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Movement Dilemmas under Authoritarianism: National and Local Activism in Russia

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Abstract

Scholars of social movements are often skeptical about the applicability of their analytical tools and theories, mainly developed for advanced democracies, to the analysis of civic and political life in authoritarian states. In this article, I will apply the micro-sociological strategic interactionist perspective to analyze the national political oppositionist movement and local grassroots mobilizations in Russia and show that movement players and activists in authoritarian states have agency, face dilemmas, and make strategic choices informed by their understanding of the situation and the adversaries they interact with.

Keywords: Russia; strategic interactionism; social movements; protest.

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1 Introduction

The common understanding of dissent in authoritarian states envisions two options for the dissenters: a mass popular revolt or tacit resistance (Scott, 2008). Classic social movement theory was developed in advanced democracies, or "movement societies," in which protest and mobilization become part of the "conventional repertoire of participation" (Meyer & Tarrow, 1997, p. 4). These origins raised doubts among scholars as to whether the existing tools of social movement research were applicable to authoritarian societies at all, since the strategic tools of political engagement were seen as unavailable to protesters. Recent scholarship has begun to challenge this view, arguing that authoritarianisms are different (Chen & Moss, 2018) and that social movement scholarship can add much-needed nuance to our understanding of political life in such societies.

Researchers describe Russian civil society as "weak" (Caiazza, 2016), and the society in general as characterized by high levels of social and political mistrust (Shlapentokh, 2006). Most citizens tended to avoid politics, which led to lower voter turnout and an overall atmosphere of political apathy (Zhelnina, 2020). In the past few decades, the political regime has grown increasingly hostile to dissent, slowing the development of activist infrastructures and resilient civil society actors. Still, it would be a simplification to see the regime as monolithic and indiscriminately repressive; such labels obscure a much more dynamic and complex reality of activism in Russia in the past few decades.

In this article, I apply the strategic interactionist perspective (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015) to show how civil society players, social movements and oppositionist politicians gradually developed new movement infrastructures and tried to change the strong patterns of political disavowal and mistrust in Russian society. In this process, they faced not only an increasingly repressive state, but also a spectrum of strategic dilemmas that concerned their own choices, interactions with other movement players and authorities at different levels, as well as skeptical citizens who adhered to their long-standing "cultural toolkits" (Swidler, 1986) of avoiding politics. Looking at these processes from the strategic interactionist point of view allows us to foreground the cultural, emotional, and agentic dimensions of protest and mobilization in authoritarian societies, adding a much-needed complexity to the often reductionist view of political agency in authoritarian states. We can unpack the way authoritarianism works on a daily basis instead of simply reifying it and describing it as an immutable "context." In what follows, I will use the language of players and arenas, dilemmas, and strategic choices to show how social movements and other civil society players made their decisions and influenced the choices of state players.

Below, I will first review the struggles and dynamism of the national opposition movement. I will examine some of the dilemmas and choices of the players within the movement against electoral fraud in 2011–2012 (known as the movement "For Fair Elections," or FFE). The national opposition had to decide how radical or yielding it wanted to be and which strategies and political arenas it would choose. Parallel to these highly publicized efforts, a different strand of activism developed across Russian regions: local and urban social movements and protests. With a few notable exceptions in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, these episodes rarely made it to the pages of national media, not to mention the international press, but nonetheless played a crucial role in shaping the political fields in Russian cities. Often framing their claims as "apolitical," these movements faced a different set of dilemmas: they risked being co-opted by local and regional authorities and had to choose whether to politicize and expand their claims, risking retaliation.

2 Dilemmas of the National Political Opposition Movement

In the post-Perestroika decades, large rallies and protests were a rare sight in Russia, where people prioritized their private affairs and survival in economically unstable circumstances (Clément, 2008; Clément et al., 2010; Zhuravlev, 2015). A culture of social and political mistrust persisted, diverting people from political participation — both in formal (voting) and grassroots politics. Still, episodes of mass mobilization happened, famously, in 2005 against the monetization of social benefits, followed by a wave of workers' protests, and finally by protests against electoral fraud, the movement For Fair Elections, in 2011–2012 (Erpyleva & Magun, 2015). In response to this gradual escalation of protest activity, the political regime grew increasingly vigilant and repressive, especially after the rallies of the "Bolotnaya protests" in 2011–2012.

The Bolotnaya protests, named after a square in Moscow that became the location of the largest rallies in 2011–2012, were a transformative moment in Russia's politics. Street protests were a response to electoral fraud during parliamentary elections in December 2011, a topic that was brought into the spotlight by notable activists and politicians, among them Aleksey Navalny (Dollbaum et al., 2021). Strategic efforts by these people incited mobilizing emotions among opposition voters, who responded to the publicized evidence of fraud by taking to the streets and demanding a recount after the predictable electoral victory of the United Russia party. The protests continued through the spring of 2012 when Vladimir Putin was re-elected president after symbolically conferring the presidential mandate to his proxy Dmitry Medvedev for one term. The largest rallies attracted hundreds of thousands of protesters.

The government was initially taken aback by the magnitude of this discontent; still, it gradually increased repression and developed new tools to minimize protest turnout by increasing the cost of protest participation. The legislation regulating the organization of public events was amended to include stronger punishments for violating the rules of organizing and participating in public protest and to give the authorities almost unlimited power in rejecting activists' applications to hold public events. The law required event organizers not technically to seek permission for the event per se, but for the rally location, by informing the government of their chosen time and location. Still, the government can disallow having a rally in a particular location under false pretenses, such as construction work or competing applications for the same location (Zhelnina & Jasper, forthcoming).

The dilemmas the protesters faced under these circumstances included a version of the "naughty or nice" dilemma (Jasper, 2006): a choice between more or less radical action. Constant discussions within the movement revolved around whether to acquire permissions from the authorities for the rally locations or to claim the constitutional right of freedom of assembly risking confrontations with the police. In this case, the "radical" option included claiming the constitutional right to gather without seeking permission from the government. Agreeing to locations and times that the authorities suggested, which were often inconvenient, looked less provocative but was also less efficient in terms of generating empowerment and efficacy among the protesters. The "naughty" option, showing up at an "unsanctioned" location, could result in clashes with the police and arrests, as it happened, for example, at the May 6th rally in 2012. That day, authorities changed the agreed march route at the last minute, essentially forcing the protesters to violate the rules and provoking face-offs with law enforcement.

The movement leaders tried to navigate the options of the dilemma to maximize the number of participants. Rallies in the approved locations attracted more people, while the "naughty" option scared off those who didn't want to be arrested or beaten by the police. Still,

as often is the case, there was a (relatively) "radical" wing that insisted on not being obedient and gathering in the locations of the protestors' choice. Mostly these were the old oppositional organizations and leaders (such as "Strategy 31," an established movement for the freedom of assembly that resisted the regime's encroachment on people's right to assembly for years before the Bolotnaya protests). Different solutions to the dilemma shaped one of the main cleavages within the oppositional movement: playing by the rules established by the government or rejecting these rules altogether.

The options of the naughty or nice dilemma are *culturally and situationally-specific*. The boundaries of what is considered safe or risky, and moderate or radical, can stretch and are subject to negotiations, including within the movement itself and in the broader public discourse. Over the years, claiming the right to assemble became a radical, "provocative" option in Russia; seeing media reports of people being arrested and beaten, many potential dissenters chose not to join "unsanctioned" protests. To this day, the "what if" questions haunt the oppositionist discourse: what if the movement showed more "radicalism" at the Bolotnaya rallies or occupied the streets demanding free elections for Navalny and other opposition candidates? And what if there was no mass display of discontent, and the authorities were not "provoked" into growing increasingly repressive? (Ivanova, 2022). Disagreements over these questions and strategies for the national opposition fractionalized the movement, but even after a violent crackdown on street rallies in May 2012, the indignation kept the movement alive.

Eventually, central figures in the oppositionist movement chose a strategy of participating in elections and building an infrastructure for mobilizing voters, electoral observers, and candidates. Alexey Navalny and his team spearheaded these efforts, hoping to mobilize enough popular support to win even in the rigged electoral system. Navalny's team started building an organization and a network of volunteers across the country's regions, preparing candidates for elections at various levels and supporting acceptable candidates from parties other than United Russia. Navalny ran for Mayor of Moscow in 2013 and came in second, sparking hope for the electoral strategy (Jasper et al., 2022). He and his team pursued the electoral strategy across different regions, establishing a network of regional organizations, fundraising, and mobilizing volunteers.

Emotions that mobilized protestors to join street rallies could only keep the movement alive for as long as the emotions were high; for a sustained effort to get into formal politics, a movement infrastructure — a network of local organizations with loyal volunteers and training activities — was necessary. In addition, after the protest wave of 2011–2012 subsided, some oppositionists turned their attention to local activism and the lowest level elections: the municipal council elections at the district level in large cities, especially in Moscow and Saint Petersburg (Belokurova & Vorobyev, 2020; Zhuravlev et al., 2020). People who mobilized during the Bolotnaya Square protests wanted to find a new outlet for their energy and indignation, as well as use their new knowledge and activist networks: people ran for seats on municipal councils, became electoral observers, and began to pay more attention to the mechanics of the political field.

The electoral strategy, however, had one major flaw: it assumed entering arenas where state actors could exercise almost complete control. The authorities could refuse the candidates' registration under false pretenses, or turn to electoral fraud (ballot stuffing, voter coercion, rewriting the results in voting protocols, etc.). Retrospectively, it became clear that elections were "false arenas" (Jasper, 2006, p. 168): arenas where decisions are not really made (but made elsewhere, behind closed doors) and where some players are systematically disadvantaged. Importantly, the participation of challengers in such arenas can legitimate the decisions already

made elsewhere: this is why creating an impression of democratic elections is a popular tool for authoritarian governments (Schedler, 2002). By trying to game the state in heavily controlled electoral arenas, the opposition movement had slim chances of winning but faced a real risk of legitimating these elections. These options represent the "being there" dilemma (Jasper, 2006).

3 Dilemmas of "Apolitical" Local Activism

Unlike the national anti-regime mobilizations, the authorities generally tolerated local and urban grassroots mobilizations unless they posed a direct challenge to the political regime. Local and regional authorities and political parties could even side with protesters and initiate or encourage participatory projects (for example, participatory budgeting). For state actors in authoritarian regimes, such civic engagement techniques are popular tools to boost their legitimacy and generate electoral support (Schlaufer, 2021).

Semenov (2018) estimates that even during the national protest wave of the For Fair Elections movement in 2012–2013, the majority of the protest events in the country were associated with urban and local issues (17.6%, compared with 11% for events protesting electoral fraud). Local problems are classic "close to home" (Eliasoph, 1998) issues that motivate even those avoiding politics to mobilize. Moreover, these movements can and often do frame themselves as non-political, which allows them to attract more participants (Baiocchi et al., 2015; Bennett et al., 2013); this is especially true in authoritarian societies where people may think that politics is not only "dirty," but also dangerous. Despite these concerns, people may see addressing concrete issues such as infill construction, redevelopment of green areas, or demolition of historical heritage as a necessity. The explicitly apolitical framing of these issues makes movements addressing them more acceptable to both the potential participants and the authorities, who are more likely to see them as a form of feedback and a potential source of electoral support rather than a threat to the political system. Scholars have documented how urban activism became a politicization opportunity in several Russian cities (Tykanova & Khoklova, 2020; Fröhlich, 2020).

This situation can create specific dilemmas and challenges for the local activists: the *cooptation dilemma* (a version of the "powerful ally" dilemma) and the *politicization dilemma* (a version of the "extension dilemma").

As often is the case in Russia's centralized political system, Moscow-based conflicts and mobilizations are more visible in the media (such as the highly publicized and consequential fight for the Khimki forest; Evans, 2012). Based on a study of media coverage of protest events in the largest Russian cities, Semenov & Minaeva (2021) estimate that 64% of the conflicts reported in the 2010s took place in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The interesting side of these statistics is the relatively high success rate of those local protests: the contested projects were canceled in about one-third of those cases.

Interestingly, in Moscow, activists were less likely to be successful (only 18% of protests have managed to cancel the project in question) than, for example, in Saint Petersburg and Novosibirsk. In a comparative study of Moscow in Saint Petersburg, Zhelnina and Tykanova (2021) find that the proximity of national authorities and largest developers in Moscow makes it harder for the activists to challenge the projects initiated and supported by some of those most powerful players in the country. At the regional and local level, however, authorities are charged by their national level bosses with minimizing public discontent and generating electoral support for the pro-regime parties and political figures. Therefore, they are more careful in pushing controversial projects and are more interested in gaining the sympathies of the mo-

bilized citizens. This situation creates more strategic options for the activists. Of course, the proximity of the national institutions and their involvement is not the only factor influencing the choices and opportunities of local protesters. Research shows that the configuration of local issues and civic infrastructures varies in different cities; for example, the importance of the historic heritage may become more salient and politicized in some cities (Chernysheva & Khokhlova, 2021). The relationships between powerful players at the local levels are also different (Bederson & Shevtsova, 2021), creating unique configurations of arenas, possible alliances, and resources in each city.

Along with some advantages, however, comes a dilemma. Jasper (2006) describes a dilemma of powerful allies: movement players can benefit from joining forces with resourceful and strategically placed actors (e.g., political parties, politicians, or famous activists), but there are trade-offs to such alliances. Powerful allies can hijack the movement's agenda and its successes or demand that the movement's tactics and priorities are changed. For local activists in Russia, this dilemma often revolves around the prospect of co-optation: the authorities can offer activists some access to decision-making and even positions in their governance structures, expecting that they would become less critical and will stop challenging the existing system. It also means that they will have to publicly demonstrate support for the party of power, United Russia, and encourage the members and supporters of the movement to vote for it.

The risk of co-optation has also been an issue for the national oppositionist movement. For example, a discussion evolved around the strategy of "changing the system from the inside" — taking the positions in local and regional governments and trying to change their corrupt and undemocratic practices. Local activists, however, are often strategically apolitical, and siding with parties or occupying positions in government has a different tone for them. Not only do they risk looking like sell-outs a the context when much of the population sees politics as a dirty thing, they also risk losing their movement's radical potential and pressuring power.

The politicization of initially apolitical movements and activists poses a larger dilemma than the one described above. In Russia, the culture of political avoidance is partly sustained by the bad reputation of politics but also by the risks associated with doing it: the increasingly repressive regime makes political criticism a costly option. Therefore, to not become a target of political repression, many local activists try to keep their movements "free from politics."

Keeping away from politics, however, is not easy. Sooner or later, even activists who mobilize for a very specific local cause develop a new worldview or a new "cognitive toolkit" (Passy & Monsch, 2014) that connects these local issues to larger imbalances and injustices of the political system. For example, in my study of mobilization in response to the demolition-based urban renewal program in Moscow, I often encountered self-identified 'apolitical' people who began to see the connections between the threat of displacement and losing their homes, and the unresponsive and undemocratic political system at the local, and eventually, the national level (Zhelnina, 2022). Once people were immersed in local activism, these larger political connections became hard to ignore, raising a question: is staying apolitical really an option? The solutions to the dilemma include persistence and a gradual expansion of one's political activities (running for seats in municipal councils, joining movements for new causes), or retreat and apathy.

4 Conclusion

Under authoritarianism, political engagement and activism become costly, yet people turn to them. Even in non-democratic countries, activists face various strategic choices, although their options may be limited, many of the political arenas turn out to be "false," and some of the solutions to the emerging dilemmas may involve a lot of personal risks. The alternative is political apathy, which, in the Russian case, is also a long-standing cultural pattern and a preferred option, developed and practiced by Russian citizens during decades, if not centuries, of politically oppressive regimes.

The trials and failures of social movements in Russia in the past decades have produced some intended and unintended outcomes: they have battled political apathy and avoidance, generated activist networks and skills, and caused reactions from their counterparts, including local and national authorities. Legislation limiting freedom of assembly was passed and increased the cost of participation; the oppositionist organizations created by Alexey Navalny and his team were labeled as extremist and their leaders were imprisoned, which instilled fear among potential dissenters.

The strategic interactionist perspective has the potential to shed light not only on the protesters and their navigation of the increasingly hostile political circumstances, but also to show how the regime is changing its strategies and practices of dealing with dissent in interaction and in response to protesters' actions. The gradual increase of measures to suppress the activities and freedoms of politically undesirable players took place in response to and in interaction with the activities of the opposition. The goal of these measures was to prevent the civic infrastructures and networks that the players in the opposition were building from taking shape and generating enough power to eventually challenge the government's control in electoral "false arenas." For local and urban grassroots movements, that faced a choice to expand their claims and build political alliances, but this became a dangerous option too.

As a result of these incremental changes, the society's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine looked and felt much different than its mobilization in response to electoral fraud ten years earlier: no hundreds of thousands marched down Moscow's boulevards to protest the war. Those who came out to protest were chased by the police around the city centers in Russian cities, not being able to hold ground at one spot and show their unity and numbers (Tilly, 2008). The organizations and leaders that could potentially raise a voice were smashed or imprisoned, which left private individuals and loose networks of dissenters to their own devices. They turned to small-scale, private, and almost invisible to the international media acts of resistance: people brought flowers to monuments of Ukrainian poets, replaced price tags in supermarkets with anti-war stickers, pinned badges with the colors of the Ukrainian flag to their clothes, or wore yellow and blue outfits in public. The state quickly intensified repression even against such acts: for example, the artist Sasha Skochilenko faces criminal charges for replacing supermarket price tags with anti-war stickers, Aleksey Moskalev is imprisoned because of his daughter's Masha anti-war drawing at school, among others.

The difference between the regime's repressive apparatus ten years ago and today is striking. It also illustrates that authoritarian regimes change over time, revise their strategies in treating dissent, and not only differ between countries, but also within a single country.

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