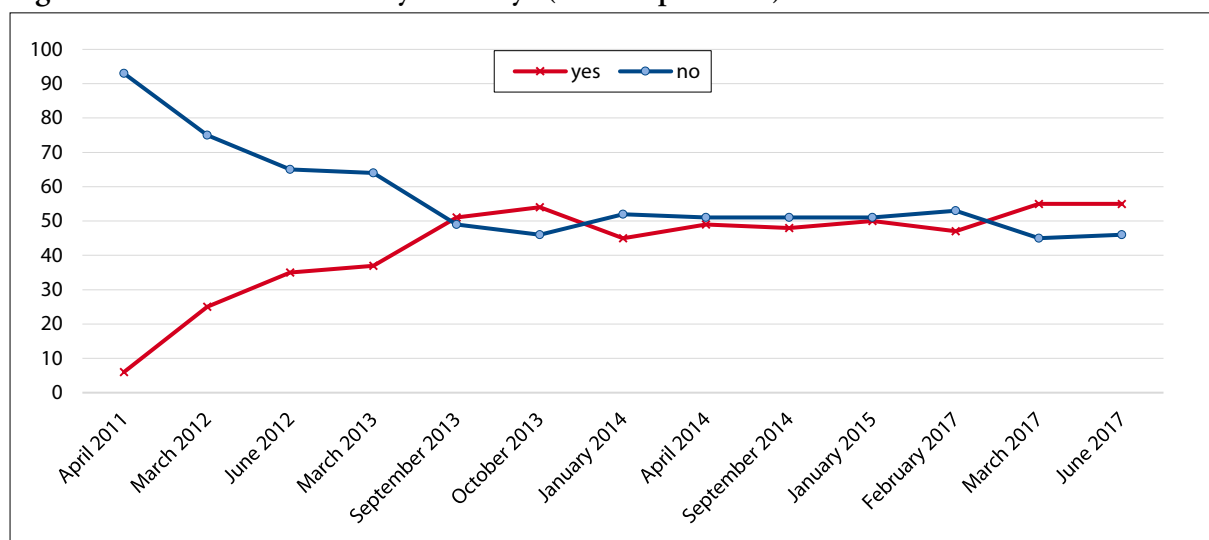
*Further Reading*

- The basic points of Navalny’s program (in Russian): <<https://2018.navalny.com/platform/>>
- The finances of the campaign as presented by chief of staff Leonid Volkov (in Russian): <<https://www.leonidvolkov.ru/p/237/>>
- A call for solidarity with Navalny from a left-wing perspective (in English): Budraitskis/Matveev/Guillory: Not just an Artifact <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/russa-alexey-navalny-anticorruption-movement-left>>
- Criticism from liberal economist Andrey Movchan (in Russian): <[https://www.znak.com/2017-07-13/ekonomist\\_andrey\\_movchan\\_ob\\_opasnosti\\_avtoritarizma\\_v\\_postputinskoy\\_rossii](https://www.znak.com/2017-07-13/ekonomist_andrey_movchan_ob_opasnosti_avtoritarizma_v_postputinskoy_rossii)>
- Oleg Kashin on the interdependence of Putin and Navalny (in English): <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/03/opinion/russia-putin-aleksei-navalny.html>>
- Moen-Larsen, Natalia (2014): “Normal nationalism”: Alexei Navalny, LiveJournal and “the Other”. In: East European Politics, 30(4), 548–567.

## OPINION POLL

## Results of Surveys on Alexey Navalny Conducted by Levada Center

Figure 1: Do You Know Alexey Navalny? (% of respondents)

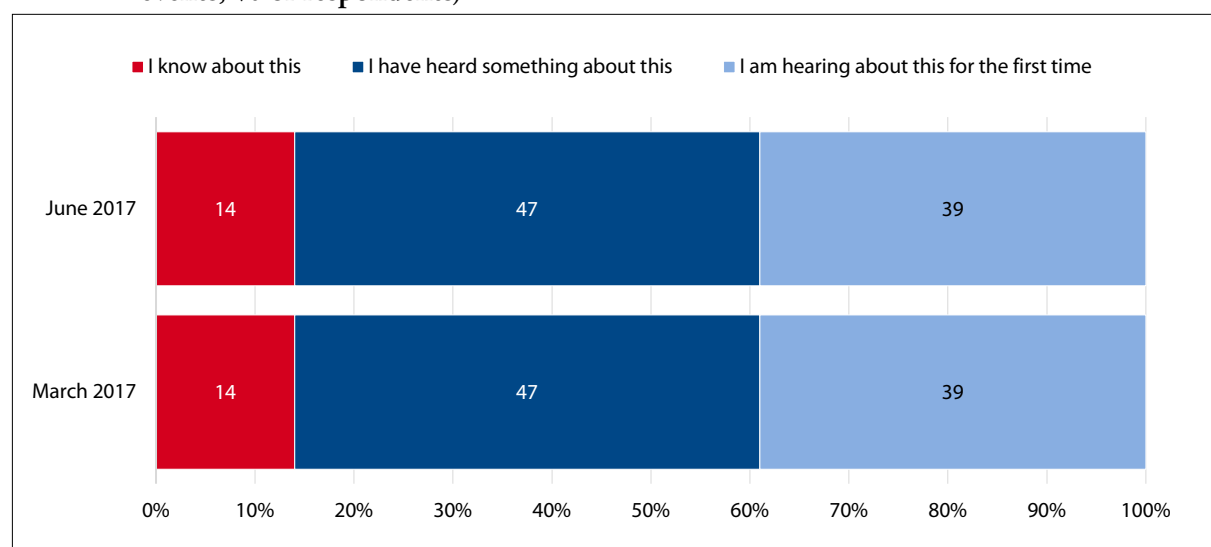


Source: opinion polls by Levada Center 2011–2017. Surveys in 2017 were conducted between 31 March and 3 April and between 21 and 26 June; 1600 respondents from 137 settlements in 43 regions; the statistical error (95% confidence) is 3.4% for values around 50%, 2.9% for values around 25%/75%, 2.0% for values around 10%/90% and 1.5% for values around 5%/95% <<https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/protesty-i-navalny/>>

**Table 1: Do You Know Alexey Navalny? (% of respondents)**

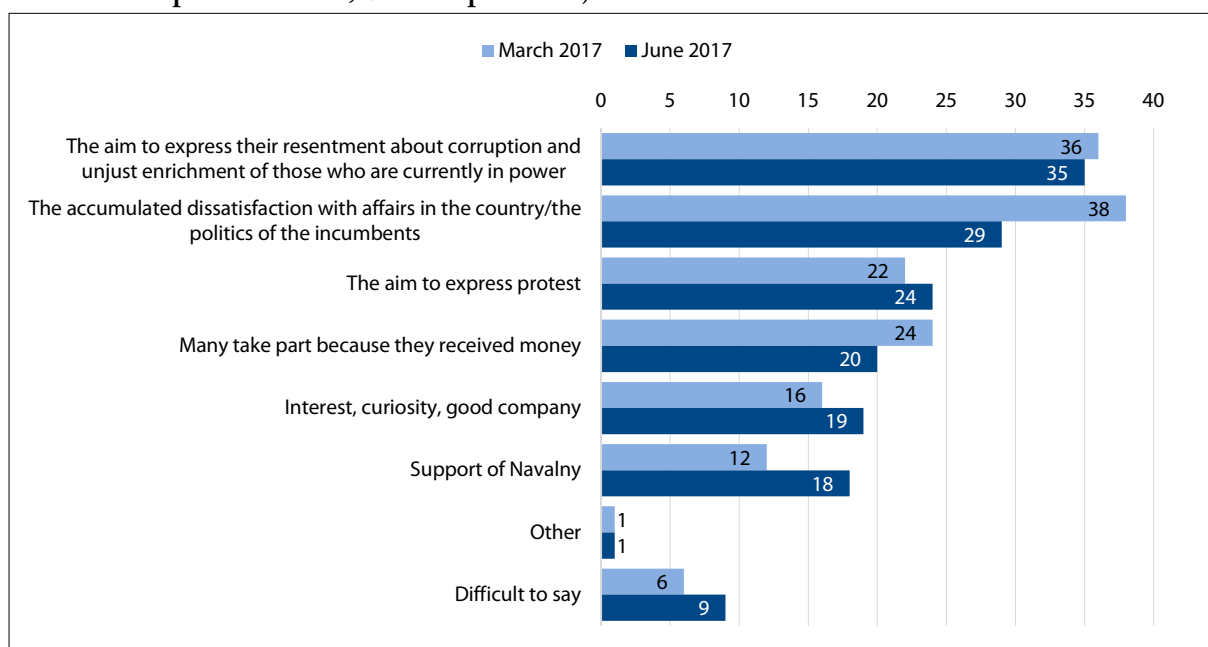
	2011	2012		2013			2014			2015	2017		
	April	March	June	March	Sept.	Oct.	Jan.	April	Sept.	Jan.	Feb.	March	June
yes	6	25	35	37	51	54	45	49	48	50	47	55	55
no	93	75	65	64	49	46	52	51	51	51	53	45	46
no answer	1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	4	<1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1

Source: opinion polls by Levada Center 2011–2017. Surveys in 2017 were conducted between 31 March and 3 April and between 21 and 26 June; 1600 respondents from 137 settlements in 43 regions; the statistical error (95% confidence) is 3.4% for values around 50%, 2.9% for values around 25%/75%, 2.0% for values around 10%/90% and 1.5% for values around 5%/95% <<https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/protesty-i-navalnyj/>>

**Figure 2: Have You Heard of the Past Protest Actions of 26 March / 12 June 2017 against Corruption of the Country's Leadership? (surveys were conducted after the respective events; % of respondents)**

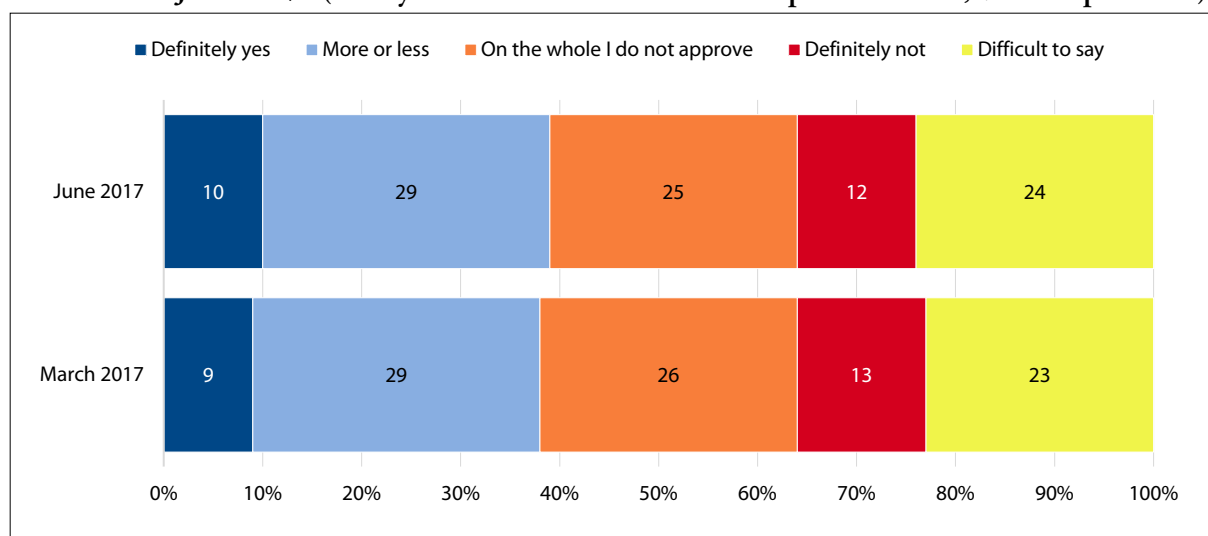
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**Figure 3: What Do You Think Motivated People to Participate in the Protest Actions of 26 March / 12 June 2017? (several answers possible; surveys were conducted after the respective events; % of respondents)**



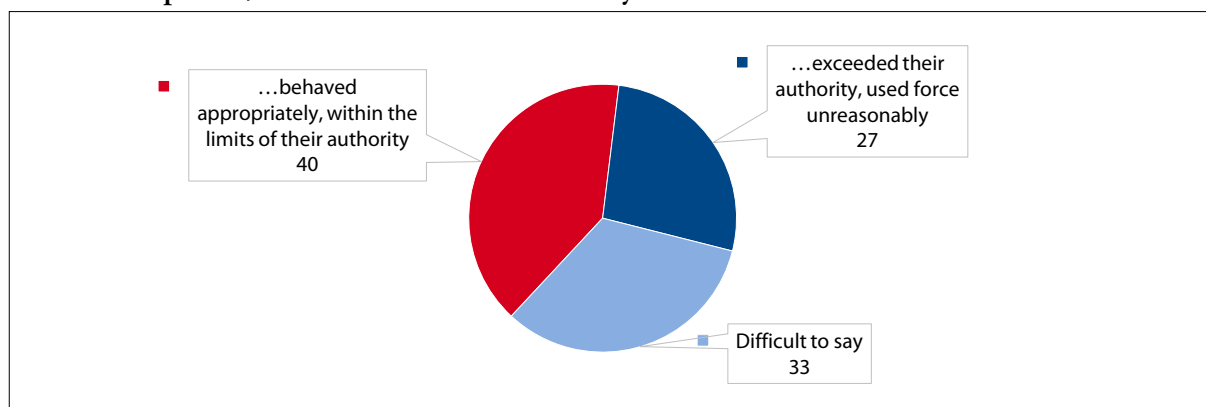
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center 2017. Surveys were conducted between 31 March and 3 April and between 21 and 26 June; 1600 respondents from 137 settlements in 43 regions; the statistical error (95% confidence) is 3.4% for values around 50%, 2.9% for values around 25%/75%, 2.0% for values around 10%/90% and 1.5% for values around 5%/95% <<https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/protesty-i-navalnyj/>>

**Figure 4: Do You Approve of the People Who Took Part in the Protest Action of 26 March / 12 June 2017? (surveys were conducted after the respective events; % of respondents)**



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center 2017. Surveys were conducted between 31 March and 3 April and between 21 and 26 June; 1600 respondents from 137 settlements in 43 regions; the statistical error (95% confidence) is 3.4% for values around 50%, 2.9% for values around 25%/75%, 2.0% for values around 10%/90% and 1.5% for values around 5%/95% <<https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/protesty-i-navalnyj/>>

**Figure 5: In Moscow, St. Petersburg and Other Cities, Many of the Protest Actions on 12 June Were Not Sanctioned by Authorities. Thousands of People Were Arrested. In Your Opinion, in This Situation the Security Forces...**



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center 2017. Surveys were conducted between 21 and 26 June; 1600 respondents from 137 settlements in 43 regions; the statistical error (95% confidence) is 3.4% for values around 50%, 2.9% for values around 25%/75%, 2.0% for values around 10%/90% and 1.5% for values around 5%/95% <<https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/protesty-i-navalnyj/>>

## ANALYSIS

### Demonstrations Against Demonstrations

By Jardar Østbø

#### Abstract

This article shows how, in the midst of the patriotic fervour following the Crimea annexation, the Russian regime used mass demonstrations to pacify the population. Rather than mobilizing people to actively participate in pro-regime, anti-opposition rallies, Kremlin spin doctors used social media to spread moods of sadness and fear in order to discourage all popular mobilization, even in favour of the regime.

#### Background: Pro-Regime Counter-Demonstrations

For authoritarian regimes, which rely on the population's perception of the regime's invincibility and the lack of political alternatives, even relatively small opposition-minded demonstrations represent a potential danger. To deal with this, the Russian regime has, along with other repressive and manipulative measures, staged parallel counter-demonstrations of various sorts. After the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004–5, and the mass protests against the monetization of social benefits in Russia, the Presidential Administration set up “patriotic” youth activist organizations such as Nashi (Our people), which mimicked the Orange revolutionaries' mass gatherings and absurdist performances. When this strategy

proved ineffective in preventing the new wave of opposition mass demonstrations from late 2011, the regime used administrative pressure and incentives to make employers and educational institutions send people to mass gatherings that focused not primarily on supporting the regime, but on specific problems such as the “Orange menace.” Since 2014, the strategy of administrative pressure (“surrogate mobilization”) has remained, but the demonstrations have changed.

#### The Regime's “Mobilization Dilemma”

The Crimea annexation brought patriotic euphoria and sky-high ratings for Putin. Nevertheless, the liberal opposition mobilized for two mass demonstrations, namely the “Peace March” in September 2014 and what