Cultural processes behind contemporary protest mobilisation in authoritarian settings: unaffiliated citizens vs Putin's regime, 2017-2022.

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Abstract

This PhD project analyses the cultural dimension of contemporary protest mobilisation – the ideas that drive individuals from different walks of life to the streets. It seeks to advance the current debate on identity, leadership and motivation in the movements based on weak ties with no apparent collective identity. This study focuses on the underrepresented perspective of the unaffiliated protesters, analysing it through a framework that fuses sociology, social psychology and political communication, thus contributing to the interdisciplinary project advocated by many prominent scholars. Furthermore, this work contributes to Democracy Studies and Russian Studies.

35 qualitative interviews with the participants in the anti-corruption and pro-democracy protests in March 2017 and January 2021 and in the anti-war protests in February 2022 across eight large cities of Russia form the base of my empirical work. These narratives combined with extensive secondary research shed light on the meaning-making behind contemporary protest mobilisation, the role of trust in movement leaders and other actors such as family, peers and teachers in this process, as well as the factors that enable anti-regime action in authoritarian settings. My research updates the current frameworks on protest motivations and resonance and suggests the ultimate identity formula for mobilising unaffiliated individuals.

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List of abbreviations

BLM – Black Lives Matter

CAT – Collective Action Theory

CPRF – Communist Party of the Russian Federation

DJ – Disc Jockey

EU – European Union

FD – Federal District

FFE – “For Fair Elections”

FSB – *Federal’naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti* (Federal Security Service)

HQ - Headquarters

IM – Instant Messaging

IT – Information Technologies

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

MVD – *Ministerstvo Vnutrennih Del* (Ministry of Internal Affairs)

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

PIS – Participant Information Sheet

POT/PPT – Political Process Theory/Political Opportunities Theory

RCT – Rational Choice Theory

RMT – Resource Mobilisation Theory

SIT – Social Identity Theory

SIIT – Symbolic Interactionist Identity Theory

SIMCA - Social Identity Model of Collective Action

SMO – Social Movement Organisation

SNT – Social Network Theory

TV – Television

VAT/SST - Value-Added Theory, or Social Strain Theory

VK – *Vkontakte* (“In Contact”)

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

US/USA – United States/United States of America

1. Introduction

The early 21st century has seen numerous protest movements spring up across the globe - from the Euro-Atlantic region to Africa and the Middle East to Asia-Pacific to the former Eastern bloc. These movements have attracted a lot of interest in academia and beyond. One of the most fascinating developments has been the interplay between the changing society, new communication technology and evolving mobilisation dynamics. The resulting debates on the meaning-making behind protest participation signalled the beginning of a new era in social movement studies.

This thesis examines the recent waves of political protests in Russia to analyse the cultural processes behind contemporary protest mobilisation. In this chapter, I outline the phenomenon of interest, formulate the research questions, introduce the case study and define the general terms that frame this research. Finally, I provide a brief outline of the following chapters of this thesis and specify the contributions of this study to the interdisciplinary field of social movement studies, including sociology, social psychology and political communication, as well as other disciplines.

1.1. Evolution of protest movements in the 21st century

At the turn of the century, societies around the world had already been experiencing a decline in trust, widespread political apathy, loss of community and growing individualism (Bennett, 2008; Castells, 2000; Turner, 2013, Valgarðsson et al, 2024). Proliferation of media actors and the resultant fragmentation of audiences contributed to these trends (Blumler, 2016). Much like the religious institutions, the media, television in particular, had previously worked as a social cohesive in a Durkheimean sense, “upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas” to keep the society unified (Durkheim, 1912, pp. 474-5). Social movement actors, as well as most of the population, had no control over this technology and had limited capacity for mass communication, therefore mostly relying on the more local, denser and smaller membership-based networks. However, the spread of Internet access and platforms hosting user-generated content during the first decade of the century saw the emergence of a new, “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2017). The old, legacy media corporations lost their monopoly over the public sphere (albeit retaining strong positions) as they came to be challenged by a multiplicity of information flows online. Challengers of various regimes around the world were now able to act as media actors in their own right and communicate their ideas to broad audiences.

As a result of the aforementioned societal shifts and technological advances in mass communication, collective action dynamics underwent significant changes. Traditional membership-based and obligation-laden brick-and-mortar social movement organisations (SMOs) began to be side-lined by loose voluntary networks of social ties maintained by interactive information and communication technologies - i.e., social media platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). These new movements relied on what Mark Granovetter would call the “strength of weak ties” (1973). They used the affordances of digital social media to ensure far-reaching diffusion of the movement ideas to a wide range of people and generate more autonomous action. This was an entirely different mobilisation logic, which went outside of the scope of the traditional social movement scholarship. Yet it seemed to succeed in bringing very diverse crowds of otherwise unconnected and unaffiliated

individuals out to the streets, nationwide, as with *Los Indignados*[1] in Spain, and even worldwide, as illustrated by such manifestations as the *Occupy*[2] movement.

Furthermore, the digitally enabled, sparse and more horizontal structure of these movements involved qualitatively new types of leadership - less formal, digitally enabled and information-driven. These online influentials used the affordances of various online platforms to capture attention, generate resonance, and, most important of all, mobilise their social media followers to offline action. This was remarkable considering the abundant stream of multifarious online content and widespread political apathy meant attention, trust and political will were scarce. Yet these emerging movement leaders seemed to find ways to overcome these obstacles.

Finally, it was notable that these new types of movements appeared not only in the relatively democratic states, where the system was more accommodating to collective protest, but also in the more authoritarian states, where such undertakings were less likely to succeed and carried risks. Similar to their more fortunate counterparts, these movements were often heterogenous in their composition and led by online influentials with thousands (e.g., Zainab Al-Khawaja in Bahrain) and even millions (e.g., Alexei Navalny in Russia) of social media followers. Regardless of the varying levels of success in achieving their main goals, these movements' ability to mobilise action despite the narrower opportunities and higher risks posed by the authoritarian regimes was impressive.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the perspective of unaffiliated protesters and offer a plausible explanation as to how they mobilise as structurally unconnected individuals in a context of information profusion, low trust political apathy and authoritarian political conditions. Thus, my research questions are as follows:

- How do a wide range of unaffiliated individuals come together in a collective protest?
- How are some actors able to succeed in generating attention, resonance and political action amidst information profusion, low levels of trust and political apathy?
- Why do the low chances of success and higher risks of repression fail to stop protest mobilisation in authoritarian regimes?

1.2. Protest movement in Putin's Russia

1.2.1. Russia as a case study

This case study focuses on the protest movement in Russia, which I also refer to as "Russia's protest movement" and "the protest movement". While there are many social movements and various instances of collective protest in Russia, "the protest movement" is what various academics and journalists, as well as the movement participants, have used as a name, or what Charley Tilly and Sidney Tarrow would call a "political identity" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 12), and it generally includes the various contentious campaigns from the late 2000's until the present day, which involved street protests against various aspects of Vladimir Putin's regime and spread across the country throughout the 2010's (Greene, 2013; Gudkov, 2019; Kirillova

[1] *Los Indignados* ("the indignant ones"), also known as *Movimiento 15-M*, or simply *15-M*, was a grassroots anti-austerity movement in Spain between 2011 and 2015.
[2] *Occupy* was a global protest movement against economic and social inequality and undemocratic political systems, which began in 2011 and mostly ended in 2016.

& Hvostunova, 2019). Essentially, it is a movement that is rooted in its opposition to Putin's regime but flexible in terms of the issues that serve as a basis for every new campaign. My case study focuses on the recent anti-corruption, pro-democracy and anti-war protests that took place in 2017, 2021 and 2022. This case study choice is justified because it exemplifies all the societal features mentioned in the previous section.

First of all, despite its not-so-distant collectivist Soviet past, individualism has been on the rise in Russia at least since the market reforms that precipitated the fall of the USSR (Mamontov et al, 2014). Some Russian social movement researchers have even gone as far as characterising contemporary Russian society as being comprised of individuals who "act in their own interests without reference to collective concerns", with social solidarity and civic activity replaced by selfishness and narcissism (Chebankova, 2013, p. 14). These types of evaluations are partially reflected by the generally low levels of self-reported altruistic, communal and civic behaviour (giving blood, taking part in the life of one's community, volunteering, etc.) (Levada-Centr, 2023, p. 41). Same can be said about people's sense of responsibility, which is relatively high only in relation to one's family and decreases significantly as the scope widens to include one's neighbourhood, district, township, etc. (Levada-Centr, 2023, pp. 42-44).

Secondly, Russian society can also be defined in terms of widespread political apathy. For the past decade more than 70% of those asked whether they could influence decisions of the state answered "Rather not" or "Definitely not" (Ibid.). The figures get slightly better as the scope moves from the state to the more local level in line with the figures on the sense of responsibility. However, the overall active political participation among those polled by *Levada-Centr* over the past decade has consistently failed to surpass 3% of the total sample, with just as many struggling to give an answer, at least a half consistently expressing lack of interest in politics and the rest "following politics, but not actively participating" (2023, pp. 34). This widespread civic disengagement from politics has been noted by various researchers of Russia's civil society and social movements (Chebankova, 2013; Clément, 2015; Greene, 2014).

Thirdly, both attention and trust are rather scarce in Russia. The internet use grew from meagre 3% of the population in 2000 to staggering 71% in 2017 and 90% in 2022 (Interfax, 2022), and the Russian segment of *YouTube* offers an abundant stream of content that covers everything from entertainment to politics. This is also the case with the television, which remains the most popular source of information for two-thirds of the population (Levada-Centr, 2023, p. 118). As for general trust, public opinion polls show that since the mid-2000's more than 60% of the population have been wary of trusting other people; this indicator began to grow in 2017 and surpassed the 80% mark the following year (Levada-Centr, 2023, p.30).

Finally, what makes Putin's Russia particularly interesting is its regime. There have been various attempts to classify Putin's post-2012 regime – "hybrid" (Greene, 2014), "semi-authoritarian" (Clément, 2015), "soft-authoritarian" (Power, 2020). I argue that the latter is the most appropriate for describing Putin's Russia up until March 2022[3]. A soft authoritarian regime is "a political system in which there are minimal components of democracy such as elections and political parties" and where "basic social and political rights are often compromised" (Nasir & Turner, 2013, p. 1140). While this type of regime tolerates some contention, it presents certain risks pertaining to repression. On the one hand, most protests related to social, economic and environmental issues at the local level are generally tolerated (Tokarev et al, 2023). On the other hand, as outlined further in this section,

[3] This cut-off point is defined by the commencement of the more aggressive phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war and a series of new extreme laws severing freedom of speech, thus signalling a hard authoritarian turn.

protesting against the national power elite[4] and their policies is likely to bode negative consequences for the participants and unlikely to result in significant tangible changes.

The aforementioned circumstances would suggest that any efforts by the regime challengers to capture attention and generate trust, let alone mobilise people to the streets, would likely be futile. Nevertheless, the reality proves otherwise. The following two subsections outline the evolution of Russia's protest movement amidst democratic backsliding and increasing Internet use as well as the more recent developments.

1.2.2. Evolution of Russia's protest movement

Following his victory at the 2000 presidential elections, Vladimir Putin began to gradually consolidate his power, which included curbing the influence of some members of ex-president Boris Yeltsin's elite (Sherr, 2013). This group included the likes of former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, who went on to form the core, liberal segment of what came to be known as the "non-systemic opposition". This term was introduced to strike a contrast between the more pliable official parliamentary opposition, mostly embodied by the *Communist Party of the Russian Federation* (CPRF) and the more recalcitrant anti-regime actors, who had largely remained outside of the State Duma[5] (i.e., the "system"). Alongside the liberal organisations such as *Solidarity*, there were the far-right (e.g., *the Movement Against Illegal Immigration*), which had proliferated under Yeltsin, and the left, which included communists, LGBT rights activists and more ideologically ambiguous organisations such as Eduard Limonov's *National Bolshevik Party*.

This rather heterogenous grouping spent most of the 2000s organising small demonstrations defending the right to protest (e.g., *Strategiya-31*) and occasionally joining the CPRF in larger campaigns (e.g., *L'gotniki* movement that opposed the government's plans to replace social subsidies with direct payments for the groups reliant on state benefits). However, partially due to the economic growth and political stability delivered by Putin's regime during his first two terms and partially due to the lack of appeal of the movement leaders, which primarily stemmed from the public's association thereof with Yeltsin, these efforts failed to generate support from the public (Chebankova, 2013; Horvath, 2015; Scherr, 2013). This paved the way for the new generation of protest leaders. In the liberal camp, there was Ilya Yashin, an activist from a youth organisation *Oborona* ("Defence"). On the left, the leader of *Vanguard of Red Youth* (the youth wing of communist *Labour Russia*) Sergei Udaltsov and a number of other relatively young political activists made an attempt to unite the various left-wing organisations under the banner of the *Left Front* and organised a number of *Days of Wrath* protests against corruption and socio-economic inequality in 2009-2010.

Then there was Alexei Navalny, a person with an ever-expanding professional background that included business, law, sales, accountancy and increasingly politics. Expelled from the liberal *Yabloko* party for attending the *Russian Marches* (an annual event featuring various nationalists, including far-right extremists), he went on to form *Narod* ("The People"*)* together with writer Zakhar Prilepin. Although its manifesto featured a bouquet of popular ideas, from reviewing the unfair privatisation of the 1990s and recognising sovereignty of the pro-Russian regimes in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniestria to democratising the

[4] I borrow the term "power elite" from C W Mills (1956) to signify the highest social stratum, those who wield a great influence over and whose decisions impact the majority of the population. Like Mills, I move away from the liberal and Marxian conceptualisations that view either the political or economic elites, respectively, as the ultimate holders of power. As shown by Mills, the power elite can consist of holders of different types of resources. Hereafter, I use it interchangeably with "elite".

[5] *Дума/Duma* is the lower-chamber of Russia's bicameral parliament.

Russian regime, the organisation did not last long. However, this did not discourage Navalny. He was quickly coming to terms with the Internet and populism as the winning combination for mobilising members of the public for various political and economic enterprises (Lasilla, 2016).

After failing to gain traction with xenophobic sketches in his early experiments with YouTube, he moved on to the popular theme of corruption, experienced by many and loathed by many more. Navalny used his blog on *Live Journal*– one of the most popular online blogging platforms in Russia at the time – to raise funds for his anti-corruption projects (e.g., *Rospil* that scrutinised dubious state procurement transactions) and turn himself into a local celebrity. Essentially, he took political activity outside of the traditional collective action institutions, thus demonstrating the role of the Internet as the space for new, networked political projects.

In 2010, there were a few small protests in Kaliningrad against the local government and larger far-right protests in Moscow. These events, along with an increasing demand for democratisation by the liberal democrat activists, active grassroots work of the leftists and emergence of the Internet as the counter-public sphere had paved the way for the biggest protest campaign in Putin's Russia to date.

For Fair Elections (*FFE*), triggered by the theme of falsifications in the 2011 parliamentary election, was the first major digitally enabled political protest campaign in Russia. Social media platforms, such as *Facebook*, *VKontakte*[6] and *Twitter* were instrumentalised as the information channel, increasing the number of people dissatisfied with the regime, and as a collective action channel, encouraging people to participate in the protests (Enikolopov et al, 2020). Navalny, Yashin and Udaltsov emerged as the new leaders of Russia's protest movement.

These protests were also novel for Russia in terms of their modes of action and demographics. First of all, they involved creative humorous political posters mocking the ruling elite. Secondly, they attracted new types of individuals, who were younger (at least, in the beginning) and more affluent (in particular, in Moscow) (Hagemann & Kufenko, 2016; Levinson, 2017). At the same time, with the new wave of protests, against Putin's re-election in 2012, the liberal middle-class "hipsters", or the "creative class" [7], were increasingly being joined by the leftists and older and more working-class protesters, especially in the less affluent regions away from Moscow (Rosenberg, 2018; Solodnikov, 2015).

The power elite's response to the *FFE* campaign was a mixture of accommodation and repression. The voting threshold to extend political participation to smaller parties was lowered. At the same time, several protesters, including Udaltsov, were arrested. Soon after losing in the mayoral election in Moscow, Navalny and his brother had a number of criminal cases launched against them in regard to their previous business activities. Furthermore, several new anti-protest laws targeting protesters were introduced. These included amendments to the Article 20.2 to the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation, which meant an increase in fines and other punitive measures for participating in an event the organisers of which had not reached an agreement with local authorities on its logistics (KOAP RF, 20.2). In 2014, this article was amended with tougher sanctions for potential transgressors. In addition to this, a new article was added to the Criminal Code, which made a provision for a possibility of criminal prosecution for those who have been charged for the corresponding offences more than twice within half a year (UK RF, 212.1). *Democracy Index* had already marked Russia as "authoritarian" in 2010 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023).

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[6] *VKontakte*,meaning "in contact", or *VK,* is Russia's most popular social media platform, akin to *Facebook.*

[7] In Russia *"kreativnyi klass*" is used interchangeably with "*hipstery*" and the more negative "*kreakly*" is used to denote representatives of creative professions, mostly middle-class, with university degrees and financially well-off.

While that may have been slightly premature, with some Russia experts still considering it rather a hybrid regime in the early 2010's (Greene, 2014), this designation was increasingly becoming appropriate. These developments as well as the organisational weakness and ideological differences within the opposition, as well as their links to Western officials and NGOs contributed to the demise of the *FFE* campaign (Chebankova, 2013; Dollbaum, 2017; Greene, 2013).

Russian takeover of Crimea in 2014 dealt another major blow to the movement (Gudkov, 2019; Rogov, 2017; Rosenberg, 2018). The state officials and elite-aligned media actors promoted this foreign policy gambit through the patriotic frame as a reunification of culturally, ethnically and historically Russian peninsula with mainland Russia - and stigmatised those who considered it an annexation. This development had mostly neutralised the three main factions of the movement. In the leftist camp, already weakened by Udaltsov's imprisonment, there was a split, whereby some saw Putin's actions in Crimea as an act of imperialism while others embraced a statist stance. As for the far-right, which had already been subject to state repressions since the late 2000s, one *Russian March* being split into two smaller events resulted in disintegration and marginalisation. Some of the extant far-right extremists would eventually join the pro-Russian separatist militia in Donbass while others - the pro-Ukrainian nationalist battalions on the other side of the barricades (Avakov, 2015). The liberals, most of whom did not subscribe to Putin's "return to the home harbour" narrative[8], became increasingly unpopular with the general public, yet they mostly stayed united and became the dominant part of the protest movement.

That same year, Russia's protest movement was further weakened by the crisis of its counter-public sphere. This was manifested in the banishment of the only opposition-friendly TV channel *TV Dozhd* from television, the replacement of the most popular online news portal *Lenta.ru*'s chief editor with a more conformist official and the acquisition by state-friendly *Mail.ru* of Russia's most popular social media platform *VKontakte*. As a result, the movement had much of its communication system curtailed, which resulted in its temporal and partial paralysis. Meanwhile, the elite-aligned media continued with the efforts to supress the protest movement by modes ranging from ignoring and underestimating the regime challengers to vigorously depreciating and demonising them. Around the same time, a number of new legislative initiatives made a provision for the state to block certain types of information, in particular "containing calls for mass unrest, extremist activity, participation in mass (public) events that are conducted outside of the existing legal framework" (SZ RF, 398).

The murder of Nemtsov the following year frightened many of the prominent movement figures and failed to result in anything beyond one annual commemoration event. With high public distrust ratings against Putin's higher-than-ever trust ratings– around 60% according to the most modest estimates (Levada, 2022; 2023, p. 104), - Navalny and other non-systemic opposition figures decreased their political activity. Widespread patriotic euphoria from Crimea, the Sochi Olympics and military victories in Syria left little space for the protest movement and its anti-regime ideas.

[8] The official narrative of the elite-aligned media in Russia emphasised the recent period of history during which Crimea was a part of the Russian Empire and then of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic until its transfer to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 within the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, as well as the ethnic-Russian-identifying majority and the dominance of the Russian culture on the peninsula, thus, framing the 2014 takeover as a "reunification" rather than "annexation".

1.2.3. YouTube, Navalny and beyond

By 2017, Russia's power elite had managed to weaken the media capabilities of the non-systemic opposition, retaining control over the television, which had played a key role in nationwide pro-government consolidation and keeping the protest movement on the margins. However, the counter-public sphere reemerged on the non-Russian platforms such as *YouTube, Telegram, Instagram* and *TikTok*, less prone to Russia's state censorship and thus perfect for disseminating the oppositional ideas. In fact, *YouTube* became to the younger and the anti-government segments of the population what the regime-friendly television was to the older and the pro-government segments. It became the "alternative television" (Litvinenko, 2021).

While entertainment dominated the Russian section of *YouTube*, the popularity of oppositional political content was growing too. There were the liberal media outlets such as *TV Rain* and *Ekho Moskvy*[9], political scientist Yekaterina Shulman, as well as now local councillor Yashin and now CPRF-affiliated Udaltsov and many more. What all of them had in common was thousands or even millions of followers and regular generation of multimodal content. Whether organisations or individuals, they were all media actors in their own right. However, the most well-known was Alexei Navalny, who became the most popular leader of the non-systemic opposition, notwithstanding his relatively low popularity among the overall population (Levada-Centr, 2023, p. 104).

Most important of all, Navalny succeeded in converting his online political communication into mass offline protest. In an unprecedented manner, thousands of people across the country took it to the streets in March 2017 following Navalny and his *Anti-Corruption Fund*'s *YouTube* film about then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's alleged corruption schemes "He's no Dimon to you", or "Don't call him Dimon"[10]. Speaking of repressions, apart from 36 criminal prosecutions in relation to the *FFE* protests in 2012 attended by hundreds of thousands of people across the country, criminal prosecution of protesters had remained fairly rare, with only 21 protest-related criminal cases launched between 2013 and 2016 (OVD-Info, 2022; 2023). However, the state stepped up the repressions in 2017, detaining 1,805 people across the country and opening 40 criminal cases following just one day of anti-corruption protests triggered by Navalny's film. Legal prosecution for protest-related social media activity also became a reality. Putin's strong yet previously soft authoritarian regime began to harden.

2018 saw a series of protest campaigns against the pension reform (raising the pension age). These were mostly organised by the CPRF as the pensioners comprised a large part of their electorate. However, Navalny among others also organised a few anti-pension reform protests, albeit on a smaller scale. In 2019, a number of politicians and activists, including Navalny, organised several protests against the parliamentary election in Moscow, where a number of candidates from the non-systemic opposition were prevented from running and arrested. There were also protests against the government's attempts to tighten their control over the Internet. Once again, all of the above were facilitated by *YouTube* and other social media used by Navalny and others to mobilise a variety of individuals. While the

[9] *Ekho Moskvy/Эхо Москвы/Echo of Moscow* was a media outlet that existed until it was shut down following the hard authoritarian turn in 2022. Partially funded by majority-state-owned GazProm, they maintained their overall liberal democratic leaning and were often seen as part of the "fifth column" by the conservative pro-Putin segment of the population and the elite-aligned cultural agents. Yet, despite their liberal democratic leaning, they invited guests with different political views and perspectives.

[10] The film is called *Он вам не Димон/On vam ne Dimon*, meaning "He's no Dimon to you", or "Don't call him Dimon", Dimon being a colloquial diminutive of the Prime Minister's first name, Dmitriy. The title as well as the film suggested that Medvedev was not as much of a simpleton as he had been often seen as.

local authorities across the country had mostly been allowing protests against economic and environmental issues (e.g., anti-landfill protests in Shiyes in 2019), they had been increasingly impeding any political protests against the federal government and the ruling *United Russia* party's policies, especially those events organised by Navalny and his allies. 2020 protests against the arrest of Khabarovski Krai's uncooperative governor Sergei Furgal were the last of its kind before the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the authorities to limit collective protest even further.

In 2021, Navalny's new *YouTube* film about President Putin - *Дворец Путина/Dvorets Putina* ("Putin's Palace")[11], - as well as his incarceration and earlier poisoning, triggered another wave of protests. On two days in late January, 4,000 and 5,700 people were detained across the country and 181 criminal cases were launched. Mass surveillance technology began to be employed to identify, locate and detain some of the protesters who had not been detained during the protests. Shortly, Navalny's activist "headquarters" across Russia and his "Anti-Corruption Foundation" were proscribed as "extremist organisations" and essentially banned. In addition to this, the Ministry of Justice designated 113 new "foreign agents"[12] that year, which was four times the average figure of the previous years, and there was also a noticeable rise in organisations being labelled "undesirable"[13] (OVD-Info, 2022).

In late February 2022, Putin violated Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity by launching a full-scale offensive against the neighbouring state. The anti-war protests that ensued were smaller in scale but more temporally spread out throughout the year, with the highest turnouts on the first day and the following month. The first day saw almost 2,000 people detained across the country (OVD-Info, 2023). In March 2022, a new law, Article 208, was added to the Criminal Code, boding harsh punitive measures for anyone proven spreading information about the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation that significantly contradicted the state-sanctioned "Special Military Operation"[14] narrative (UK RF, 208). This signified the ultimate hardening of authoritarianism in Russia and resulted in major demobilisation of collective protest, which marks the temporal cut-off point of this analysis.

Navalny and his allies had joined the anti-war campaign. However, with Navalny incarcerated and increasingly isolated, his organisation proscribed and his networks scattered, the first nationwide anti-war protest as well as many others that followed did not have any visible leader figures or organisations behind them. While a human rights activist, Marina Litvinovich, with a far lower following than that of Navalny's, was arrested as the organiser, there is little evidence to suggest a strong causal relationship between the call-to-action video she posted on *Facebook* and the anti-war protests. This begs the question of how this instance of mobilisation was possible. It also puts to question the extent of influence the leader figures such as Navalny have had over the protest mobilisation in recent years. Furthermore, most of the participants in the political protests between 2017 and 2022 were not members of Navalny's organisation - there were far more unaffiliated individuals compared with the earlier waves of protests (Levinson, 2017; Solodnikov, 2015) - and they varied more-than-ever in terms of age, sex, social class and a number of other factors, with no indication of a group identity that would unite them (Arkhipova et al, 2019; 2021). This

[11] In this film, Navalny dissected and dismembered the myth about Putin as the selfless saviour of Russia that the elite-aligned media had been promoting and suggested he had built a major corruption scheme with a purpose of building himself a palace and sponsoring people close to him.
[12] "Foreign agent" is a label that is applied to individuals and organisations deemed by Russia's Ministry of Justice to be engaged in political activity while in receipt of material support from a foreign entity.
[13] "Undesirable" label is given to organisations the work of which is considered to be a threat to the Russian state.
[14] "Special Military Operation" is the officially approved term in the Russian Federation to denote the Russian military's actions in Ukraine.

was not a case of traditional SMO-brokered collective action. Finally, a society of widespread political apathy, individualism and growing repression is far from an enabling environment for collective protest, which calls for a close examination of the cultural processes behind these instances of protest mobilisation.

Hence, exploring Russia's protest movement can offer valuable insights into how structurally unconnected, unaffiliated individuals may mobilise in a fragmented, individualist society defined by information profusion, low levels of trust, political apathy and authoritarian regime.

1.3. Contemporary protest movements & cultural processes

Having introduced the phenomenon of interest, the research questions and the case study, it is important to define the general concepts that frame my research. As stated earlier, the transformation of society and communication dynamics have given rise to new types of movements - based on loose, heterogenous networks mostly made up of individuals with no SMO affiliation. This contrasts with the previous social movements that were based on dense networks with a strong shared identity in which SMOs played a more prominent role. I therefore decided to use the word "contemporary" to signify the above features. I acknowledge that these are not the only types of movements that exist today. Even in the most advanced societies there are various types of movements, including those of a more traditional kind. However, the type of movement I am focusing on is seen as a product of our time, typical of today's societies defined by individualism, scarcity of attention, low levels of trust in traditional institutions and widespread political apathy, and in this sense, "contemporary" seems most appropriate.

The "protest" descriptor specifies the nature of a movement I am examining – where protest is the defining feature. I had contemplated using Aldon D Morris & Naomi Braine's "social responsibility" label (2001, p. 34) as it denotes movements that "challenge certain conditions that affect the general population" (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004, p. 179). However, that particular term is rarely used in social movement research and appears more frequently in business studies literature on corporate social responsibility. At the same time, "protest movements" is a common term in social movement studies used to denote movements rooted in opposition to particular government policies and conditions perceived as unjust (Jasper, 2014; Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Trere & Mattoni, 2016; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). This is also appropriate considering the movement in the focus of this case study is often referred to as "the protest movement", as mentioned in the previous section.

The types of collective protest such the one in the focus of this thesis have put the previous ideas about what a "social movement" is to the test. If one is to employ Mario Diani and Ivano Bison's (2004) taxonomy, sparse networks and a weak shared identity qualify the phenomenon in question as a "conflict organisation" rather than a "social movement". However, using the word "organisation" instead of "movement" is bound to sow confusion as the former means an organised group of individuals while the latter is defined more by the activities individuals, including organised groups thereof, engage in. Organisations are clearly but an element of a social movement, as Tilly & Tarrow (2015) also concur. Their definition of a "social movement", which includes public displays of unity among other things, partially echoes Diani & Bison's specifications regarding the shared identity component. Nevertheless, their more minimalist definition of a "movement" (without the "social" descriptor) as "a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 11) perfectly describes the phenomenon in the focus of this thesis. It stops short of claiming an underlying movement-wide identity and dense networks, yet it

perfectly captures the essence - a long-term series of public efforts to promote a particular set of ideas.

Hence, for the purpose of this study I shall define a contemporary protest movement as a long-term public effort by sparse, heterogenous networks of actors dedicated to protesting perceived injustices the blame for which they attribute to the power elite.

Protest movements are driven by mobilisation. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) conceptualise it in terms of the movement participants becoming active in their claim-making (p. 38) while David Snow and his colleagues (1986; 2018) focus on the efforts by movement leaders and SMOs to bring the potential participants to action. For the purpose of this thesis, I conceptualise mobilisation as both - the potential protester becoming an actual protester and the role and of other factors, including movement leaders, in this process. Mobilisation is the main point of interest in this thesis, which seeks to trace its development by paying close attention to the concomitant cultural processes, which brings us to culture.

"Culture" can be thought of as the "meanings we carry in our heads" and the actions and "objects we use to express and embody them" (Jasper, 2017, p. 285). This conceptualisation is also consonant with late Lev Vygotsky's individual-level concept of a "mediated mind" (1978), whereby people use symbolic artifacts (e.g., language) in the same way as physical tools to establish the relationship between themselves and the world. In my understanding, the perceivable side of culture includes not only actions, social relations, symbols and inanimate physical "objects", but "objects" rather encompass everything we can perceive, including other people and ourselves, as well as things, symbols, sounds, sensations, and smells. Hence, culture, in the most general sense, is a set of meanings and corresponding objects we use to interpret and interact with everything and everyone we perceive in a particular context. It is what connects the minds of individuals to external reality. In fact, this is the focus of symbolic interactionism, which permeates much of my conceptual framework – how symbols such as words and gestures and concomitant meanings construct the social reality for each person and guides them through it (Blumer, 1937).

These symbols and meanings are adopted as a result of our lived experiences[15] of the world and communication with others, and they may vary across different social networks, institutions and structures we may find ourselves in, each of which have their own cultural dimension. Thus, we may pick up some cultural elements from our proximate social structures such as our family or our class in an educational institution during the earlier stages of our socialisation (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 34). We may also adopt them from the mass media, activist networks or elsewhere. As Michèle Lamont and her colleagues put it, cultural processes are "constituted at the level of meaning-making" and "involve a sorting out of people, actions or environments… [a]s individuals and groups go about acting in the world… they tend to use schemas that are largely taken for granted and made available by the cultural toolkits that surround them" (2014, pp. 11-12). Hence, cultural processes, in a general sense, involve individuals adopting ideas about the world they derive from their interaction with it and applying them by thinking, feeling and acting in a certain way.

1.4. Chapter outline & research contribution

[15] By "lived experiences" I mean "[p]ersonal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people" (Oxford Reference, 2024).

This chapter has drawn attention to the phenomenon of contemporary protest movements, outlined the research questions, introduced the case study and defined the general terms that frame this research.

In Chapter 2, I outline the key terms and concepts used throughout this thesis and evaluate the current scholarship on collective protest, the theoretical and empirical literature that deals with the processes in the focus of this thesis. In this chapter I also highlight the key debates and gaps in research. In Chapter 3, I explain my methodological choices, outlining the advantages of a qualitative interview-based case study design, and provide a high degree of detail in regard to the key stages of my research.

In the following three empirical chapters I use my interviewees' narratives to make sense of their individual cultural journeys to protest participation and examine the key patterns from across the interviews. Chapter 4 explores the cultural alignment processes that took place prior to my interviewees' immersion into Russia's protest movement by considering their lived and interactive experiences and connecting them with the contextual, systemic factors. Chapter 5 looks at how the likes of Alexei Navalny were able to generate attention and resonance as well as to trigger further-reaching cultural processes among my interviewees and the role they played in the subsequent protest mobilisation. Chapter 6 offers a detailed insight into the grievances, motivations and other aspects of the internal cultural processes that led to my interviewees' protest participation.

In Chapter 7, I discuss how my findings help understand the cultural processes behind the contemporary protest mobilisation of unaffiliated individuals amidst information profusion, low levels of trust, political apathy and an authoritarian political regime. It is where I analyse the key identity processes, the actors who influenced cultural transformation and action mobilisation and the protest-enabling factors in authoritarian settings. In Chapter 8, I draw the final conclusions and outline my perspectives in respect of further research.

This research contributes to social movement studies as well as to the study of collective protest and the discipline of sociology in general by exploring the underrepresented perspective of unaffiliated protesters that many contemporary protest movements are comprised of. It analyses the key cultural processes, including those related to identity and leadership, and contributes to the ongoing debates in the field, as outlined in the next chapter. My study adopts a flexible approach to movement leadership to identify the different types of actors that shape and direct contention in contemporary societies, offering new conceptualisations thereof. Furthermore, this thesis advances the interdisciplinary project by fusing sociological and socio-psychological approaches as well as engaging with some ideas from political communication, answering the recent calls of social movement scholars from across social sciences (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Earl, 2019; Earl & Garrett, 2017; Jasper, 2017; Karpf, 2019; Rohlinger, 2019). As a result, this study offers updated frameworks of protest action motivations and cultural resonance, as well as provides a better understanding of the identity processes in contemporary protest movements. Furthermore, with democratic backsliding trends on the rise around the world, this thesis highlights the mechanisms that allow to defy the demobilising nature of authoritarianism, thus providing a timely contribution to Democracy Studies. Finally, with Russia becoming more closed off to the West and more unpredictable than ever, this research also makes a valuable contribution to Russian Studies.

2. Cultural processes behind contemporary protest mobilisation

2.1. Introduction

Social movement studies, according to Donatella della Porta & Mario Diani, is about examining "how ideas, individuals, events, and organizations are linked to each other in broader processes of collective action" (2020, p. 9). I would condense this to three elements – the actors (individuals and/or more-or-less institutionalised groups thereof such as organisations), the events they take part in (e.g., listening to a movement leader) and the ideas that give meaning to these efforts (e.g., motivations). The purpose of this thesis is to identify and understand the ideas that drive unaffiliated individuals to take part in a street protest as well as where these ideas come from. The latter is just as important because one's understanding of reality is shaped by one's interaction with the world. In the context of protest mobilisation, one's ideas about who one is, what is happening, what is wrong, and why one needs to act develop in the minds of individuals but are often a result of their experience of reality.

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework that guided my data collection and analysis. To some extent, it was inspired by Karl Opp's (2009) structural-cognitive model for collective action analysis. Its premise is that the macro-level factors at the system level are connected to the micro-level cognitive processes in the minds of individuals via the communication efforts by actors such as movement leaders. Therefore, macromobilisation, micromobilisation and motivation are the three key types of mechanisms behind collective protest, located at three different levels of analysis. Macromobilisation concerns the macro-level factors related to reality, the conditions that enable or impede collective protest. Micromobilisation is located at the meso-level at which some individuals such as movement leaders attempt to define reality for others, form social networks, cultivate identities and mobilise others to action. Motivation is situated at the micro-level of individual cognitive processes, which form the final link between the aforementioned factors on the one end and protest preparedness on the other. Each of the following sections presents and evaluates the key concepts, theories and application thereof in research, with a particular focus on contemporary societies, authoritarian regimes and more specifically Russia.

Considering that the wave of protests I analyse here is very recent (2017-2022), the existing scholarship on it is still relatively modest. Hence, I complement it with various studies on the earlier waves of Russia's protest movement, as well as other instances of collective protest - in Russia and other, authoritarian and non-authoritarian contexts. I introduce these studies throughout this chapter to illustrate and critically assess how the aforementioned theories and frameworks have been applied to explore the cultural processes behind contemporary protest mobilisation, identifying their strengths, weaknesses and implications for my research.

2.2. Macromobilisation

2.2.1. Strains, opportunities & resources

In sociology, it was the collective behaviour theorists who laid down the groundwork for social movement studies. Neil Smelser's Value-Added Theory, also known as the Structural Strain Theory (VAT/SST) (1962), offered one of the most comprehensive frameworks that described collective protest at the time. It ascertained that in order for collective protest to take place, the system had to be conducive to such behaviours, a structural strain had to exist, there should be a generalised belief related to the problematic nature of the strain, its source and the need to act, an event triggering action should take place, and at least some of the individuals had to be able to mobilise to act without being preliminarily stopped from doing so.

Structural strain at the heart of VAT/SST, trigger event and structural conduciveness to collective protest are theorised to exist in the reality as well as in the minds of the potential protesters. Structural strain most commonly manifests as inequality of access to resources in society or a similar kind of discrepancy or ambiguity. Structural conduciveness was most famously cemented in the Political Opportunities/Process Theory (POT/PPT), which focuses on the opportunities offered by the political regime to the state officials and their challengers (McAdam, 1982). The idea is that any opening in the political opportunity structure makes protest more likely. These opportunities include "the multiplicity of independent centres of power within [the regime]", "its openness to new actors", "the instability of current political alignments", "the availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers, "the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making", and "decisive changes in [those] items" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 59). More generally, regimes can be democratic or non-democratic (authoritarian), with the former having a wider political opportunity structure than the latter. Furthermore, the regimes can be strong or weak, whereby the former are more capable of containing any contentious action than the latter.

POT/PTT is also related to Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT), which focuses on how the resources available to the "movement entrepreneurs", or leaders, and the SMOs, affect their tactics and overall success (McCarthy & Zald, 1973). Building on the argument that social strains are present in almost all societies and that their relevance for collective action cannot be assumed, RMT proponents maintain that it is the availability and mobilisation of resources that are crucial to moving people to action (Tilly, 1978). There are material (e.g., money), human (e.g., movement participants) and social-organisational (e.g., list of activists' contacts) resources, which RMT scholars have traditionally focused on.

At the same time, there are also cultural and moral resources. The former include knowledge and media products while the latter – legitimacy, solidarity and public support. This warrants a mention for another macro-level factor – cultural opportunities. The general premise is that if there is a society-wide tradition of criticising the government and engaging in public protest, as in democratic states with a developed civil society[16], then collective protest becomes more likely.

2.2.2. Authoritarianism, Russia & the Internet

When it comes to social strains and trigger events, these conditions can be observed in both democratic and authoritarian contexts. For instance, in the case of the *Occupy* protests that swept many countries around the world in the previous decade, the economic inequality of

[16] By "civil society" I mean "that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values . . . and advance their interests" (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 7).

capitalist relations was amplified by new austerity policies following the 2007-2008 economic crisis (Bailey et al, 2022; della Porta, 2015). Similarly, in Russia, economic and political inequalities were amplified by the evidence of electoral fraud in the 2011 parliamentary election (Greene, 2013; Hagemann & Kufenko, 2016), corruption scandal in 2017 (Fomin & Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk, 2022), Alexei Navalny's incarceration in 2021 (Busygina & Paustyan, 2022) and violation of Ukraine's sovereignty in 2022 (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023).

At the same time, while the macro-factors such as structural strains should be considered, as put by Martijn van Zomeren and his fellow collective action scholars (2008), their "empirical relation to collective action… is elusive and weak at best" (p. 505). A good case in hand would be Harald Hagemann and Vadim Kufenko's (2016) logistic regression analysis of the factors behind the nationwide *For Free Elections* protests in the early 2010's Russia. Their results suggest that the economic inequality indicators were the strongest predictors of collective protest. The authors measure this structural strain through a proxy - the ratio of the governor's family income to the average family income in the region. However, they do not provide an explanation as to how the governor's family income leads to protest action at the micro-level of protest participants. Such an explanation would require one to analyse how (and whether) the region denizens had learnt about this inequality and the subsequent cognitive processes that resulted in their decision to take it to the streets. Thus, research must reach beyond the macro-level variables in order to explain the relationship between them, which may not always be straightforward.

For instance, there is some ambiguity in social movement studies in regard to the role of resources in protest mobilisation. One large-N study that included states from around the world with various types of regimes has shown that, on average, higher levels of income and education correlate with protest participation (Dalton et al, 2010). The results pertaining to the levels of education have been confirmed by studies focusing on various contexts, including Russia's protest movement (Busygina & Paustyan, 2022; Nikolayenko, 2023). At same time, when it comes to the levels of income, a recent study that focused on authoritarian China showed its negative correlation with protest preparedness, whereby individuals with higher income were less likely to protest out of fear of losing their resources (Ong & Han, 2019). This contrasts with authoritarian Russia, where many anti-regime participants have been affluent professionals, which posed a question as to what made them think differently from their Chinese counterparts (Arkhipova, 2019).

In terms of the political regime, most of the opportunities suggested by Tilly and Tarrow (2015) have been negligent in the context of this case study. As put by Samuel Greene (2014), the Russian "state organises politics in such a way as to prevent competitors from creating a power base that draws support from outside the limited sphere of 'administrative resources'" (p. 7). In other words, the political powers are fully under the control of the political elite, where Putin is situated, and are used to maintain their overwhelming dominance. Furthermore, as outlined in the previous chapter, repression has been increasing in Russia throughout Putin's rule, thus decreasing the likelihood of anti-regime protests in accordance with the POT/PPT.

As far as the cultural opportunities are concerned, there is a long tradition of state-orchestrated collective action, which has its roots in the Soviet collectivism and even includes some protests (albeit usually against other countries' governments). Grassroots protests concerning environmental, social and political issues have not been uncommon in post-Soviet Russia (Tokarev et al, 2023). However, these protests mostly target local and regional elites while the elements of civil society capable of challenging Russia's central, power elite have been gradually dismantled over the years (Greene, 2014). There is some data that suggests that there had been an increase in public acceptance of political protest, which facilitated it between 2017 and 2019 despite the narrowing political opportunities

(Rogov, 2019; Savenkov, 2019). However, such attitudes remain marginal, and there is a widespread sense of political impotence (Levada, 2023).

At the same time, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Russia's protest movement continued to mobilise en masse at least until March 2022 despite the narrow political and cultural opportunities. Furthermore, a number of scholars have recently found that an online video footage showing Russian law enforcement representatives using force against some of the protesters have caused an increase in protest preparedness among some citizens (Ayusheva, 2019). This contrasts with research that highlights the negative relationship between repression and protest mobilisation and point in the direction of the non-material dimension of protest, alternative cultural processes and the role of the Internet therein.

While the Internet, and social networking sites in particular, have been instrumental in facilitating collective protest in democratic regimes, they have been crucial in authoritarian settings. Digital media platforms have enabled a formation of the "counter public sphere", which makes "alternative discourses critical of the dominant discourse", defined as "oppositional knowledge", available to the public (Tang, 2018, p.189; see also, Hsiao, 2018; Litvinenko, 2021). Thus, the Internet and access to the cultural resources it facilitates is a crucial macro-level factor that makes up for the narrow political and cultural opportunities (Busygina & Paustyan, 2022; Ruijgrok, 2017; Weidmann & Rød, 2019). While repression has been penetrating the online realm in various states around the world, it mostly punishes the publishers rather than the audiences (Earl et al, 2022), making accessing oppositional information mostly risk-free.

In the Russian context, 90% of the population were using the Internet at the time of this research (Interfax, 2022). Social media in particular were the second most popular source of news after television, and *YouTube* has become the second most popular social media platform after Russian-based *VK* over the past few years (Levada-Centr, 2023, pp. 118-121). As mentioned in the previous chapter, *YouTube* has crystallised at the counter-public sphere and enabled protest mobilisation (Fomin & Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Litvinenko, 2021). *YouTube* has enabled similar dynamics in other contexts such as the Gezi Park[17] protests in Turkey (Jenzen et al, 2020). At the same time, digital media platforms are not neutral platforms, and their algorithms are kept secret and controlled by their top management (Pedro-Carañana et al, 2018). *YouTube* in particular has been shown to promote content more extreme than that already watched by the users (Tufekci, 2018). Therefore, one should pay more attention to detail when it comes to the enabling role of such digital media platforms.

Overall, the macro-level factors outlined in the previous subsection are certainly a valid part of the inquiry and are often applied in quantitative macro-level studies the results of which derive their strength from statistical generalisability. However, macro-level analysis and crude economic rationality seldom have the explanatory power to form a bridge between the structural conditions and the outcome. Macro-level conditions must be taken into account to understand the context, but they must be traced to the protest participant to identify how and whether these factors played a role in one's decision-making process. This is certainly the case with authoritarian states where street protests occur despite the sense of political impotence and fear of repression facilitated by the regime. Furthermore, the existence of social strains, political opportunities and resources independent of the observer may well enable (or impede) mobilisation, but what is more important is that they are perceived by individuals as such. Considering that some macro-level conditions may be unknown to the potential protester and may also be exaggerated, downplayed or even manufactured, those who define the reality for others play a crucial role in protest mobilisation. Moreover, seeing

[17] Gezi Park protests were a series of collective action events in 2013, which were initially concerned with an urban development but became increasingly political, encompassing a range of issues such as freedom of expression and the government's political direction.

as the Internet and social media platforms such as *YouTube* have been shown to facilitate counter public spheres, the micromobilisation that takes place on them must be analysed more closely, which is the focus of the next section.

2.3. Micromobilisation

2.3.1. Frames, alignment & signifying work

"Frame" is the central concept in the Framing Theory, which focuses on the micromobilisation processes in collective protest. Erving Goffman conceptualised "frames" as the "schemata of interpretation" that organise experiences and guide actions, individual or collective, for individuals "to locate, perceive, identify and label" occurrences within their life space and the world at large (1974, p. 21). These are essentially ideas about reality. Identities – how one sees oneself and others - have been conceptualised in the same way as frames - as "cognitive schemas - internally stored information and meanings serving as frameworks for interpreting experience" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286; see also, Markus, 1977). In addition to this, David Snow (2001, p. 2) sees identity as something one can attribute to oneself and impute to others. Frames are thus schemas of meanings (complete with symbols that stand for them) that help us interpret and interact with everything and everyone we perceive as part of our reality. In the same vein, identities are a type of frame that we apply to individuals, including ourselves, and groups. Frames, including identities, are components of culture, and thus adoption and application thereof comprise cultural processes. Furthermore, considering their experience-organising and action-guiding functions, the content of these frames includes beliefs pertaining to cognition and to behaviour (norms). Other scholars also point to the affective dimension of these processes such as emotions and feelings (Jasper, 2018; Melucci, 1996; Turner, 2012).

One of the important contributions of what Jasper calls "culturalist" theories (2010) is bringing the "symbolic interactionist approach to the study of collective action by emphasizing the role of framing activities and cultural processes" in protest mobilisation (Buechler, 1995, p. 441). In other words, in order for individuals to consider participation in a street protest as necessary it must be presented and communicated to them as well as received and interpreted by them as such by means of symbols and meanings attached to them. What the culturalist theories highlight is that while various conditions such as strains, opportunities and resources available to would-be protesters may indeed facilitate collective action, they can also be exaggerated (Johnston & Noakes, 2005, p. 2). Hence, they only matter inasmuch as they are perceived by the potential participants in a way that facilitates their participation. Framing is thus the orienting, subjective component of mobilisation capable of shaping the reality.

In their seminal work on framing in social movements Snow and his colleagues (1986) have used the examples of *Hare Krishna* and various other movements they had previously researched to demonstrate how the SMOs engage in micromobilisation - a "range of interactive and communicative processes devised and employed by SMOs and their representative actors to mobilise and influence various target groups with respect to the pursuit of collective or common interests" (p. 465). These efforts are thus aimed at activating "frame alignment" processes, which link ("align") the interpretative frameworks of SMOs with those of individuals (or groups thereof) through amplification, bridging, extension or transformation of certain frames as to generate participation. Dennis Chong & James N

Druckmann (2007) call the former “frames in communication” and the latter “frames in thought”. This is a very important distinction, which is revisited further on.

Framing takes place all the time, even during the latent phase when no protest events are taking place (Melucci, 1989, p. 248), but the key framing processes in the run-up to the protest. “Collective action frames” are crucial to moving people “from the balcony to the barricades” by articulating the problem and attributing the blame (“diagnostic frame”), proposing a solution (“prognostic frame”), and suggesting reasons and incentives for action (“motivational frame”) (Snow et al, 2018, p. 395). Essentially, this is the key micromobilisation task that aims to cultivate what Smelser (1962) referred to as a “generalised belief” among others that there exists a situation that constitutes a problem, somebody (or something) in particular is to blame, and something specific needs to be done. Social psychologists conceptualise this as consensus mobilisation, which involves disseminating the SMO viewpoints as to generate as many sympathisers as possible – i.e., influencing people’s frames in thought, - and action mobilisation, which involves transforming sympathisers into participants – i.e., influencing people’s behaviour (Klandermans, 2014).

Social movement scholarship has long emphasised the role of the SMOs in the above processes and in movements in general. This is mostly related to the traditional collective action dynamics whereby the brick-and-mortar SMOs and formal membership therein served as the cohesive that reified the movement networks and kept them together. According to the Social Network Theory (SNT), the greater the number of ties between the movement participants the denser the network, which in its turn makes collective action more likely to take place (Krinsky & Crossley, 2014). Therefore, dense social networks have long been seen as a crucial element of collective action and social movements (Diani & Bison, 2004). Cultural processes rely on social networks through which the movement frames are transmitted. As put by Gonzalez-Bailon et al (2013) in his analysis of *Los Indignados* in Spain, “[n]etworks shape choice by altering the probability that an actor will adopt a given practice”; thus creating “paths of influence through which behaviour diffuses” (p. 946). At the output end, there are individuals with ties to the movement participants, which make their participation more likely (Passy, 2003). At the input end, there are the most connected individuals within those networks - the movement leaders.

Framing theorists recognise the role of leaders in the above cultural processes as “signifying agents” who engage in “signifying work” - articulating frames (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al, 2018; Snow & Soule, 2010). Movement leaders are the most influential when it comes to defining reality to others, and they purposefully engaged in micromobilisation, articulating the action frames as well as facilitating prior frame alignment. Social psychologists also recognise the signifying and mobilising power of leaders as movement identity signifiers and charismatic orators, defining norms and persuading others to adopt them and act upon them (Hogg et al, 2012). Snow uses “identity work” as the catch-all term for the signifying work that involves generating, invoking and maintaining symbolic resources related to identification (2001, p. 8). Other scholars from the symbolic interactionist tradition have also emphasised the crucial role of the movement leaders in this aspect of micromobilisation, which also requires the proffered movement identity to be congruent with the individuals’ identities (Melucci, 1996; Polletta & Jasper, 2001)

Furthermore, it must be noted that signifying work may involve not only framing already known situations, but also introducing new situations to the audiences. For instance, in the context of Russia’s protest movement, it must be noted that not only did Navalny engage in negative framing of certain actions by the power elite, but he also often introduced previously unknown cases of alleged corruption to his audiences, as with “Don’t call him Dimon” in 2017 and “Putin’s Palace” in 2021. This is best conceptualised as “agenda-setting”, which, according to political communication scholarship (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), precedes framing. In other words, before framing a situation in a particular way, it must be introduced first. Thus, not only can the signifying agents proffer a frame to be applied to a situation, but

they can also introduce a situation (whether or not it had taken place). This is particularly relevant in the current context where media production is no longer confined to the legacy media corporations, and where anyone with the media editing skills and software has a potential to construct a situation and broadcast it via platforms such as *YouTube*, which brings us to the subject of leadership in digitally networked action.

2.3.2. Leadership in digitally networked action

While the role of leaders has long been recognised by the adherents of both culturalist and materialist theories, since the Internet and social media platforms began to change the dynamics of mobilisation, some scholars began to suggest that these digitally enabled "connective action" networks based on weak ties were "leaderless" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Their key argument is that the new digital technologies and social media have democratised social movements in terms of giving everyone with an Internet connection the tools to participate in the online public sphere and in the relevant cultural processes, reducing the role of SMOs and their leaders and facilitating sparse networks that were voluntary and horizontal.

While the studies on these "digitally networked action" movements such as *Los Indignados* in Spain (Gonzalez-Bailon, 2013) and *Gilets Jaunes* in France (Royall, 2020) often displayed more horizontal dynamics, they also revealed that these movements still had leader figures who possessed more influence than others. There is a substantial body of literature that suggests that while the digital media have reduced the role of SMOs and enabled a more horizontal movement structure, they have not done away with hierarchy and leaders. This is evident from the studies such as Marisa von Bulow's (2018) analysis of a student movement in Chile, the analysis of the protest movement in Egypt and other strands of the Arab Spring by Evronia Azer and her colleagues (2019) and Sofia Glazunova's analyses of the protest movement in Russia (2020a; 2020b; with Amadoru, 2023). Azer et al (2019) propose the term "connective leadership", which is less centralised and may be shared by several individuals, who "connect" potential participants to information and networks of participants to other social networks, both online and offline, as well as represent the movement. At the same time, they maintain that it is nevertheless still leadership in a sense that these are movement actors who have more sway over the movement trajectory than others. Moreover, during their analysis of the protest movement in Egypt, Azer and her colleagues found a combination of traditional and "connective" leadership, which they classified along three categories - "coordinators" (organising and directing), "charismatic leaders" (inspiring and mobilising) and "experts" (imparting their knowledge). Thus, there are the charismatic leaders, who play the central role of cultural agents in micromobilisation, involving both consensus and action mobilisation, as well as the coordinators, who play a more organising role behind the scenes, and the experts, who play a signifying role in the cultural processes that is nevertheless more supportive and implicit as far as protest mobilisation is concerned.

In the Russian context, all three types of leaders were present. There were the more technical "coordinators" (e.g., Navalny HQ head activists around the country in charge of organising the protests) and "experts" (e.g., intellectuals sympathetic to the movement and active on YouTube and other social media). At the same time, it was a small number of charismatic leaders, first and foremost Navalny, who were found to be the most influential in protest mobilisation; moreover, the protest participants were found to mostly rely on top-down communication from these cultural agents and depend on their physical and online presence, both in the early 2010's and early 2020's (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023; Litvinenko, 2012). Navalny's crucial role in action mobilisation is also confirmed in relation to the 2017 "Don't call him Dimon protests" (Dollbaum, 2020; Dollbaum & Semenov, 2021;

Fomin & Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk, 2022). This suggests that while the Russian protest movement was mostly based on weak ties, most of those ties were between the charismatic leaders such as Navalny and their followers, making the cultural processes more centralised and hierarchical, in line with the empirical research mentioned in the previous paragraph.

In some ways, Navalny resembles Zeynep Tufekci's (2013) "microcelebrity activist"; although, his audience counted into millions, making his reach wider than "micro". Nevertheless, he fitted Tufekci's criteria of "a politically motivated actor who successfully uses affordances of social media to engage in a presentation of [their] political and personal self to garner attention to a cause (p. 857; see also, Laaksonen et al, 2020). Microcelebrity activists differ from traditional celebrities in that their claim to fame is based on their political activism and they are not afraid to transgress into more anti-establishment and even radical discourse. Hence, a microcelebrity activist is similar to a social media "influencer" (Ahmadi & Ieamsom, 2021) but is rather politically (than economically) motivated. This is also the reasoning Sofya Glazunova & Malmi Amadoru (2023) give to their use of "anti-regime influentials" (as opposed to "influencers") whom they define as "political communicators, who share an anti-authoritarian and anti-regime ethos, spread anti-regime discourses, and possess and exercise various degrees of political influence online facilitated by digital platforms" (p. 191).

What is noteworthy is that the list of anti-regime influentials identified by the authors, political communication scholars, includes not only charismatic leaders such as Navalny but also media outlets such as *TV Rain* and *Echo of Moscow* and other, more ambiguous communicators such as *YouTube* entertainers. If the social movement theorists focus on the framing efforts of the movement leaders and SMOs vis-à-vis potential participants, in political communication, the purpose of framing is for the media actors to influence the audience's reception (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Thus, there are the "media frames", which are similar to the frames-in-communication, and the "audience frames", akin to the frames-in-thought - "individual means of processing and structuring incoming information" (Scheufeule, 2000, p. 301). As a result of the affordances of social media platforms, the lines between movement leaders and media are increasingly blurred, with the former often acting as media actors, the latter essentially being signifying agents and thus both disseminating frames-in-communication, which calls for a more flexible approach to leadership in the cultural processes behind protest mobilisaiton.

This is the political communication perspective on movement leaders. Defining them as "participants in an action or process, who potentially affect the trajectories of movements" Rohlinger (2019) encourages fellow social movement scholars to keep an open mind on who may be leading protest movements in the digital age, giving examples such as trolls, bots and opinion entrepreneurs (pp. 725-6). Other researchers have acknowledged the role of media organisations (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023), as well as cyber activists and watchdog organisations (Tkacheva et al, 2013; Lokot, 2020). More generally, experts such as scientists have been shown to generate high levels of trust (Seyd et al, 2024).

Hence, when it comes to the cultural processes in the context of digitally networked action, one should think of leadership in cultural terms - as power to shape reality for others, thus keeping an eye open on various signifying agents, which may include media organisations among others. At the same time, one should exercise caution with terms such as "political communicators" and "anti-regime". Political communication is "purposeful communication about politics" (McNair, 2017), yet intentionality cannot always be assumed, especially when it comes to those actors who do not make their political allegiance or goals explicit. In the same vein, not all influentials who are not aligned to the power elite are "anti-regime". In fact, *Echo of Moscow*, which Glazunova & Amadoru also mention, was a relatively neutral, alternative media outlet that gave a platform not only to anti-regime, but also to the elite-aligned and other, politically ambiguous voices.

To accommodate the diversity of the cultural agents in the given context, I propose a slightly broader term of alternative influentials, who act as signifying agents disseminating frames-in-communication alternative to that of their elite-aligned counterparts, which may also be more explicitly "anti-regime" in their orientation and have a purpose of cultivating consensus and action mobilisation. Thus, they may include movement leaders as well as other actors such as experts and media organisations, whose online broadcasting (as opposed to proximate in-person interaction) makes them mass influentials, much like their elite-aligned counterparts promoting pro-regime frames.

Furthermore, signifying work can be thought of as being akin to socialisation – cultivation of particular social norms and values (Parsons, 1949). Some of it may be more explicit and intentional, as is often the case with the movement leaders, who engage in "cognitive socialisation" – actively cultivating certain beliefs. In other cases, it may be more implicit and voluntary, as when individuals adopt new frames as a result of watching, listening and observing, as in "observational socialisation" (Berns, 2016). Considering that agents of socialisation include not only the media actors, but also one's family, peers and others present in one's proximate social structures, they too may play a role in shaping one's interpretative framework and mobilising one to action. In fact, in his recent study based on a number of interviews with protesters in Belarus, Mexico, Spain and Poland, Przemysław Szczygieł (2020) conceptualised this as "socialisation to rebellion", whereby protest is normalised by one's parents though both cognitive and observational socialisation. Another recent study based on a survey with university students in Hong Kong showed a positive association between their protest preparedness and their fathers' previous protest participation, peer influence and media consumption (Chui, 2022). This once again emphasises the need to pay attention to a wide range of potential signifying agents.

2.3.3. Scarcity of attention, resonance & trust

In his reflection on the current, "fourth age of political communication", Jay G. Blumler (2016) emphasises how the "avalanche of yet more communication abundance", the profusion of multifarious online content has increased the deficit of attention (p. 24). In the same vein, Joan Pedro-Carañana and his colleagues (2018) note the dominance of entertainers and other, resource-rich cultural agents on the social media platforms and the resultant struggle for any alternative voices to be heard (p. 75). This reinforces the idea that the Internet and social media platforms may have created the conditions for democratisation of the public sphere, but the extreme profusion of information as well as unequal distribution of resources mean that some voices are likely to dominate these platforms while others may never be heard. Therefore, the movement leaders and other alternative influentials must compete for attention, without which their signifying work is unlikely to have any effect.

Apart from exposure, the success of micromobilisation also depends on "frame resonance". In other words, the proffered frames must resonate with their targets, and this resonance is contingent upon a number of factors. Benford & Snow (2000) mention "frame consistency (congruence between the SMO's beliefs, claims & actions)", "empirical credibility (apparent fit between the framings and events in the world)", "centrality (of the beliefs, values and ideas of the movement frames to the lives of the targets of mobilisation)", "experiential commensurability (congruence with personal everyday experiences of the targets of mobilisation)", "narrative fidelity (cultural resonance of the proffered framings with the targets' cultural narrations/myths/domain assumptions/inherent ideology)" (pp. 619-622). The latter depends on the understanding of the local culture and opportunities it entails (Snow et al, 2018, p. 398). Johnston & Noakes (2005) condense the above to three factors – "cultural compatibility (symbols synchronizing with the society's cultural stock)", (internal)

"consistency" and "relevance (capacity to make sense of what is happening in the lives of their target audience)" (p. 15). Thus, the communicators have to be knowledgeable of the target's culture and skilful with their rhetoric, by which I mean context-situated communication aimed at achieving a persuasive effect (Soule, 2015). This is also reiterated by Aldon D Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg (2004), who illustrate this with an example of the African American church preachers, who were perfectly placed in this regard in the context of the Civil Rights Movement in the US because they were part of the same cultural milieu and perfected their rhetoric on a regular basis (p. 185).

At the same time, the communicators themselves, or rather how they are perceived, is also of great importance. Therefore, Benford and Snow also stress the "frame articulators/claim makers' credibility", which is based on their expertise and status (2000, p. 622). Sergio Belardinelli and Guido Gili (2022) also recognise the importance of this aspect, which they conceptualise as the cognitive dimension of the credibility-trust relationship, based on the more rational thinking related to the person's knowledge and competence (p. 92). Purdue (2001) conceptualises these as "competence trust", usually confirmed by the previous experiences of the leader providing correct information and their reputation.

At the same time, Belardinelli and Gili also point to the ethical-valuative dimension – the confidence in the speaker because of the values they embody, - and the affective dimension, based on a "sense of security and well-being" in one's relationship to the speaker. Purdue (2001) conceptualises these two dimensions as "goodwill trust", based on the leader's perceived honesty arising from the trustor's emotionally charged belief in the moral character of their trustee. This appears to be in line with the socio-psychological research on leadership that conceptualises trust as a shortcut to power over others, an emotional bond that suspends any rational evaluation (Hogg et al, 2012). This is also consonant with Max Weber's *Führerdemokratie*, a hierarchical system based on "charismatic leadership" that is built on and maintained by the "charismatic community" members' belief in the leader's "revelation, heroism or exemplary qualities" and "devotion arising out of enthusiasm, or despair and hope" (1968, pp. 216 & 242-3). Charismatic leaders are trusted and considered to wield a great deal of influence over their followers, especially in the times of crisis (Hogg et al 2012, p. 279; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). This makes trust an important component of cultural leadership.

Social science scholarship on trust also breaks it down by the types of trustee – thick interpersonal, thin interpersonal and system (Khodyakov, 2007). Thick interpersonal trust is based on strong ties – family, close friends. Thin interpersonal trust is based on weak ties – people one does not know very well. System trust, also referred to as "systemic" (Luhmann in Belardinelli & Gili, 2022) and "institutional" (Parry in Khodyakov, 2007), is about confidence in the system, social institutions (state, in particular). It is also linked with the "political" trust in the elected officials (Valgarðsson et al, 2024).

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, there has been a global decline in trust in state institutions, elected officials and traditional media, as well as widespread political apathy, in both democratic and authoritarian states around the world. It was therefore important to understand how movement leaders and other influentials managed to overcome these obstacles and succeed in generating trust in themselves and resonance for their signifying work.

One of the first studies I came across while looking for research on micromobilisation was Lu Jian & Chris Chan King-Chi's (2016) case study of an environmental collective action against a construction of a paraxylene plant in Qidong, China. Their analysis explores the clever framing strategy used by the vigilant local activists, who took into account the political culture, and used communist-style rhetoric to circumvent the constraints of a more authoritarian regime they found themselves in. In contrast, Louisa Prause's (2019) analysis of an anti-land grab movement in Senegal suggests the movement leaders' lack of

understanding of the cultural opportunities as a reason behind the failure of their micromobilisation efforts.

Both of these studies are very insightful, and the authors apply the framing theory adeptly. However, despite using qualitative interviewing as their primary research method in addition to secondary research, they focus on the leaders, or core activists, thus giving a concise account of the articulated frames – frames in communication – while failing to capture the reception side of all the people who had been successfully mobilised – frames-in-thought. While the frames in communication and frames in thought may coincide in smaller local movements such as that in Qidong, where everyone is equally involved in frame negotiation, this is less likely to be the case with Russia's (nationwide) protest movement.

When it comes to research on the Russian context, there is also no shortage of research on the frames in communication proffered by the protest movement leaders – Alexei Navalny's "Internet populism" during the early 2010's (Lasilla, 2016) and his "populist frames" in the late 2010's (Glazunova, 2020a; 2020b), Eduard Limonov's attempts to claim the legacy of Soviet dissidents to legitimise his political persona during the *Strategiya-31* campaign before the rise of Navalny (Gilligan, 2015; Horvath, 2015), and various protest movement leaders' framing efforts on YouTube during the 2018 presidential election (Litvinenko, 2021). There is some insightful research on the framing struggle between the protest movement leaders and the authorities in the early 2010's (Oates & Lokot, 2013; Smyth & Oates, 2015; Tertychnaya & Lankina, 2020). However, there is very little research on the frames-in-thought– i.e., the protesters' perspective on those events.

Ivan Fomin & Olga Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk (2022) take it one step further by using the photos from the 2017 "Don't call him Dimon" nationwide protests to derive the anti-corruption, anti-regime and election-related frames from the symbolic interaction of the protesters. Therein they interpret the creative placards and humorous posters mocking the authorities as the manifestation of the protesters' lack of fear of or respect for the ruling elite, corroborating the analyses of the previous waves of collective protest (Denisova, 2017; Levinson, 2017). At the same time, they do not attempt to explore the cultural processes behind those symbols by interviewing those individuals and base their analysis on their interpretation of the posters as opposed to the meaning-making of the protesters themselves, thus once again not fully addressing the frames in thought.

At the same time, there is one recent study that stands out in this regard. It is Miriam Wenner and Silva Lieberherr's (2022) research on "trust work" – the movement leaders' efforts in generating trust. Their research is based on semi-structured interviews with a variety of actors, including the movement leaders and their supporters, in the context of two different regional movements in India. The narratives of the supporters suggest that their trust in the movement leaders developed as a result of the latter proving themselves to the former by helping them with their everyday problems at the local level. This is known as "process-based trust" because it results from the potential trustee earning the trust of their potential trustor through systematic demonstration of their trustworthiness (Zucker, 1986).

Overall, there is an abundance of research on the frames-in-communication, but the scholarship on the frames-in-thought is lacking. Considering that we are living in the "era of minimal effects" of the ever-multifarious signifying agents on the ever-fragmented audiences (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), there are too many cultural agents to assume that any one of them will have reached, let alone influenced a particular individual's attitude and behaviour. Furthermore, Karine Clément, who complements her research on small-scale grassroots mobilisation in Russia with the Framing Theory, stresses that in a context of increasingly restrictive political conditions such as contemporary Russia the "socio-cultural dynamics at the level of the everyday lives of ordinary people are needed to explain mobilisation" (2015, pp. 217-218). Therefore, in order to understand the cultural processes behind contemporary mobilisation it is crucial to follow Clément, Wenner and Liebereherr in shifting the attention to

the micro-level of protest participants, as other social movement scholars have advocated in recent years (Earl & Garrett, 2017; Sobieraj, 2019). This is the focus of the next section.

2.4. Motivation

2.4.1. Injustices and grievances

"Political opportunity structures are more subjective than objective... Networks are not mechanical circuits, but interactive opportunities based on emotional bonds such as trust. State repression is not simply an increase in the costs and risks of protest, but an action that can be evaluated morally, sometimes leading to more mobilization rather than less".

(Jasper, 2017, p. 288).

Furthermore, as emphasised in the previous section, the effect of any micromobilisation efforts by movement leaders and other influentials cannot be assumed because attention and resonance are not guaranteed. Corroborating the conclusions from earlier in this chapter, James Jasper proposes that it is ultimately the protest participants themselves that hold the key to understanding how they think, feel and act their way through the world (Ibid.). Therefore, Jasper and other social movement scholars from all across social sciences (Earl & Garrett, 2017; Sobieraj, 2019; van Zomeren et al., 2018) increasingly insist on the necessity of focusing on the micro-level of protest participants and integrating the socio-psychological frameworks with the symbolic interactionist approach in order to explore the cultural processes behind protest mobilisation.

Social psychology of collective action and movement participation is situated at the intersection of sociology and psychology and seeks to understand why people participate in collective protest.

Injustices and grievances are important concepts in this tradition as they are usually the root cause of motivations in protest mobilisation. The former tends to be a matter of mismatch between one's understanding of how things ought to be and how things are while the latter is the resultant cognitive and emotional experience of the former. Anger is the most common emotion in such grievances, but there may also be other emotions such as hope (Bericat, 2016; Jasper, 2018; Jenkins, 2014; Melucci, 1996).

Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans (2013, p. 1) propose that the injustices behind protest motivations are a matter of violation of one's interests or principles. In the case of the former, one perceives oneself to be disadvantaged, either as an individual or as part of a group, while in the case of the latter, one may perceive another party to be the recipient of injustice.

Social movement scholars generally separate grievances into structural – these are long-term and may be routinely tolerated – and incidental – these are "suddenly imposed" and are thus more likely to mobilise action (Snow & Soule, 2010; van Zomeren et al, 2008, Walsh in Bray et al, 2019; Zald, 1991). The latter is also consonant with Anthony Giddens' work on "ontological security", which denotes a sense of "order and continuity" in one's experiences, in one's self-identity and beliefs about the reality, the disruption of which creates a sense of ontological insecurity and requires action to adopt to the new reality (1991, pp. 43-44).

While grievances are crucial, they do not automatically convert into protest participation. This is where motivations and incentives come in. Social psychologists tend to focus on the former (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023; van Zomeren et al, 2018) while the sociologists - on the latter (Chong, 1991; Opp, 2013). However, these two concepts are also

mutually compatible (van Stekelenburg, 2013a). Motivations are the reasons for, or logics behind, an action whereas incentives are the perceived goals of this action.

2.4.2. Instrumentality, expression & identity

Instrumental logic is more consonant with the strand of theories that conceptualise street protests as a strategic collective action and social movements as rational phenomena, an "extension of political action beyond conventional means" (Della Porta & Diani, 2020, p. 19), or "politics by other means", as famously formulated by William Gamson (1975, p. 3). Initially, this approach was an attempt to make sociology more rigid by injecting it with not only political, but also economic logic of the Rational Choice Theory (RCT), whereby fully informed and economically rational individuals sought to maximise benefits and minimise costs. One of the best-known developments in this paradigm at the micro-level is Mancur Olson's Collective Action Theory (CAT) (1965), which addresses the "free-riding" problem, whereby a possibility of obtaining a "collective good" without participating in their production causes individuals to avoid engaging in collective action, and thus selective, participant-only incentives need to be provided.

In social psychology, the instrumental motivation is when one engages in protest action to change one's circumstances, or, more generally the state of affairs, for the better (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). This motivation has traditionally been connected to violated interests on the one end and material incentives on the other end (van Stekelenburg, 2013a; with Klandermans, 2023). Nevertheless, the main idea is that the individual acts in order to have an impact that is material in its consequences in a sense of affecting the behaviour of the action target in a way that would facilitate the desired change (e.g., releasing a political prisoner).

This motivation is reinforced by the efficacy belief - a belief in the success of the anticipated action, usually conceptualised as a group efficacy belief, which is about the ability of the group to make a difference and is contingent on the perceived opportunities and constraints. It also depends on one's belief of sufficient human resources, which I refer to as a numbers belief as it is about believing in sufficient numbers of the participants. Recent research points to the potential role of "vicarious experiences" - the knowledge of previous collective action successes, - as one of the predictors of the group efficacy belief (Salanova et al, 2022). Action preparedness is also facilitated by a personal efficacy belief, which is about the significance of one's own contribution to the common goal. At the same time, the costs associated with the protest action such as time, effort and, most importantly, risks (e.g., incarceration), are thought to have a demobilising effect (Hsiao, 2018). Therefore, with protest preparedness being subject to a cost-benefit calculation, it becomes less probable in authoritarian regimes where the likely costs may outweigh the unlikely benefits.

If the earlier, "narrow" version of RCT viewed individuals as omniscient observers, the more recent, "wide" version has come to recognise the incomplete knowledge and potentially false beliefs possessed by individuals (Opp, 2013). This came to be conceptualised as bounded rationality, meaning that while an individual's motivation may be instrumental, it is shaped by their personal understanding of resources, opportunities and risks at play, which can only be discovered at the micro-level.

In the same vein, while research inspired by the earlier, "narrow" version of the RCT was concerned primarily with a more material, cost-benefit logic, the "wide" version and growing acknowledgement of the cultural processes drew the scholars' attention to the role of cultural constructs such as identities in shaping individuals' choices (Ibid). Likewise, if Olson (1965)

had focused more on the material incentives, as time went on, non-material incentives came to garner more scholarly attention. For instance, in his seminal work on the Civil Rights Movement in the US, Dennis Chong highlights the role of moral and psychological incentives, which stress the mobilising power of moral obligation to self and psychological satisfaction (which includes the "narrowly rational expressive benefits" such as revenge), respectively (1991), which brings us to another type of motivation.

The expressive motivation is thought to arise when individuals decide to engage in protest action to express their views and feelings. This motivation has traditionally been connected to violated principles on the one end and moral incentives on the other end (van Stekelenburg, 2013a; with Klandermans, 2023). Morality has been increasingly included in collective action models as moral conviction grounded in core values and resulting in a sense of obligation to act (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Sabucedo et al, 2018; van Zomeren et al, 2018). At the same time, considering the affective dimension of feelings and the role of emotions such anger, hope and shame in protest movements and other social phenomena (Bericat, 2015), psychological incentives may also be at play.

Finally, over the past few decades, identity has emerged as the central concept in social movement studies. According to the Social Identity Theory (SIT), the social identity is an "individual's knowledge that [t]he[y] belong to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to [them] of [their] group membership" (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). In most socio-psychological models of collective action, this group-based social identity plays the central role as both the source and the product of morality as well as the predictor of protest participation via perceived injustices, boosted by the group-based anger, and group efficacy belief (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Thomas et al., 2009; 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2008; 2018). Identification with the injustice recipients has also been shown to result in a greater sense of grievance (Pelletier, 2012).

Identity motivation is thus about an individual deciding to engage in protest action to act as a member of their group (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). This motivation has traditionally been connected to social incentives such as reputation (Chong, 1991; van Stekelenburg, 2013a). This mechanism is theorised to be facilitated by identity politicisation, which entails a "qualitative change in the self-concept" at the individual level that makes individuals become involved in a political struggle as carriers of such an identity (van Zomeren et al, 2018, p. 151). Then, if the group norms dictate the need for participation in a particular situation, the individual has no choice but to participate in order to remain a member of the group, to maintain their reputation among fellow group members. It can also be understood in relation to the conceptualisation of exercising identity as a "social practice" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 4), something that one does as a carrier of a particular identity. This Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) has been successfully tested in different socio-political contexts - from South Africa (Cakal et al, 2011) to Lebanon (Tabri & Conway, 2011) to Spain (Sabucedo et al, 2018) to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the US (Wermser et al in van Zomeren et al, 2018). At the same time, the changing dynamics in protest mobilisation may require different identity models, as outlined in the following section.

2.4.3. Identity processes in contemporary protest movements

If social psychology of collective protest has traditionally focused on social identity at the individual level, Alberto Melucci's theorisations on collective identity at the group-level (1996) have been considered the "obligatory entry point literature" in symbolic interactionism and

social movement studies in general (Monterde et al, 2015, p. 931). Melucci's conceptualisation of collective identity is that of a cohesive that brings individuals to act together collectively, as well as of its dynamic nature, its emotional component and the concomitant processes which align collective action goals and their meaning for each participant. While Melucci emphasised the processual nature of collective identity, Snow saw it more as a product rather than a process - "a shared sense of 'one-ness' or 'we-ness' anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of 'others'" (2001, p. 2; see also, Flesher Fominaya, 2010). In the most basic terms, collective identity is a shared, group-level understanding of own groupness that enables collective action such as street protests. Therefore, a strong collective identity came to be seen as a necessary component of any social movement alongside a dense network (Diani & Bison, 2004).

At the same time, the increasingly fragmented, individualist and heterogenous societies have produced protest movements based on loose networks with either a weak or no collective identity. James Jasper (2014) explains these identity dynamics in terms of an "identity dilemma" – the unlikelihood of a movement-wide identity that would accommodate everyone and alienate no one, where some identities would be more congruent with the movement unlike others. This dilemma is acknowledged by some of the Russia scholars, who recognised the problem posed by the heterogeneity of the protest movement and absence of a unifying social structure in the context of the *FFE* campaign (Remmer, 2016; Toepfl, 2018). Olga Onuch & Gwendolyn Sasse's (2016) study of the *Euromaidan* movement in Ukraine also demonstrates that in a heterogenous movement comprised of a diverse range of groups there may be several collective identities but no one unifying identity. These findings are corroborated by an earlier analysis of the environmental movement in Britain where it was concluded that a possibility of a movement-wide collective identity in heterogenous movements is unlikely (Saunders, 2008, pp. 232 & 249). Thus, the presence and persistence of these movements with no strong collective identity resulted in the questioning of the Collective Identity Theory's relevance and an ongoing debate on the identity processes in the context of contemporary protest mobilisation.

In his infamous critique, Kevin McDonald attempts to explain the emerging phenomenon using Paul Lichterman's concept of "personalism" - "shared ways of speaking or acting that emphasise the personal self rather than its relationships to specific communities or institutions" (McDonald, 2002, p. 112). The idea is that people act (e.g., participate in street protests) not out of particular group-based obligations but rather out of a sense of personal responsibility and to emphasise who they are as individuals, which suggests a combination of identity and expressive motivations. McDonald also suggests Alain Ehrenberg's "public experience of self and other" - "a struggle for (rather than mobilisation of) identity that is more personal than collective" – as the incentive for participation and conceptualises collective action as a "shared struggle for personal experience" (p. 125). The idea is that today's collective protest participants are first and foremost individuals pursuing a personal experience of building own personal identity in tandem with others. In another work he suggests that the new "movements of expression" – a term he borrows from Pierre Rosanvallon, - are replacing the "movements of identity"; thereby, people increasingly taking part in protests to express themselves individually rather than to affirm a group-based identity (McDonald, 2004, p. 589). Solidarity of the previous "movements of identity" is thus replaced by "fluidarity" of these ephemeral phenomena, which may disappear as quickly as they appear (Ibid., p. 575).

Contrary to McDonald's critique, for Manuel Castells (2012) the networks that make up contemporary movements are still based on solidarity and the resultant "togetherness", which allows movement participants to "overcome fear and discover hope" (p. 225). At the same time, this "togetherness" still does not reify as a collective with its own group norms, but rather temporarily binds together individuals driven by own motivations and goals. So,

more of a shell of collective identity – something halfway between Melucci's and McDonald's theorisations.

With the digital social media playing a major role in the contemporary protest movements, it comes as no surprise that an increasing number of media and communication scholars have been joining the debate. In their seminal work "Logic of Connective Action" (2012), briefly cited earlier, W Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg address the changing identity processes behind contemporary protest movements such as *Los Indignados* in Spain and *Occupy* around the world. The two scholars acknowledge the phenomenon by contrasting the concept of organisation-brokered "collective action" by dense networks with that of "connective action" by loose, organisation-facilitated or self-organising networks enabled by digital media platforms. They explain the overcoming of the identity dilemma by the use of more inclusive calls-to-action, "personal action frames", which personally appeal to a wide range of individuals, as opposed to the traditional collective action frames tied to a particular group and its identity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). So, instead of "Join our protest as an x, as a part of the X (which you may or may not identify as)" and "Here are our slogans (which you may or may not relate to)", it was now "Join our protest as the person that you are" and "Here is a general slogan – personalise it to make it your own". Instead of everybody being "we/us", everyone was more of an "I/me". Thus, very much in line with McDonald's and Castells' ideas, "connective action" is therefore about "personal expression and recognition or self-validation" as opposed to an expression of a collective identity, which the authors suggest is unnecessary for this type of protest action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752). However, the latter suggestion is compromised by their own admission that a collective identity was present in *Los Indignados,* which they chose as their main example of a self-organising connective action network.

Stefania Milan (2015) agrees with Bennett & Segerberg on identity proposing that group-based "politics of identity" are increasingly flanked by "politics of visibility", which creates "individuals-in-the-group as opposed to fully-fledged groups, and the 'collective' is experienced through the 'individual'" (p. 896) – the group as the means of collective action not the end (p. 887). Individual action is thus a performance and expression of a personal identity first. Like Milan (2013, p.9), Thomas Poell & Jose van Dijck (2018, p. 5) suggest that collective identity is still there but also emphasise its ephemeral nature. On the other hand, Monterde et al (2015) argue for replacing the concept of "collective identity" with "multitudinous identity" as an all-encompassing identity present in heterogenous networks such as *Los Indignados/15M*, a product of continuous interaction rather than that of identification with a symbol, a person or a cause (Monterde et al, 2015, pp. 944-5).

On the one hand, media and communication scholars highlight the important role that the Internet and sites enabling user-generated content such as social media platforms play in contemporary protest movements. On the other hand, they tend to focus more on the online activity at the expense of offline action and the cultural processes behind it. This is the case with Bennet & Segerberg's (2012) "connective action", which occasionally blurs the lines between the two, and Milan's (2015) "cloud protesting", which focuses more on the online manifestation of cultural negotiation between potential movement participants. Nevertheless, the overt focus on the digital platforms exacerbated by a lack of deeper culturalist grounding that goes beyond Melucci have been acknowledged by some of the media and communication scholars as problematic; they have thus been making calls to "shift away from media-centric and techno-deterministic approaches" by focusing on the cultural processes in the minds of the protest participants (Mattoni et al, 2020).

Another problematic aspect of much of the scholarship on contemporary protest mobilisation is its ongoing focus on the SMOs, with the unaffiliated protesters remaining largely underrepresented. This is the case with Anastasia Kavada's impressive search for identity processes in *Occupy* (2015), where despite choosing a "connective action" type of

movement, the author nevertheless focuses on interviewing the core, organisation-linked activists, following the traditional collective action logic, instead of exploring the unaffiliated participants brought in through the weak ties. This trend can also be observed in the socio-psychological scholarship, where SMO membership has been used as a proxy for politicised identity, thus excluding the unaffiliated participants (Klandermans, 2014; van Zomeren et al, 2018).

The literature on the Russia context also largely overlooks the unaffiliated protesters. Thus, there are surveys and interviews with Navalny's social media followers (who did not participate in the protests), and core organisation-linked activists (including paid staff) (Dollbaum, 2020; Dollbaum & Semenov, 2021; Fomin & Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk, 2022), a meta-analysis of a large body of surveys with Russian citizens in regard to their protest preparedness (Ivanov et al, 2017), an insightful study based on surveys and focus groups with pro- and anti-regime Russians aged between 18 and 35 (Krawatzek, 2020), which provide useful insights into various groups but exclude the unaffiliated protesters.

There is Radzhana Buyantuyeva's study (2020) based on interviews with LGBT activists in Russia, which includes both organisation-linked activists and unaffiliated protesters and partially applies the socio-psychological framework to collective protest in Russia. Buyantuyeva attributes the rise of LGBT activism in Russia to Putin's ultra-conservative turn, which created grievances and strengthened the collective identity of Russia's LGBT community, which in their turn served as the basis for collective action. She thus connects the materialist and culturalist perspectives, the macro- and micro-levels, which makes her research more comprehensive. Her analysis reveals that the protesters had little hope for repelling discriminative laws, but, nevertheless, found street protests to be effective in achieving visibility, hoping to raise awareness of their shared identity with other LGBT people, among other things. While this is a very insightful study, it nevertheless does not differentiate between the organisation-affiliated and unaffiliated protesters.

Overall, research focusing on the unaffiliated participants remains extremely scarce. However, there are three particular studies that stand out in this regard.

"Mobilisation Without Organisation: the Case of Unaffiliated Demonstrators" by Bert Klandermans and his colleagues (2014) - a quantitative study of protest movements across Europe, - is rather one of a kind in terms of systematically separating the unaffiliated protesters from their SMO-affiliated counterparts. The results reveal some differences between the SMO members and unaffiliated demonstrators, whereby the latter are more likely to be recruited via open channels (e.g., social media) or asked to join by a family member or a friend. This is an important finding as it takes us outside of the box of traditional SMO-centred collective action and suggests the media, family and peers as the influentials engaging in micromobilisation. However, they also find that the unaffiliated demonstrators are less motivated than their affiliated counterparts in terms of all three socio-psychological motivations outlined in the previous subsection. This is a crucial findings because it renders the existing framework insufficient for capturing the cultural processes behind some of the contemporary protest movements.

"Unlikely mobilisations: how ordinary Russian people become involved in collective action" by Karine Clément (2015) is another important work. The author's expertise comes from many years of living in Russia among ordinary people while conducting ethnographic research on protest and activism. In this study, Clément discusses the frame transformation processes, which she calls "re-framing", at the individual level to discover how an ordinary, unaffiliated person may become an activist and engage in protest action. Clément concludes that this is a two-stage process, whereby an unaffiliated individual becomes a "learner activist" as a result of conditions such as "encounters, emotional communication and conversations, the first results of small deeds and the positive or negative emotions which

arise in the process of attempting to do something new" and then turn into a "confirmed activist" if encouraged by ongoing collective action and not discouraged by any obstacles (Ibid, 236). It must be said that the above study focuses on smaller protest initiatives related to housing and work conditions rather than the protest movement examined here. Nevertheless, Clément makes an important point about paying attention to the alignment processes that transpire in the lives of the individuals before they come together to constitute the base of the protest movement.

Finally, there is Thomas O'Brien & Remus Cretan's (2020) study that explores the street protests triggered by a fire in the "Collectiv" club in Bucharest. It focuses on ordinary individuals, who comprised the majority in this collective action. As a result, the authors get an insight into the lifeworlds of the unaffiliated protesters and discover their side of the cultural processes at play. While the authors do not use a systematic conceptual framework, their analysis highlights the role of the fire as the trigger event, corruption and perceived failings of the political system in Romania as the structural grievances, the instrumental and expressive motivations of stopping corruption and signalling disapproval, respectively, as well as a range of non-SMO identities. The strength of their study comes from its focus on the micro-level, as in their previous research on collective protest of Romanian shepherds (O'Brien & Cretan, 2019). Thus, the next step would be a more systematic study that would generate more conceptual clarity in regard to the motivations and identities at play, which is what this thesis attempts to achieve.

2.4.4. Alternative identity bases & content

The above developments show the need for seeking identity bases outside of the SIT's social and CAT's collective identities. Van Zomeren and his colleagues suggest conducting qualitative research on "identity content" (what an identity is about) and propose the personal identity as a potential identity base (van Zomeren et al, 2018). According to the SIT, it is the individual-level identity, unique to the individual (Ibid.; Tajfel, 1972), which echoes McDonald (2004) and Milan (2015). In the same vein, Jonathan Horowitz (2017) considers the Symbolic Interactionist Identity Theory (SIIT) as a potential alternative framework for contemporary protest mobilisation.

SIIT classifies identities into three types – "person identities", based on the individual's perceived personal qualities, "role identities", based on the expectations attached to a position perceived to be occupied by the individual in a social structure, and "group identities", based on one's perceived membership in a group of people one interacts with (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 38). Jonathan H Turner also suggests a "social identity" that is categoric[18] in a sense that it is about "membership in a categoric unit" (2012, p. 350)., Identities can vary in salience (the likelihood of being invoked across different situations), prominence (the extent of internalised importance thereof) and commitment (based on the number and appraisal of other identity verifiers) (Stets & Serpe, 2013: pp. 36-37). Moreover, successful identity performance and its positive appraisal by others have a positive effect on one's self-esteem (Stryker in Turner, 2012, p. 336).

While SIT's personal identity appears to capture and define the reflections of McDonald (2004), Bennett & Segerberg (2012), Milan (2015) and other authors mentioned in the previous subsection, the SIIT is just as promising when it comes to the unaffiliated protesters. While O'Brien & Cretan (2020) do not apply any such frameworks in their

[18] Hereafter, I refer to this as a "categoric" (as opposed to "social") identity to avoid any confusion with the SIT's "social identity".

analysis, their data on motivations nevertheless reveals an “obligation”-linked moral (person) identity, a parent (role) identity and a “small person in a country” (group or categoric) identity (p. 379).

The “moral identity” is something that has been previously conceptualised by symbolic interactionists as being about wanting justice for and caring about others (Stets and Carter, 2011, p. 197) It is also consonant with a more action-linked “activist identity”, a role identity that is “politicised” in a sense of being normatively tied to a political struggle, whereby a situation evaluated morally as an injustice has to be acted upon (Horowitz, 2017; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al, 2018). In fact, there are two studies on the Russian context that touch upon this type of identity. One is a survey-based article by Regina Smyth and her colleagues (2013) that involved polling actual protesters of the early 2010’s *FFE* campaign as well as the pro-regime counter-protesters. The scholars suggest that the stalwart anti-regime activists were defined by a greater sense of duty and understanding of the protest goals as well as the moral incentives of participation and hinted upon an activist identity. Another one is Clément’s study (2015) mentioned in the previous subsection, which proposes the “learner activist” and “confirmed activist” identities.

Activist identities have also been noted in protest campaigns in other contexts. For instance, in their survey-based study of the identity dynamics in the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, Ozden Melis Ulug and Yasemin Gulsum Acar (2019) found that most of the protesters adopted the “capulcu” (“looters”), ascribed to them by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as their group identity. “Activist” was the most common word they used to describe it, alongside “protester”, “critical and intelligent”, anti-Erdogan, “intellectual”, “conscious”, for democratic values and for freedom. In contrast, they saw others as pro-Erdogan, “discriminatory”, “conservative”, “violent”, “self-interested”, “anti-intellectual” and “passive”, among other things.

While the above are person and role identities, a “small person in a country” with an “obligation to be there on the streets”, mentioned by one of O’Brien & Cretan’s (2020) interviewees appears to be either a group or categorical identity. Furthermore, in terms of its source, this particular identity is likely to be rooted in one’s situation and relation to a political community (a state), which leads us to the subject of citizenship.

2.4.5. Citizenship & rights

Citizenship can be defined as a membership in a political community that endows one with an identity and a legal status, along with the rights and obligations that come with it (Isin & Turner, 2002; Kochenov, 2019; Stanford, 2023). While there are different taxonomies on citizen rights in sociology and other social sciences, if synchronised, they can be classified into the following groups (Isin & Turner, 2002, p. 15; Maas, 2017; Marshall, 1950; Turner 1997):

Civil, or legal rights, which include personal security, access to justice, and freedoms of choice and conscience (e.g., freedom of speech).

Political rights, which include the rights to vote, run for political office, organise and participate in politics though parties and other types of organisations (e.g., SMOs).

Social rights, which include access to state-funded institutions and resources such as healthcare, education and benefits.

Economic rights, which are about participating in the labour market.

While the above rights are generally considered to be guaranteed by the state through citizenship, there is also a globalist perspective that suggests that many of the above rights should extend across state borders (Maas, 2017). This is most often reflected in the concept of human rights, which can be conceptualised as a subset of the civil rights, seeing as personal security includes first and foremost the right to life. They may also be seen as a standalone category, whereby one does not need to be a citizen of a particular state to be entitled to them. International law is the institution that guarantees the right to security to individuals and states.

While the civil, political, social and economic rights, along with the concomitant obligations, are all part of citizenship, the political rights, or more specifically the exercise thereof and struggle for them are often seen as the ultimate citizen activity because it is through them that citizenship can be reshaped. Thus, in line with the earlier conceptualisation of the politicised activist identity, active citizens engage in politics, both conventional (e.g., voting) and contentious (e.g., street protests), in opposition to the power elite to defend or secure their rights and rights of others, as opposed to passive citizens (Janoski & Gran, 2002, p. 40).

Thus, with identity being part of one's self-concept – how one sees oneself, - being a citizen means seeing oneself as a member of a political community where everyone is entitled to a particular set of rights, which serve as the basis for one's principles and interests. In the context of protest mobilisation, any violation of or threat to those rights translates into violation of or threat to one's principles and potentially interests, which should trigger action by an active citizen. Therefore, citizenship has a strong potential as a source of identity for a heterogenous protest movement and collective protest in general because it is a status that every citizen understands themselves to occupy regardless of other self-identities.

Citizenship has thus become a viable cultural foundation for contemporary protest movements, where the citizen identity is re-conceptualised in a way that facilitates protest participation. This has been acknowledged in regard to *Los Indignados*, *Occupy* and various movements around the world (Papa & Milioni, 2013). Even in authoritarian regimes, which repress active citizenship to a greater or lesser extent, there is usually some common understanding of citizenship, which creates the cultural opportunities for collective protest. In fact, in the Qidong case study mentioned earlier in this chapter (Lu & Chan, 2016), the local activists mobilised others around the "fellow citizens, compatriots" identity. While the smaller scale of this collective protest may have been an important factor in avoiding the identity dilemma and enabling this movement-wide citizenship-based identity, there are other studies of larger-scale movements that point to the potential role of citizenship in contemporary protest mobilisation. For instance, in a study titled "Identity politics over Issue politics" by late Faleh A Jabar (2018), which analyses an issue- rather than identity-based protest movement in post-invasion Iraq, the author finds that there were no sectoral, factional or local identities at play, which was what set it apart from many of the previous protest campaigns. Nevertheless, what this study also implicitly shows is that there was an emerging citizenship-based identity at the heart of the movement. Similar identity processes are observed by Emanuela Buscemi (2017) in her study of a movement of young people and women in Kuwait, who had been building a new, alternative, all-inclusive cultural identity, which fuses some forms of active citizenship with Islam to circumvent the risks and constraints imposed by their relatively authoritarian, conservative regime. Some of the scholarship on Russia's Protest Movement also hints on the potential of citizenship to generate a movement-wide identity (Fomin & Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Lokot, 2020; Smyth et al, 2013). This is explored in more detail in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Considering citizenship in the current context, as noted earlier, sociologists have noted the growing mistrust of conventional politics and mainstream media among the public resulting in disengagement from conventional citizenship practises such as voting and joining political

parties (Blumler, 2016; Castells, 2000; Turner, 2013). At the same time, some social scientists have also pointed out that the demise of a "dutiful citizen" did not result in the demise of citizenship but rather in the emergence of a new "self-actualising citizen", or a "social movement citizen", who prioritises individual purpose over obligation to the government, activism and volunteering over conventional politics, and networks based on thick ties to friends and peers and thin ties enabled by social media over any traditional group-based activity and information from the mainstream media and politicians (Bennett, 2008; Papa & Milioni, 2013). Thus, the Internet has facilitated alternative cultural dynamics, which have played an important role in cultivating identification based on citizenship that is detached from the traditional institutions.

Finally, in regard to the globalist perspective on citizenship mentioned earlier, a violation by the power elite of one's home state of another state's sovereignty is likely to trigger a more complex set of identity processes. There is some research on the anti-war movement in the UK and US that suggests that the American and British citizens who were protesting their power elite's invasion of Iraq in 2003 were driven by anger, shame and guilt (Iyer et al, 2007). Furthermore, there is research on semi-identification with migrant parents in migrant and mixed families (Gigliotti & Odasso, 2014). Thus, when one shares their cultural, ethnic or national identity with the injustice recipients across the border, it may also cultivate negative attitudes towards one's aggressor state and result in protest participation. This was identified in a study that focused on the experience of young British Iraqis following George W Bush and Tony Blair's violation of Iraq's sovereignty in 2003 (Ali, 2019). Another study on Muslims in the UK highlighted the participants' perception of the suffering of fellow Muslims in Palestine and Iraq (Appleton, 2006). Considering that it was Putin's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty that served as the trigger event behind the 2022 anti-war protests and taking into account the cultural closeness and familial ties between Russians and Ukrainians, there are likely to be similar identity dynamics involved.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented a wide range of existing scholarship that informs my research and underlined the necessity to consider the factors pertaining to macromobilisation, micromobilisation and motivation by taking an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates ideas from sociology, social psychology and political communication.

Macro-level factors such as strains, opportunities and resources are likely to play a role in protest mobilisation, but if they are not perceived as such at the micro-level, their relation to collective action, as put by van Zomeren and his colleagues (2018), is "elusive and weak at best". This is especially the case in authoritarian regimes where collective protest persists despite the low efficacy beliefs and risks of repression. The affordances of the Internet and digital media platforms have been identified as crucial to creating an alternative, counter-public sphere in such a context. At the same time, the role of movement leaders in micromobilisation via these technologies is unlikely to be of any significance if they do not manage to secure attention, resonance and trust, which are scarce in many contemporary societies. Furthermore, the aforementioned societal and technological transformation has changed the leadership dynamics and thus requires a more open and flexible approach for identifying the signifying agents involved in micromobilisation.

Nevertheless, the key point of this chapter is that in order to analyse the cultural processes that drive mobilisation in contemporary protest movements one must explore the underrepresented perspective of unaffiliated protesters at the micro-level. This is where one can learn how an individual perceived a particular situation, evaluated it as an injustice,

whether it was a matter of violation of one' interests or principles that turned the injustice into a grievance, what kind of identities were at play, as well as what structural strains, mobilising events, opportunities and resources were perceived by the individual, which influentials played a role in the frame alignment and micromobilisation, and how they were able to capture attention and generate resonance and trust in the individual.

Overall, this chapter highlights three research areas that require further examination. First of all, there is an ongoing debate on the identity processes behind contemporary protest participation, which fluctuates between the group-baseed collective and social identities on the one hand and individuals' personal identities on the other. Secondly, while there is plenty of research on the movement leaders' frames in communication, there is a need for a focus on the participants' frames in thought to better understand how and which signifying agents are able to generate attention, resonance and action, as well as the nature and extent of their cultural leadership. Thirdly, there is a matter of ambiguity in regard to how some authoritarian states are less able to contain anti-regime protests than others, which requires a closer examination of protesters' perceptions of efficacy and risks as well as their understanding of opportunities and resources available to them. While these debates are addressed in the empirical and discussion chapters of this thesis, the next chapter outlines and explains the methodology behind it.

3. Methodology

While the previous chapter outlined my conceptual framework, this chapter is going to provide a high degree of detail on the methodological aspects of my work. In the following sections, I elaborate on the philosophical underpinnings of my research, including my ontological and epistemological positions, and explain my choices in regard to my case study research design, interview method, the affordances of online interviewing and measures taken to ensure high quality data.

After explaining my research design, I offer a detailed overview and evaluation of my data collection strategy. I elaborate on my participant recruitment tactics, data collection tools and the overall process. This is followed by two more sections, which outline my data analysis techniques and the ethical considerations behind my research, which entailed a great deal of attention to security due to the increasingly high-risk nature of anti-regime protests in the context of hardening authoritarianism in Russia.

3.1. Philosophical approach

My philosophical approach, briefly touched upon in the preceding chapters, is mostly inspired by Roy Bhaskar's "critical realism" (1997) and to some extent by Björn Kraus's "relational constructivism" (2015) and Kathy Charmaz's works on constructivism and grounded theory (2006).

My ontological position is that of realism, in a sense that there is a real material world out there that is independent of the observer. In other words, when I am asleep, Downing Street and the Kremlin stay as they are, celebrations and protests still take place, and so do various other natural processes that I may not be aware of. Bhaskar's stratified ontology (1997, p. 56) proposes three nested domains. There is the empirical domain (one's experiences and observations), which is a subset of the actual domain (which also includes the events and regularities that occur regardless of whether one experiences, observes them or not), which is a subset of the real domain (which also includes the structures or mechanisms behind the events and regularities that we may not be aware of but can strive to discover). Therefore, Downing Street and the Kremlin, which I have observed, and the celebrations and protests, which I have experienced, exist, but so do those material objects and events that I have not experienced, and so do the processes that I may not be aware of. There is also a social, or cultural, world – the world of meanings, which have been socially constructed and exist independent of the observer. In other words, when I am asleep, the social institutions such as state and societal norms, as well as those institutions, norms and other social constructs I may not be aware of, still exist in the minds of those who share those meanings.

At the same time, my epistemological position is that of subjectivism – it is based on the assumption that everyone's understanding of the world is their own subjective construct. Thus, my ideas about Downing Street, the Kremlin, various social institutions and norms, events, groups, individuals and other things I believe to exist in the material or cultural dimensions are a product of my perception and cognition and do not capture the reality as it is. One may not know everything about the reality through observation as per empiricist logic because of one's limited perceptual capabilities. One may not understand everything about the reality through reason as per rationalist logic because of one's limited cognitive capabilities, and because one cannot produce any knowledge independent of one's own perspective. Thus, in the view of those limitations, any researcher is fallible and can only offer "an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 30). The same applies to any research participants. According to Kraus, there is the "living situation" – "the material and

immaterial living conditions" of the research participant, external to them – and the "lifeworld" – their "subjective reality construct" (2015, p. 4). At the same time, one crucial point that needs to be made clear is that, while the ontological reality and epistemological knowledge are indeed separate, they are also linked in a sense that the former sets the conditions for, or limits, the latter. As recognised by Kraus (Ibid), the subjective construct that is one's "lifeworld" is formed under their "living conditions".

To summarise and illustrate the above, each of my interviewees could only tell me about their paths to protest participation through the prism of their individual lifeworlds, internal to their minds. Therefore, their narratives were not identical as they were about their own (past) cognitive processes of internal meaning-making. This was what I was interested in – the cultural processes behind the action mobilisation, which only the protest participants themselves could tell me about. At the same time, those internal cultural processes were based on my interviewees' prior experiences – interactions with the world external to them, the one reality which all of them and I shared. These included the various objects, events and regularities situated in the actual domain of reality – something that had occurred or existed, – such as YouTube videos, friends talking to them, Navalny's incarceration, election fraud, undemocratic laws, economic inequality, etc. All of those manifestations existed in the same actuality both them and I shared. Therefore, I understood that I would be able to link their internal cultural processes to the various events and regularities in the actual world using my own knowledge, which was also a product of my own meaning-making based on my interactions with the reality that I shared with my interviewees, which in its turn included my interviews with them, secondary research and other experience of the world. Considering that I am also limited by my perceptual and cognitive capabilities, and that my understanding of reality is my own subjective construct, this thesis is merely my interpretation of reality.

3.2. Research design & methods

The qualitative nature of my project was determined by my research questions and aligned with the increasing need for this type of research, which was evident from Chapter 2. I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the contemporary protest movements and tap into the cultural processes behind them, which could not be measured quantitatively and analysed in a positivist manner. These processes consisted of meanings and interpretations and could therefore only be accessed through more complex communicative activity.

My research design choice fell on the case study as it facilitates generation of in-depth qualitative data and allows for analysis of complex social phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bertaux & Thompson, 2006; Yin, 2009). Robert K Yin recommends the case study design for the projects that seek to answer the "how" and "why" questions, do not allow for manipulation of the behaviour of the research participants, incorporate the relevant contextual conditions and require an explicit drawing of the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context (2009). All four of these criteria were present in my project. Indeed, I wanted to find out why different individuals participated in the protests, and how the ideas behind their motivations came about, my research design was non-experimental, and I believed in the importance of the context to my analysis and of conceptual clarity.

I have kept to the case study logic by only making a few initial assumptions, or "propositions" (Yin, 2009), as to how the cultural processes may function as opposed to making claims or stating hypotheses to be proved. My conceptual framework was therefore merely there to guide, rather than lead me through my otherwise inductive research. I followed Anselm Strauss's (1987) advice in combining the case study methodology with a grounded theory

logic seeing as my aim was to develop a theoretical model grounded on the data. As put by Eman I M Alzaanin, who also combines the two in her research, “[a] theory grounded in the data provides a better explanation than a theory borrowed “off the shelf” because it fits the situation, actually works in practice, is sensitive to individuals in a setting and may represent all of the complexities actually found in the process” (2020, p. 1367). This kind of approach is about unpacking the context-related processes in the centre of inquiry by engaging with the data and achieving greater conceptual clarity as a result (Timonen et al, 2018).

I recognise some of the existing prejudices in respect of the case study, regarding the lack of rigour and non-generalisability. Nevertheless, careful planning and structure can help overcome the former. As for the latter, I agree with Yin that while a qualitative, case study methodology may not provide for statistical generalisation, it allows for analytical generalisation, which is just as valuable for building knowledge (2009. pp. 14-16). As Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson put it: “Statistics can rely on the virtue of the representative sample; but only case studies allow us to reach in-depth, to descriptions of complex situations and conducts, and beyond that to the level of social processes underlying them” (2006, p. 7). At the same time, there was still another risk, arising from having even a rough theoretical framework prior to the empirical phase of research. It was that it could get in the way of the inductive mode of exploration. To mitigate this, I took advice from Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack - to discuss all thoughts and decisions in this regard with other researchers (2008, p. 553). My meetings with the supervisors provided me with this opportunity.

Case study approach encourages the use of multiple data sources, types and collection methods. My research is based mostly on the primary data I have co-produced with 35 individuals who have taken part in the street protests against various policies of the Russian government in Russia in recent years. This primary data is complemented by the secondary data related to the context.

My primary data was collected through qualitative interviewing, which is considered the “sociology’s standard workhorse method” (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Much like with my overall methodology, my choice of this method was determined by my research questions and confirmed by my literature review, with several sociologists and communication scholars recommending it as most suitable for exploring cultural processes, in particular at the micro-level (Earl, 2019; Hecht, 2021; Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Lamont et al, 2014; Rohlinger, 2019; Sobieraj, 2019; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Semi-structured qualitative interview format allows to “obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” by letting the interviewees use their own words (Kvale, 1996, p. 5). I understood that my interviewees may not be able to recall everything with complete accuracy. However, I was asking them about relatively recent experiences. Even more importantly, these experiences were not conventional and were likely to have had a great deal of emotion and significance attached to them, which has been shown to mitigate the potential recall-related issues (de Vaus, 2006). In fact, some researchers have used retrospective interviewing to obtain memories of meaning-making processes from almost fifty years prior (Bray et al, 2019).

In general, my approach to data was akin to Daniel Bertaux’s “life story/life history” framework, which he suggested to be suitable for sociological micro-level interview-based research (with Kohli, 1984; with Thomson, 2006). Within this approach interviewees are seen as “informants about the various contexts which shaped their life: thus, they are used as sources to reveal what happened to [them], how and why it happened, what [they] felt about it, and how [they] reacted to it or 'proacted' to realize [their] projects”, with the resultant life stories treated as “evidence of facts (situations, contexts, conducts) along with perceptions and evaluations” (Bertaux & Thomson, 2006, p. 13).

I am familiar with the critiques of this approach as well as those related to the interview method in general. Nevertheless, I agree with Lamont & Swidler (2014) that they often have a rather narrow understanding of what it entails. For instance, in his classic “Bibliographical Illusion”, Bourdieu (1986) raises a number of valid points. These are concerned with the interviewee’s propensity to mix up the chronology of their life events and the influence of their social position and the “situation of the inquiry” (i.e., setting, mode and purpose of the interview) on the outcome. He also highlights the pursuit of coherence on behalf of both the interviewer and the interviewee, which continues to be acknowledged as having implications for the knowledge output today (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 163). In his seminal work on collective identity, Melucci (1996, p. 57) also stresses the weakness of cultural process research that only relies on individual representations.

I addressed the above critiques as well as other potential issues with a number of mechanisms for ensuring the optimal results for my research.

Using the train route analogy, Bourdieu states that “one can understand the trajectory… only on condition of having previously constructed the successive states of the field through which the trajectory has progressed” (1986, p. 302). In other words, to understand the individual experience of the interviewee the researcher must first understand the context of the life story being told. I therefore carried out thorough contextual research on Russia’s protest movement before conducting the interviews to add to my prior knowledge of Russian politics, society, culture and history, which comes from several years of academic research and previous experience of living and staying in Russia for long periods of time. This also allowed me to mitigate any issues arising from the interviewee’s potential propensity to mix things up.

It must be said that my approach to data makes no claims to pristine authenticity of the life stories presented by the interviewees in a sense that it does not take them completely at their face value. Some of the data produced in this way is indeed interpretative, as in “descriptions of feeling and experience of relationships with significant others… interpretations of turning-points… influences which were rejected rather than followed” (Bertaux & Thompson, 2006, p. 7). At the same time, there is what Bertaux refers to as “factual” data, whereby the “informants not only explain but also describe [their experiences] as factually as possible.” Essentially, the interviewer “takes interviewees as informants about the various contexts which shaped their life: thus, they are used as sources to reveal what happened to the interviewee, how and why it happened, what he/she felt about it, and how he/she reacted to it or 'proacted' to realize his/her projects.” (Ibid, p. 13) This approach, also referred to as “contextual”, is thus realist in that the interpretations the life stories embody are nevertheless “set within a social context of factual events” (Nilsen & Brannen, 2010, p. 9). Therefore, the use of other data, from different sources and of different types, is seen as essential to understanding the context of the life stories being told, which in its turn allows for the analysis of the qualitative data. Therefore, I employed triangulation on several levels by using different data types (interview life stories, media reports, academic literature, etc.), sources (different individuals and organisations) and collection methods (qualitative interview and secondary research). Speaking of source triangulation in terms of different interviewees, each added depth and strengthened my data. This is because, while each of them presented me their own subjective reality construct, each of those lifeworlds was situated within the same context, the same reality, which meant they overlapped in many ways and thus often confirmed one another. Conducting multiple interviews has been known to strengthen the data (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). In addition to this, my work was regularly reviewed by my supervisors in the early stages of data collection.

There were other measures I took to strengthen the quality of my data – for instance, minimising the influence of the research design and of the interview itself on the life stories produced. I made sure that all the information listed in the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) was as neutral as possible. The title (“Protest Dynamics in Contemporary Russia”), the stated purpose (to better understand the dynamics of the phenomenon) and reason for the invitation

(because of their relevant protest-related experience) were generic. Much like the rest of the information, they outlined what research was about without any evaluative or ideological skewness.

Besides this, my social media presence, which most of my participants would have checked prior to the interview, represented me as a regular, down-to-earth and open-minded person, a family man with a very diverse range of friends and acquaintances. I tried to also convey this image throughout my interaction with each participant, which was facilitated by the fact that is this is how I perceive myself. I made sure to let everyone know that I was born in the USSR and had lived the post-Soviet Russian experience as a child, like most of them. I also made jokes where appropriate and made sure to make my interviewees laugh. For instance, when one of my interviewees mentioned renowned pro-Putin TV host Vladimir Solovyov, I made a humorous martial arts-like move he is known for, which they acknowledged with a laugh and "That's the one". Knowing the Russian culture and the various relevant subcultures helped me build rapport, maintain optimal power balance and create a relaxed friendly atmosphere. All of this was so that the interviewee would not feel like they needed to embellish or gloss-over anything to make a good impression and just "be themselves" as much as it was possible. This was my way of trying to minimise the influence of what Bourdieu called the "situation of inquiry" (1986) on the interviewee's conduct therein (e.g., Hawthorn effect). Furthermore, I tried to make my questions relevant and interesting as to maintain the participant's engagement. At the same time, I also tried to keep my talking to the minimum and only probe when necessary to ensure the flow of rich participant-generated narrative.

Finally, I understood that the life stories borne out of our interviews were a product of co-construction, meaning-making where my interviewee was not the only party as I was involved in that process too. I also acknowledged that just like my interviewer was not a neutral depository of memories, neither was I a passive receptor (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Therefore, I made every effort to minimise my influence on the research output. I had worked through my interview questions with my supervisors to ensure that my wording and sequencing did not encourage a particular response. For instance, I asked open-ended instead of close-ended questions with pre-determined options. I also tried to minimise my influence on both the data collection and analysis processes by not only triangulation and audit by my supervisors, but also self-reflection, the importance of which has been noted by Melucci (1996, p. 58) as well as emphasised in methodological literature on qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Listening to my participants during the interview and encouraging them to give me feedback after the interview also helped me with reducing my influence as well as giving more power to my participants. For example, two interviewees from my early cohort noted how I overfocused on a word they had used to describe themselves and other protesters, asking them to tell me more about it. This was because two of the earlier participants had used that particular word quite a few times, which made me chase for the pattern. Once again, the feedback I received from these two participants helped me keep my influence on the output under control, which contributed to confirmability of my research. I also did my best to follow Lamont & Swidler's (2014) advice to avoid searching for coherence where there may have been none and thus not forcing my interpretative framework on the data (p. 164).

3.3. Data collection

3.3.1. Contextual data

In the early stages of my research, I collected secondary data online, both qualitative and quantitative, to help me establish the context necessary for my research. This included opinion polls and surveys, NGO reports, government records, media reports, *YouTube* content (e.g., political communication by movement leaders) and academic literature, which I have mentioned in Chapter 2. I made sure to use a variety of sources. For instance, when sourcing protest event turnout figures I looked at those offered by the police, the event organisers, NGOs and media, taking into account protest event research on Russia that suggests the organisers tend to exaggerate the turnout figures while the state agencies tend to downplay them (Enikolopov et al, 2020; Semyonov, 2018). Looking at the figures pertaining to state suppression I also consulted both the police figures and those provided by *OVD-Info* – a crowdfunded NGO focusing on state suppression. I had some direct correspondence with the latter to clarify some of the figures for me. In terms of the academic literature, I made sure to complement the scholarship produced by the researchers working in Western institutions with that of the researchers working in non-Western, particularly Russian institutions. Fluency in both English and Russian enabled me to examine sources in both languages. My main focus was to establish the political opportunity structure dynamics over the past ten years, focusing on the suppression of dissent, as well as the protest movement dynamics and broader societal issues over the same period.

3.3.2. Online interviewing

One of the reasons I envisioned the interview as my main method from the beginning was its modal flexibility afforded by the modern technology. In other words, if an in-person interview is not possible, it can always be carried out over the telephone, online (using audio-call, e-mail, instant-messaging or video-call software) or by other means. These alternative modes offer the potential to mitigate geographical, financial and other obstacles and can therefore expand the scope of access to various otherwise inaccessible individuals and groups. Obstacles were certainly in abundance in case of my chosen case study. The acceleration in the authoritarian direction that followed the anti-war protests in February and March 2022 rendered travel to Russia potentially unsafe for both the researcher and prospective participants. Furthermore, even if I had been able to travel, my limited funding and time would not have allowed me to reach beyond Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. Opting for the online modality allowed me to recruit across Russia, a country that spans eleven time zones, without incurring any extra expenditure such as travel and accommodation expenses or international calling costs. Also, the non-aural modes such as instant messaging (IM) offered me the potential to accommodate those unable to engage in verbal communication due to conditions such as deafness and hearing impairment. Thus, online interviewing presented a legitimate alternative to in-person interviewing.

Furthermore, I did my best to consider both advantages and disadvantages of the online modality. For instance, I recognised that while facilitating access to and inclusion of some categories of people, online interviewing could potentially exclude others such as those constrained by limited digital literacy, technophobia, extreme poverty, homelessness or living in remote areas with no Internet. However, taking into account that by 2022, when I was conducting my interviews, 90% of Russia's population were using the Internet, which was where the protest, counter-public sphere had crystallised, and considering that most of the protesters in Russia do not fall in any of the above groups, I concluded that the online interviewing was likely to enable access to most of my population of interest (Arkhipova et al, 2019; 2021; Interfax, 2022).

Data quality was another aspect I had to consider. One major difference between the in-person and online interview is the non-verbal, visual cues. Some researchers point out that the video-call format limits the number of those cues as the respondent is likely to be only displaying his face and not the rest of the body (hands, arms, legs, etc.) while other, non-visual online formats do not facilitate the observation of those cues at all (Seitz, 2016). However, I also learnt that the negative impact of this issue can be diminished by the use of follow-up probes to confirm responses and encourage active engagement (Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009). Furthermore, it has also been argued that the non-verbal cues can be misread and may therefore do more harm than good to research (Clarke, 2000). Other researchers also find the online interview offering a better researcher-participant power balance, which also has implications for the data quality. The in-person mode gives the participant less control over how much of themselves and their private space are exposed, there is a matter of "foreign" objects and persons in their home as well as more pressure to complete the interview (Linabary & Hamel, 2017). In contrast, online interviewing affords the participant more control, giving them the power to decide as to how much of themselves and their personal space can be seen. This often generates "perceived anonymity", which has a positive effect on participation, engagement, reflection, honesty and opinion expression, and thus a positive effect on the data quality (Hinchcliffe & Gavin 2009, Lobe et al, 2022). Therefore, I concluded that the quality-related advantages of online interviewing outweigh the potential disadvantages such as those related to the ambiguous non-verbal cues.

Overall, there is substantial scholarly evidence that there is no significant difference in quality between the interview data collected in-person and online (Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009; Lobe et al, 2022). At the same time, the video- and audio-call formats are generally preferred to the text-bases formats (IM, e-interview, etc.) as the latter are considered undeveloped and problematic in terms of the authenticity of the interview data (due to the re-drafting option) and interviewee's identity (James & Busher, 2006; Lobe et al, 2022). Speaking of the e-interview and other asynchronous modes, they are the most problematic as they complicate the research process further by extending it temporally, sometimes to a point where the interviewer may wait for indefinite periods of time unaware whether or not the respondent is going to respond.

Based on the above information, I chose the video-call as my primary interview mode, with the audio-call as the secondary option and the instant messaging mode (IM) as the accessibility-inclusivity alternative (for those unable to participate via the other two modes).

I chose Telegram as the primary communication app, which most of my population of interest used on a regular basis. It has been noted that research participants are more open and less self-conscious when using a medium they are used to (Brown, 2018). This was certainly desirable as far as producing good quality data was concerned.

3.3.3. Recruitment

As I have already mentioned, I was interested in discovering the cultural processes at the micro-level, from the perspective of the unaffiliated protest movement participants. So, I set out to find individuals who participated in the street protests against the Russian government's policies between 2017 and 2022 and were not members of the organising SMOs. I set my minimal recruitment target at 20 participants. This was to accommodate the recommended minimum sample size for my type of research, which was set at 15 (Bertaux, 1981), as well as to make provisions for any contingency (i.e., problems rendering an interview unusable). My overall number of interviews was to be determined by the saturation point, at which the

new life stories would confirm the previous interpretations without adding anything significantly different (Bertaux & Thomspon, 2006).

Qualitative nature of my study meant that I was looking for depth rather than statistical representativeness. I therefore used non-random sampling, typical for qualitative interview research. Considering that the protests I was interested in were deemed illegal by the regime and that the participants were not easy to find, let alone recruit, convenience sampling was the most appropriate strategy. I reached out to seven acquaintances from Russia who I thought were likely to have either participated or had friends who did. I based my assumption on my knowledge of their social networks (e.g., university) and political views (from neutral to anti-Putin/United Russia[19]) from our previous communication and their social media activity. Three of them stated they did not know anyone. Four others became my gatekeepers. While they did not participate in the street protests themselves, they had friends who did, and they kindly sent my invitation message to them.

My invitation message was under 300 words. I tried to keep it as short as possible as not to lose the attention of my potential participants away and at the same time detailed enough to include all the necessary information. This included: short personal introduction; institution name; research aim and scope; proposed interview modes; anonymity and other safety assurances; contact details; links to my social media profiles and publications. Making one's own personal social media account visible to the potential interviewee has been said to facilitate trust, in a sense that in addition to the information already given in the "pitch" message, the potential interviewee may explore the researcher's profile in order to ensure they are being contacted by a real and trustworthy person (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Once I had conducted a couple of interviews, I added a sentence indicating this ongoing status to my personal message for added peace of mind. The message was in Russian, the main language in Russia. My style was polite and friendly. I used the formal way of address (*Вы/Vy* – akin to French *Vous* or German *Sie*), which is appropriate for addressing people one does not know.

My gatekeepers provided me with twelve respondents. As I proceeded to interview them, I added the snowball sampling method, asking each of my participants at the end of the interview to pass my invitation on to other participants they knew. Combining convenience and snowballing sampling is a recommended practice in recruitment of not easily accessible participants (Hecht, 2021). As a result, I sourced eight more participants. However, I was yet to reach the point of saturation; therefore, I continued my recruitment efforts.

My following recruitment strategy involved convenience sampling but with a different approach. I was aware that *OVD-Info*[20] published lists of individuals detained at the protests across the country. I already had a lot of recruits from Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. Therefore, I decided to start with the lists of other major cities (with a population over one million). I looked for the less common names, avoiding the more common names like Ivan Petrov, equivalent to John Smith. Not only did this make finding their bearers easier, but it also provided me with potential participants from ethnic minorities whom I was keen to include out of considerations of inclusivity. I then proceeded to search for them online – on *Instagram* and on *Facebook*. I excluded *VK* because, although it was more popular in Russia, it had been known to cooperate with the Russian security services and was deemed unsafe for that reason. I verified each person by checking their location (as corresponding to the city where they were detained) and their social media activity (scanning for anti-government posts and photos from the protest). Once confirmed, I would contact the person with the same message

[19] "United Russia" has been the ruling party in Russia for most of Putin's rule and has backed Putin's and Medvedev's presidential candidacies.

[20] "OVD-Info" is a human rights and media organisation that publishes various information such as basic legal guides for the would-be protesters, statistics on political repression, and more. They also help those detained in relation to political dissent.

I had sent to my first and second cohorts, specifying that I found their name on the *OVD-Info* website.

This recruitment strategy had a minor technical flaw. On most social media platforms messages from non-friends/non-followers are allocated to the "Other messages" folder, which many users either do not check regularly or are not aware of, as previous research had shown (Balfe et al, 2012). This appeared to be the case in my project as out of 35 people I had messaged only 18 read my message. One did not respond. Another person was happy to participate only if I could find one mutual friend. However, we did not have any friends in common to the best of my knowledge; therefore, we could not proceed. Another person, an elderly gentleman, replied but cancelled twice and then disappeared. Nevertheless, the other 15 replies turned into 15 interviews. This brought me up to 35 interviews in total. I had already reached my saturation point by the time I got to my 30th interview, but, with the encouragement from my supervisors, I decided to continue seeing as I had put a lot of effort into sourcing my participants, and I kept my eyes open for any unusual cases.

In the end, 14 (40%) of my participants were female, and 21 (60%) were male. Individuals aged between 18 and 40 made up 30 (85%) of my respondents. 25 (71%) of my respondents had a university degree. This roughly corresponded to the existing figures on Russia's protest movement demographics (Arkhipova et al, 2019; 2021). Most of my interviewees were ethnic Russians, but there were also people of other or mixed heritage, which included Ukrainian, Tatar, Jewish, German and Georgian, which are common ethnic minorities in Russia (FADN, 2020). Many of my participants worked in IT and education, but there were also a few university students, a DJ, a tattoo artist, and even an Orthodox priest. Most of them described their political views in terms of liberalism, democracy and opposition to Putin's regime, and there were also one libertarian, one anarchist, and one person who described oneself as far-left. Religion-wise, most of my participants were either atheists or agnostics, but there were also a few Orthodox Christians, a Hillsong[21] worshipper and a Buddhist. (see Appendix 1)

Such a diverse range participants, typical of heterogenous movements, essentially made this a single case (protest movement) with embedded units (participants). My interviewees varied in age, education level, professional level and geographic location among other things. While this would have been problematic in a quantitative study, the qualitative nature of my research made it an advantage as it allowed me to explore the potential connections between a variety of factors.

My interviewees also varied in terms of the number of protest events they could tell me about. However, there were three nationwide protests that the majority of them took part in, which also happened to be some of the highest turnout protests in recent years:

- First "Don't call him Dimon" protest, on 26th March 2017
- First "Putin's Palace"/"Free Navalny" protest, on 23rd January 2021
- First "No to war" protest, on 24th February 2022

These were the three instances of protest action I decided to focus on in my analysis of the cultural processes behind mobilisation.

[21] "Hillsong Church" is an international association of Christian churches with the headquarters in Australia.

3.3.4. Interview

Holding a preliminary face-to-face meeting, either online or in-person, prior to the interview, has been noted as a good way to build rapport and to test the logistics (Brown, 2018; Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009; Lobe et al, 2022). I therefore proposed this to each of my participants. They all chose to hold it just before the interview, out of convenience. The preliminary meet-up usually lasted between 5 and 10 minutes. It was a good way to build on any rapport that had already been established in the prior IM chat, in which I had introduced myself, double-checked the participant fitted the criteria, shared the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Consent form and gave my prospective participant a chance to ask any questions.

Every time I began by greeting the person and thanking them for agreeing to participate. I would usually follow it up with a joke that I just wanted them to "see that there were no FSB or MI6 agents sitting next to me, recording and smoking". I would rotate the camera just to reveal more of my personal space to them. This worked well to break the ice and put my interviewee at ease from the start. They would smile and often laugh at my joke (sincerely, as far as I could discern) and state that they were not worried because they had "already done their research" on me, or "had nothing to fear" (mostly those who had already left Russia), or were "of no great importance to be spied on", or believed in my credibility as a result of their trust in our mutual (gatekeeper) contact.

I would then tell them that while I had a lot of questions to ask them about themselves, I was happy to answer any potential questions they may have had about me or my project. Most of the interviewees did not have any questions about the project as they had received sufficient information in the PIS and Consent form I had sent to them prior to the meeting. Quite a few participants were curious to know how a person named Ernest Reid could be fluent Russian. I then briefly shared some of my life story, revealing to them that I was born in the USSR, spent most of my childhood in Saint-Petersburg and moved to the UK with my mother at the age of twelve. In fact, I tried to tell this to every one of my participants seeing as this made me more of an insider, thus facilitating rapport, as indicated in previous research (Pszczółkowska, 2020; Ryan, 2015).

After double-checking that the interviewee had understood the interview conditions stated in the Consent form they had signed prior, I would start recording and begin the interview. In the first part, I would ask my interviewee to tell me about themselves. This was the least structured part, which allowed my respondent to represent themselves as they wanted, reveal what they considered to be salient to their lives and contribute their input in terms of setting the context for their life story. This is the part where I learnt about my interviewee's primary (e.g., family) and secondary (e.g., education) socialisation, their social networks (e.g., friends from work) and various social structures (e.g., township) and institutions (e.g., university) they were part of. I would then go on to ask them about their trusted sources of information in relation to what goes on in Russia and in the world, their perspectives on life in Russia and on themselves. This was to get the snapshot of their current interpretative framework. I then asked them whether they had always seen life in Russia and themselves as they had described, encouraging them to inform me on when, how and why the frames through which they had been interpreting the world around them and themselves had changed. This was to help me understand the key moments related to frame transformation, or what Clément called "re-framing", and the experiences behind them.

The main block of questions was about the protest movement and their participation therein. I would first ask my interviewee to recall all the street protests they had taken part in, especially those related to the movement in question. I would then focus on 3 particular street protests and proceed to ask the participant to recall why and how they decided to participate in them, where they learnt about the protest from, etc. This was to learn about the processes that took

place just before their participation and various factors behind them. I asked about their understanding of opportunities and risks at the time of making the decision to participate. I would then probe them about the role of various grievances and incentives, the concomitant beliefs and values, goals and interests, identities, social networks and cultural agents they had mentioned during the interview.

I ended each interview by thanking the participant for their time and their intellectual contribution, asking for their permission to contact them in case anything they had said needed clarification and repeated some of the safety recommendations mentioned in the PIS. I also asked them if there was anything else they wanted to add and encouraged them to send me any signifying work (*YouTube* videos, *Telegram* posts, etc.) they had mentioned being exposed to prior to their participation.

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. Transcription & anonymisation

The output of 35 interviews I had conducted were 34 audio files, 7 videos files (many participants preferred the audio-call mode while at other times this was dictated by the connection issues that rendered the video-call mode problematic) and 1 text (as one of my interviewees opted for the IM mode). The latter was quickly converted into a text document and formatted, which involved deleting the timecodes and putting the interviewer speech in Italics. All the files were transferred into Aston University's safe digital depository. To clarify, this and the following steps I am describing were often overlapping in terms of time. For instance, on one day I could have an interview in the morning, then spend the rest of my day transcribing the interview I had conducted the day before, then conduct another interview the following morning, and then proofread or analyse some of the earlier interviews I had already transcribed.

The next step was transcription. While I was searching for transcription software, I realised that my options for transcribing Russian dialogue were rather limited as most of the available programs were tailored first and foremost for the English language. Out of the few that included the Russian language, *NVivo*'s transcription add-on was considered the best on the market. Hence, I downloaded the free trial version, put a 15-minute fragment from one of my interviews through it and then checked it manually while listening to the audio to edit all the mistakes. I then took another 15-minute fragment from the same interview and transcribed it manually. I timed both attempts. In the end, I concluded that manual transcription took approximately the same amount of time as the computer-aided transcription. This was mostly due to the number of mistakes the software made (approximately 30% of the dialogue) and the time it took me to correct them. I therefore decided to opt for manual transcription and transcribed 3,089 minutes of audio.

Every completed transcript underwent the processes of proofreading and anonymisation. The latter involved changing the names of my participants and of any other individuals, institutions, or places they had mentioned (Katz, 1997). The new names I gave to my individuals were different from their original names but corresponded to them in terms of gender and ethnicity. This made it impossible for others to identify my interviewees by their names, and at the same time enabled me to remember them as they were during the interview. I did the same for the names of any individuals they had mentioned. As for the names of schools and universities they attended and companies they worked for, I replaced them with descriptive phrases, which

reflected some essential characteristics, which could nevertheless be applied to more than one place. As for the names of geographical locations, I only kept the names of the cities where they participated in the protest as every one of those cities had a population over one million and replaced the names of any smaller places such as towns and villages where some of my interviewees were born in the same way as I did with the institutions (e.g., “a small town next to the Lake Baikal”).

3.4.2. Coding & pattern identification

I employed thematic analysis (Nowell et al, 2017), which is common for analysing interview data and exploring the cultural content in particular (Hecht, 2021; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). So, after preparing my data and familiarising myself with it, I proceeded to coding. Throughout this phase I used *nVivo* to organise my data. I used the grounded-theory approach as I had described it earlier, with coding decisions dictated by my data and merely guided by my prior conceptual framework (Timonen et al, 2018). In the end I had 223 codes (including all the subcodes). There were many codes related to concepts (re-framing, cultural agents, regional disparity, etc.). There were also a few event-related clusters (e.g., 2022 Anti-war), each of them containing a number of sub-codes (identity, motivation, signifying work, etc.). I focused more on the most populous codes – those that contained the data from all or most of the participants. Nevertheless, I also paid attention to the less populous codes, which could sometimes be connected to the more populous ones. I then proceeded to the next phase – scanning for patterns arising from the coded data, searching for themes. Apart from searching for patterns in my data, I also created an excel spreadsheet containing the data on every participant’s date of birth, place of birth, where they took part in the protest, where they were residing at the time of the interview, education, profession, etc.

While my analysis was an iterative process, it still had an overall structure. My analysis began with the cognitive processes pertaining to action mobilisation at the micro-level of the participant and proceeded backwards to where those ideas came from (interaction with someone, exposure to various signifying work, lived experiences of the regime, etc.). Thus, after learning about the motivations and underlying beliefs I took a step back to examine the role of various actors in generating those processes, and how different types of signifying agents were able to earn my participants’ trust and shape their interpretative frameworks. Finally, I connected these cultural processes to the structural grievances and corresponding social strains at the macro-level, as well as the role of my interviewees’ proximate social structures therein, which is the focus of the next chapter.

3.5. Ethics

Considering the delicate nature of my inquiry and the turbulent period during which I was conducting my research, it was very important for me to ensure the utmost attention to the matter of ethics. Therefore, it was only after I had studied carefully the Statement of Ethical Practice of the British Sociological Association (2017), consulted with my supervisors and the Ethics Committee members and had my Ethics form approved by them, did I proceed to conduct my research.

Safety of my participants was my top priority. I was therefore very careful from the beginning. I ensured that my participants were fully informed of all the aims and objectives of my research, which were outlined in the PIS along with the safety recommendations. I recognised that

Russia was a technologically advanced country, certainly when it came to online surveillance, meaning the reach of the Russian security services extended into the online realm. I was able to mitigate the concomitant risks by opting for the communication apps that offered most protection (end-to-end encryption) and were unlikely to be penetrated by the Russian security services – Telegram as the primary option and Signal as a secondary option - because the companies behind these apps were based outside of Russia's sphere of influence. This meant that they were less likely to be pressured into handing the Russian security services the encryption keys necessary for penetrating into the private chats in contrast with the Russia-based *VK*.

I ensured that every one of my participants was left one-on-one with me with no one else in the vicinity. I also ensured to obtain the permission to record from each of my participants. Most of them had returned their signed Consent forms, and all of them gave me their permission verbally "on tape". I used a separate password-protected offline device to record the audio and Aston University's safe depository to store all the audio files as to minimise any possibility of these files being accessed by any unauthorised party. These audio files were the one piece that could be used as incriminating evidence against any of my interviewees. I believe this extra step added an extra layer of safety for my participants. I anonymised all of my data, as detailed in the previous section. Overall, I made every effort to ensure anonymity and safety for my participants.

Furthermore, I understood the long-recognised issue of power asymmetry, often skewed in favour of the researcher. I mitigated this it by using online interviewing, which gave more power to my participants in terms of choosing from three different options and exercising control over how much of them they wanted me to see before and during our interview, as mentioned in the Data Collection section. I also did my best to build good rapport with my participants. I was aware of the "faking friendship" critiques of this approach (Berner-Rodoreda 2020). Nevertheless, considering that I am a friendly person in real life, the way I interacted with my participants did not differ significantly from how I interact with all people, which neutralised the aforementioned issue. Moreover, I made sure to establish early on a mutually accepted way to address one another – familiar (*ты/ty*) or formal (*Вы/Vy*). As far as the power balance was concerned the most desirable was the equal *ты-ты* or *Вы-Вы* situation. Some, mostly those closer to my age, preferred the former whereas the latter was what we opted for with my oldest respondents as that was culturally appropriate. Similarly, some of my youngest participants felt inclined to address me formally seeing as I was significantly older than them, and I addressed them formally too as I was keen to ensure the optimal power balance.

4. Prior alignment: grievances, citizenship & system distrust

4.1. Introduction

While the signifying work carried out by the movement leaders and other alternative influentials in the run-up to collective protest is of great importance, this is usually preceded by a longer period of prior cultural alignment, or "frame alignment" (Snow et al, 1986; 2018). As noted in Chapter 2, the framing scholars have mostly focused on the movement leaders' micromobilisation efforts, collective action frames, in particular. However, in the context of contemporary protest mobilisation one cannot assume that any of the movement leaders will have reached, let alone resonated with any unaffiliated individuals amidst the online content profusion. Furthermore, these individuals need to be predisposed or at least open to the alternative frames that are likely to contradict the dominant, elite-aligned perspectives. Such predisposition is likely to be formed as a result of one's prior interaction with the world, which can take place in two different ways.

One is through lived experiences. These are explored in the next section of this chapter, which demonstrates how the macro-level factors – structural strains - are experienced at the micro-level, mediated only by one's own mind, and result in structural grievances and system distrust. The other way in which one learns about the world is through communication, especially with those situated in one's proximate social sctructures. Therefore, the following section analyses the role these proximate signifying agents (family, teachers and peers) may play in alternative socialisation – cultivation of an interpretative framework that is different from that cultivated by the elite-aligned agents and thus predisposes individuals to the signifying work by movement leaders and other alternative mass influentials. Overall, this chapter is based on my interviewees' cultural transformation narratives, which were a result of retrospective tracing of the cultural processes that led to the subsequent action mobilisation.

4.2. Lived experiences of structural strains

4.2.1. Social & economic rights

Considering that most children in Russia attend public schools, some of them become acquainted with the public sector problems early on in life. When asked about the transformation of her initially neutral political perspective, 22-year-old Lydia, a recent Oriental Studies graduate from a Moscow university, recalled her time as a high school student in her hometown in the Republic of Tatarstan:

"I'm at school. The school is being refurbished by a bank. Because the school does not have the money for refurbishment. Well, everything is alright (sarcastically)… Well yeah. This realisation - that the school, one of the best in the Republic and in Russia, had to ask a bank for money for refurbishment because the state wasn't giving any – that had some effect [on me]."

In Lidya's understanding, the state was supposed to provide "one of the best [schools] in the Republic and in Russia" enough funding to pay for refurbishment; thus, by failing to do so it failed to fulfil its obligations in respect of the education sector and potentially Lidya's rights in that domain.

Public universities were also among the institutions mentioned by my interviewees in their cultural transformation narratives. Here is what Gavrila, a 29-year-old IT developer from Novosibirsk, had to say about his experience with state-funded higher education in Russia:

"Well, first, I went to one university to study IT Security… having realised that their curriculum was rather behind the reality on the ground – that what was being taught to us was some rancid old stuff, let's call it that, - I decided not to continue my studies…

My second attempt was at another local university. Computer Science, where they wanted me to do some lab work using Pascal[22], which is when I said, 'No, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am neither going to attempt to dig out this mammoth nor am I going to waste any more time with you."

Gavrila had expected to accrue up-to-date high-quality knowledge from his higher education. However, after both public universities failed to provide him with the said cultural resources, he felt disappointed in the state education system and moved on to enrol for a private online course.

With most Russian residents using national healthcare, public hospitals were also among the state-funded institutions mentioned by my interviewees. For instance, 31-year-old Oksana recalled how she studied medicine at university in the late 2000's and wanted to become a doctor. However, she was on the fence regarding the low pay, and her work experience was an "eye-opening" one, as it revealed to her other problems within the healthcare sector, which made her drop out of her course and change her career plans:

"[S]ome hospitals had not seen any refurbishment in 15-20 years, maybe even since the Soviet times. Some of them had not received any new equipment in 15-20 years. Some of them just didn't have enough equipment. The more provincial the hospital the worse it was."

This was consonant with a recollection of Galya, a 32-year-old housewife who had moved to Russia from Kazakhstan in the late 2000's in search of a better life. She recalled visiting what looked like "a hospital from a horror film" as a patient for the first time and thinking to herself: "Where is everything? Where is it? It must be somewhere!"

Much like in Lidya's and Gavrila's narratives about the education sector, Oksana and Galya felt like their expectations regarding the quality of the healthcare sector to be provided by the state were not met; hence, this violation of principles and interests resulted in structural grievances, reduced levels of trust in the said institutions and in the system. Furthermore, the disparity between the major cities and what is generally referred to in Russia as *регионы/regiony* (the "regions") – the provincial towns and villages as well as the regions outside of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg in general was another recurring theme. Many of my interviewees had experienced both the city life and the "regions", and they mostly referred to the former when talking about the positive aspects of living in Russia and to the latter when talking about the negatives. All of the interviewees who mentioned having negative experiences with the public sector were originally from the "regions".

The underfunded public sector and core-periphery disparity were often denoted as a matter of injustice by my interviewees and a source of their low trust in the system. Furthermore, when it comes to the more provincial towns, the symbiosis of the local officials with other public sector institutions may take on a variety of forms. Karina, a 28-year-old project manager who had moved from her hometown to Yekaterinburg a few years earlier, shared with me her memory of winning inter-school *олимпиады/olympiady* ("Olympiads")[23] and receiving mock-ups of gadgets as prizes:

[22] Pascal is a programming language that was popular in the 1970's and 1980's but has since been displaced by other programming languages.
[23] "Olympiads", or "Olympics", are inter-school and inter-university competitions in different disciplines.

"As a young child I would ask myself 'What is this?' (laugh) 'What do I need this for?' And I understood that something was not right, but I did not quite understand what exactly it was. And when I grew up, maybe when I was in Year 9, I must have understood that they were not supposed be mock-ups. They were supposed to be real phones, tablets… … I felt this was absurd because they would give me a box from a real phone or a real tablet, and then we, the winners, would be lined up to take some photos with the organisers and local deputies who had sponsored the event…"

Karina understood that a smartphone box was supposed to have a smartphone inside, and as she got older (in Year 9, when she would have been fifteen years old), she realised that those particular boxes were supposed to have smartphones and tablets in them. Thus, she understood that her rights, her interests had been violated, which reduced her trust in the states institutions and officials.

While some of the transformation narratives were about violated interests, there were others, which touched upon violated rights of others. For Katya, a 22-year-old university student who had recently left Russia to continue her studies in France, the issue of small pensions was "one of the biggest tragedies of our time – how [the pensioners] barely make ends meet if they don't have anyone supporting them". She cited her grandmother's monthly pension of 10,000 roubles (£100).

In the same vein, Verner, a 37-year-old IT specialist, who had moved from Kazakhstan to Moscow in the 2010's for better career opportunities, attributed the beginning of his cultural transformation to two pensioners he had witnessed in the late 2010's. One was an "elderly woman who was neatly dressed but rummaging through the bin" behind the local supermarket, "looking for food", who shared with him that her pension was only enough to cover her bills and then "choose between food or medicine". Another one was a "very old man in his 80's" who was working as a delivery person, "struggling with dragging huge bags", who also shared that "his spouse had been very ill" and they could not afford her medicine on their pension.

"Well, this was very much in-your-face. As you begin to picture yourself in… that… alright, you are not on the world's richest list, and so, when you reach the pension age, you will end up in the exact same situation as these people."

Therefore, for Katya this was first and foremost a violation of principles while for Verner this was also a matter of threatened interests. At the same time, these principles and interests were based on an idea that senior citizens had a right to a decent pension.

At the micro-level, the above narratives are essentially about the social rights that my interviewees understood themselves (or others) to be entitled to as citizens of the Russian Federation as well as about the emergence of structural grievances and reduced trust in the system as a result of the state's failure to fulfil their obligations regarding those rights. At the macro-level, these lived experiences and the resultant cultural processes are a result of larger, systemic problems - the structural strains in the economic domain.

Mikhail Gorbachev's and Boris Yeltsin's market reforms in the late 1980's and early 1990's resulted in soaring economic inequality, privatisation of public property by oligarchs and reduction of the welfare state (Novokmet et al, 2018). Thus, many representatives of the most vulnerable social groups such as pensioners were pushed into poverty. While the economic situation improved during Putin's first two presidential terms (Scherr, 2013), the newly formed capitalist system with its reduced public sector and welfare state remained. Healthcare and education sectors combined seldom received more than 10% of the budget, with a significantly larger share going to the state apparatus, military and security services (MinFin, 2023). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the teachers and medical workers in Russia found themselves underpaid, many universities– particularly those outside Moscow and Saint-Petersburg - underfunded to such an extent that they struggled to attract

specialists and to ensure the staff updated their knowledge and the syllabus; there have also been ongoing maintenance issues and equipment shortages across the public sectors, including schools, universities and hospitals (Russell, 2017; 2018).

Furthermore, due to the centralised tax distribution system in Russia, most of the taxes paid by the individuals and businesses in small towns and villages are transferred into the regional and federal budgets, controlled by the regional governors and central government officials. When a significant proportion of that money stays in the regional capital and the state capital, the already potent problem of underfunding becomes even more pronounced for those in the province, the "regions". This is further exacerbated by other factors such as corruption. Karina's case was rather extreme in that it appeared as though the corrupt adults – whether the local government officials, school headmasters, or local businesspersons, – were cheating the children out of the prizes they had earned. Nevertheless, it is an illustration of corruption, which became rampant during the Yeltsin era but continued under Putin. It exists not only in the form of bribery and embezzlement among high level officials, but the system of informal relations also runs through local councils, hospitals and schools (Ledeneva, 2013).

Returning to Oksana's narrative, she mentioned the low pay in the healthcare sector, but there was more:

"I also witnessed some attempts to get the doctors involved in some political activities – organisation of the voting, of some United Russia activities… and I was not interested in these politics."

This was the final straw for Oksana as she decided to escape the fate of being underpaid and made to engage in pro-regime activities as a medical worker and moved to Saint-Petersburg to become a small entrepreneur. However, this was not the case for Antonina, a 53-year-old geography teacher from Saint-Petersburg who was pressured into becoming a polling station officer and turning a blind eye to falsifications by the school management. At the same time, for both Oksana and Antonina these experiences contributed to development of distrust in the system.

Unlike Oksana and Antonina, Boris, a 29-year-old IT specialist in Samara, had always worked in the private sector, which in theory would make him less prone to the aforementioned encroachments. However, his private sector experience played a similar role in his cultural journey. During the interview, he recalled to me his thoughts during Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014 as the starting point of his political transformation:

"Well, perhaps, the most memorable was… the annexation of Crimea as a worsening of… international relations. As in, after all, most of the positive changes, investments of some sort, and information technologies… When 'Innopolis'[24] was being built… And I had been working in international companies, and after the annexation of Crimea it was noticeable how all the long-term investments went away. Speaking of 'Innopolis', Microsoft, Oracle and other companies that had been there - they left."

While Boris's narrative appears to be different from the previous two, they all have something in common. Oksana witnessed and Antonina experienced firsthand how the low salaries in the public sector and corruption puts the teaching and medical staff into a precarious position where they struggle to turn down an offer of collaboration with the local political elite. There are numerous reports as well as documentary evidence that some teachers and medical staff have been offered monetary incentives and threatened with potential disciplinary action to help organise political events, engage in pro-regime

[24] *Innopolis* is a higher education institution and a surrounding, which was established in 2012 as a technology park dedicated to IT and Robotics, similar to Skolkovo in Moscow or Silicon Valley in California, USA.

propaganda and even help falsify the election results in favour of the ruling party's candidate (Rybina, 2012). This was exacerbated by Putin's gradual subjugation and co-optation of the trade unions, curbing the power of workers to negotiate their pay and other conditions.

Oksana's and Antonina's narratives were thus about the state failing to deliver on their economic rights to fair pay and negotiation thereof, as well as job security and protection from discrimination. While Boris's employment in the private sector made him less dependent on the state in those aspects, his situation within Russia nevertheless meant that his career prospects still depended on the state to some extent. In his understanding, Putin's decision to take over Crimea resulted in the US-led sanctions and subsequent departure of the Western companies some of which he had been working for. Thus, in his understanding the government interfered with his economic right to work for those companies, violating his interests.

The last three narratives were about the violation of economic rights, which, along with the earlier narratives about the violation of social rights, show how the macro-level economic factors such as the underfunded public sector, reduced welfare state, corruption and centralised tax distribution system were experienced at the micro-level by my interviewees, forming long-term grievances as well as decrease of system and political trust. At the same time, they also highlighted the role of other macro-level factors such as the election falsification and expansionist foreign policy, which takes us from the economic to the political realm.

4.2.2. Political & civil rights

If Antonina had experienced election falsification as an insider, 27-year-old self-taught graphic designer Marat recalled his time volunteering as an election observer in Moscow and witnessing some "minor but still violations". As a result of "seeing it with own eyes" this issue became "something tangible" and "in your face" and confirmed his previous suspicions. Then there was Karina. Ten years after being handed her first empty box as a competition prize, she felt "deprived of a certain number of opportunities and rights" as a "citizen" after noticing the reported high turnout for her local polling station. This did not correspond to the "three attendees" she would see in the observers' paperwork at the end of the polling day. Thus, Karina felt like her principles in regard to fair elections and her interests based on the political rights she felt entitled to as a citizen had been violated. It was this deprivation of the right to influence politics the conventional way, which would reduce the levels of system and political trust and steer Karina and Marat towards contentious politics in due time.

The above narratives reflect Russia's gradual democratic backsliding under Putin. According to the Economist Democracy Index, Russia became an authoritarian regime in 2008 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023). This was when Putin retained political power as the new prime minister after two presidential terms as a result of his ally and personal friend Medvedev becoming the new president. This way Putin was also able to bypass the constitutional prohibition of more than two consecutive terms and return to presidency in 2012. Throughout Putin's rule, the political party scene has gradually come to resemble a one-party state, with the ruling United Russia having an overwhelming power over both chambers of the country's parliament and most other parties generally supporting the regime, with occasional resistance from the increasingly pliable opposition, CPRF. Elections at all levels have been marred with different degrees and types of fraud. It was therefore not surprising that election falsifications became yet another source of long-term grievances among my interviewees, who, like Karina and Marat, came to perceive their political rights to be violated.

Alongside the narratives about political rights, there were others that focused on the civil rights such as those pertaining to freedom of expression and media. Here is how 41-year-old Alex remembered his first experience of the curtailing of freedoms in the early 2010's:

"[W]hen I was working in the Russian edition of one American magazine [in Moscow], I understood that they had already begun to close off the oxygen, that we could no longer write about certain things… This is when I began to understand it. When I found myself at the turning point, when some things were still allowed. One could still publish some critical material, right? And then all of this was over. 'This is not allowed'. And then… obviously… the magazine itself fell out of favour."

Valera, a 28-year-old Senior Development Engineer from Novosibirsk, recalled this development as follows:

"So, what was it they told us when Putin had arrived - that… 'You do not get into politics, and the government does not interfere in your affairs'. And that was, in general, a rather comfortable [arrangement]...

And then, they began to control my Internet. Can't make jokes anymore, even about religion. And I really love jokes about religion."

The anti-government protests in the early 2010's were followed by an increasing political pressure on the media and curtailing of editorial non-alignment with the power elite. Alex had a firsthand experience of this, working for a magazine whose decision-making centre was in the US and thus less likely to be functioning as a Russian elite-aligned propaganda outlet. Around the same time, following a series of new legislative initiatives that allowed the state to block certain types of information and fine individuals and companies for publishing politically undesirable content, the Internet watchdog *RosKomNadzor* and other state agencies became very active. While the said legislative initiatives were mostly related to public protest and terrorism, the "insult of the religious feelings" trope often functioned as an effective way to stir up pro-regime sentiments, giving the state agencies tasked with de-facto censorship a free reign to ban anti-regime content. This was what Valera was talking about. Along with Alex, he thus perceived his civil rights pertaining to freedom of media and expression curtailed, which resulted in long-term grievances and anti-regime sentiments.

Some media outlets, like the one Alex worked for, were shut down while others were coopted into taking a more government-friendly line. In contrast, Grigoriy, a human rights veteran from Nizhniy Novgorod, who spent many years of his life documenting the First and the Second Chechen Wars[25], received a two-year suspended sentence after publishing some material that was at odds with the official narratives and deemed "extremist" by the court. This contributed to his resentment of the regime and formed long-term grievances.

State security agencies also played a role in the cultural transformation of Natasha, a 30-year-old tattoo artist who had moved to Saint-Petersburg a few years earlier:

"Perhaps, by 2016-2017… I began to get this… not just this general discontent, but a broader… well, perhaps, because… sort of… I began to take more interest in some political things… right… and I began to be less keen on what was going on. Well, and then it got worse when I had a kind of a personal experience – when you get in trouble and see that…

[25] First Chechen War (1994-1996) was launched by Boris Yeltsin against the separatist regime in Russia's Chechen Republic and ended with a de-facto Russian defeat and loss of control over the breakaway republic. Second Chechen War (1999-2009) was launched by Boris Yeltsin towards the end of his presidency, continued by Vladimir Putin and ended during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency following the co-optation of one of the separatist clans by the Russian government and re-establishment of Chechnya as an integral part of Russia (albeit with a high degree of autonomy and concessions for the ruling Kadyrov clan).

your country, your state cannot protect you… and, sort of, here it becomes obvious that everything… well, becomes obvious that you are not down with what is happening."

Natasha was referring to being robbed and experiencing domestic abuse. She felt like both times the police did not take her seriously enough. As a result, she felt like "[her] state [could] not protect [her]". Thus, while Natasha had already been developing anti-regime sentiments, being denied protection by the police - an institution she reasonably considered responsible for protecting citizens such as herself - made her lose all trust in the system.

Considering that Putin had gradually consolidated all three branches of power, including the judicial one, under his control, Grigoriy's case is another illustration of how authoritarian practices lead to violation of civil rights, to a point of repression in extreme cases such as his. Another problem that arises from the prioritisation of the dictate from above by the law enforcement is that their everyday duties pertaining to the citizens' most basic civil rights – such as the right to security, to be protected by the law enforcement - become deprioritised, as reflected in Natasha's narrative. It must also be noted that tolerance of domestic abuse has been promoted in Russia on the legislative level (e.g., decriminalisation of first-time domestic abuse offences in 2017) and in the media, which has particularly affected women in Russia (Makashova & Bachanova, 2021).

The above narratives demonstrate how the political macro-factors related to democratic backsliding were experienced at the micro-level by my interviewees. Same as with the narratives in the previous sub-section, these experiences were based on the perception of failure of various state institutions to deliver on the rights my interviewees understood to be entitled to as citizens. According to Geraint Parry (in Khodyakov, 2007, p.118), the system trust depends on effective functioning of the institutions. Thus, in addition to developing long-term grievances, my interviewees also lost a lot of trust in the system as a result of the state institutions failing to protect their citizen rights.

While the above sections examined my interviewees' experiences of the regime behind their cultural transformation, as already noted, Putin's foreign policy, his takeover of Crimea in particular, also played a role in this process. For Marina, a 27-year-old department manager in a software company, who had just moved from a small village in the Ural region to Kazan' at the time, this was also the moment she realised "that something was going to go wrong":

"Russia took a territory of another country, and at the same time introduced criminal liability for anyone saying that Crimea is not 'ours'. (titter) And this is where questions began to arise. First of all, why do they have the right to take it, and why can you not say that Crimea is not ours?"

Putin's initiative was not appraised positively by Marina. She questioned the emergent norm of recognising Crimea as part of Russia, which began to be reinforced on the legislative level (UK RF, 280.1) and in the media (political communication) and essentially came into conflict with her civil rights, freedom of expression in particular. What is also noteworthy is that she disputed this development from a normative perspective, whether legal or moral, by questioning the Russian government's "right" to exercise control over the peninsula.

Ivan, a Siberian-born 28-year-old IT specialist who lived in Saint-Petersburg at the time, had a similar evaluation of the event:

"It seemed to me that there was a problem with the fact that… (laughter) Like, how? Well, I lived in St-Petersburg at the time and thought to myself that here is Finland. So, we have a town called Vyborg in the Leningradskaya Oblast', and [Finland] would say 'it's ours'[26]*, and people would vote because Finland, well, let's say, has higher pensions. And so, they would*

[26] *Крым наш/Krym nash* ("Crimea is ours") was a slogan that was promoted as a meme on social media and elsewhere by Russia's elite-aligned cultural agents in their priming efforts following the 2014 takeover.

vote. And what, would we really say 'Yes, alright. Vyborg is now part of Finland'? And for me, that position, which… I then understood that it was wrong, it should not be happening."

What is fascinating is that prior to this event, Ivan had felt a "sense of loyalty, or at least neutrality" towards the government due to his previous positive experiences of life in Russia. However, he clearly perceived the power elite's foreign policy move to be unjust, which made him re-frame certain domains of his lifeworld.

Marina's and Ivan's narratives demonstrate that while Putin's takeover of Crimea, framed by the Russian president himself and other elite-aligned agents as "the return to the home harbour", may have generated a surge in patriotism and garnered support among a significant part of the population, there were others, who saw this as a violation of their principles, resulting in formation of long-term grievances and doubt in the ability of the power elite to act in a normatively appropriate manner. These narratives were also about having the agency to think and reflect on reality outside of the elite-approved frames and to care about violation of principles, even when it did not affect one's own interests, which is something that is revisited further in this thesis.

4.3. Alternative socialisation via proximate cultural agents

4.3.1. Anti-regime attitudes, grievances & system distrust

While the lived experiences of the system played at important role in the prior cultural alignment of my interviewees, their lifeworlds also developed as a result of interaction within their proximate social networks where their socialisation took place. Family, parents in particular, are often the first agents of socialisation in one's life. Therefore, for some of my interviewees their parents played a foundational role in cultivating anti-regime attitudes, grievances and system distrust.

As Io, a 33-year-old translator and blogger from Moscow, recalled her childhood, "it has always been like that in my family – that the USSR is evil, Putin is evil". Similarly, Petya, a 22-year-old who left his "depressive town" to study at university in Kazan', recalled his parents saying to him "everyone in the government is a bloody thief".

Io's father was a very religious Russian Orthodox Christian, which may explain his use of the "evil" frame as well as the discursive linkage of Putin (as someone who has utilised religion for own political gain) with the USSR (where religion was mostly rejected even when it was tolerated). Petya grew up in a provincial working-class family; hence, his parents' framing of the government most likely reflected their economic grievances. At the same time, both of these narratives illustrate how negative frames were applied by my interviewees' oppositional-minded parents to the power elite, and how these framings were adopted by my interviewees as a result.

In contrast to the above narratives, quite a few of my participants experienced a kind of socialisation that was more typical of the majority of the population, whereby their parents had initially acted as the elite-aligned signifying agents, cultivating their children in line with the dominant ideology. Mikhail, a 27-year-old account manager and voguing enthusiast from Saint-Petersburg, recalled how he was "very much tied to Mum, opinion-wise" and how at the age of 17 he was "still very much pro-Putin". At the same time, what made his case interesting was that upon reaching his adulthood, it was also his mother who played the decisive role in his cultural transformation in the oppositional direction. She happened to be appointed as the chairperson of the electoral committee at the local polling station and

witnessed electoral fraud from the inside. She then shared this information with her son, which had a strong effect on him:

"[T]his falsification of the election results – that was the turning point. Well, basically, there was no mechanism to influence all of that in any way. It's as if everyone had just agreed on something, did something, and you are just, sort of… 'Are you all taking me for a fool?'… That was the feeling I had… It was a sense of constantly being… like everyone thinks you're a retard, that's it, that you're some sort of an idiot. And this was the most disgusting thing… right… This is how it all began. This is how it began for me – from this. As in, 'why do you all think that I am stupid?' (titter)"

Mikhail's narrative suggests that upon accepting this new framing of the political system he perceived it to be a matter of violation of his political right to influence politics in his country by voting. He also appeared to perceive that those who were behind the electoral fraud had challenged his diagnostic capacity and imputed a negative identity to him, challenging his identity of a person capable of interpreting reality. Mikhail's interpretative framework was thus disrupted, and he needed to salvage it by readjusting his framework to the new reality. Therefore, Mikhail and his mother "evolved together", as he put it, by changing their previously pro-regime perspective to an anti-regime one, rooted in system and political distrust. This way he could no longer be considered "a fool" or "an idiot", but rather as someone who understands reality.

Mikhail's cultural shift in the anti-regime direction was clearly a result of the signifying work by his mother. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that by that time he had already been socialising with opposition-minded people from his live-action role-playing game circle, whom he also mentioned when asked about his cultural transformation:

"[Oppositional discourse] had already been all around me in one way or another… Facebook posts, something like that, some discussions somewhere… I think it was 2012, Bolotnaya… 2011, 2012…When Crimea happened, I mean, for me… I was then using my oppositional friends as a point of reference."

Therefore, by telling Mikhail about the election fraud his mother confirmed the frames he had already been exposed to by his opposition-minded peers, who then took over as his main cultural agents as he "split off" from his mother and entered his adulthood.

While Mikhail was born and spent his whole life in the second largest city in Russia, Saint-Petersburg, where he met his "oppositional friends", Marat was born in a smaller town but moved to the capital of Russia and the largest city in the country, Moscow, where he gradually developed an oppositional framework:

"I was not into politics before moving… [I]t was while living in Moscow, [some people] began to explain something [to me]. We would discuss, talk about things. And, so, bit by bit, I suppose, some sort of opinion, vision began to take shape."

While the protest geography has expanded in Russia since the early 2010's, there are nevertheless many smaller cities, towns, villages, and even whole regions, where political protest is uncommon. This was the case with Marat's hometown, where the low salaries, limited employment opportunities and tight local government control left little space for political dissent. Therefore, he was unlikely to connect with the movement participants there, and it was only when he arrived in a large city with a significant protest-prone population and street protest culture that he got that opportunity. Moreover, his move coincided with the "Don't call him Dimon" protests in 2017, which increased the likelihood of being exposed to the protests and connecting with the protesters.

It must be noted that the narratives such as that of Marat – about one moving to a large metropolitan city for better education and economic prospects and becoming politicised as a result take us back to the macro-factor of the economic disparity between the major cities

and the “regions” in Russia and show yet another way in which it indirectly stimulates the protest movement, through the push for migration of individuals dissatisfied with the local conditions to the protest-prone urban areas.

While for Mikhail and Marat it was their peers, for Valera, who had already had low system trust due to his earlier experiences with public universities, it was his wife who played a role in his negative evaluation of Putin’s takeover of Crimea and subsequent cultural transformation:

“[M]y wife decided to find out more – what this was and how it happened… And she spent a lot of time on this. The pieces of the puzzle came together in her head. She brought that information to me. I took some time to digest it. And, basically, also understood that this was a rather grave situation.”

In this instance, Valera’s wife was very much a cultural agent in a sense of providing her husband with a particular framing, which contributed to an important cultural shift in Valera’s worldview. In most cases, my interviewees who had a husband or a wife, a boyfriend or a girlfriend, highlighted that it was their shared beliefs reinforced by regular dialogue that enabled their relationship in the first place. Therefore, the partners of my interviewees often confirmed their loved ones’ framings, thus reinforcing their oppositional frameworks for them rather than changing them.

What the cultural transformation narratives of my interviewees also had in common was trust they had in their agents of alternative socialisation. They often explained their trust in their family members like Sara, a 31-year-old Israeli-born Muscovite - “Well… (laughter)… she’s my mum”, - thus indicating its primordial nature. At the same time, their trust in peers appeared to be a result of a prolonged interaction. As put by Mikhail: “If I talk to people on a regular basis, I trust them”. This thick interpersonal trust enabled parents, partners and peers of my interviewees to shape certain aspects of their interpretative frameworks – cultivate anti-regime sentiments, structural grievances and system distrust.

While the above narratives highlight the role of thick interpersonal trust, it was nevertheless not indissoluble. Here is how Petya recalled his grandmother’s reaction to the news about Putin’s takeover of Crimea:

“On the one hand, she was rejoicing. On the other hand, she was going silent because, as she said, ‘all the pension money that is supposed to come our way will go there’… This is what I didn’t understand. Rejoicing about the ‘return’, yet at the same time she was cussing it out.”

In the same vein, Petya also recalled how he was surprised at his parents criticising the “corrupt people in power” yet proceeding to vote for the ruling party. These extreme contradictions subsequently made Petya lose his trust in his parents and grandmother, suggesting that even the seemingly primordial trust in one’s parents (or grandparents) was prone to dissolving as a result of extreme dissonance.

4.3.2. Cognitive agency

While some of the cultural agents from my interviewees’ proximate social networks engaged in cultivation of anti-regime attitudes, there were others whose signifying work was more about providing relatively neutral or alternative frameworks, encouraging my interviewees to apply them independently, thus cultivating cognitive agency – the capacity to think, - mentioned briefly in the previous section.

Here is how Boris recalled his high school experience:

"I was there at the time when the Soviet education no longer existed, but the contemporary Russian education had not yet appeared. And so, we did not get any ideology in school… Every teacher would share their life experience, their views with us, and we could then paint our own picture from that. I think, this really helped me and my generation."

Danya, a 22-year old teacher from Krasnoyarsk, also stressed the role of one of his teachers in his cultural journey:

"Yes, I had a good teacher back in school. She taught Russian and Literature. She conducted rather interesting discussions with our class… which were about developing oneself as an individual, let's put it that way. She would tell us about some interesting books, interesting authors, and, well, just taught us to examine them in a way that was not one-sided."

Universities appeared to play a similar role in my interviewees' transformation narratives, especially among the social science graduates such as Denis, a 25-year-old Economics graduate and IT worker who had moved to Moscow for higher education. Here is how he looked back at the role of university in his cultural transformation:

"I studied… I got a Bachelors and a Masters, both in Economics. Therefore, I came to acquire some sort of economic perception on the situation… The first thing I understood was – if nothing changes in Russia in terms of the economy, production, science, then some terrible things would begin to transpire, in terms of the financial welfare of the population."

Boris went to school in the 2000's, when the power elite mostly avoided any strong ideological work in the education system. Therefore, the teachers would have had more creative freedom at the time. Danya started school a few years later, but his narrative also suggested that his teacher went outside of the standard curriculum and made an extra effort to turn her students into critical-thinking individuals. Both narratives suggest the role of teachers as alternative influentials, who provided some frames to be applied independently as opposed to ready-made anti-regime framings. This was also the case with Denis, who credited his university with providing him with the framework he had applied to his understanding of the reality in Russia, which resulted in a negative shift in his perspective.

While the above interviewees spoke of their interpersonal trust in teachers and institutional trust in the institution of education, much like with the parents, this trust was not indissoluble. Here is how Boris recalled a conversation he had with one of his other teachers in the senior years of high school:

"[F]or some reason she decided to tell me about how she organised karuseli[27] for money.. for United Russia… while throughout my school years she kept telling me that… communism, CPRF, and all that… For me it was, you know, like a bit of a brain explosion moment – that these people had been telling me for ten years how good the Soviet Union was, and how bad yedinorosy[28] were, and then, she goes and sells herself for some 500 roubles or something."

Apart from reinforcing the theme of semi-forced engagement of public sector workers in pro-regime activities from earlier in this chapter, this narrative of Boris and his schoolteacher also echoes that of Petya and his parents. In both cases, despite their previous alternative, oppositional signifying work, the former signifying agents negated their own credibility due to the stark inconsistency between their declared beliefs and actions.

[27] *Карусели/karuseli* ("carousel") is a type of election fraud that involves a bus taking a group of people around different polling stations to vote several times (for the same political force).
[28] *Yedinorosy/единороссы* – a portmanteau of "United" and "Russia" used to denote the members of the ruling party.

4.3.3. Conscious and active citizenship

While family, peers and teachers clearly played a role in cultivating an alternative interpretative framework in my interviewees, they also promoted various norms related to citizenship. Many of my interviewees spoke about becoming "active citizens", "citizens with an active position", "persons with an active civic position", etc. For example, here is a memory that came to mind of Gavrila when he was asked about his self-realisation as a citizen:

"When I was a child… my mum said to me that… There was some election going on… don't remember which one. She said to me on the election day, when I wasn't going to go, when I was eighteen… 'You must fulfil your duty as a citizen'. Therefore, perhaps, this really stuck with me. After this, I always went to every election."

Klava, a 23-year-old DJ from Moscow, had a similar memory of her parents:

"Well, we always discussed what we did not like what the president was doing, and that one had to go to the elections to change something, to put that blue tick… Well, they were sort of a little anti- but not too anti-."

Lidya recalled a kindred experience from her childhood when recalling the origins of her transformation into an "active citizen":

"In our home it was normal to hear 'I am going to the protest" from Mum or Dad… Mum could call me on the phone and say 'daughter, come and bring my passport to the protest – I have been detained by the police'."

Gavrila's, Klava's and Lydia's parents essentially educated their children on the political rights and obligations that came with their citizen status, along with the concomitant norms, the building blocks of their emergent active citizen identities. Gavrila's and Klava's parents cultivated the more conventional political participation norm of voting - as a means of performing one's citizen identity in the case of Gavrila's politically neutral mother or as an instrumental action of changing one's situation for the better (along with the implied personal efficacy belief) in the case of Klava's moderately oppositional parents. Lidya's parents normalised a more contentious form of political participation – street protest, which all would come to embrace in due time.

At the same time, some of the parents appeared to be even less explicit in their signifying work. A good case in hand would be that of Natasha, who credited her mother with influencing her to become an "active citizen":

"I think it was my mum… Perhaps, she had been a person who was unhappy with the state of things longer than me, but… perhaps, she did not have enough resources to actively try and change something, and so she just tried to do some small, nice things that change life for the better. And, sort of, looking at her I have come to realise that I must do whatever is in my power to make it better for everyone."

While the earlier parent-related narratives illustrated a more explicit signifying work, or cognitive socialisation, Natasha's suggested a more indirect kind of influence, or observational socialisation. It appears from her account that her mother did not explicitly try to impose any framework on her daughter. Natasha observed her mother's behaviour and adopted her altruistic norms as building blocks for her own active citizen identity. Familiarity is not only subject to the amount of time spent together, but also to emotional bonding and intimacy (Belardinelli & Gilli, 2022, p. 93; Khodyakov, 2007, pp. 120-21). Natasha mentioned

her lifelong closeness with and admiration of her mother more than once throughout the interview. It was therefore logical that she would embrace her mother's way of life.

There were also narratives about peers playing a role in cultivating norms of political participation. While for Marat, it was a result of inter-regional migration and concomitant connection to a new, politicised peer network, for Karina this was a result of a cross-border experience. Thinking about her transformation into an "active citizen", she recalled how as a high school student she travelled to the US on an exchange program, where she volunteered working with people with special needs as well as on an eco-project. This was also where Karina had her first experience of collective action:

"I think it was a pro-LGBT event. I do not consider myself as belonging to the said community, but it seemed rather interesting to me, to participate. Plus, many of my friends were going. I found it to be a cool idea because I had never seen anything like that before."

Having been socialised by parents who were educated professionals and by teachers at "one of the best [schools] in the Republic and in Russia" in the 2000's, a time when homophobia had not yet become an important part of the power elite's ideology, Karina was open-minded enough to find the idea of a pro-LGBT protest enticing. Her American peers not only proffered Karina new action-related frames, norms, but they also gave her an opportunity to enact them, thereby normalising protest action to her in the long run.

While most of my interviewees spent their childhood and adolescence in the post-Soviet Russia, some of my older interviewees spent their formative years in the Soviet Union and were keen to connect their experience of the Soviet system to their cultural transformation into "active citizens". Here is how Antonina, a 53-year-old Petersburger, a schoolteacher and senior coordinator at a local tourist organisation, explained the origins of her "person with an active life position" identity:

"I was an active Pioneer[29], active Komsomolets[30]… (laughing)… As in, I wanted to be useful. I would often take on organising roles… I would say, it is related to my Soviet upbringing. On the other hand, we were all brought up in the same way, but not everyone turned out the same. Maybe, it was my experience… I was in the local Pioneer HQ. We had such wonderful… coordinators and… a wonderful team. And we lived, sort of… Everything we did there, we did out of our consciousness. Not just to tick a box."

Antonina, like another one of my interviewees from her age group, attributed the development of her activist identity to her participation in the Pioneer and Komsomol organisations, both of which encouraged civic activism (albeit, within a regime-friendly framework). She contrasted the pro-active and sincere approach to life based on "consciousness", or morality, to the passive "box-ticking" mode based on crude rationality, which she had attributed to contemporary Russian system earlier in the interview. As per Antonina's narrative, her Pioneer coordinators cultivated this "conscious" and "active" identity, which continued to guide her through life even in Putin's Russia.

[29] Pioneers were the members of the Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer organisation, which was a youth organisation in the USSR that engaged schoolchildren between the ages of 9 and 14 in a variety of collective activities, including sports competitions, environmental projects, community volunteering and summer camps.

[30] Komsomol, or the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, was a youth organisation in the USSR, which young people could join after graduating from the Pioneers, and where they could engage in various projects in education, construction and other areas.

4.4. Conclusion

The above narratives and analysis thereof demonstrate how a wide range of individuals gradually came to share an interpretative framework that differed from that promoted by the power elite. It included anti-regime sentiments, structural grievances as well as system and political distrust. They were also complemented by emergent cognitive agency and active citizenship, which were about thinking independently, being conscious to injustices and engaging in political participation. This cultural alignment was a result of the lived experiences of systemic factors and interaction with proximate influentials such as family, peers and teachers.

The lived experiences and the resultant cultural processes were linked to the structural strains at the macro-level. The economic strains were a matter of Russia's traumatic transition to capitalism that resulted in the underfunded public sector, reduced welfare state, inter-regional disparity and corruption. The political strains were a matter of growing authoritarianism, which manifested as curbing of freedoms, increasing repression, election falsification and failure of the state to protect its citizens. These issues were experienced by my interviewees as violation of and threat to their interests and principles, grounded in social, economic, political and civil rights they perceived to be attached to their Russian citizen status. In the case of Crimea, these principles extended beyond Russia, suggesting a more globalist perspective on citizenship among some of my interviewees. More importantly, the above experiences resulted in structural grievances and reduced trust in the system and in the politicians among my interviewees, as well as in migration to large cities among those from the province, and the resultant social embeddedness in protest movement networks.

Alternative socialisation by trusted agents of socialisation also played a major role in the prior cultural alignment of my interviewees. Family and peers appeared to be instrumental in cultivating anti-regime attitudes, structural grievances and system distrust. At the same time, school and university teachers appeared to cultivate cognitive agency in my interviewees, proffering relatively neutral and alternative frames and encouraging them to apply these frames independently, which in the case of Denis resulted in a shift to a perspective critical of the regime. Some of the proximate signifying agents also appeared to stimulate active citizenship in my interviewees by forming a link between the citizen status and identity and the concomitant norms of political participation, whether conventional (e.g., voting) or contentious (e.g. street protest), thus encouraging my interviewees to be conscious to injustices and use their political rights to act upon them. Some of this active citizenship cultivation occurred through the more explicit, cognitive socialisation, and some of it occurred through observational socialisation. Furthermore, especially when it comes to peer-led socialisation, these processes often took place in larger cities, where the oppositional networks and protest culture were present, facilitated by higher population density, better employment opportunities and higher education capital, and not impeded by the relatively soft authoritarian regime at the time. At the same time, some of my interviewees adopted their active citizenship norms from their exposure to other systems (e.g., the USSR and the USA).

The narratives examined in this chapter reflect the early stages of the process of becoming a "learner activist" (Clément, 2015), whereby my interviewees' "encounters, emotional communication and conversations" drove the cultural alignment in the oppositional direction of structural grievances and system distrust. This prepared the foundation for the signifying work of Alexei Navalny and other alternative mass influentials, which is analysed in the following chapter.

5. Alternative influentials: attention, resonance and leadership

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted how my interviewees' micro-level experiences of social strains in the political and economic domains, as well as how their family, peers and teachers generated an interpretative framework grounded in anti-regime sentiments, structural grievances, system and political distrust, cognitive agency, and conscious, active citizenship. As a result of these processes my interviewees became more culturally aligned with the protest movement and more predisposed to the signifying work of Navalny and other alternative mass influentials.

This chapter examines the processes that link the prior cultural alignment to the protest mobilisation. It is dedicated to understanding how the elite-aligned media have been unable to secure my interviewees' attention and generate resonance among them while Navalny and other alternative mass influentials were able to succeed in this regard, generate trust and play a significant role in cultivating a politicised mobilising identity, and how these dynamics mattered to the subsequent protest mobilisation.

My interview data suggested that all my interviewees had been exposed to the alternative mass influentials prior to their participation in the protests. While a few of my youngest interviewees became exposed to them early in life, most discovered them as adults. I call these signifying agents mass influentials to stress their significantly superior reach in comparison to the agents of socialisation mentioned in the previous chapter. These signifying agents are media actors in their own right, with their audience countable in thousands, like Tufekci's micro-celebrity activists, or even millions of people when it comes to the likes of Navalny. This chapter examines how these mass cultural agents managed to win the hearts and minds of my interviewees against the far more dominant elite-aligned influentials by generating attention and resonance as well as wider-reaching processes pertaining to trust and identity. It will then explore the extent to which Navalny's and other alternative influentials' micromobilisation efforts influenced my interviewees' consensus and action mobilisation in 2017, 2021 and 2022, as well as the failure of the counter-framing by the elite-aligned agents.

5.2. Securing cultural leadership

5.2.1. Attention

Attention is sparse and scarce in the fourth age of political communication, where countless multifarious actors compete with each other across a variety of media platforms. Nevertheless, it is what every signifying agent must capture before attempting to resonate and have any effect on their target. This subsection examines how the elite-aligned media, primarily television, lost or failed to attract my interviewees' attention, and how the alternative influentials succeeded in capturing it.

Most of my interviewees who were above the age of 25 used to watch television before, which was very common for people of their generations. So, for them any transformation in the oppositional direction was contingent on disconnecting from the elite-aligned media first. For Galya, who used to consider Russia's elite-aligned television "trustworthy" before moving from Kazakhstan to Novosibirsk, it was a matter of circumstances:

"I had a long break after moving. Studying at university. I was not interested in anything. I was just a university student. And very little… I didn't have a television – I was living in the halls. Therefore, I had a long break from the state media. And when I began to encounter them again, which was 10 years ago, perhaps… well, a few years after graduating, perhaps, I got a television. By that time, as it turned out, I no longer trusted it. Yep."

When asked why she no longer trusted it, Galya stated that by that time she "had already changed [her] views" and "had already been following online media outlets".

Tatyana, who had moved to Moscow in the early 2000's to look for work, had a somewhat consonant experience:

"I was moving from one flat to another. Hence, I ha[d] neither the will nor the capacity to be dragging that coffin with me everywhere. Well, what would be the point? You have a phone. You have a computer. You can find anything you want… And so, we have now been without television for nineteen years."

Both of these narratives can be traced to the macro-level. In Galya's case it was about the underfunded public sector and inter-regional disparity. Most student halls in Russia are administered by state universities, meaning they are also underfunded and therefore less likely to have televisions there, especially if they are not in Moscow or Saint-Petersburg, thus making the university students' exposure to the elite-aligned mass influentials even less likely. In Tatyana's case it was about the inter-regional disparity that propelled her to relocate to a large city where she had to move from one flat to another, turning her television into a logistical burden. Furthermore, for both of them, this was also a matter of communication technology. The greater mobility and ease-of-access of the devices such as a mobile phone and a laptop, as well as the widespread Internet access, made them the ultimate alternative to the television, and as for Tatyana's negative labelling of the television, it is discussed further in this chapter.

What was fascinating was that if for Galya and Tatyana there was still a matter of choice between the television and the Internet, this was not the case for some of my younger interviewees. Here is how Lidya, who was born in 2000, recalled how she began to watch *TV Rain* on *YouTube*, subsequently learning about Navalny and others:

"What really had an impact was that I had changed… my field. I had an injury and left sport, began to do a lot of research… to learn all of that. And that included going on YouTube. And at the time these… oppositional videos of all sorts began to appear… and so, this also had an impact."

And here is how Yakov, a university student in Kazan', born in 2001, recalled his acquaintance with the alternative media:

"Yeah, well… It was when I was still in Samara in the senior years of high school. As in, before Year 7, I was overloaded with all kinds of educational activities, thanks to my parents. So, I didn't have time for anything else. But after that, when I finished the music school, when I got some free time, and I began to realise that just playing on the computer may not be the best decision, I just began to gather some new information, watch some videos, read something, and at that point I began to change my understanding of the world."

Like with Galya and Tatyana, for Lidya and Yakov it was a matter of circumstantial change – leaving sport following an injury and finishing the music school, respectively – that led to their acquaintance with the oppositional online media. However, television was not present in their narratives – not because they had no access to it, but rather because the Internet was a more natural medium for them. Therefore, they did not consider spending their newly acquired free time watching television. The only other alternative for Yakov was playing video games. This reflects the generational factor. Since the 2010's, the Internet has been the preferred medium for information among the younger Russians (Levada, 2023, p. 120).

What is also noteworthy, is the lack of acknowledgement of *YouTube*'s agency, whereby "oppositional videos of all sorts began to appear". This perception of *YouTube* and other non-Russian digital media platforms as neutral persisted across all my interviews. While a few of my interviewees acknowledged the *YouTube* algorithms recommending videos to them, their perception thereof was that of a neutral feature, which contrasted with their understanding of Russia's television grid being under the control of the power elite. Moreover, some of their narratives, like that of Lidya, suggested that they began by watching the more moderate alternative channels such as *TV Rain* and were subsequently led to the more anti-regime content of Navalny.

Some of my narratives also revealed that the family and friends acted as cultural intermediaries by connecting my interviewees with the alternative influentials. For instance, there was Antonina, who had no prior knowledge of Alexei Navalny and others as she was not an active Internet user. It was her son who began to send her links to oppositional media content, including Navalny's videos, and later showed her how to look for it. There was also Lyudmila, a 58-year-old university professor and entrepreneur from Saint-Petersburg, who took pride in her capacity for critical thinking and was sceptical of all media but nevertheless watched Navalny's "Don't call him Dimon" in 2017 upon a recommendation from her former student and close friend. For Io, it was her parents who played this role. This is how she recalled her childhood:

"I've always been in this sort of environment, but I wasn't interested at the time. My parents were always listening to Echo of Moscow at home. For me it was just a sound in the background, but some basic things stuck in my mind."

Therefore, from a young age Io had been conditioned to consider the alternative media as the norm. She would listen to certain alternative influentials on *Echo of Moscow* and most likely internalise some of their frames, elements of oppositional knowledge. However, it was not always the family who acted as cultural intermediaries. For Gosha, a 30-year-old marketing specialist who had moved from the province to Moscow, it was his close friend:

"It was really around… 2008… I was only watching the First channel[31], well, and some other television [channels] loyal to the authorities… and, in general, I supported Putin. I liked what he was doing. But… somewhere around then, the conflict with Georgia happened, and that got me thinking a bit… but I still continued to support Putin because… well, sort of… why did Saakashvili attack… what was it then… South Ossetia… but around that time a friend of mine introduced me to Echo of Moscow".

What Antonina's, Lyudmila's, Io's and Gosha's narratives have in common is that their cultural intermediaries were particular ties from their proximate social structures whom they trusted the most. This highlights the role of trust in connecting individuals to new signifying agents, and the capacity of the influentials from proximate social structures to connect even regime-friendly Gosha, who was more likely to trust the elite-aligned media, and sceptical critical-thinker Lyudmila, who was unlikely to trust any mass influentials at all.

5.2.2. Resonance

As stated earlier, attention is of great importance, but it does not automatically translate to resonance. My interviewees' narratives demonstrated the importance of resonance and shed some light on its nuances. While my interviewees found the frames of both alternative and elite-aligned agents equally relevant, there was a stark contrast between the two when it

[31] *First* is one of the most popular TV channels in Russia, broadcasting across the country.

came to cultural compatibility and consistency. Here is how Tatyana described an epiphany-like moment she and her daughter experienced after watching a news program presented by Irada Zeynalova[32] on one of Russia's mainstream state-aligned TV channels in the early 2000's:

"She brainwashed us so hard that then we just simply… No one could sleep. No one could go on living. But we began to reassess our values… which was triggered by her. Because the information she gives… yeah, that's just too much."

Early 2000's was the time when Putin engaged in a power struggle against Yeltsin-era oligarchs to eventually bring most of the media under the control of his allies. Therefore, perhaps, Tatyana's experience reflects the change from a media sphere defined by political competition between media tycoons backing different political forces to an increasingly ideologically homogenous one with stronger propagandistic overtones. Throughout the interview she often referred to the TV as a *zomboyaschik* - "zombie-box" – which is a common name for it among the opposition-minded Russians that stresses its zombifying (ideologising and stupefying) function. Furthermore, the TV presenter Tatyana was talking about had previously been noted for her distinct style based on "aggressive delivery", which has made her one of the most effective communicators on Russia's elite-aligned television (Mal'tseva, 2017).

Denis, who, born in the late 1990's, was too young to remember the more diverse mainstream television from the Yeltsin and early Putin eras, had this experience much later:

"[U]p until 2014… the volume of propaganda being poured down the ears of the population was nowhere near what it became… Up until 2014, it was at an acceptable level for someone living in Russia."

Danya, who was around the same age, offered a similar narrative on when and how he lost trust in the state-aligned media:

"From 2014. It's just that I… well, I don't know. It was just that inner flair – when you hear a phrase, when you see a phrase, and you understand that in this phrase there is a particular trigger, which allows for your thought to be shaped in a particular way. Well, it was about conceiving hate towards a particular people… along the lines of this people being often mentioned in a negative context… as an example, just awful demonisation of some representatives… of that people."

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, 2014 was a pivotal year for Russia, defined by another push in the authoritarian direction following the coup in Kyiv and intensification of the Russian power elite's confrontation with their US counterparts, whom they claimed to be responsible for the events in Ukraine. It was manifested in the forced buyout of top social media platform *VK* by regime-friendly *mail.ru*, domestication of popular news portal *Lenta.ru*, ousting of oppositional *TV Rain* from the television grid, as well as of increased pressure on the Russian television companies to avoid any criticism of Putin and the regime. The political debate shows, along with the news broadcasts and other programming, stepped up the level of propaganda, especially in relation to the US, NATO and Ukraine. At the same time, the "demonisation" of the other was often accompanied by the idealisation of the regime and the ruling elite, especially the president. Valera picked up on the "one-sided" information delivery and noted: "The authorities praise themselves through [the media], and when the authorities praise themselves a lot, there must be something wrong with them".

The narratives from Tatyana, Denis, Danya and Valera had something in common. They were about the elite-aligned media moving away from the previous level of rhetorical intensity, which was considered as culturally appropriate by my interviewees – "acceptable",

[32] Irada Zeynalova is a high-profile journalist in Russia, who has worked on the elite-aligned TV channels.

as Denis called it - to a stronger one. In other words, their rhetoric became less balanced. My interviewees may have expected media outlets to engage in some purposeful persuasive communication but not to an extent where the attempts to manipulate them would be so obvious and intense. The examples here are “zombifying”, as Tatyana described it, or trying to make one’s “thought to be shaped in a particular way” as to trigger a particular emotion, as per Danya’s narrative. Hence, there was an issue with cultural compatibility that was about rhetoric balance.

These narratives thus presented cultural compatibility as something that can be quantitively low or high because it is about the cultural norms pertaining to the intensity of rhetoric, the “level” of which, using Denis’s words, can be “acceptable” or unacceptable. Thus, when high (e.g., aggressive propaganda), it resulted in lower resonance and trust. When low, the likely result was higher resonance and trust. The latter was evident from the narrative given by Gosha, who had been a supporter of Putin when his friend recommended alternative outlet *Echo of Moscow* to him in 2008:

“I was sceptical about it at first, really, but… as time went on, I began to listen to them a bit and I began to appreciate… that they would present two points of view instead of one. And I began to listen to that other point of view, which criticised the authorities. And that’s how, gradually… by 2011 I began to think differently. I didn’t like what was going on in the country.”

The rhetorical balance offered by *Echo of Moscow* contrasted with Russia’s increasingly elite-aligned mainstream media and clearly appealed to Gosha. Therefore, this alternative media organisation gained Gosha’s trust and regime-critical messages gradually came to resonate with him as they were not forced on him. Thus, a lower rhetorical intensity and a balance (between pro- and anti-regime perspectives) offered by *Echo of Moscow* were more culturally compatible with Gosha’s initially regime-friendly stance and resulted in his gradual cultural transformation. Less intense and more balanced media outlets such as *Echo of Moscow* were thus important when it came to the individuals who were sceptical of alternative media and thus less likely to be persuaded by more intense, anti-regime Navalny, who resonated more easily with those with already oppositional views.

While the rhetoric balance was important, so was the symbolic clarity of communicators. Here is a memory that Katya shared with me when asked about her cultural journey:

“Perhaps, it was in 2014, when Crimea happened, when I came to develop this interest in politics… because my grandmas and grandpas became really hooked on television around that time. They were all rejoicing about what had happened. And I didn’t really understand back then what had actually happened…”

When I asked Katya to tell me more about not understanding, she said the following:

“I simply did not understand why everyone was shouting and rejoicing, like the monkeys from the television. I did not understand their emotions. As in, it was, perhaps, that I found their emotions to be ingenuine – what they were expressing. Well, I didn’t believe them, so I went online…”

Born in 2000, Katya was part of a new, increasingly distinct, inquisitive generation that the increasingly propagandistic and obsolescent elite-aligned television struggled to cater for. Katya’s conceptualisation of the political TV show hosts and pundits as “shouting” “monkeys” suggested that the symbols, the frames and styles they were using in their signifying work were unfamiliar and unappealing to her. Furthermore, Katya’s close relatives failed to explain them and to act as cultural intermediaries in that regard. Thus, the signifying work proffered by the elite-aligned television did not resonate with Katya, and neither did the emotions of her relatives, which, in the absence of clarification appeared ingenuine to her. This made Katya turn to the Internet, which was the more natural medium for her as a young person.

Katya's experience with the elite-aligned television was in stark contrast to my interviewees' accounts of discovering the alternative influentials. Here is how Galya explained the resonance of the first Navalny video she watched: "He would lay it all out, in so much detail and so concisely, explain it, show it. The information that he presented in such a clear, simple manner." Similarly, Valera found Navalny's content to be resonant because "the way he presented everything was simple and clear enough."

Indeed, unlike the obsolescent presenters of the political debate shows on the elite-aligned television channels, Navalny was "a breath of fresh air", as Karl also described him. He was culture-savvy and young enough to know how to speak in a way that would also appeal to the younger, *YouTube* audience. He spoke in a clear manner, using the frames that all Russians could understand. Thus, his symbolic clarity proved to be of great importance to resonance. This was also the case with other alternative mass influentials mentioned by my interviewees, which included some journalist format actors like *TV Rain, Echo of Moscow*, Alexei Pivovarov's *Editor's Room*[33], *Meduza*[34] and a few foreign state-funded channels such as *Current Time*[35], interviewers Yuri Dud' and Yekaterina Gordeyeva, expert-type influentials such as politics professor Yekaterina Shulman, urbanist Ilya Varlamov and former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, opposition politicians Ilya Yashin and Maksim Kats, and others. This list of alternative mass influentials mostly coincided with Glazunova & Amadoru's (2023) recent research on anti-regime influentials in Russia. Most importantly, what it showed is that in addition to Navalny and his team, with their populist mass appeal, there were also a wide range of other alternative influentials that varied in terms of age, rhetoric and style and catered for various audiences from different social groups.

Apart from cultural compatibility, consistency also mattered to my interviewees. Danya's narrative in the previous section was not only about the extreme level of rhetorical intensity designed to evoke a particular emotion in him, but it was also about the "demonisation" of Ukrainians. Danya disagreed with the framing of Ukrainians he was proffered as it did not match up to the image of Ukrainians from his lifeworld. Similarly, Karina recalled how she "understood that [her] views were not entirely congruent with what was being said" in one political TV programme she tried watching, and how she then "began to look for alternatives", which she subsequently found in Navalny.

Similarly, Katya experienced something of a cognitive dissonance when the elite-aligned media would talk about the increase in salaries and pensions, which was in conflict with what she witnessed in her hometown and the information she gathered from her grandmother, whose pension was under 10,000 roubles (£100) per month:

"Increasing pensions and wages – all a lie. Only the utility bills have been increasing. And how the pensioners live – for me that must be one of the biggest tragedies of our time – how they barely make ends meet if they don't have anyone supporting them".

So, once again, this non-resonance and loss of attention was due to the incongruence between the proffered framings and her perspectives. Conversely, the alternative signifying agents, the anti-regime influentials in particular, were more successful in this regard.

Here was how Oksana recalled her cultural transformation following her move to the city in the early 2010's:

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[33] *Редакция/Redaktsiya/Editor's Room* is an independent media project by former TV journalist Alexei Pivovarov that produces news and documentaries while maintaining relative political neutrality.
[34] *Медуза/Meduza/Jellyfish* is an English- and Russian-language media outlet based in Riga, owned by *Lenta.ru*'s former editor Galina Timchenko, who moved to Latvia following the Russian power elite's partial usurpation of the media sphere in 2014.
[35] *Настоящее Время/Nastoyashchee Vremya/Current Time* is a Russian-language media outlet based in Prague, created by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* and *Voice of America*, funded by the US Congress through the US Agency for Global Media.

"My perspective on what was going on around me began to change, I suppose, during the Bolotnaya protests, which eventually spread all over the country. Although, at the time, there were two parallel processes, really. I began to encounter problems with finding employment, nepotism… with the fact that if you had a dad or a sugar daddy who were some big boss, you would easily get sorted out with a job. And if your parents had no connections, then… good luck. Yes, and at the same time, these protests were happening. Navalny… I began to read his Live Journal. And then, I gradually began to realise that what he was writing about coincided with what was happening over here."

The early 2010's was the time when Navalny was commencing his anti-corruption activity, with nepotism and problems in the public sector among the main themes he focused on. Oksana had already seen the underequipped hospitals and underpaid medical staff in the province, which made her cut her medical studies short. She also appeared to be experiencing nepotism first-hand while looking for a job. Therefore, Navalny's frames were consistent with her lifeworld.

Galya, who had similar experiences to those of Oksana, recalled how Navalny's frames came to resonate with her in a similar way, resulting in her subscribing to his channel:

"Well, it was hard not to believe it. It really looked like the truth. It was easy to check – everything he was talking about. He would leave the sources. They were… sort of… (laugh) I don't know, clear. As in, that helped with opening one's eyes…"

Here, Galya was not only talking about the external consistency - how Navalny's framings "looked like the truth". When mentioning Navalny's use of sources, she was stressing internal logic in his signifying work that made it "look like the truth". It was thus also a matter of internal consistency. In fact, quite a few of my interviewees stressed the resonating power of the "evidence", confirming previous assumptions about its significance in Navalny's political communication (Glazunova, 2020a; 2020b). According to Verner and Valera, the "documents" worked as "proof", thus fulfilling the external consistency criteria by tying the framings to the viewers' reality, but they also helped fulfil the internal consistency criteria as part of a logical chain. As Danya put it:

"I always considered myself to be a person of logic, who tries to evaluate everything logically… not only when it comes to political matters, but also everyday things. And therefore, when you compare most of Navalny's theses and… with the position of the authorities, the officials… the logic is present… in Navalny's videos and publications, but at the same time, I had never seen any logically coherent explanations from the other side."

Thus, as far as Danya was concerned, the elite-aligned influentials had lost to Navalny because they failed to achieve logical coherency. Overall, the above narratives suggest that the resonance of alternative influentials such as Navalny and their signifying work was also greatly influenced by the internal and external consistency thereof, but there was more to it.

5.2.3. Transformation & trust

The previous subsections have shown how the alternative mass influentials were able to secure my interviewees' attention and resonance for their frames while the elite-aligned influentials failed in this regard. This development appeared to have led to two further processes.

One was that of cultural transformation, whereby my interviewees' interpretative frameworks were becoming increasingly aligned with that of the protest movement. This was the case for the likes of Arseniy, a 28-year-old artist from a provincial low-income family, who had been

pro-Putin until discovering oppositional content and Navalny. This was also the case for the likes of Yegor, a 19-year-old print shop assistant from Kazan', who had had no negative experience of the political system and had been apolitical until discovering Navalny and his associates at the age of sixteen. This was also the case for the likes of Oksana, who attributed the gradual change in her understanding of reality to her negative experiences with the system and the signifying work of "Navalny and everyone on his channel":

"Because as I was watching [Navalny's] videos, my eyes began to open more and more, regarding what a useless government we had, what problems existed in our country, and just how not normal all of that was."

Denis's narrative was consonant with that of Oksana:

"Then I began to look at things, sort of… from a more global perspective… that… we have an illegitimate president, who has been ruling for quarter of a century, and… sort of, because of that… the fish rots from the head down, and it's all coming from there… and, like, the schools are falling apart, the hospitals and all the rest. And all of it is mutually connected."

So was Danya's:

"At that point, you begin to take more interest in things. Is everything as good in our economy as they say [on TV]? Is everything as good in our healthcare? And… could this news item about a new clinic that had just been opened in Greater Moscow be a distraction from a million other news items about people dying in the corridors of the hospitals in Greater Moscow? And, so, you begin to research all of that…"

Oksana, Denis and Danya described how their consumption of resonant oppositional content began with some domain-specific and progressed into a more global transformation across all domains of their lifeworlds. They began to identify and discover new injustices and connections between them, overturning the previous perspectives on what was true and what was not, what was "normal" and what was not. As evident from Oksana's and Denis's narratives they made an important step in attributing the blame for these injustices to the ruling elite, which increased their political distrust. Danya's narrative illustrated how growing trust in the alternative mass influentials such as Navalny went hand in hand with growing distrust in the elite-aligned media. It also suggests that regular exposure to oppositional content encouraged a more active approach to information - seeking out more framings to confirm the emergent perspectives and becoming more independent from the elite-aligned influentials, more conscious and more active than before.

Another development that transpired from systematic resonance of the alternative influentials and non-resonance of the elite-aligned influentials was related to trust. All of my interviewees stated that the elite-aligned media had lost their trust, at least when it came to the political information, which negated these actors' potential to cultivate a more regime-friendly framework in my interviewees. As put by Danya:

"When the news are, roughly speaking, related to something like 'somebody crossed the road' – just something regular, - they are delivered in a regular, adequate manner, without any embellishment… whereas those related to various political motivations and news that can raise one's trust towards the government, they are always created with a specific purpose, specific vector... And so, you just stop trusting them".

In contrast with the non-resonance of the elite-aligned media the resonance of Navalny and other alternative mass influentials had the opposite effect. As put by Karl:

"The fact that people said these sorts of things even though they were also politicians, and said, as it seemed to me, things that were coherent and correct. I agreed with a lot of these things… So, therefore I quickly… Navalny and his team quickly got a major credit of trust from me, and everything just made sense and sounded convincing."

Karl's evaluation of Navalny and his team's frames as "coherent", "convincing" and "correct" stressed the internal and external consistency. Karl then clearly drew the link between the systematic resonance and him developing trust for Navalny and his team over a short period of time. Navalny and his team proffered the frames that Karl found consistent with his understanding of reality and therefore secured Karl's "credit of trust". In other words, Karl began to trust them in advance, by default, which increased the likelihood of resonance of their further signifying work. Thus, trust was both a criterion for resonance and a product thereof. What is also noteworthy is that many of my interviewees who trusted Navalny admitted they believed him unquestioningly and rarely engaged in fact-checking, which is also consonant with other research that noted the top-down nature of the relationship between Russia's alternative mass influentials and protest movement participants as well as centrality of Navalny's figure (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023; Lonkila et al, 2021). Karl also made an emphasis on how Navalny and his allies "said these sorts of things even though they were politicians". Thus, he considered their resonance atypical of politicians. This was also present in Marina's narrative, which also emphasised political distrust. When asked how she came to trust Navalny, she said the following:

"Because he was different from all the others. Because this was something new. You see, when you see this bunch of politicians who have 'You are all slaves, and I will rob you all to live well' written all over their faces… and then you see Navalny… He was just different. First of all, he was young. He was very charismatic. Wonderful public speaker… He was not afraid. He openly expressed his views and (titter) even mocked those people. And just… the fact that he was different from the others… that is why I thought: 'Something normal – can we have it at last? Something normal, something different".

This suggests that Navalny's appeal was based on his relative youth, charismatic communication and, most important of all, not being part of or resembling the political elite, who were seen as haughty and corrupt, partially as a result of the lack of democratic power rotation, and did not correspond to Marina's normative vision. She had been yearning for something new, someone who would represent her ideas about what is "normal", and she essentially saw Navalny as the embodiment of her emergent cultural framework. As a result, Marina came to "admire… respect… and see Navalny as [her] president", someone who could represent her views at the government level.

Tatyana's narrative was consonant with that of Marina to some extent. After "disconnecting from the matrix" of the elite-aligned cultural agents by cutting out television from her life, Tatyana found herself alone. Her proximate social networks were made up of elite-aligned individuals, which, in the absence of access to an alternative public sphere, resulted in her feeling "not normal" for several years until she discovered Navalny in the early 2010's. Here is how she recalled her journey:

"I thought… Alright. I'll be 'out of this world'. Deal. But I won't be like you… And then you see someone who begins to tell you this had not been the norm all along… (titter) … far from it! And then it's just great. Such a discovery it was… To feel there is someone else, that you are not the only one. Because I had thought I was all alone, suffering… … All that time when we had not had, had not seen Navalny, I… (titter) … I had thought that there was nobody who shared my views. So, I felt solidarity with this person. And my life became easier because it turned out that I really wasn't 'not normal', but… You are just sort of living and feeling that you are not… you just do not believe that everything that is happening is good. And then someone on that level comes up and opens people's eyes – that is very important."

Tatyana's understanding of reality and of what constituted the "norm", her interpretative framework, was not being confirmed by the elite-aligned influentials and their adherents present in Tatyana's proximate social structures. This resulted in a sense of ontological insecurity and partial acceptance of the negative "not normal" identity (which implied a lack of cognitive capacity to interpret the reality correctly). However, after being exposed to Navalny, not only did he confirm Tatyana's interpretative framework, but by doing so he also

empowered her, restoring her ontological security. He changed her self-identity from a negative to a positive one and made her feel that she was not "not normal" and not alone because he had the same perspectives as her while being "on that level". As a result, Tatyana was keen to trust Navalny.

Navalny earned Marina's and Tatyana's trust by confirming their alternative frameworks, won their admiration through his charismatic communication, and became their leader by representing them "on that level", as a well-known political activist. Furthermore, he came to embody their emergent active citizen identity, which he had activated through the positive signification thereof. He was therefore in a position to set the terms for what it meant and how to be an "active citizen" – the identity the likes of Marina and Tatyana were coming to embrace, - to cultivate certain beliefs and norms in them. This is evident from Marina crediting Navalny in playing an important role in her subsequent "development" as an "intelligent", thinking person and a "caring citizen", which she considered him to personify, and which eventually led to her "conscious" participation in street protests. Similarly, soon after her positive self-identity re-evaluation, Tatyana proceeded to seek out ways to perform this identity – by helping Navalny collect signatures for his 2013 mayoral campaign in Moscow and subsequently by protesting in 2017, 2021 and 2022. In fact, quite a few of my protesters drew the link between their exposure to Navalny's signifying work and their protest preparedness. Here is what Yegor had to say:

"I then began to really get thinking, when I started watching Navalny's and Anti-Corruption Foundation's channels. Yeah, I then became… convinced not only in the fact that corruption really did exist in Russia… I was amazed by its magnitude and by the insolence of the state officials, who made this corruption, so to speak… who were engaged in that very corruption. And, thanks to these investigations, I gradually began to form an opinion. I can't remember the exact date when I started thinking differently. Of course, it wasn't like that. But I can say for sure that by the end of Year 11 – which must have been in 2018 – I was ready to come out on the street to protest."

Verner was almost twenty years older than Yegor, but their narratives were mutually consonant:

"It was like, I moved to Russia – everything seemed so good and wonderful. And then, you start encountering some sort of injustice every day. And all of that is growing. And then, you watch some exposé-type video. And then all of that begins to boil inside of you and makes you want to come out [to the protest]".

For Yegor, like for all of my young interviewees born in the 2000's, who had not had any negative experiences with the system, cultural alignment and politicisation began online, with Navalny or other alternative influentials. Thanks to their symbolic clarity, in contrast with the elite-aligned media, they were able to mobilise consensus and subsequently action in the likes of Yegor, who were politically neutral and open to alternative socialisation. It was most likely this absence of a developed interpretative framework that made young individuals like Yegor more predisposed to the one proffered by Navalny. For Verner, like for most of my older interviewees, whose cultural transformation had already been underway as a result of negative experiences, the likes of Navalny rather confirmed and amplified the already existing anti-regime sentiments and grievances as well as generated new ones. Furthermore, while both of their grievances were based on normative disapproval of perceived injustices, Verner "boil[ing] inside" suggests that he was also experiencing anger. It was most likely a product of Verner's experience-based grievances mentioned in the previous chapter and the adept amplification thereof by Navalny's emotional appeals he was known for (Glazunova, 2020a; 2020b). Finally, what both of these last two narratives had in common was the linkage between exposure to the oppositional, anti-regime content and protest action preparedness, which is explored in more detail in the following sections.

5.3. Action frames & mobilisation

5.3.1. Diagnostic frame

The scholarship on framing mostly emphasises the role of the cultural agents in framing the reality for others. When it comes to the collective action frame, that is the function of the diagnostic frame – outlining what the injustice is. At the same time, as noted in Chapter 2, for a sense of injustice to appear, a situation has to be perceived before being interpreted as an injustice and converted into a grievance.

When I asked my interviewees where they had learnt about the situations they assessed as injustices, I found that they all found out about Medvedev's and Putin's alleged corruption schemes from Navalny's films "Don't call him Dimon" in 2017 and "Putin's Palace" in 2021, respectively. This can be explained by the fact that Medvedev's and Putin's alleged corruption schemes that were among the primary sources of grievances in 2017 and 2021 were first presented on Aleksey Navalny's *YouTube* channel. Many of my interviewees also watched Navalny's films about Putin's and Russian special services' alleged plot to assassinate Navalny in the run-up to the 2021 protests, from which they adopted the framing about Putin's and the Russian security services' complicity in the poisoning.

Thus, in 2017 and 2021 Navalny and his associates functioned as the agenda-setters by proffering a previously unknown situation as real (e.g., particular corruption schemes), which my interviewees came to perceive as part of their reality as a result. At the same time, their signifying work was far less important in terms of agenda-setting in regard to Navalny's poisoning and incarceration in 2021, as well as the war in Ukraine in 2022. My interviewees learnt about these events from various sources because these situations were widely reported on, discussed and not disputed. This suggests that Navalny and his colleagues had been successful in setting the agenda and thus constructing the reality on some occasions, but their agenda-setting efforts were not as crucial in respect of the situations that were widely recognised as a fact.

In terms of framing, Navalny and other alternative influentials also framed all of the above situations as injustices and proffered the relational mechanisms that should turn them into the viewers' own grievances. However, it is extremely difficult to prove the causality between these grievance-generating efforts and the grievances of those who had been exposed to them. At the same time, I was able to identify numerous signs of correlation between the two by closely examining the transcripts of the *YouTube* videos my interviewees claimed to have watched prior to the protest and their interview transcripts.

First of all, all the injustice frames proffered by Alexei Navalny in his videos (2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2020b, 2020c, 2021), as well as in Marina Litvinovich's (2022) video, which some of my interviewees mentioned watching prior to the first anti-war protest, matched with the perceived injustices that my interviewees' grievances were based on. It is possible that some of them were adopted from the signifying work pertaining to the situations that were first introduced in those videos (e.g., Medvedev's and Putin's alleged corruption schemes). However, this is less likely in regard to Navalny's poisoning and incarceration and Putin's full-scale offensive against Ukraine, as my interviewees learnt about them from various sources and immediately evaluated them as injustices and came to experience them as own grievances.

This was reflected in many narratives, such as that of Petya, who recalled that as soon as he heard Putin announce the "special military operation", he "immediately became an opponent of it" and "immediately understood that [he] didn't like it", qualifying it as "ultimate

lawlessness" and experiencing "rage". Ivan appeared to have had a similar experience when watching Navalny's detention live in January 2021: "I am watching it, and it is making me outraged. I am watching it and starting to outright boil on the inside."

Therefore, in those cases, my interviewees did not need the alternative influentials to frame those situations for them. Any frames in communication my interviewees were subsequently exposed to most likely confirmed the injustices my interviewees had already perceived and amplified the concomitant grievances.

At the same time, regarding the injustices such as Medvedev's and Putin's alleged corruption schemes or the alleged Putin-FSB assassination plot, which my interviewees first learnt about from Navalny's videos, there is a possibility that the narratives proffered by Navalny influenced the grievance formation. This is because those videos involved both agenda-setting (e.g., "Medvedev or Putin has built himself a palace") and framing (e.g., "Medvedev or Putin has built himself a palace by stealing from you").

For instance, "Don't call him Dimon" left a "strong impression" on Karl in 2017:

"Here is how it is. There is a problem, which you may not encounter on a daily basis, it does not bother you on a regular basis, but you are shown something so outrageous in regard to this problem that for the next few days you cannot help but think about it and cannot get it out of your head because of how much of an impression it had on you."

Karl had already known about the existence of corruption, although due to the lack of its relevance to his lifeworld it had not previously worked as a mobilising grievance. However, Navalny's film amplified it to such an extent that this new incidental grievance related to Medvedev became a mobilising one.

Furthermore, at the end of "Don't call him Dimon", Aleksey Navalny (2017a, 48:00) also says: "Every day we see people trying to raise funds for the medical treatment for themselves or their relatives". As he speaks there is a videoclip of a fundraising campaign from television shown next to him. He continues: "And every time we think to ourselves 'Lord, why is there not enough state funding for these things? Where is that money?'" He answers this question by saying "Well, here it is. We have just shown it to you.", referring to his corruption investigations, with the photos of the alleged culprits, including Putin and Medvedev, coming up on the screen.

When explaining the grievances that made him take part in the "Don't call him Dimon" protest Karl linked them to him being "not indifferent", which echoed the "conscious" identity mentioned earlier by Antonina, and went on to elaborate how he came to be this way:

"This is formed very easily, really, by those currently in power, among others. When you, figuratively speaking, just turn on the television, and there are people on a federal channel trying to raise funds for an operation for a small child… sort of… you come to experience these feelings. You see that someone… Once again, this should not be happening. It is as if the authorities jeopardise themselves… You simultaneously feel sympathy for these people who have such a tragedy in their family. On the other hand, you experience purely negative emotions towards those responsible for this."

One may argue that the fundraising advertisements mentioned by Karl were not uncommon for the Russian television, and that people did not need Navalny to draw their attention to them. At the same time, not only does Karl's narrative mirror that of Navalny closely – accentuating this particular phenomenon, giving it a negative normative assessment and assigning the blame to the ruling elite, - but all of that is in the context of the 2017 protest, triggered by Navalny's aforementioned video that used that same narrative to facilitate grievance formation. Considering that Karl has said that he had watched this video prior to the protest, it is likely that he either adopted this framing from it or, if it had already existed in Karl prior, Navalny at least confirmed it. This narrative also suggests the role of the elite-

aligned media (unintentionally highlighting the underfunding of the public sector) and Navalny's signifying work (purposefully drawing a link between the underfunded public sector, using a familiar cultural element, and the ruling elite's alleged corruption schemes).

Furthermore, in "We demand answers on the street" Navalny (2017b, 5:20) said: "We are also citizens. We pay our taxes. We have our rights." This logic was also reflected in quite a few of my interviewees' 2017 and 2021 protest narratives, such as that of Valera, who linked his tax-paying citizen identity to their rights and violated interests, echoing some of the earlier narratives about the citizen identity forming around the citizen status grounded in citizen rights, which is explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Similar patterns can be observed in relation to other videos my interviewees had watched prior to the 2021 protest. Navalny's appropriation of the "patriot" identity from the ruling elite who are denounced as "traitors" and a "gang" and the link between "poverty" and "oligarchs with yachts" (2020b, 48:40), as well as the assessment of the authorities' actions as illegal and Putin's regime as illegitimate (2021, 1:50:20). All of these themes were reflected in my interviewees' grievance narratives. There were Karl, Marina, Irina and Yegor, who considered themselves patriots and equated it with being an active citizen. There were the likes of Aleks, who blamed the "criminal gang that has been in Kremlin for too long". There was Verner who was discontent because the "money [was] wasted on palaces and yachts», which he said to have learnt about from Navalny's videos, while the pensioners had to "save money and not buy sausages", which he had previously witnessed himself.

What is noteworthy about the above narratives is the absence of the elite-aligned frames in them. Russia's mainstream media outlets such as *First* and *Russia* TV channels among many others engaged in own signifying efforts on every one of those occasions in order to control the narrative among the population and maintain their cultural dominance. However, my interviewees preferred the likes of Navalny and *TV Rain* to them and either ignored or rejected the elite-aligned influentials. As explained by Danya:

"This was because the Russian [elite-aligned] media had lost their credibility… and their versions [of events] were not convincing… well, that one about a person going into coma due to the diabetes… Like, well, no, maybe it can happen, but this person would look very differently and lead a very different lifestyle."

Danya rejected one of the elite-aligned media's narratives about Navalny's coma being caused by diabetes because it was inconsistent with his perception of Navalny as a healthy person, which was how he was represented by the alternative influentials, and because Danya had already lost trust in the elite-aligned media due to their non-resonance.

My interviewees also unanimously rejected the official narrative that Navalny was incarcerated in 2021 for breaching the terms of his suspended sentence by staying in Germany after his medical treatment (instead of returning to Russia to sign in at his local police station). Klava "did not think this was sufficient for being put in prison" and considered the original case to have been "fabricated":

This belief was shared by Konstantin, a 37-year-old historical tour guide from Saint-Peterburg, who elaborated as follows:

"[E]ven if there had been some sort of a legal violation, then what about the people, so to speak, loyal to the authorities and those who do not voice their political views and make some bureaucratic mistakes… these are forgiven for a hefty sum."

Konstantin appealed to the premise of processual rather than distributive justice and clearly saw Navalny's incarceration as political. He referred to the double standards and corruption, which he considered a "part of the society". Thus, it appeared as though his distrust in the system extended to all its institutions, resulting in non-resonance of the elite-aligned media. This was also the case in February 2022. As recalled by Ivan:

"I categorically disagreed with the version that was presented… talking about… well, that, let's say, ethnic Russians were being killed…

… I suppose that all sorts could have been happening over there, but I don't believe that was the reason they went over there. It was definitely not it."

Ivan did not believe that Vladimir Putin's "Special Military Operation" was about defending the ethnic Russian population from Volodymyr Zelensky's "Anti-Terrorist Operation". As he stated earlier, he had no trust in the elite-aligned media as he believed them to be "cooperating" with the political elite, in which he also had no trust. Thus, the lack of trust in the elite-aligned influentials and their failure to resonate played a crucial part in their failure to demobilise my interviewees. This was also clearly rooted in the broader distrust in the system, cultivated earlier, as outlined in the previous chapter.

This was in contrast with Marina Litvinovich and the video she posted online on the first day of Putin's full-scale offensive in Ukraine (2022), in which she said: "I know that this very moment many of you are experiencing desperation, powerlessness, shame in regard to Vladimir Putin's violation against the friendly-to-us people of Ukraine". This was consonant with many of my interviewees' narratives, such as that of Karina, who identified with the "brotherly people of Ukraine", as well as those about "shame", as experienced by Gavrila, among other narratives analysed in the next chapter.

Litvinovich also said: "We, the people of Russia, are against the war launched by Putin. We do not support this war. It is waged not in our name. We are against this war". This was also consonant with some of my interviewees' narratives such as those of Marat and Katya, who emphasised that no one had asked them, and that they did not give their permission for the "special military operation". Once again, only correlation can be ascertained here. Some of my interviewees may have adopted the above injustice-grievance frames from Litvinovich, but they may have come up with them themselves with Litvinovich merely confirming them. In fact, considering that most of my interviewees who went out to protest on the first day of Putin's full-scale offensive had immediately come to perceive it as an injustice and experience it as own grievance, the alternative influentials most likely played a very modest role as far as framing was concerned in this instance.

5.3.2. Prognostic & motivational frames

As noted in Chapter 2, in order to mobilise action the diagnostic frame must be followed by the prognostic (what to do about the injustice) and motivational (why do it) frames. I was therefore interested in exploring the potential connection between my interviewees' participation in the protests and the frames in communication they had been exposed to prior to it.

It must be said that when it comes to the 2017 and 2021 protests, all of my interviewees who participated in them had learnt about them from Navalny's social media, in particular his *YouTube* channel. At the same time, most of my narratives suggest that the protesters had been ready to protest even before Navalny's call-to-actions. This was reflected in Klava's narrative:

"Well, as far as I remember, they did not announce it right away when… There was a period of silence, and everyone was waiting when they will make an announcement about coming out to the protests… I had already reached the boiling point, and still nothing… So, when they made the call-to-action, then it had all been boiling up on the inside already and [I] wanted to [come out] already…"

Navalny was arrested on 17th January 2021, and the call-to-action was made two days later, along with "Putin's Palace" on YouTube. Thus, on 17th January, Klava learnt about Navalny's incarceration, assessed it as an injustice and developed a grievance in that regard. She wanted to express it and decided upon the street protest as the best course of action. Hence, Klava generated her own "diagnostic", "motivational" and "prognostic" frames. However, while the latter resulted in action preparedness, it still required further micromobilisation to convert it into action participation.

The above narrative was a common one among those of my interviewees who were relatively new to protesting, like Klava, who had only been to one protest prior to this one. When asked about her acceptance of Navalny's call-to-action, she replied; "Maybe I am just a follower-type of person because it's like… Navalny's team put out this video, and I thought, perhaps, this is the effective way… seeing as they are calling." Thus, Navalny and his team functioned as leaders, reifying Klava's "prognostic frame" with a specific time and place, and provided her with the efficacy belief, which was necessary for turning her action preparedness into action participation.

Then, there was Karina, who "watched ['Don't call him Dimon'] (titter), got flabbergasted (titter), and decided that something needed to be done", yet, she was "scared" to come out on her own as she considered it to be "risky". However, she changed her mind upon learning about Navalny's call-to-action and thus believing that a lot of people were going to come out.

In his video "To the streets!" (2017c, 1:30), which Karina had watched prior to the protest, apart from announcing the time and the place, Navalny also stated: "In 97 towns people have united to come out – Kremlin got scared because they only expected 3 people to come out." It was a common belief among my interviewees that the more protesters there were the less were the chances of being caught by the police. Thus, Navalny provided Karina with the belief in sufficient human resources, the numbers belief, based on the perceived sufficiency of his material and social-organisational resources, which neutralised Karina's perceived risks and fears in this regard.

While the above narratives reveal the role of Navalny in the more "rational", instrumental motivation processes, a somewhat consonant yet different narrative was presented by Marina, who was "impressed" by Navalny's "funny video about the duckling" and his "bravery":

"He was not afraid to speak out about corruption in our country, about the fact that we have money being stolen, and (titter) to take the mick out of Dmitriy Medvedev himself…

… And it's as if the world is starting to open up to you a bit. It turns out you can speak out like this. It turns out you can come out to the protests."

Thus, apart from entertaining Marina, Navalny also proffered new cognitive schemata and behavioural norms to her, which "started to open up" a new world to her. He challenged the norm of fearing and pandering to the authorities by ridiculing and belittling them, with Medvedev becoming "Dimon" (2017a), thus neutralising fear. He also did that in regard to Putin, who turned into "a grandpa" (2020a), a term that quite a few of my interviewees used when speaking about him. For instance, Valera referred to him a "crazy grandpa" as well as a "midget" while 31-year-old graphic designer Mitya called him a "mad grandpa". This is in line with other research that suggested that mocking of the state officials helped mitigate fear thereof among Russia's protest movement participants (Denisova, 2017; Fomin & Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Levinson, 2017).

Apart from the examples above, which confirm Navalny's role in converting their action preparedness into action participation by maximising efficacy beliefs and minimising risks, I have also noticed many similarities between Navalny's proffered motivations and my interviewees' motivation narratives.

"Feel what it's like to be a citizen. What is the most important here is to express your personal position." (Navalny, 2017b, 5:50)

"It's the government that is making us take it to the streets. For they have done away with all the mechanisms. There is no law enforcement. The courts are not working. The media are either staying silent or lying. So, how else are we going to draw attention to ourselves?" (Ibid, 5:00)

"Future is in our hands. Do not stay silent." (Navalny, 2021, 1:51:35)

All of the recurring themes in Navalny's signifying work – being a citizen by expressing own "individual position", being the maker of one's own future, street protest as the ultimate action option in the context of Russia's soft authoritarian regime – were reflected in many of my interviewees' narratives about their activist identity, as well as the expressive and instrumental motivations embedded in it, explored in the next chapter.

Like with the example of one interviewee repeating Navalny's injustice narrative about the TV crowdfunding campaigns for sick children from the previous subsection, there were similar examples among the action motivation narratives. For instance, here is another excerpt from one of Navalny's pre-protest call-to-action videos:

"I want to be able to say to my children and grandchildren one day, 'Guys, there was a time when your national wealth was being stolen, and at least I didn't stay silent whilst laying down on the sofa. I found an hour of spare time and came out on the street with people like me.'" (2017b, 4:05)

And here was one of Klava's motivation narratives:

"I had this thought that, well, one day I will be telling my children about what was happening, and they will ask me what I did to make sure that it wasn't happening… And what would I tell them if I were just sitting at home? But I was not sitting at home. I went. I tried to do something about it."

Considering that, like Klava, many of my interviewees had confirmed watching the above video prior to their protest participation, they either adopted these ideas of prospective social incentives based on perceived moral resources from Navalny or had them reinforced by him.

5.3.3. Beyond Navalny

While Navalny appeared to have had a significant influence on some of my interviewees in 2017 and 2021, this was no longer the case in 2022, as he had not been making any new videos due to his imprisonment. However, by that time there were a number of other mass cultural agents my interviewees were subscribed to, who appeared to have had some influence on their decision-making process. For instance, Marat linked his group efficacy belief to his earlier exposure to Yekaterina Shulman: "I remember how she said about the street protests, that the numbers are important. So, this was why I came out." Sara cited her "privilege of knowing how *OVD-Info* works": "I knew who to write, and who would help me. I had faith, believed that they will not abandon me if anything goes wrong."

While celebrity politics professor Shulman and civil rights watchdog *OVD-Info* were not directly advocating for protest action, thus were not the charismatic or coordinator-type leaders, they fulfilled the expert function by providing some of my interviewees with useful cultural resources based on own expertise. This oppositional knowledge - about group

efficacy and legal procedures, for instance, - formed the group efficacy belief and mitigated perceived risks, respectively.

At the same time, there were still other influentials who acted as movement leaders in a classic sense - a few of my interviewees mentioned watching Marina Litvinovich's call-to-action. In her online video she suggested that everyone comes out "to say loud and clear that we, the people of Russia, are against the war launched by Putin, we do not support this war, it is waged not in our name, we are against this war". This was echoed in many of my interviewees' motivation narratives. Once again, a few of them had seen Litvinovich's video, but it cannot be ascertained whether they had adopted this motivation from Litvinovich or had generated it prior with the video simply reinforcing it. Most of my interviewees who came out on 24th February 2022 had not seen Litvinovich's video, and some of those who used to watch Navalny had stopped watching his channel, which had been run by his associates since the 2021 arrest. Considering the gravity of Putin's actions in Ukraine, they did not need anyone to motivate them to protest. Moreover, they appeared to no longer need the mass influentials to set the time and the place. As Valera recalled:

"Well, there was no more Navalny, everyone was getting banned, everyone was starting to get scared, so there was no coordination… We just got up and went. As in, you didn't know where, what, when… Yes, we didn't know whether or not anything will take place. We just went to the main square."

This narrative of Valera's reflected many others, including those who had previously relied on Navalny to set the time and the place. For many of them, this was not their first or even second street protest. Over the past few years, they had been coming out to the same location in their hometown suggested by Navalny and his local activists. Hence, Navalny appears to have succeeded, over the years, in cultivating a norm for many of my interviewees, whereby action preparedness came to be linked to a particular location, which turned these protesters into self-mobilising agents (no longer needing the likes of Navalny and others to convert action preparedness into participation).

While the above narratives emphasise the more obvious alternative influentials, family and friends also featured in some of the action mobilisation narratives. For instance, in 2022, Mitya had no longer had any efficacy belief and no longer wanted to participate; however, his wife made him change his mind regarding the efficacy and convinced him to come along. Similarly, Marina did not care about corruption and was not interested in politics in 2017, but she was invited by her friends. Antonina and Ludmila were both sceptical about Navalny and had no prior experience in Russia's protest movement despite their Soviet-linked "conscious, active civic position" and anti-Putin sentiments. Nevertheless, they decided to participate after being invited by their son and former student, respectively. Hence, family and friends were crucial in converting action preparedness to participation in those who were not persuaded by the mass influentials' micromobilisation efforts, including the protest-fatigued, the sceptics and those with no protest experience.

5.4. Conclusion

Television has been gradually stepping back as the primary source of information, in particular among the younger generation of Russians to whom the Internet has crystallised as the natural medium of choice. Therefore, my younger interviewees were more likely to be introduced to the alternative mass influentials by *YouTube* algorithms while in the case of my older interviewees their family and friends often played an important intermediary role. Parents, partners and peers and trust they had generated among some of my interviewees were particularly crucial to connecting the elite-aligned and sceptical individuals to the

alternative online content. As for *YouTube*, it was seen as a neutral platform and did not raise any suspicions among my interviewees.

The elite-aligned media such as *Perviy* & *Rossiya* failed to resonate with my interviewees due to the poor cultural compatibility – increasingly extreme rhetoric intensity, as well as the lack of symbolic clarity to the younger generation. They also failed in terms of consistency – both internal and external, - largely jeopardised by the dissonance of their proffered frames with the lifeworlds of my interviewees. In contrast, the resonance of the alternative mass influentials among many of my interviewees was facilitated by their cultural compatibility and consistency.

Alexei Navalny resonated with many of my younger interviewees who had limited experience of the system and no established interpretative framework at the time and with those who had already developed experience-based grievances. Those who had already developed anti-regime sentiments were not dissuaded by his high level of rhetoric intensity at the time, and his symbolic clarity was high due to his broad cultural knowledge and charismatic communication. He also excelled in terms of consistency, both internal and external, thanks to his use of evidence and ability to tie his framings to the experiences and perspectives of my interviewees. The more balanced alternative influentials such as *Echo of Moscow* appeared to succeed in transforming the perspectives of the previously elite-aligned individuals thanks to their lower rhetoric intensity facilitated by the diversity of their guests. The wide range of alternative mass influentials catering to various audiences appeared to enable the alternative socialisation of individuals from different social groups.

The successes of the alternative mass influentials, especially Navalny, went beyond capturing attention and resonating with my interviewees. The resonance of their signifying work served as the foundation for their credibility based on trust my interviewees came to develop for them, just like the non-resonance of the elite-aligned media resulted in distrust therein. This made the likes of Navalny and others influential in terms of signifying reality for their followers. Cultural transformation pertaining to one domain of life gradually led to a more global transformation across all domains. Furthermore, Navalny was able to activate even deeper cultural processes in some of my interviewees - confirming their interpretative frameworks and coming to embody active citizenship in their eyes. This resulted in Navalny's emergence as the leader, the standard bearer for the active citizen identity and the signifier thereof for some of my interviewees. Navalny has thus been able to ignite agency in these individuals, whereby they became more active in seeking out alternative information, advancing their transformation in the oppositional direction. They also sought out ways to perform their emergent active citizen identity and were soon ready to take their active approach to the streets.

In terms of grievance formation, there was some correlation between the injustices and grievance mechanisms proffered by the alternative mass influentials and my interviewees' perceived injustices and grievances. Navalny fulfilled the agenda-setting function in 2017 and 2021 by introducing the sources of injustices – Medvedev's corruption scheme and Putin's corruption scheme & assassination plot, respectively – to the lifeworlds of my interviewees. They were not significant in this capacity in regard to Navalny's incarceration and Putin's offensive against Ukraine because these situations were widely reported on and recognised as facts. At the same time, there were also numerous signs of correlation between the framing aspects of the signifying work (by Navalny in 2017 and 2021, and by Litvinovich in 2022) that my interviewees had been exposed to prior to the protests and their stated grievances. This suggests that the injustices and grievances were either adopted by my interviewees from the aforementioned influentials or confirmed and amplified by them after being adopted prior. The former was likely in the case of Medvedev's and Putin's alleged corruption schemes because my interviewees were exposed to the framing efforts at the same time as they learnt about those situations whereas the latter was far more likely in the case of Navalny's poisoning and incarceration and Putin's full-scale offensive against

Ukraine as my interviewees learnt about those injustices prior to being exposed to any signifying work. While the alternative influentials played an important role in grievance formation, their elite-aligned counterparts also engaged in a great deal of counter-framing. However, their efforts failed due to their earlier failure to resonate and their association with the political elite and the system my interviewees' had no trust in, which was often a result of earlier negative experiences with the system mentioned in the previous chapter.

Speaking of the role of the alternative influentials in action mobilisation, they appeared to matter up until 2021 but became less important afterwards. For instance, Alexei Navalny's signifying work such as "Don't call him Dimon" (2017a) and "Putin's Palace" (2021c) were likely to have influenced some of my interviewees' motivations at the time. However, in other cases, when the injustice situations had been widely known prior to the call-to-action, my interviewees generated the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames themselves, and the likes of Navalny and Litvinovich mostly confirmed and amplified those already existing motivations. At the same time, while my interviewees appeared to mostly generate their own action frames, Alexei Navalny and his team were crucial in reifying them by providing the outlet for my interviewees' motivations – the protest event - up until Navalny's incarceration. They also provided my interviewees with the efficacy belief and numbers beliefs through oppositional knowledge and mitigated perceived risks. There were also other alternative mass influentials, who were rather "expert" rather than "charismatic"-type leaders, like Shulman and *OVD-Info*, providing my interviewees with the oppositional knowledge but not engaging in any micromobilisation. Furthermore, alternative proximate influentials such as family and friends played an important role in mobilising those who had not been persuaded by the likes of Navalny. Alternative mass influentials were also less important in 2022 because my interviewees had by then developed the capacity to self-mobilise as a result of the long-term efforts by the likes of Navalny to link action preparedness to action participation, through the habituation of a particular time and place for the protest.

At the same time, while the alternative mass influentials clearly played a role in micromobilisation, my interview data suggests a great degree of agency in my interviewees, who were much more than passive adopters of action frames. Hence, the next chapter focuses on the cultural processes that took place in the run-up to the protest events to examine my interviewees' motivations to protest in 2017, 2021 and 2022.

6. Protest mobilisation: motivation, citizenship & identity

6.1. Introduction

As suggested in the previous chapter, there was general unanimity among my interviewees as far as the sources of the mobilising grievances were concerned. “Don’t call him Dimon” protests in 2017 were about Dmitry Medvedev’s alleged corruption scheme. 2021 protests were about the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, his treatment by the legal system, most importantly his incarceration, as well as Putin’s alleged corruption scheme. In 2022, it was about Putin’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and the Russian military actions therein. There was also unanimity in assigning the blame for the injustices behind the mobilising incidental grievances to Russia’s power elite, Putin in particular (as well as Medvedev in 2017). Where my interviewees – unaffiliated protesters - varied was in the meaning-making processes that generated grievances and protest preparedness. This chapter explores the various motivations that resulted in action mobilisation.

In the following sections, I organise and analyse a wide range of diverse cultural processes behind protest mobilisation in 2017, 2021 and 2022. I begin by focusing on different types of grievances and the role of citizenship as a status and a source of rights and principles perceived by my interviewees. I then make a transition to the motivations by identifying the movement-wide identity and other congruent identities that played a role in protest mobilisation. In the following two sections I explore the instrumental and expressive motivations and introduce new types of motivations that I discovered in my data while suggesting a range of important factors such as my interviewees’ understanding of the opportunities, resources and risks involved. In the last section before the conclusion, I focus on another kind of motivation, which arose in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war and put the Russian citizen identity centre stage.

6.2. Citizenship-based grievances

6.2.1. Citizen rights, interests & principles

Motivations for protest action generally arise out of grievances. As noted in Chapter 2, the economically rational approaches tend to emphasise violated interests as the basis for grievance. These types of grievances were present in my interviewees’ narratives. Here is how Valera recalled his grievance formation in the run-up to the 2021 protest, where Putin’s alleged corruption scheme to build a palace for himself was the primary injustice:

“[M]y salary was 200 thousand roubles, and it could have been 270… right... if I just didn’t pay my taxes… well, damn… that’s 70 bloody grand… Could you at least get the street cleaned up?! That’s a lot of money, and I am not the only one living in the city. There are two million of us… and we are all chipping in. And for what? For a house for the midget?!”

As far as Valera understood, the money he and other residents of Novosibirsk had paid in tax went towards building a palace for Putin instead of communal services. He thus connected his long-term grievance about the streets of this Siberian city not being cleared of snow during winter to the new incidental injustice suggested by Navalny. He thus perceived himself to have been deprived by the ruling elite of his social rights related to the public sector’s provision of services that he expected in exchange for 70,000 roubles (approximately, £700) he paid in tax.

Ivan, who lived in Saint-Peterburg at the time of the 2021 protests, recalled the idea of Navalny "representing" him as central to his meaning-making of the opposition figure's incarceration ahead of the protest:

"I had always said that there needed to be some sort of a leader. It had always been important for me. Well, I saw in him, a leader, who, well, was capable, to be fair, of dialogue with foreign heads of state. Well, and therefore, I understood that that leader was taken away from me."

Ivan perceived Navalny as a political leader who represented him as an active citizen and through whom he could potentially exercise his political rights. With Navalny incarcerated by the authorities, Ivan perceived himself to have been deprived of these rights by the ruling elite.

Karina's grievances ahead of her protest participation in Yekaterinburg were also about Navalny's poisoning and incarceration, but they were based on a different premise:

"Our state did not guarantee any investigation, let alone an independent one, or of any kind. So, I felt that if a person in our country can get into such a situation, then no one is safe… I got scared."

By 2021, Karina came to identify with Navalny through their shared opposition to the regime and active citizenship as well as their physical situation in the Russian state. She thus understood that his poisoning, closed judicial process and incarceration meant that she or any other Russian residents with the same system of beliefs and norms could suffer the same fate. Thus, Karina understood her civil rights to health, justice and freedom to be under threat from the authorities.

First of all, the three narratives above reflect the multi-issue nature of the January 2021 protest, which was about Navalny's poisoning and incarceration as well as his *YouTube* film about "Putin's Palace", but also triggered other long-term, structural grievances such as that of Valera's. In fact, he was not the only one in that respect. Here is how Iskander, a 44-year-old priest and teacher from Moscow, remembered it:

"I had a whole set of grievances against our government… not to mention that Medvedev or Putin had a palace. For me, the rotation of power, fair elections, freedom of press, freedom of expression of one's political views played the main role."

Therefore, the trigger events generated incidental grievances, but they also activated the long-term grievances accumulated during the prior cultural alignment examined in the previous chapters.

Secondly, what these narratives also show is how one situation may be evaluated as different types of injustice and generate and activate different types of grievances, which may be explained by the heterogenous and horizontal nature of the movement. This was also the case in 2017 and 2022. In fact, the 2022 grievance narratives mostly focused on the Ukrainians and the Ukrainian state as the primary recipients of injustice, as is shown further in this chapter, but there were also a few other narratives that were about the individuals' own interests. Here was how Danya remembered his thought process:

"I understood that there would soon be some instances of tightening along the lines of possible mobilisation, sanctions, which did appear soon enough… I often use some foreign services and foreign software, and it became more difficult to work. I did not want that."

Danya was underpaid as a teacher and thus had to rely on the extra income he made as a freelance photographer. Therefore, the potential of losing access to the software he needed for generating the extra income as a result of the ruling elite's actions made Danya perceive his economic rights to be under threat.

While the above narratives reflect a variety of meaning-making processes behind grievance formation in a heterogenous movement of unaffiliated individuals, they have something else in common. They are all about the individuals' own interests derived from their perception of the rights to which they were entitled through their citizen status. In fact, when asked to elaborate, almost everyone mentioned their self-identification as *гражданин/grazhdanin* ("a citizen") at some point as the basis for this entitlement. Being a citizen made one consider oneself entitled to the rights that the government was meant to provide or facilitate. Thus, in the above narratives, the citizen status and concomitant self-identity was the source of interests, the violation of which was perceived as an injustice.

At the same time, there were even more narratives about violated principles as the basis for grievance formation, reflecting the culturalist approach to protest action motivation. Karina's narrative on her grievance formation in 2021 extended beyond her own interests:

"[N]ot a single person should be subjected to such violation of their rights, freedoms, health, integrity, no matter what group of people they belong to, what political views they have. It is a human being. This should not happen to a single person. This is all just some sort of hell and surreal madness…"

Karina recognised that the entitlement of other citizens to same rights as herself. Therefore, Navalny's treatment by the authorities also violated Karina's principles, which were based on the premise of citizen rights and everyone's equal entitlement to them. Equality and violation of principles was a recurrent theme across all three protest events. Recalling her decision-making process in the run-up to the "Don't call him Dimon" protest in 2017, Oksana explained her perception of Medvedev's alleged corruption scheme as an injustice with "stealing was bad", which clearly had a moral undertone. Yakov explained his qualification of Navalny's 2021 trial as "absurd" as the basis for his grievance:

"I understand that there are [law] articles and have some understanding about the judicial process. And when you see that a person is taken to some police station, where trials are not even supposed to take place, and some sort of special judge goes there, there is no publicity and no information available as to what is happening in there… this simply does not correspond to the declarations that our government has previously signed and that I know."

While Oksana appealed to morality, Yakov focused on legality, qualifying Navalny's trial as "absurd", legally incongruous. Therefore, his grievances were based on perceived violation of laws rather than morals. It must be noted that moral norm violation appeared to result in more intense emotions across my data. For instance, Oksana's evaluation of Medvedev's alleged activities as "stealing" and thus "bad" caused her to feel "indignation" and "anger" while Yakov was describing how his negative evaluation of Navalny's legal treatment made him feel "annoyance", which is the milder form of anger in the sociology of emotions (Bericat, 2015, p. 502). At the same time, my data also showed that the two normative evaluation logics were not mutually exclusive. In some narratives, they featured alongside each other. For instance, for Natasha, the injustice that happened on 24th February 2022, was about an "violation of a separate, sovereign state" and "killing people", which were "illegal… and just wrong". Therefore, to Natasha, Putin's actions in Ukraine violated her principles pertaining to both her legal and moral norms.

What Yakov's narrative also does is bring the government to the fore by highlighting the incongruence between their legal obligations to citizens and their treatment of Navalny. This is also consonant with Konstantin's narrative from the previous chapter, which highlights the failure of the authorities to provide fair treatment to all regardless of their political views, thus creating a system where not everyone is equal before the law.

6.2.2. Human rights, Ukraine & global citizenship

The above narratives highlight the central role of citizenship and the rights the individuals perceived themselves and their fellow citizens to be entitled to through this status. At the same time, this perception of citizenship and rights gradually extended beyond Russia for many of them. Karina's 2021 narrative mentioned earlier in this section referred to Navalny as a "human being". In addition to the "citizen" identity, *человек/chelovek* ("human"/"human being"/"person") was another word that came to be used interchangeably with or instead of "citizen" in the narratives regarding Navalny's poisoning and, even more so, the war in Ukraine. For instance, when recalling her grievance formation on 24th February 2022, Oksana stressed her "self-identification as a citizen… but at the same time something about being a human… humanity… that the war is bad". This can be explained by the nature of injustice, and thus the evaluative criteria, narrowing down from the broader, citizen rights to its more basic subset, human rights such as the right to life. There was a threat to human life, which, according to many of my interviewees was "the primary… cornerstone value", as put by Karl.

Hence, my interviewees recognised that human rights were not only a subset of citizen rights to be enjoyed by them and their fellow citizens, but they were also universal rights to which all their fellow humans, including Ukrainian citizens, were entitled. At the same time, there were other aspects that amplified the grievances related to Ukraine and the Russian citizenship of my interviewees. Here is what Lidya recalled:

"It was terrible news, and I did not understand how one could engage in military action against the place where my mother, grandmother and auntie were born… For me it was not just about me being a [Russian] citizen, but also about Ukraine being also my home, like Russia. And, I think, that had an impact."

The closeness between Russians and Ukrainians was one of the recurring themes in the grievance narratives about the 2022 anti-war protests. This was not surprising, considering that many Russians and Ukrainians were connected by family ties, which entailed a different identity process. While Lidya was a Russian citizen and ethnically half-Russian, she was also half-Ukrainian and had previously spent a lot of time in Ukraine. The strong relationship Lidya had with her mother, which she had mentioned more than once during the interview, made her Ukrainian heritage even more salient in this instance and resulted in a feeling of sadness. This was also the case with Irina, a 37-year-old design teacher from Moscow, who mentioned that her mother, who she lived with, was Ukrainian, and linked that to her own experience of emotional "pain" the morning of Putin's full-scale offensive in Ukraine. Thus, Lidya's and Irina's partial identification with their mothers appeared to make them experience more passive negative emotions more typical of victims rather than external observers.

While not all of my interviewees had personal social ties to Ukrainians, there was yet another kind of identity process, which is best illustrated by Karina's narrative:

"War in the 21st century is, to say the least, the last thing one should engage in, especially, a war with a country that had always been a brotherly state, which had always been for us… something super-close. I think, most Russians[36] and Ukrainians have relatives and friends among each other, families in common, and so on."

[36] My interviewees mostly used *русские/russkiye*, which means ethnic Russians, but also used *россияне/rossiyane*, which means Russian citizens, often interchangeably and regardless of own ethnicity. This is commonplace in contemporary Russia, where the former term has been popular since the 18th century whereas the latter has only come back into everyday use following the formation of the Russian Federation and is more common in the formal discourse.

Thus, Karina stressed the group-based closeness and inter-connectedness between "us"/"Russians", and the "Ukrainians" and Ukraine as a factor that increased the severity of the violated anti-war principles. This was a recurrent theme across many of my interviewees' narratives regarding Ukraine in 2022. Quite a few of them referred to Ukraine as a "brotherly country"/"brotherly state" and to Ukrainians as a "brotherly people". These terms have their roots in Russia's Imperial and Soviet past, but they remain in common use in post-Soviet Russia, mostly referring to the people of Ukraine (and Belarus). At its root is the pan-Slavist idea of the Ukrainians (and Belarussians) as the Russians' natural allies and culturally, ethnically, genetically, geographically and historically close others. Therefore, some interviewees also highlighted the Ukrainians being "people who speak a language we understand" and "our neighbours" as the aggravating factors of Putin's offensive against Ukraine. All of my interviewees were clear in their recognition of Ukraine as a separate state and Ukrainians as a separate people (contrary to the ultra-nationalist discourse about Ukrainians as estranged Russians, which had been lingering in the Russian media space). At the same time, many of them considered their own group-based Russian identity as something that made them close and similar to Ukrainians. Thus, this appears to be a case of group-based semi-identification with similar others resulting in stronger grievances about Putin's actions in Ukraine.

Finally, my interviewees recognised both Russia and Ukraine as sovereign states, members of the global community governed by international law. They perceived Putin's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty as illegal as well as morally wrong. Therefore, they also embraced the globalist perspective on citizenship and perceived the Russian state in breach of the rights of the Ukrainian state and of international law. While they recognised that some of the other states also breached those rules in respect of other states (e.g., the US in Iraq), what made the Ukraine case the basis for their grievance was that "the state doing it is your own state", as put by Gavrila. Their own relation to the Russian state through their citizenship was what made this injustice stand out to them among all the others and created the basis for action, which is explored in more detail in the following sections.

6.3. Identity norm motivation

6.3.1. "Thinking", "caring", "active" citizen

While the previous section has highlighted the role of citizenship as the source of violated interests and principles, my interviewees recognised that the majority of their fellow citizens did not share their grievances and were not protesting. They explained this by distinguishing themselves as the citizens who "think", "care" and "act", which is what turned their citizenship from a mere status into a self-identity.

Referring to his self-identification as a "thinking person" as an important pre-condition to his participation in the 2021 protests, Valera described this identity as "someone capable of thinking critically and who, when noticing something fishy, will understand that it is not true". Similarly, to Antonina, who was recalling her reaction to Putin's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty in 2022, it was about "being able to think critically, to analyse something, to think". According to my interviewees, this cognitive agency was what allowed them to establish facts, "the truth", and it went hand-in-hand with not trusting the "propaganda" - the elite-aligned media and their signifying work. Thus, distrust in the elite-aligned cultural agents, cultivated prior, as described in the previous chapters, was an important part of this identity. It was also what made my interviewees different from the "others", whom they perceived to be "brainwashed" and "zombified" (by the elite-aligned mass influentials) as well

as “ignorant” and “uneducated”. Therefore, being a “thinking person” was perceived to endow my interviewees with a sense of cognitive agency and intellectual superiority, which is consonant with the narratives from the previous chapters such as that of Mikhail who “evolved” with his mother after developing system distrust. In other words, it was what, in their understanding, enabled them to “think for themselves” and apply the evaluative criteria mentioned in the previous two sections to assess perceived situations as true or untrue, just or unjust.

According to my interviewees’ grievance formation narratives, this identity was accompanied by another one, defined as *неравнодушный*/*neravnodushny*, which is often translated as “partial” but in actuality means “not indifferent” or “caring”. It is not so much about being biased but rather about “not being able to stay indifferent” in relation to a perceived injustice, as put by Karl when recalling his decision-making ahead of his protest in 2017. It is about being a person who cares as opposed to the “others” who were referred to as “uncaring”, “apathetic” and “apolitical”. If broken down linguistically, it is “non-equal-souled” as in “one to whose soul it is not the same”, suggesting a moral undertone. At the same time, as Karl elaborated, “you want it for yourself in the first instance, but you also want everyone to live with a bit more ease, at least a little better”. Hence, this “caring” identity entailed caring about and wanting justice not only for others, but also for oneself – i.e., it was about wanting to see one’s principles and interests protected – and literally “caring”, thus converting perceived injustices based on both violated interests and principles into own grievances.

Hence, the thinking and caring identities worked together as a diagnostic-relational mechanism, which enabled establishing and normatively evaluating facts and converting perceived injustices into one’s own grievances. At the same time, in many of the narratives they featured alongside another, larger identity, or rather as part of it. When speaking about the role of citizenship in their action mobilisation, my interviewees often added the words with the *актив/aktiv* (“activ”) stem to it, making it *активный гражданин/aktivniy grazhdanin* (“active citizen”) or *гражданский активист/grazhdanskiy aktivist* (“civic activist”), and thus emphasising action as its defining feature. That is what distinguished them from the “passive” citizens, or, as Verner called them, “the grey mass that does not act upon initiative, does not do anything to change something, and only complains”, which reflects the distinction between active and passive citizenship in the scholarship mentioned in Chapter 2. Most important of all, this is what made my interviewees “act” by engaging in protest action. As described by Yakov, who came out as an “active citizen” in 2017 “to express discontent in order to push against [the injustice]”, the essence of this identity is as follows:

“[It was about] expressing your position in some way and doing something when you disagree with some decision… You see that something needs to be done to make things better, but you need to do something to achieve it.”

Thus, being an active citizen meant expressing one’s grievances when they arise and doing something to change the circumstances for the better. This “active” identity clearly functioned as the continuation of the “caring” identity, with the former invoking a reaction to the grievances generated by the latter. The “active” component appeared to function as a mobilising mechanism, triggering the identity motivation, which in its turn also triggered the expressive and instrumental motivations embedded in it. Staying inactive as an active citizen was not an option. Here is how Yakov elaborated on the connection between him being an active citizen and his motivation to protest Navalny’s incarceration in 2021:

“I think [I came out] because by that time I thought that what was happening was absurd. And if I don’t say anything and don’t come out, then I would simply be ashamed before myself, perhaps, because it would mean that I accepted this absurd and did nothing about it.”

Yakov came out because the perceived injustice threatened his activist identity and failing to verify it to himself by staying inactive in the light of the injustice would make him feel shame.

This was also consonant with the reasoning given by Katya, who came out to protest in 2017 for her "own conscience", meaning that it was about her personal sense of responsibility. Thus, both Yakov and Katya saw themselves as the ultimate verifiers of their own active citizen identity, and the selective incentives at play were moral, in that they were about an obligation to oneself, and psychological - avoiding the negative emotion of shame. Most importantly, my interviewees perceived themselves as active citizens individually rather than as group members, which is a point that is revisited in the next chapter.

6.3.2. Patrons, patriots and peers

While the active citizen identity described in the previous subsection appeared to be shared by all my interviewees, there were a few other partially overlapping identities that were mentioned by my interviewees alongside this activist identity. There were the "university student" and "young person" self-identities, which, according to 22-year-old Petya, made him "prone to protesting" against injustices and "concerned about the future of the country", mirroring the expressive and instrumental components of the active citizen identity. Some, like Marina, were keen to reclaim "patriot" from the elite-aligned influentials and used it interchangeably with the activist identity. Gosha used "Russian European" in the same way, emphasising the "liberal democratic values" as the root of his expressive and instrumental motivations. Once again, despite the implied groupness of some of these identities, they were mentioned as primarily role and person identities – they were about acting in line with perceived expectations and qualities assigned to them rather than acting as group members.

Apart from the above, there was one particular group of identities that featured prominently across the narratives in relation to all three protest events. In 2021, Iskander was not only driven by his desire to express his grievances about the increasingly authoritarian politics manifested in Navalny's incarceration, but he also felt like he had to come out as a priest and a teacher (at the extracurricular mathematics classes organised by his church) as well as a "son of [his] mother". As he recalled:

"I thought… that if my students… my parishioners… go to these protests, then, well… I must show my solidarity with them and be next to them… Yes, the most important thing for me was to be with them… so that if they are in danger, I will be next to them. Well, and if I am then excommunicated, then, oh well… My mother was also going. I had to show my solidarity with her too."

There were also two similar narratives of husbands who went to the protest because of their wives. One of them was Mitya, who initially tried to talk his wife out of going because he was worried, they would "just wind up in the cell, and nothing would change in the end". This was in 2022, when Mitya had started developing fatigue because he had been attending political protests for a few years with no tangible result. However, he did share his wife's views in regard to the war, and he also felt like he "had to go to be with his wife" because he "understood that it was not safe" for her.

Antonina's narrative in relation to her participation in the anti-war protests somewhat echoed those of Iskander and Mitya, but she had her son in mind. She recalled him saying to her "Let's go?" and her immediately replying to him "Let's go":

"Well… it coincided with my views. I do want to make some contribution whenever possible. And secondly… I understood that it was not safe. I knew it could lead to detentions and so on, and… when my son said it to me… well, I wanted to be with my child and support him… and simply as a mother, I would rather be there, next to him, in one police van [with him], than be sitting at home wondering where my child is and what is happening over there."

What all three narratives have in common is the role-based identities derived from their proximate social structures, which went alongside their activist identities and became the decisive factor in protest mobilisation. These were a priest, a teacher and a son for Iskander, a husband in Mitya's and a parent, a mother in Antonina's case. These identities were pervasive, as Iskander, Mitya and Antonina clearly felt like they had to act upon them all the time, even outside the social contexts traditionally associated with them (a church, a school, home). They also overrode the risks perceived by my interviewees, as indicated by Iskander's preparedness to be "excommunicated" from priesthood as long as he remained true to his priest identity before his parishioners. As for the potential risks they understood their role counterparts (parishioners, students, a parent, a partner, a child) to be facing, these worked as the mechanisms that activated their role-based identities and their motivations to be with their important others in a high-risk situation. This motivation to act in a patron-like manner – to be watching over their significant others in a relatively high-risk situation - appeared to be embedded in the above identities, much like the instrumental and expression motivations were embedded in the active citizen identity.

Finally, there was one other type of mobilising identity, which featured in Marina's recollection of her decision-making process in 2017:

"You know, this wasn't my 'active position' at the time. (titter) It's just like, everyone is going and you go because, well, that funny video. (titter) I just decided to go because everyone was going – the guys, young people… like some sort of a movement happening… vibes… opposition."

What is fascinating about this narrative is that there was neither a grievance nor an activist identity at play, which Marina made clear when she said that she had not yet developed it and that at the time she was a "person who… was just thinking about [her]self, perhaps, about [her] own life" and was not interested in politics. However, there was a social identity at play. It was her group identity related to her peers who were going to the protest. Hence, this was a matter of an identity norm motivation – coming out to act in accordance with one's identity, which in this case was that of a peer. In other words, driven by the social incentives, Marina went to the protest to abide by the emerging norm in her friendship circle of attending street protests to "act as a good group member". While this identity not movement-wide, it was nevertheless a mobilising identity, the peculiar nature of which was that it did not require one to have an underlying grievance. At the same time, Marina's participation in the protest in 2017 did result in her eventual acquisition of the activist identity. Thus, it facilitated not only short-term protest participation, but also a major cultural transformation process – "development", as Marina called it, - and long-term participation in the protest movement, which lasted until 2022.

What the above narratives highlight is the role of ties to movement participants embedded in proximate social structures in action mobilisation, whereby role identities that incorporated norms of patron-like behaviour towards their role counterparts and group identities overrode risks and negated the need for grievances, respectively, and led to protest participation.

6.4. Instrumental motivation

6.4.1. Direct & strategic instrumentality

Instrumentality is a type of motivational logic that suggests that people engage in protest action to change their circumstances for the better or to influence the social or political environment, - i.e., to achieve their goals that entail tangible changes. Using the collective

action terminology mentioned in Chapter 2, it is about the collective incentives – the attainment of public goods for everyone including oneself. At the same time, there was a matter of nuance to instrumentality, as identified in my data analysis.

There were instrumental motivation narratives about protesting in order to trigger an investigation into Medvedev's financial affairs in 2017 and to have Navalny freed in 2021. Some aspired for greater reforms, and one of my interviewees had an even more ambitious goal of "ousting" Putin. This variance in instrumental motivations among the protesters appeared to be common in the 2017 and 2021 protests, and it may be explained in part by the multi-issue nature of the protest in 2021 and partially by the heterogenous composition of the movement.

However, in 2022 there were no contemplations about democratisation or regime change. There was only one instrumental motivation – to pressure the government into ceasefire. This was most likely dictated by the hardening of the regime and the gravity and urgency of the incidental injustice emphasised by my interviewees. As put by Tatyana: "There were people getting killed out there!" When talking about their political beliefs, many of my interviewees underlined the importance of their rights as citizens, but they have assigned the highest value to human life. It was also mentioned frequently in their violated principle narratives in relation to the 2022 protests. Therefore, with the most salient principle violated, all the other grievances were backgrounded.

The above narratives may serve as illustrations of a typical instrumental motivation, concerned with bringing about some tangible changes. I call this a **direct instrumental** motivation because it is about coming out to achieve specific tangible changes as a result of a particular instance of collective protest. At the same time, there were other narratives, which fitted the instrumental logic but with nuance. For instance, Petya had very little hope for "ending Navalny's prosecution", citing the gradual hardening of Putin's regime in 2021. However, his goals extended beyond Navalny:

"[I] thought, coming out to the protest was not about coming out for Navalny's political views. It was about coming out for our and your freedom… … If I got into some situation with the FSB[37] or MVD[38] officer, they could just do anything with me, and no one would even find out, help or protect me. Therefore, when I was coming out to support Navalny, I was coming out to support everyone including myself, for our future, however this sounds, but I believed in that."

Like Karina, from earlier in this chapter, Petya understood Navalny's treatment as a threat to own interests, civil rights. This raised the stakes and made the protest participation a necessary measure for securing the future well-being for oneself and for others, which was Petya's long-term goal. What is also noteworthy is that Petya's use of "for our and your freedom" was a slogan used by Navalny and his associates, which reflects the alignment between his framework and that of Navalny. However, Petya's instrumental motivation was more complex:

"[I came out] to show all the people around us, those doubting masses… who do not know whether to join the protest or not. I wanted to lead by example, to demonstrate that there are lots of people who support, let's say, Navalny… and his aspirations for a free political environment, well and roughly speaking, against Putin among other things, so that people would not be afraid to express their point of view. To show them that I am a part of a large group of people, who only through their wholeness and numbers can attract an even larger

[37] FSB (Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti) – ФСБ (Федеральная Служба Безопасности) – Federal Security Service – Russia's principal security agency

[38] MVD (Ministerstvo Vnutrennih Del) – МВД (Министерство Внутренних Дел) – Ministry of Internal Affairs – Russia's interior ministry, responsible for law enforcement

number of people... to our protest. And, of course, only then will we be able to achieve our goals."

One aspect that is noteworthy about Petya's narrative is that unlike with most motivation narratives (which were more personal, as detailed further in this chapter) he signalled groupness by acknowledging "us" and himself as "a part of a large group of people" with collective goals they could achieve as they increase their numbers. When I searched for references to groupness across the motivation narratives, I mostly found them in those pertaining to instrumentality as well as recollection of intra-protest action experience. Thus, Petya and many others only perceived themselves as part of a collectivity in a context of achieving their goals and when in the physical presence of other protesters during the event but saw themselves as individuals otherwise.

Petya did not simply come out with a specific, tangible goal such as having Navalny freed, but with a strategy consisting of several consecutive goals. Petya wanted to first expose the undecided segment of society to street protest to help them overcome fear and join him and other protesters, which was his short-term goal, consonant with Buyantuyeva's study on Russia's LGBT activists, where visibility was also at the heart of the instrumental motivation (2020, p. 9). This visibility would result in larger numbers (which Petya's presence would contribute to) and may (or may not) propel the authorities to release Navalny in the mid-term, but most importantly, they would deter the authorities from repeating such repressive practices, whether towards Petya or others, thus improving their circumstances, and paving the way for a "free political environment" in the long term.

It should also be noted that this ambitious long-term goal was rooted in Petya's long-term structural grievances about the lack of political freedom and election falsifications. Thus, here, once again, the incidental grievances activated structural grievances and thus a broader long-term aim. However, the main point here is that Petya and others who shared similar narratives did not believe that their protest action would directly result in a specific tangible change but would rather be a strategic step in bringing about broader changes, which they deemed possible in the long term, upon growing their numbers. I therefore call this a **strategic instrumental** motivation. The factors that determined the degree of this motivation are analysed in the following section.

6.4.2. Efficacy, opportunities and risks

Motivations and incentives do not appear in abstraction from reality but are rather shaped by one's lifeworld. As already noted in the beginning of the Chapter 3, everyone's knowledge of reality is limited by their perception and cognition. Therefore, individuals make decisions in line with their bounded rationality – what appears to be rational to them based on their limited knowledge of reality.

While the instrumental motivation narratives varied in terms of the collective incentives across the events and participants, they were all backed by a group efficacy belief, which can be explained by a simple logic that if one is coming out for the purpose of achieving a particular goal, one must believe in the possibility of success. The incentive must seem attainable. As put simply by Alex, when recalling his decision to protest in 2017, "Well, I believed that if there is a certain critical mass of people, yeah, they will be able to make change happen somehow", which illustrates his group efficacy belief at the time.

Instrumental motivation narratives were generally rooted in the perception of the political opportunities available under the existing regime. The narrowing of the opportunities was widely recognised by my interviewees, but their group efficacy beliefs persisted due to the

extant flexibility of the Russian regime's authoritarianism. Danya believed in 2021 that the "authorities would come up with… find some scapegoat to be jailed" and let Navalny go in 2021, as per "our general scheme – good Tsar, bad boyars". Putin's regime had occasionally sacrificed some of the elite figures to give the public a sense of social justice. These figures ranged from former Minister of Economic Development Alexei Ulyukayev in 2017 to various local officials. This strategy also maintained the popular idea that any injustices are the fault of particular corrupt individuals rather than that of the sacred persona of Putin. Similarly, Io believed in the possibility of the "civil society's victory over the authorities" in 2022. She gave an example of opposition journalist Ivan Golunov, who was arrested in 2019 but released after five days, following the official investigation (and one by Navalny's team), which found that the evidence had been fabricated, as well as a public protest campaign.

Another recurrent theme was that of a personal efficacy belief. For example, Io saw her participation as a "tiny little grain" while Galya saw hers as a "small brick" towards a big cause. Nevertheless, they and others believed that their contribution, no matter how small, would have an impact on the final outcome. This belief in personal efficacy was one of the mechanisms that helped counter the free-rider problem, a common demotivator in collective action. Io's and Galya's motivation to bring about change and their understanding of the necessity of own participation for attaining the collective incentive eliminated the free-riding option. In fact, some participants, like Alex, were aware of this problem:

"You know, it's because… you understand that many really think like this. As in, many disagree, but many of them just sit still. Along the lines of 'I will just sit this one out, and somebody will come out instead of me'".

Thus, while Alex had previously confirmed having an instrumental motivation backed by a group efficacy belief, he was convinced that there would be many free-riders. However, the latter only empowered him as it meant more personal efficacy for individuals like himself who would come out, and his commitment to the goal, his instrumental motivation, meant he would do everything to increase the numbers needed for the attainment of the collective incentive.

Furthermore, perceptions about the opportunities as well as resources appeared to influence my interviewees' considerations of risks, as in the case of Denis:

"This was a fairly anonymous form of protest, allowed one to feel safe… because… naturally, all this persecution of the opposition-minded people – especially those active in the media space – received a wide coverage, and everyone knew about it".

Denis saw the offline protest as the safer alternative to online protest, the latter becoming riskier as the authorities had stepped up their online surveillance efforts over the past decade and were indeed engaged in a legal persecution against some of the most vocal dissenters. Thus, offline protest appeared safer at the time as it provided a chance to escape unnoticed as opposed to the online protest that leaves a digital trace. This appeared to be the case up until that very year, when the face recognition cameras were used for the first time in Russia to identify the offline protesters. In fact, one of my protesters was visited by the security services following his protest that year.

At the same time, many of my interviewees understood the potential costs involved. Here is how Gavrila remembered his risk assessment in regard to that same protest in 2021:

"I was seeking any available means that would not land me in prison… After all, our regime wasn't that cannibalistic yet. People were not put in prison for this. This was an administrative offence."

Hence, Gavrila was aware of the legal intricacies, whereby being caught at a non-approved protest no more than once every six months would most likely result in an administrative fine not exceeding 20,000 roubles (approximately £200), which he said he could afford to pay, or

15 days of administrative arrest at a local police station, which he said he was fit enough to endure. Pre-March 2022 Russia's softer authoritarian regime had relatively low costs for an average protester like Gavrila, who could afford to pay the fine, thanks to his above-the-average salary, and whose employment in the private sector mostly shielded him from the political pressure and whose relative youth and good health made any physical repression more bearable. At the same time, a few of my interviewees were older and either on a low income, like 46-year old Tatyana, or had a public sector job, like 53-year-old Antonina, who admitted having faced pressure from her superiors over her support for the protest movement. However, this did not deter them from protesting, rather both opted for a less active, quiet mode of protest such as "just being present" and "staying on the sidelines", which appeared to mitigate their perceived risks.

Narratives such as those of Gavrila and others highlighted how having certain cultural resources such as the knowledge about the extent of constraints and opportunities mitigated the perceived risks. This was often the knowledge they had accumulated in the online counter-public sphere, from alternative mass influentials, as outlined in the previous chapter. Many of my interviewees appeared to be empowered by this oppositional knowledge as far as protest preparedness was concerned. As for the instrumental motivation in particular, the group efficacy belief appeared to be the key condition. When it was strong, it resulted in a direct instrumental motivation as in the case of Aleks, Danya and Io, who believed that they would be able to achieve their goals and bring about particular tangible changes through collective protest action. However, there were various degrees of efficacy. For instance, Petya, who did not believe that there were enough individuals, human resources, to achieve any tangible changes (such as freeing Navalny) in the short-term, had a slightly lower group efficacy belief, which resulted in a strategic instrumental motivation. However, there were others, whose efficacy belief was even lower, which resulted in other types of motivations, as detailed in the next section.

6.5. Non-instrumental motivations

6.5.1. Expressive, semi-instrumental, proto-instrumental

As outlined in Chapter 2, the three types of motivations behind protest participation are identity and instrumental, covered in the previous two sections, as well as expressive. This third type of motivation is based on the premise that people take part in protest action to express their views and emotions, and it is about the selective incentives based on non-material resources. Here is Petya's narrative from his 2022 mobilisation to illustrate this:

"As soon as [Putin] began to announce the military action, I immediately became an opponent of it. I immediately understood that I didn't like it, that it is just some ultimate lawlessness. And then… maybe these were just my emotions, maybe it was this rage… It was impulsive… I was like… Well, got to do something. Got to say something, scream something."

If we link the conceptualisation of grievance as consisting of cognitive and affective components to the expression of views and emotions respectively, Petya's cognitive evaluation of Putin's "military action" as "ultimate lawlessness" (violation of principles that were perceived legal norms) were the views while the affective experience of "outrage" was the emotion he wanted to express. Furthermore, the expression of views (military action as lawlessness) indicates the moral incentives while the expression of emotions (letting the rage out) indicates the psychological incentives involved.

In some narratives expressive motivations featured alongside instrumental ones, with individuals wanting to both express their grievances and achieve particular goals, while in others, they were defined by an absence of an efficacy belief. There were also two narratives that appeared to signal an expressive motivation but with some nuances. When looking back at her motivation to participate in the 2017 protest, Katya recalled how she was "appalled by the level of impunity, how the officials in Russia just don't give a damn about the citizens… don't even think about taking… our views into account". Therefore, she saw the protest as an opportunity to say to them:

"Hello. We are here… We do not approve of what you are doing… And we want to knock on your door so that you feel at least a little bit uncomfortable, even if just for one day."

While most of the expressive motivation narratives I came across were personal, Katya's was clearly a group-based one as she imagined herself and other "citizens" addressing the "officials". However, the goal was not a tangible one as in the instrumental motivation narratives. While, at first, it seemed as being about expressing disapproval, it was also about impact. The goal to "pressure politicians", which was one of her goals, has been used as an indicator of instrumental motivation in collective action models (Klandermans, 2014). Considering that Katya's grievances were based on violated interests (her and her fellow citizens' views not being taken into account by the authorities), her action motivation was more likely to be instrumental. Nevertheless, while her action was directed at the target of the claim, the "officials", her motivation to have them experience a negative emotion stopped short of being instrumental. This can be explained by the fact that Katya had stated she did not feel like she could change anything, thus indicating the absence of the efficacy belief.

Like Katya in 2017, Lidya "did not think about achieving anything" but rather came out "to express discontent" in 2021. However, there was another motivation at play:

"I had a thought that if we came out here and there, then [Navalny] would feel much better."

Like Katya, Lidya wanted to express her grievance, but her motivation involved the recipient rather than the perpetrator of injustice. She wanted to impart on him a positive short-term affective experience. At this point, I would like to make a distinction. Katya's and Lidya's motivations to express their grievances were textbook examples of an expressive motivation. However, their other motivations – to make sure the state officials "feel at least a little bit uncomfortable, even if for one day" and Navalny "feel[s] much better" were different. They resembled what Chong (1991) refers to as "narrowly rational expressive benefits", which include revenge among other things. These motivations thus went beyond mere expression as they had a target audience (external to the individual) they sought to influence. At the same time, this motivation stopped short of being instrumental because it only sought to influence somebody's feelings but not behaviour, thus not being about bringing about any tangible change. I therefore call this motivation **semi-instrumental** because it is about exerting affective (but not behavioural) influence on the target.

While the absence of an efficacy belief appears to account for Katya's and Lidya's motivations not following the instrumental logic, the desire to nevertheless go beyond expression and influence the affective state of their target may be explained by their relation to their targets. In their grievance and motivation narratives Lidya had emphasised feeling for Navalny as a fellow "human being" while Katya stated that it was more about "how they [the officials] are living, how they are treating the population of their country" and depicted them as the ultimate "other". It appears that Lidya's empathy with the injustice recipient pushed her to go beyond mere expression to make Navalny "feel much better". In contrast, Katya's antipathy towards the injustice perpetrator pushed her beyond expression to make the "officials" feel "at least a little bit uncomfortable". Furthermore, both Lidya and Katya felt like their objects of action had not received what they deserved. Therefore, protest participation enticed them with the psychological and moral incentives of mitigating own negative

emotions by exerting some emotional impact on those they felt strongly about and restoring justice, even in the most miniscule way.

There was yet another kind of motivation that was related to the absence of an efficacy belief that I came across. While Valera was angry about his violated interests and wanted to express his grievance about "Putin's palace" in 2021, he also had another motivation:

*"I understood that nothing will change [regarding Navalny's detention and Putin's alleged corruption scheme]. My presence at these protests was more for me personally. It was so that I would understand that I was not the only person who saw that we had been, pardon my language, f**ked over. It was the desire to get rid of this feeling of… hopelessness."*

As mentioned earlier, a group efficacy belief is an important element in most collective action models. The idea is that people who protest to bring about change must believe in their collective capacity to achieve their goals. What is often left out is what I call a numbers belief. If one's belief in success rests upon the participation of others (e.g., active citizens), then one needs to believe that there are enough of those fellow active citizens who share one's grievances and are prepared to engage in protest action, or, using the RMT terminology, it is about believing in sufficient human resources. Thus, the group efficacy belief was contingent the numbers belief. It must be added that elsewhere in the interview Valera also mentioned having a close relationship and being in daily contact with his next-door neighbours, who were his closest friends, who shared his views and often went to the protests with him. Hence, this was a matter of a low numbers belief rather than a complete absence of it. Nevertheless, it clearly had a negative effect on Valera's hope for achieving his goals. Valera's sense of threatened goals, arisen out of his low numbers belief, made it crucial for him to see others who shared his perception, his framing of the situation, in order to ensure there were more people like him to carry on the long-haul struggle for the better future, because "one person is easier to break than… a large number of people", as he put it. I therefore call this a **proto-instrumental motivation** because it was about a psychological incentive - restoring one's numbers belief in order to restore one's group efficacy belief, after which the instrumental motivation could be activated.

6.5.2. Ontological security & identity-building

The numbers belief mattered in yet another way, as suggested by Klava when she recalled her thought-process on the first day of Putin's full-scale offensive in Ukraine:

"It seems to me that when I was coming out to that anti-war protest, I was going there to sober myself up and understand that I was not the only one, that it is OK. Because it is very difficult when everyone around you supports the war, and you are against it, and you then think that you may be not normal. And it seems to me that I was just coming to realise that I was not the only one..."

Klava's perception of "everyone supporting the violation" (due to the dominance of warmongering sentiments in her proximate social networks) led to her doubting her "normal" self-identity, her own framing capacity – i.e., the ability to interpret the world around herself correctly. Confirming self as "normal" or "sane" (both of which were used in these types of narratives interchangeably) is extremely important to one's self-concept because confirmation of the opposite would negate one's framing capacity and thus all the cognitive schemata one has of self (one's self-identities) and of the world around them. The best-case scenario would involve a global framework transformation in line with the dominant culture while the worst-case scenario, as suggested by some of those who shared a similar narrative, would mean "losing one's plot", "going crazy". It is therefore not surprising that

Klava felt anxious in this regard. This was thus a matter of ontological insecurity, which reflected Tatyana's narrative from the previous chapter, who had also been experiencing ontological insecurity until her exposure to Navalny made he feel "normal" again.

While Petya's more optimistic, strategic instrumental motivation from the previous section was about coming out with like others and creating visibility, for Klava it was rather about being on the receiving end of this visibility. Klava needed to see other people who shared her framing of the issue at hand as well as her principles in general. In this sense, this appeared similar to Valera's proto-instrumental motivation narrative. However, Valera was secure about his self-identity and interpretative capacity and rather needed his numbers belief to be reinvigorated in order to restore his efficacy belief. In Klava's case, seeing others who held the same beliefs and made the same evaluations as her was important to her ontological security. Klava needed to see she was not the only one to have her whole interpretative framework confirmed and preserved. I therefore call this an **ontological security** motivation because it was about a major psychological incentive of keeping one's interpretative framework, including one's self-concept, intact.

Finally, there was Marina, who mentioned a profoundly different motivation to come for the first time in 2017. Watching "Don't call him Dimon" made Marina feel excited, and she did not deliberate for too long when her friends called her to join them. As Marina said, she went "out of curiosity and because the guys were going". While her peer identity motivation was explained earlier in this chapter, the "curiosity" that Navalny's signifying work arose in her suggest a different logic at play. Marina had already been yearning for "something new" that differed from the obsolescent political officials she had come to resent. After her exposure to Navalny's signifying work, Marina saw him as representing her emerging new understanding of herself and the world around her. As mentioned in the previous chapter, for some of my interviewees Navalny became a charismatic leader, which endowed him with the power to interpret the reality and signify what being an active citizen means. Marina therefore decided to participate in the protest "out of curiosity" – to discover more about this new way of being and seeing the world through protest experience. I therefore call this an **identity-building** motivation. It was about acquiring new knowledge – a cultural resource; therefore, it was driven by a cultural incentive. Furthermore, following this experience, Marina's first protest, she gradually "grew", became "more conscious" of herself as an "active citizen" and came to perceive protest participation as a concomitant norm rather than something "fun". She thus underwent a cultural transformation, which included a formation and growing salience of the mobilising "active citizen" identity.

6.6. Representational motivation

There is one more type of motivation revealed in my data analysis that is worth mentioning. It featured prominently in the 2022 anti-war protest narratives and put identity centre stage, but it differed from the motivations mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Here is what Marat had to say:

"Any war is bad. And, well, I understand that there are different kinds of wars, and they also happen in some other localities and places. But in this situation, it affected me directly – because I was a citizen of Russia, and I understood how I was… well, I understood that this was terrible, and it seemed as though this was… No one had asked for my opinion. As in, there was no referendum, no vote on this. So, as if… just this decision by some group of persons was being passed off as… as if the whole country considered that to be the right course of action, even though this was not so… like, I thought otherwise."

Putin's decision to cross the Russian-Ukrainian border violated Marat's (anti-war) principles and (political) interests (such as the right to decide whether or not his state should launch a war). However, there was something else that was violated – his status-based "citizen of Russia" identity. In his understanding, those who had launched this war appeared to taint this identity by giving it a new, negative meaning that Marat did not agree with. As put eloquently by Katya, who had also highlighted her "citizen of Russia" identity, "All this was being done in my name, but no one had asked me." Thus, this was a case of **violated identity**, whereby it was one's self-concept, as opposed to interests or principles, that was being violated.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, many of my interviewees stressed their connection to the direct recipients of injustice - Ukraine and Ukrainians - as having an incremental effect on their sense of grievance. This was even more profound in the case of violated identity, especially when my interviewees had friends in Ukraine. Here is the narrative offered by Gavrila:

"For me this problem – the problem of war – is also connected to the fact that I have friends in Ukraine. As in, on Day One, when it became clear that it was on… when the bombing of Kyiv began, I wrote to my friend, from Kyiv, with whom we had been playing [online games] a lot, and he said that, yes, the bombing was really happening… So, when your friends, good friends and acquaintances whom you had known for many years, who had been calling you their friend… when they are bombed, their country is being bombed… and you have no clue as to the purpose of it… that seems important."

Gavrila's self-identity as a "friend" of his Ukrainian friends was clearly of high salience, and his personal connection to his friends in Ukraine made the "problem of war" particularly "important". However, there was more to it. Gavrila elaborated on this further:

"I am sitting there in the violator-state, playing with them, and I hear in real time, via our voice communication software, so to speak, the sounds of exploding rockets and… [sigh]… these… sirens signalling the air raid. That was hard… The feeling of shame, of course, because in that moment, when you hear those explosions, while you and your friends are playing and laughing together, you just feel suppressed by shame, because the state doing that is your state."

Gavrila's mutually recognised friendship with a group of Ukrainian gamers made him their "friend", a social identity that came with certain (positive) expectations such as acting morally towards one's friends. At the same time, like Marat and Katya, Gavrila perceived his Russian citizen identity to have been tainted by its association with the "violator-state". There was a clear conflict between the friendly and moral "friend" identity and the adversarial and normatively problematic tainted version of the Russian citizen identity. Gavrila was committed to his "friend" identity and was worried that it may be at risk of non-verification if his friends saw him in terms of the negative "Russian citizen" identity. If Irina and Lidya, mentioned earlier in this chapter, had closer, family ties to Ukraine, who were less likely to doubt their Russian relatives' opposition to the war, Gavrila could not be sure of this when it came to his more distant, online gaming friends. Subsequently, his perception of potential non-verification is what generated shame.

The particular type of motivation that arose from this type of grievance was summarised by Katya as follows:

"[I came out] as a citizen of Russia, yeah, who had the red passport. This was done in my name, but no one had asked me. I… It was simply my duty – to say… to the Ukrainians that not all Russians support this."

Katya was driven by the desire to reclaim the Russian citizen identity to some extent and take control of its meaning in order to salvage it. By doing this she was also salvaging her

personal ("me") identity as well as implicitly her Russian citizen identity from being tainted by the negative version of it by preventing the people in Ukraine from internalising the latter.

The key idea was that being a Russian citizen was not synonymous with the support for the war in Ukraine, Russian citizens were not politically homogenous, and that there were Russian citizens who were against the war. Therefore, while this was related to identity, it was, once again, not about acting in line with one's identity. It was about countering the violation of one's identity and a struggle to signify it, to represent oneself by representing one's category. I therefore call this a **representational** motivation.

My interviewees who mentioned this type of motivation varied in the target audience they wanted to represent themselves to. Katya's discursive efforts were directed at the Ukrainians. This was in line with the mechanism described in the previous section that made Ukrainians close and like others. Karina wanted to let the "world" know that "it was not the people, not the citizens of the country who started all this". This emphasised the scope that went beyond regional. Her discursive efforts – to signify the Russian citizen identity - were directed at the world. Mikhail wanted to create "visibility" – a word that persisted in these narratives, – "so that later it could not say in some history textbook that we started a war, and everyone was on board". Thus, Mikhail's scope of concern went beyond the present as his target audience were the people in the future, potentially both in and outside of Russia. His representational motivation was a prospective, long-term one. At the same time, all of these motivations were about representation, and thus, they were based on social incentives – being seen in a positive light by others, but not by current fellow in-group members but by out-group members and prospective audiences. This once again reflects my interviewees' globalist perspective on citizenship and future-oriented outlook.

6.7. Conclusion

This chapter has revealed a wide range of motivations behind protest participation of my interviewees in 2017, 2021 and 2022. Citizenship played an important role in these processes. Citizen status, the concomitant rights and the government's obligations internalised by my interviewees were central to the grievance formation, whereby various cases of rights violation by the power elite were interpreted as violation of own interests and principles. The mobilising grievances also activated the long-term, structural grievances cultivated prior as outlined in the previous chapters. My interviewees globalist perspective on citizenship also meant that the entitlement to rights – especially the fundamental rights to life and security, - extended not only to themselves and fellow citizens, but also to other states and citizens thereof. The historical, cultural, ethnic and geographic closeness between Russians and Ukrainians and the citizen status that connected my interviewees to the Russian state led by Putin amplified the grievances in 2022.

When conceptualising themselves, my interviewees recognised the widespread political apathy among their fellow citizens and distinguished themselves from the rest as "thinking", "caring" and "active" citizens, thereby activating their citizen status by turning it into a politicised self-identity. This identity entailed the idea of independent thinking combined with distrust of the elite-aligned agents, caring about injustices by internalising them as grievances and acting upon them by expressing them and trying to change circumstances for the better. Hence, cognitive agency, system distrust, consciousness and active citizenship developed during the earlier stages of cultural alignment, as described in the previous chapters, gradually came together and crystallised as a mobilising politicised identity. What was also noteworthy about this identity is that it relied on self-verification and concomitant moral incentives.

There were also other congruent identities such as patron identities (e.g., a teacher), based on the roles some of my interviewees understood to occupy in proximate social structures that were premised on watching over the role counterparts (e.g., students) in high-risk situations. There was also a peer identity, based on one's membership in a group from a proximate social structure that was merely about "acting as a good group member" and required no underlying grievance. These congruent identities once again underlined the role of proximate social structures in the cultural processes behind protest mobilisation.

Instrumental motivations varied slightly in terms of their goals in 2017 (an investigation into Medvedev's finances and democratisation) and 2021 (releasing Navalny and democratisation) due to the heterogenous and horizontal nature of the movement, as well as the multiple issues involved in 2021. However, because of the gravity of the injustice in 2022 – based on a violation of the most basic right – right to life and security, - with human life considered to have the highest value among my interviewees, there was only one instrumental goal in 2022 – a ceasefire in Ukraine.

The group efficacy belief varied among my interviewees as a result of their different perceptions of opportunities and resources. The extent of this belief was a major factor that determined the type of motivation my interviewees had. Therefore, those with a strong efficacy belief, usually facilitated by the perception of flexibility of Russia's authoritarianism at the time and previous collective action successes (e.g., Ivan Golunov's release), usually had a direct instrumental motivation – they believed that the collective action could directly result in attainment of specific goals (e.g., Navalny's release). Those with a group efficacy belief but a perception of insufficient numbers (human resources) were more likely to have a strategic instrumental motivation, whereby the collective action was a strategic step in attaining visibility and growing numbers, which would subsequently result in goal attainment. The free-rider problem was countered by a personal efficacy belief, and risks were mitigated by one's oppositional knowledge pertaining to the relatively low extent of potential costs at the time and alternative protest strategies (e.g., attending the protest but staying on the sidelines).

Expressive motivation was also present among my interviewees, generally as a function of one's active citizen identity (expressing grievances when they arise), sometimes alongside an instrumental motivation, or arising from a perception of scarce opportunities and an absence of an efficacy belief. When this was coupled with a sense of empathy with the injustice recipient or apathy towards the injustice perpetrator, it resulted in a semi-instrumental motivation, whereby one wanted to make their counterpart experience positive or negative emotions whilst not expecting any tangible change. Those whose group efficacy belief was absent because of an extremely low numbers belief had a proto-instrumental motivation, whereby they went to the protest to see that there were active citizens outside of their proximate structures as to then repair their own group efficacy belief. Furthermore, those who felt that there were no other active citizens as a result of being embedded in elite-aligned social structures developed a sense of ontological insecurity, whereby they felt like their interpretative framework may be invalid. They therefore needed to come out to restore the belief in own interpretative capacity and their ontological security. One narrative also suggested that a combination of system distrust, dislike for the political elite and emergent oppositional framework resulted in a demand for new leaders and cultural incentives such as a new identity and a concomitant cultural framework. Thus, when proffered by an alternative mass influential (Navalny), it arose curiosity and an identity-building motivation in the said individual to participate in the protest in order to acquire new knowledge, new experience, and build one's emerging new identity.

Finally, in the context of the historical cultural, ethnic and geographic closeness and mutual ties between Russians and Ukrainians, Putin's military actions in Ukraine resulted in many of my interviewees experiencing a sense of violated identity. This was a matter of their Russian citizen identity tied to their citizen status potentially acquiring a negative connotation due to

the action of the power elite. Due to the ascribed rather than voluntary nature of the Russian citizen identity their other identities, including their personal identities, were under threat of non-verification by others. This was particularly felt by those who had friends in Ukraine, who were worried that their Ukrainian role counterparts will associate their friend identity with the tainted version of their Russian citizen identity, which would result in potential non-verification and shame. Therefore, they came out to represent their Russian citizen identity to salvage their other identities by demonstrating to various audiences that they were against Putin's actions, thus negating his claim to representing Russian citizens.

7. Discussion

The preceding empirical chapters focused on the organised presentation, interpretation and analysis of the results of my study in the context of Russia's protest movement. This discussion chapter extends my research beyond the Russian context by linking it to the broader scholarship, the theoretical and empirical literature mentioned in Chapter 2, and suggesting more general implications of my findings.

In the first section, I address my first research question, concerned with how a diverse range of unaffiliated individuals may come together in a collective protest. I do so by focusing on the identity processes indicated by my interviewees, including the active citizen identity, citizenship-related mechanisms and congruent identities, thus contributing to the general debate on identity in contemporary protest movements and mobilisation of unaffiliated participants therein. In the second section, I address my second research question, concerned with how certain actors are able to succeed in generating attention, resonance and political action among others in the context of extreme information profusion, low levels of trust and widespread political apathy. This section emphasises the role of the proximate influentials such as family, peers and teachers and the mechanisms generating interpersonal trust. It also offers an explanation of successful micromobilisation by the likes of Navalny and other mass influentials, building on the existing resonance frameworks and adding some nuances to them. Finally, in the third section of this chapter, I address my third research question, offering a plausible explanation as to why the higher risks of repression and lower chances of success fail to stop protest mobilisation in some authoritarian regimes. I do so by paying attention to the nuances of the opportunity structure and concomitant cultural processes and suggesting new types of motivations.

7.1. Identity in heterogenous movements

7.1.1. Connective identity of unaffiliated individuals

This research focused on the phenomenon of contemporary protest movements, defined earlier as long-term public efforts by sparse, heterogenous networks of individuals dedicated to protesting perceived injustices the blame for which is attributed to the power elite. What made this phenomenon stand out was its heterogenous, individualist composition and the reduced role of movement organisations, SMOs, therein. The absence of a strong collective identity and dense networks – the key elements of a social movement, according to Diani & Bison (2004) – highlighted the insufficiency of the traditional scholarship in grasping the emerging phenomenon and resulted in a debate on the identity processes at play. This is not to say that there were no cultural processes that encompassed some form of collective identity, or that this concept was redundant, as some scholars have previously suggested (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; McDonald, 2002). My task was rather to identify the characteristics and nuances of these processes in order to understand them better and connect them to the various conceptualisations thereof mentioned earlier. The empirical findings of this study enable us to join this debate and offer a plausible explanation as to what identity processes may bring a diverse range of unaffiliated individuals together in a collective protest.

According to my data, the protests in 2017, 2021 and 2022 were neither purely instrumental, or what Gamson would call "politics by other means" (1975), nor were they merely

expressive, or what Rosanvallon would refer to as “movements of expression” (1998). While the instrumental and expressive motivations were present among my interviewees, as demonstrated in Chapter 6, they were all rooted in a mobilising, politicised identity. This was shared by all the interviewees despite the slight variance in their individual descriptions thereof and appeared to function as the movement identity.

On the one hand, these findings confirm the collective action models from a number of recent studies, which highlight the role of identity in generating instrumental and expressive motivations along with the efficacy belief and anger (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Klandermans, 2014; Thomas et al, 2011; van Zomeren et al, 2008, 2018). On the other hand, my data contrasts with much of this scholarship in terms of what the symbolic interactionists call “identity base” (Stets & Serpre, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000). As outlined in Chapter 2, the traditional social movement scholarship has focused on SMO-brokered collective action and SMO activists. It therefore suggests that the identity motivation is based on the idea that an individual engages in protest action to act as a member of a group, whereby “identification with others involved generates a felt inner obligation to behave as a ‘good’ group member” (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023, p. 91). This formulation reflects the ongoing focus on the social movements with a strong collective identity as described by Diani & Bison (2004), which, at the individual level, corresponds to SIT’s social identity as an individual’s understanding of oneself as belonging to a particular social group with the corresponding schema of thinking, feeling and acting attached to it (Tajfel, 1972). However, the identity motivation narratives offered by my interviewees suggested that their sense of obligation to act as an active citizen was mostly personal rather than group-based. Therefore, at the individual level, it was not a group-based social identity with externally brokered collective norms and motivations, as per the SIT and much of the aforementioned SMO-focused research. As a result of theory-sampling, I found the SIIT to be more adequate for conceptualising this movement identity (Stets & Serpe, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000), opening an alternative theoretical path to grasping the cultural processes behind the mobilisation of unaffiliated protesters.

The “thinking” and “caring” components resembled “person identities”, based on the individual’s perceived personal qualities; thus, my interviewees attributed them to themselves as individuals rather than as groups members. They were thinking critically and caring about themselves and others as individuals. At the same time, seeing as “caring” was an outwardly directed quality that involved interaction it was linked by my interviewees to being an “active citizen”. This is what symbolic interactionists would call a “role identity” because it is based on the expectations attached to a position in a social structure perceived to be occupied by the individual (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 34). Therefore, being an active citizen was more about doing certain things in line with one’s perceived social role and the concomitant norms rather than “behaving as a ‘good’ group member”. Hence, at the individual level, it was a chain of person identities connected to a role identity, which were about acting in line with one’s self-attributed qualities and perceived role, as opposed to a group-based social identity prevalent in collective action research (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). It was about thinking, and thus caring, and thus acting upon this care.

One crucial nuance that must be reiterated is that my interviewees did not think of themselves as the only active citizens. Some of them, like Karl, spoke of the said identities using the false second person singular (“you”), suggesting that it was a category that “you”/”one” can occupy. Thus, there was a matter of implied plurality, but it was mostly category- rather than group-based, making this more of a categoric identity, based on one’s perceived “membership in a categoric unit” (Turner, 2012, p. 350). It was a category that my interviewees understood to occupy, which reified as a self-identity with certain principles and norms attached. They did acknowledge that there were other “thinking”, “caring” and “active” citizens but only in the context of an instrumental motivation, as a means to achieving particular goals. This made them what I call an **instrumental collectivity** at the group level - a collectivity conceptualised as such by its constituents only in relation to their goals. They

also acknowledged this groupness while being temporarily in the presence of other protesters during the protest events, which is in line with some of the previous scholarship (Castells, 2012; Poell & van Dijck, 2018). Otherwise, the groupness was merely implicit and did not define these identities.

Hence, while at the individual level, it was a categoric identity, at the group level, it was not so much of a collective identity rooted in an enduring sense of "one-ness" (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Melucci, 1996; Snow, 2001). It was rather a "connective" identity because it appeared to be in line with the "connective action" dynamics described by Bennett & Segerberg (2012) - it connected a wide range of unaffiliated individuals through a cultural framework that had been cultivated prior and consolidated online, as described in the Chapters 4 and 5, and came to be shared by these individuals as personal belief systems, as described in Chapter 6. At the same time, the instrumental collectivity aspect of it suggests that collective identity processes were still present, albeit only arising in specific moments, thus not only corroborating, but also elaborating on the point made by McDonald (2004), Castells (2012), Milan (2013) and Poell & van Dijck (2018) about the temporary nature of groupness in contemporary protest movements, by specifying the goal-oriented logic behind these moments of "collectivity".

My findings also echo Milan's (2015) conceptualisation of the contemporary protest movements as consisting of "individuals-in-the-group as opposed to fully-fledged groups" (p. 896). At the same time, what my findings diverge on is the nature of this shared identity in that, just like it was not a (group) social identity, it was neither a personal identity (the individual's unique identity), as proposed by Milan as well as McDonald (2002), Bennett & Segerberg (2012) and van Zomeren et al (2018). As stated earlier, it was a categoric identity, as per SIIT, shared by the protesters as individuals, as suggested above, and occasionally reifying as a collective identity at the group level (instrumental collectivity).

Furthermore, my findings contribute to the symbolic interactionist scholarship on identity verification. On the one hand, narratives such as that of Yakov, who stated that staying inactive as an active citizen would result in shame, were in line with the SIIT research that links this emotion to identity non-verification (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Carter, 2012). On the other hand, what made these narratives stand out was that it was shame "before (one)self" rather than before others that posed the problem. Like Yakov, Katya also came out to protest for her "own conscience", meaning that it was first and foremost about own personal sense of responsibility as opposed to a sense of obligation to a group, which echoed Lichterman's (1996) concept of "personalism", only with a categoric rather than personal identity at play. Katya, Yakov and others saw themselves as the ultimate verifiers of their own identity rather than seeking appraisals from others. This contrasts with the aforementioned SIIT scholarship as well as with sociology of emotions that conceptualises shame as a social emotion (Bericat, 2015) and socio-psychological research that links the identity motivation to social incentives (van Stekelenburg, 2013a; with Klandermans, 2023). The selective incentives at play were not social because they were not based on any relationships to other people and concomitant reputational concerns. The incentives here were rather moral, in that they were about a moral obligation to oneself, and psychological - avoiding the negative emotion of shame, which echoed Chong's (1991) "narrowly rational incentives".

Such a mobilising identity is thus more robust than the politicised SMO-linked group identities described by symbolic interactionists and social psychologists for two reasons. Firstly, with self as the ultimate verifier, identity verification no longer depends on others who may be either unwilling or unable (e.g., not present) to verify this identity. Secondly, while one may be able to deceive others into verifying one's identity (e.g., faking own participation by making social media posts alleging presence at the protest), it would be much harder to deceive oneself. This makes participation obligatory, thus eliminating the free-rider problem.

While it is the base and verification aspects of this identity that make it fascinating, its content is of no less importance. The “thinking” component, which is about being sceptical of the elite-aligned influentials and their signifying work, reflects the qualities of an “actualising/social movement citizen” described by Bennett (2008), in particular the low trust in traditional media and politics. The “caring” component is also similar to Stets & Carter’s (2011) “moral identity”, which is about wanting justice for and caring about others (p. 197) and is in line with recent focus of collective action research on morality and violated moral beliefs as the antecedents of protest preparedness (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; van Zomeren et al, 2018). However, as described by Karl in Chapter 5, being caring, or “not indifferent”, was about “wanting the best” not only for others but also for oneself. In this sense, the caring identity combined Stets and Carter’s moral identity with Janoski & Gran’s (2002) “opportunistic citizenship”, which was about self-interest (p. 40). In other words, my interviewees cared about their principles as well as their interests. Furthermore, being an active citizen was about acting upon perceived injustices by engaging in protest action to express one’s grievances and change circumstances for the better. It was thus about “active citizenship” (Isin & Turner, 2002; Stanford, 2023), and it was an “activist identity”, an identity that is “politicised” in a sense of being normatively tied to a political struggle, whereby an injustice must be acted upon (Horowitz, 2017; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al, 2018).

What is also important is that my interviewees perceived their thinking, caring and active qualities as something that made them more “developed” and “evolved” - more elevated than the “ignorant”, “indifferent” and “passive” others, which increased the salience of this self-identity and their self-esteem, as per SIIT scholarship on positive identity appraisal (Turner, 2012). In fact, this may also explain the cultural processes in Gezi Park, where the protesters had a very similar conceptualisation of identity boundaries, whereby they perceived themselves as “activists”, “protesters”, “critical and intelligent”, “intellectual”, “conscious”, for democratic values and for freedom and against the ruling elite as opposed to the elite-aligned, “discriminatory”, “conservative”, “self-interested”, “anti-intellectual” and “passive” others (Ulug & Acar, 2019). Considering the similarities between the Russian and Turkish regimes at the time, a qualitative interview-based study to follow up on Ulug & Acar’s (2019) survey-based research and a subsequent comparative study between the Russian and Turkish protest movements may result in further discoveries in this area.

Overall, the three identified components of the thinking-caring-active citizen identity can be conceptualised as a three-stage mechanism, whereby as a thinking person one perceives something to be true and wrong, in opposition to the distrusted elite-aligned influentials and often in alignment with the alternative influentials, as a caring person one perceives this injustice as a violation of one’s principles and/or interests, and as an active person one act upon it by coming out to the street. They appear to crystallise as the fusion of the various earlier conceptualisations mentioned above - “actualising/social movement citizen”, “moral identity”, “opportunistic citizen”, “active citizen” and “activist identity”, - and come together as the “connective” identity at the group level. This three-part positive politicised identity may thus serve as the ultimate formula for mobilising protest action among unaffiliated individuals in fragmented societies with low system trust and widespread political apathy. Similar studies can be conducted in other contexts to see how much this formula resembles the identity dynamics in other heterogenous movements of unaffiliated individuals. Moreover, it can be tested by grassroots activists and democracy NGOs around the world in their efforts to encourage active citizenship and political participation among their local population.

7.1.2. Citizenship, semi-identification and representation

While the three components of the connective identity appeared to have different functions, they were all grounded in the broader concept of citizenship as a status and a source of identity. My participants understood themselves to be acting upon their citizenship as "active citizens", "citizens with an active position", "persons with an active civic position", etc. – all with the *ɐpaжd/grazhd* stem that tied these individual self-conceptualisations to citizenship. They were acting as citizens, whose status endowed them with the concomitant identity along with the principles and interests based on their rights as citizens. This is consonant with the scholarship that either implicitly or explicitly recognises the mobilising potential of citizenship for the contemporary protest movements in both authoritarian and democratic regimes (Buscemi, 2017; Jabar, 2018; Lokot, 2020; Milioni & Papa, 2013).

The potential of citizenship as the cultural foundation for contemporary protest mobilisation can be explained by the fact that regardless of the degree of fragmentation and individualisation in a society, the general premise of citizenship is likely to be recognised by most individuals. Therefore, despite the multiple identities that may constitute one's self-concept in contemporary societies, the citizen identity tied to one's citizen status, along with some basic understanding of the concomitant rights and obligations, is highly likely to be among them. As long as the regime one finds themselves in allows for some flow of alternative and especially oppositional ideas, whether in person within one's proximate social networks or online via alternative media outlets, there is a possibility for one's citizen identity to be cultivated and "activated" – i.e., politicised, - through these alternative cultural processes.

Furthermore, even the corrupt and authoritarian power elites officially subscribe to and promote the ideas of fairness, equality and citizen rights in one way or another while the opposition figures are portrayed by the elite-aligned media as mere manipulators devoid of any principles, as in the Russian context (Lankina & Tertychnaya, 2020; Smyth & Oates, 2015). Therefore, when the power elite and the system they maintain fail to live up to their avowed ideals in practice and the rights are not distributed in a just manner, the experience of these failures is likely to translate to a perception of violated principles and/or interests based on one's perceived citizen rights, as revealed in my interviews. Provided that one has developed the active citizen identity by then, the grievances are likely to translate to protest action, as evidenced in the empirical chapters. Moreover, if one has a globalist perspective on citizenship rooted in the concepts of international law and human rights (Maas, 2017), the violation of rights of other states and citizens thereof by one's own state is also likely to be perceived as an injustice to be cared about and acted upon. My interviewees' conceptualisation of citizenship clearly extended beyond borders in 2022, but there were some peculiar nuances arising from their perceived closeness with Ukrainians and Ukraine.

First of all, the examples of half-Russian, half-Ukrainian Lydia and Irina, who were particularly affected by a "military action against the place where [their] mother[s] were born", Ukraine, which, like Russia, was "also home" and felt sadness and "pain", emphasise their individual connection to Ukraine via their Ukrainian mothers. Their narratives suggest that not only did their citizenship extend beyond borders, but they also felt a certain degree of personal identification with the injustice recipients. This is in line with Gigliotti and Odasso's life history research on daughters of migrant and mixed families in Germany and Italy (2014), which suggests that the "intimate female alliance" between daughters and mothers generates "semi-identification". However, Lidya's and Irina's narratives suggested further processes, whereby the semi-identification with their mothers led to semi-identification with their mothers' native land and its people, resulting in the emotions of sadness and "pain", suggesting a sense of victimhood and violated interests as opposed to only violated principles.

On the one hand, this is similar to the collective action models that link violated moral beliefs to anger via identification with the affected group (van Zomeren et al, 2008; 2018). On the other hand, sadness and pain instead of anger suggests a different mechanism at play. Another concept that may also be useful here is empathy, which is about "feeling into" resulting in understanding (cognitive empathy) and feeling (affective empathy) how somebody else feels (Schick, 2019, p. 265). Thus, Lidya and Irina appeared to semi-identify with the injustice recipients – the Ukrainians – and feel into them though their own Ukrainian mothers, with whom they had a close emotional bond, thus not only experiencing principle-based grievances, but also partially experiencing interest-based grievances on their behalf.

This suggests that a sense of violated principles may lead to a partial sense of violated interests if one perceives to partially identify and empathise with the injustice recipient, building on previous research that links identification with the injustice recipient to a sense of grievance (Pelletier, 2012). As mentioned above, this semi-identification makes it a slightly different mechanism to that of most collective action models where identification is a binary absent/present variable (van Zomeren et al, 2018). These findings may therefore pave the way for a more nuanced approach to identification in the context of protest participation of individuals from mixed families or dual nationality backgrounds. The semi-identification concept may potentially explain other situations where one's ties to both conflict parties result in protest participation, as in the case of the young British Iraqis, who mentioned their Iraqi identity in the context of their participation in the post-2003 anti-war protests in the UK (Ali, 2019).

At the same time, the narratives such as that of Karina, who was "especially" dismayed by the fact that the war was with the "super-close" "brotherly nation" of Ukraine, and others who emphasised the connection between themselves as Russians and Ukrainians highlighted another kind of identity process grounded in citizenship. They cited their perceived similarity with and familiarity of Ukrainians as an aggravating factor, corroborating earlier research that suggests a greater sense of grievance in the case of identification with the targets of a perceived injustice (Pelletier, 2012). However, my findings go further by linking this mechanism to action preparedness in the context of protest mobilisation, highlighting its mobilising potential. Once again, this mechanism can be examined further in other, similar situations, for instance, building on research about Muslims in the UK and their reactions to the suffering of fellow Muslims in Palestine and Iraq (Appleton, 2006) and linking it to protest participation – for instance, in the context of recent pro-Palestine demonstrations.

Finally, while the narratives about personal and group-based semi-identification suggest a particular kind of identity process that can be triggered as a result of a war between two culturally, ethnically, historically and geographically proximate states and groups, they are all grounded in the (Russian) citizen identity. Arising non-voluntarily from one's status, this ascribed citizenship-based identity appeared to tie my interviewees to the power elite of their state, in their understanding. While the internal nature of the injustices in 2017 and 2021 made these a matter of violated principles and interests, in 2022, the power elite violated its citizens' principles beyond the state borders. According to some of my interviewees, this implicitly linked them to the injustice perpetrators because their power elite purported to represent them as Russian citizens and thus violated their identity as such on the global arena. This was reflected in Marat's and Katya's narratives, who stressed that the violation was being done "in [their] name" but without their consent. As put by Gavrila, "you just feel suppressed by shame, because the state doing that is your state".

This meant that the negative connotation that their status-based Russian citizen identity appeared to acquire triggered the mechanism of cross-identity contamination, whereby all their other identities, including their own personal identity, also came under threat. This was especially felt by the likes of Gavrila, who was worried that his friend identity may be at risk of non-verification by his Ukrainian friends and thus came to experience shame, which is in line with the SIIT research on the link between identity non-verification and shame

mentioned earlier (Stets & Carter, 2011; Turner, 2012). This also corroborates research on the anti-war protests in the US and UK against the American and British power elite's violation of Iraq's sovereignty, which lists shame among the mobilising emotions alongside anger (Iyer et al, 2007). At the same time, my research takes this further by elaborating on the identity processes behind this emotion and the resultant motivation. The citizenship-based identity-related grievances made protest participation the ultimate action for taking the signification of the Russian citizen identity into one's own hands and redefining it to other audiences in positive terms, thus salvaging one's own personal and other identities in the process.

This is also a fascinating finding because it takes us outside of the existing protest motivation frameworks (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; 2023), which proved insufficient for grasping the full range of motivation and identity processes behind contemporary protest mobilisation (Klandermans et al, 2014). My data reveals a grievance based on what I call **violated identity** and concomitant **cross-identity contamination** and the resultant **representational** motivation. On the one hand, this motivation is similar to the identity motivation from the existing framework in that the incentives at play were social – being seen in a positive light by the identity appraisers. On the other hand, it differs in that these potential identity appraisers are not fellow in-group members but mostly out-group members, which is partially a result of my interviewees' globalist citizenship perspective. Hence, this is a qualitatively new type of motivation, which can be integrated into the current taxonomy of protest motivations and tested in other situations where individuals protest their power elite's transgression against other states.

7.1.3. Congruent identities

While the key identity processes appeared to be grounded in citizenship, my data suggested that there were other identities at play. Petya's protest-prone "university student" and future-oriented "young person" self-identities appeared to mirror the expressive and instrumental components of the active citizen identity. Marina's "patriot" identity reclaimed from the elite-aligned influentials was also consonant with the active citizen identity in terms of acting to change the country for the better. Similarly, Gosha's "Russian European" identity driven by the "liberal democratic values" was also grounded in active citizenship and concomitant instrumental and expressive motivation logics. The presence of these identities was in line with Jasper's (2014) idea that multiple identities can be present in the movement provided that they are congruent with each other, as well as with the movement itself, and with other research acknowledging such identity dynamics in the context of the earlier protest movement campaigns in Russia and other contemporary protest movements (Onuch & Sasse, 2016; Remmer, 2016; Toepfl, 2018). At the same time, there were also other identities, which entailed separate cultural processes.

Marina's 2017 narrative about deciding to participate because "the guys" and "everyone else [were] going" was noteworthy. On the one hand, her motivation was the only one across my data that fitted the classic, group-based identity motivation to "act as a 'good' group member" (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023), as opposed to the active citizen identity motivation, and was also in line with Klandermans' et al (2014) study that mentioned the capacity of friends to mobilise unaffiliated protesters. On the other hand, what made Marina's peer identity motivation stand out was the absence of a grievance – an important component of action mobilisation according to most collective action models (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; van Zomeren, 2018). This suggests an alternative path to protest participation, where social incentives can mobilise

individuals without any grievances, which can be explored further, particularly in the context of protests that encourage humour-driven social interaction (Denisova, 2017; Levinson, 2017).

At the same time, the most fascinating finding in terms of congruent identities was the particular group of identities that had not been previously examined in the context of collective protest; although, their presence was briefly and implicitly noted in Cretan & O'Brien's (2020) recent research on the protests in Bucharest, where one of the protesters reported to have come out as a "parent". In the context of my study, Iskander's "priest", "teacher" and "son", Mitya's "husband" and Antonina's "mother" identities were congruent with their shared active citizen identity, but they appeared to function separately from it, in a mobilising capacity, without requiring any grievance. These appeared to be role identities, but they were based on qualitatively different cultural processes. Here, it was rather the perception of their role counterparts in a high-risk situation that activated an identity norm motivation – to be next to their "parishioners", "students", "mother", "wife" or "son" to watch over them. I therefore call them **patron identities** – because what makes them distinct is the norm of looking after their significant others as their defining feature.

The mobilising nature of these patron identities can be understood through the SIIT's concepts of commitment, prominence and salience, mentioned in Chapter 2. Iskander, Mitya and Antonina were keen to perform their patron identities across various contexts, including a protest event, and considered them very important to own self-concept, signifying high salience and prominence. Therefore, their affective commitment to these patron identities – the need to be appraised in terms of them – was high. According to Stets & Serpe (2013: p. 36), commitment depends on the number of potential identity verifiers, which would certainly be high for Iskander as a priest and a teacher with a plurality of parishioners and students. Interactional commitment also depends on the number of interactions with one's identity verifiers, which would be high for all three of these individuals as their role counterparts (mother, wife and son) were their closest relatives (from their proximate social structures) with whom they interacted on a daily basis. This suggests that the patron identities that are high in commitment, salience and prominence are likely to function as mobilising identities in situations where the role counterparts intend to participate in a potentially high-risk protest action event. This is a fascinating development as it establishes a new direction for researchers of identity and collective protest. Further studies can be conducted to explore the role of patron identities in other contexts where street protests may be perceived as high-risk situations, thus, not only in authoritarian but also in the more democratic regimes such as France and the US, where police brutality is not uncommon.

7.2. Micromobilisation in contemporary societies

7.2.1. Proximate influentials

My second research question was concerned with how some actors were able to succeed in generating attention, resonance and political action among others despite extreme information profusion, low levels of trust and widespread political apathy. While the likes of Navalny were important, my data also revealed that there was another category of actors who were influential in the said cultural processes.

My flexible approach to movement leadership focused on the actors who influenced the cultural processes and potentially affected the movement trajectory regardless of whether they were considered movement leaders in a traditional sense. Therefore, parents, partners,

peers and teachers who featured in my interviewees' cultural transformation and mobilisation narratives can clearly be conceptualised as influentials in their own right. What distinguished them from the likes of Navalny was that they came from my interviewees' proximate social structures and had a narrower reach. I therefore referred to them as **proximate influentials** while the cultural agents with a wider, digitally enabled reach like Navalny can be referred to as **mass influentials**. My findings in this regard corroborate Klandermans and his colleagues' (2014) study, which suggests family and friends, as well as online media, as the most common mobilisation channels for unaffiliated protesters. At the same time, my qualitative research goes further by offering a greater detail on their roles at different stages of the cultural processes and providing a plausible explanation behind their capacity to succeed in these roles.

Family, peers and teachers were prominent across all my interview narratives. As demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5, they often functioned as agents of alternative socialisation of my interviewees in the earlier as well as later stages of their lives. This is consonant with the quantitative study by Chui and his colleagues (2022) on the positive relationship between the fathers's protest participation, as well as previous digital media exposure, and protest preparedness among the university students in Hong-Kong. This is also in line with Szczygieł's (2020) conceptualisation of "socialisation to rebellion", but I called it "alternative socialisation" because the intentionality of subsequent "rebellion" could not be identified in all cases. Nevertheless, whether cognitive or observational, this socialisation certainly contrasted with the mainstream, elite-aligned kind. Alternative socialisation agents cultivated structural grievances, system and political distrust, cognitive agency, moral beliefs and norms of active citizenship – the building blocks of the active citizen identity, which would culturally align my interviewees with the alternative mass influentials and facilitate protest action further on. As far as micromobilisation was concerned, these actors also connected my interviewees to the likes of Navalny and were crucial to action mobilisation in some cases.

Considering that attention and resonance, including trust in the communicator, are crucial for the success of signifying work, it is not surprising that the parents, partners and peers were able to influence my interviewees' interpretative frameworks. Being situated within the proximate social structures of my interviewees and the resultant physical presence and proximity allowed these signifying agents to capture attention in person without having to compete with online algorithms. In terms of resonance, as the primary socialisation agents, my interviewees' parents were in the ideal position to construct reality for their children early on because there was not yet an established framework to be used as a comparator. At the same time, as suggested by my data, it was trust that functioned as the core element of resonance and allowed the proximate influentials to shape my interviewees' cultural frameworks in the alternative, even oppositional direction, aligning them with those proffered by the alternative mass influentials.

As noted in Chapter 4, when asked to explain why they had trust in their parents and in what they said, my interviewees often answered like Sara: "Well… (laughter)… she's my mum". One's caregivers are usually the earliest people one meets in their life and are thus trusted by default. This thick interpersonal trust develops out of perceived similarity and familiarity with the potential trustor; with familiarity being subject to the amount of time spent together as well as emotional bonding and intimacy (Khodyakov, 2007, p. 121). Therefore, it is not surprising that any questions about the origin of trust in those one lives and bonds with on a regular basis appear superfluous (Luhmann in Belardinelli & Gilli, 2022, p. 93). Thus, in most of my interviews the parents were the main cultural agents during the early (particularly, pre-adulthood) years, and my interviewees' peers and life partners often appeared to play an important role in the later stages. Unlike the parents, they started off as weak ties but grew in

strength as a result of their prolonged bonding. As Mikhail put it: “If I talk to people on a regular basis, I trust them”. This is explained by research that suggests that an increase in familiarity and similarity overtime may turn weak ties into strong ties with thick interpersonal trust developing in the process (Belardinelli & Gilli, 2022, p. 95; Khodyakov, 2007, p. 122). This thick interpersonal trust thus enabled the partners and peers of my interviewees to shape certain aspects of their interpretative frameworks in the same way as parents – cultivate anti-regime sentiments, structural grievances and system distrust.

Narratives such as that of Galya, Marat and others also highlighted the role of peers, who generated interpersonal trust in the same way as partners. These interviewees’ move from the province to the large cities resulted in their integration into the alternative and even more specifically oppositional social networks, cultural alignment with the alternative influentials and subsequent protest participation. These narratives were in line with the previous research on Russia’s protest movement that connected high population density, prevalent in major cities, with collective action (Busygina & Paustyan, 2022; Sobolev, 2012). It also reflects the long-established connection between the urban areas and protest propensity (Weiner, 1967). These narratives also illustrated how the macro-level factors such as the underfunded public sector and inter-regional disparity prompted some of my interviewees to leave their relatively deprived hometowns and villages for large cities in search of better opportunities. This corroborates previous research that highlights the role of the macro-level factors and resultant internal economic migration to urban areas with protest participation (Barker, 2022). At the same time, my interviews also revealed that the peers were not the only actors in the aforementioned processes and pointed out the potential of teachers as alternative proximate influentials whose signifying work facilitated alignment with the protest movement and subsequent participation therein.

Most of the narratives pertaining to the cultural role of the teachers partially mirrored those about parents in a sense that my interviewees appeared to trust them by default. This can be explained by the fact that at the time most of my interviewees had trust in the institution of education in Russia. This was the automatic, “unproblematic, non-reflective” trust in the functioning of the institutions – system trust - that most people acquire during their early socialisation and do not question unless a crisis situation arises (Belardinelli & Gilli, 2022, pp. 99-100). This is also consonant with research that shows the prevalence of trust in the institutions of education in different countries around the world (Valgarðsson et al, 2024). Some of the narratives singled out specific teachers as signifying agents separate from the education system hinting on interpersonal trust. These teachers were thus given the initial trust as the agents of education, in which my interviewees had institutional, system trust, and with time generated interpersonal trust as a result of increasing familiarity and systematic resonance.

At the same time, Boris’s narrative about his schoolteacher engaging in pro-regime electoral fraud activities and Petya’s narrative about his grandmother rejoicing about the takeover of Crimea while being angry about the potential pension cuts as well as his parents calling the authorities “crooks” while voting for the ruling party suggest that interpersonal trust can be lost. In line with the Benford & Snow’s (2000; also, Snow et al, 2018) resonance framework, Petya’s grandmother’s framing lacked internal consistency and his parents’ declared beliefs and claims were not congruent with their actions, which challenged Petya’s previous perception of their expertise and resulted in non-resonance and end of trust, same as with Boris and his teacher. This suggests that interpersonal trust in proximate influentials can be lost if the inconsistency of their signifying work becomes too extreme, stressing the relationship between resonance and trust.

In some narratives, my interviewees moved on to the mass influentials after losing trust in the proximate influentials. In other narratives, they were introduced to the mass influentials by their trusted proximate influentials, as was the case with Gosha, whose friend introduced him to *Echo of Moscow*, and Antonina, whose son would send her videos by Navalny and

other influentials. Hence, my data suggests that proximate influentials may also act as "connective leaders" (Azer et al, 2019), or cultural intermediaries, connecting their trustors to the alternative influentials and their signifying work. The intermediary's credibility has been noted to be of great importance when developing a new connection and trust in someone one does not know (Khodyakov, 2007, p. 122). Thus, the strong ties based on thick interpersonal trust – proximate influentials such as close relatives and friends, - made them the perfect intermediaries, who could secure the minimal level of trust required for the potential trustee (e.g., Navalny) to facilitate the attention of the potential trustor. This mechanism worked even with regime-friendly Gosha, who was more likely to trust the elite-aligned influentials, and sceptical critical-thinker Ludmila, who took pride in being a "critical thinker" and was unlikely to trust any influentials at all. This suggests that one's strong ties such as highly trusted proximate influentials may function as trust intermediaries even between unlikely trustors and trustees in societies with low levels of trust in the system, politicians and the media. This lays the groundwork for future inter-disciplinary research involving sociological and political communication frameworks and examining the role of proximate influentials as cultural intermediaries, or connective leaders in the context of movement participation.

In addition to alternative socialisation and attention facilitation, proximate influentials were also crucial in action mobilisation for some of my interviewees. Some of them were more direct, as was Antonina's son who invited his mother to join him. Others mobilised their role counterparts indirectly, as in the case of Iskander, whose students, parishioners and mother did not ask him to go, but whose decisions to participate activated Iskander's patron identity norm motivation, as elaborated earlier in this chapter. Mitya was mobilised by his wife despite his absence of efficacy belief and perceived risks of incarceration. Marina's group-based social identity appeared to function in a similar way, whereby her peers indirectly mobilised her despite the absence of grievances and previous protest experience. Finally, Ludmila's former student and close friend was able to mobilise her despite her scepticism of Navalny by connecting her "person with an active civic position" identity with his "active citizen" identity and to the norm of participating in the protest movement.

All of these narratives describe slightly different mechanisms. At the same time, they all highlight the capacity of proximate influentials to mobilise action, even among the sceptical, apathetic, inexperienced and unconnected individuals, who could not be mobilised by the alternative mass influentials. These findings build on research that suggests the mobilising potential of family and friend among unaffiliated individuals (Klandermans et al, 2014) but take it further by demonstrating the underlying dynamics and processes - how thick interpersonal trust in proximate influentials may develop amidst deficit of attention and trust, make them the ultimate alternative socialisation agents and cultural intermediaries and allow them to mobilise unaffiliated individuals in the midst of widespread political apathy. This aspect of my research brings together the scholarship on collective protest and trust and extends the flexible approach to movement leadership to highlight the crucial role of proximate influentials in contemporary protest mobilisation, signalling the need for further research in this direction in other contexts.

7.2.2. Mass influentials

As noted in the previous subsection, the proximate influentials occasionally functioned as connective leaders, highly-trusted cultural intermediaries, introducing and connecting my interviewees to the alternative mass influentials. At the same time, many of my interviewees had discovered Navalny, *TV Rain* and others on their own. For middle-aged working-class Tatyana, this was a result of internal economic migration to Moscow caused by the economic strains and the mobility of portable digital devices like a smartphone and TV, as outlined in Chapter 5. For my younger participants, the Internet was the most organic medium, and *YouTube* was their "alternative television". This is in line with the media use statistics (Levada-Centr, 2023) as well as other research on the role of the Internet in protest mobilisation in Russia (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023; Litvinenko, 2021) and in other contexts (Jenzen et al, 2020; Ruijgrok 2017; Tang, 2018; Weidmann and Rød 2019). At the same time, what mattered the most was that the algorithms and the platform itself were perceived by my interviewees as politically neutral in contrast with the Russian television grid, which was perceived to be determined by the Russian power elite. This made *YouTube* the perfect platform for generating attention for the likes of Navalny, *TV Rain*, Shulman, *Current Time* and others, whose prominence was thus seen as more organic, which laid the groundwork for resonance and trust. While corroborating research on the more general role of the digital media platforms in generating attention for alternative mass influentials, my study went further by identifying the nuances of resonance and other processes behind the attention generation and subsequent consensus and action mobilisation.

When it comes to resonance, my narratives appeared to accommodate Johnston & Noakes's (2005) and Benford & Snow's (2000) frameworks but with nuances that called for the expansion thereof. While the signifying work of both alternative and elite-aligned mass influentials was considered equally relevant, the former was far more successful than the latter when it came to cultural compatibility and consistency.

Noakes & Johnston (2005) see cultural compatibility in terms of the "symbols synchronising with the society's cultural stock" (p. 15), which is similar to Benford & Snow's (2000) "cultural resonance", both mentioned in Chapter 2. At the same time, my data suggested there were two types of compatibility, which I propose to call quantitative and qualitative. **Quantitative cultural compatibility**, or **rhetoric balance**, was about the level of rhetoric, which was considered either less appropriate, when its intentionality was too obvious (strong propaganda), or more appropriate, when it was of lower intensity. This is what made the more moderate and relatively neutral alternative media outlets such as *Echo of Moscow* more efficient in resonating with the more regime-friendly or neutral individuals, facilitating their further cultural transformation. **Qualitative cultural compatibility**, or **symbolic clarity**, was more about the language used by the mass influentials. This is where the more modern and culturally savvy Navalny and other alternative mass influentials were more successful with the younger and more culturally and socially liberal audiences, who felt a sense of symbolic disconnect from the traditional elite-aligned mass influentials.

While the qualitative cultural compatibility, or symbolic clarity, was similar to the type of compatibility mentioned by Benford & Snow and Johnston & Noakes, the quantitative type, or rhetoric balance, appears to reflect the savvy nature of some contemporary audiences, capable of identifying the less elaborate propaganda and less likely to believe it. What also facilitated both types of cultural compatibility was the diversity of alternative mass influentials, whereby they varied in terms of their rhetoric, style, political perspectives, age and other factors, thus accommodating a heterogeneous pool of audiences. There was Navalny with a more populist, mass appeal, but there were also quirky expert-type Yekaterina Shulman, casual and relatively neutral *Echo of Moscow* and others, many of whom were also mentioned in Glazunova & Amadoru's (2023) recent study.

Another aspect that proved to be important to resonance was consistency. In their framework, Benford & Snow (2000) mention “empirical credibility” and “experiential commensurability”, which are about the congruence of the framing with what the recipient considered to be true and with the recipient’s lived experiences, respectively. Considering it was not always clear as to whether my interviewees’ understanding of something as true was based on their first-hand experience or not, I conceptualised both as indicators of **external consistency**. In this sense, I followed Noakes & Johnston (2005), who had also collapsed these two concepts into one, except they called it “relevance”. However, this term appears to be closer to Benford & Snow’s “salience”, which is a more general term denoting the overall relevance of what is being presented to the lives of those the frames in communication are intended for. “External consistency” is a more specific term that captures the congruence between the content (what is inside the proffered frames in communication) and the lifeworld of the recipient (perceived reality outside of the proffered frames, from the recipient’s perspective). External consistency was the most common theme that appeared in my interviewees’ narratives. This was largely a result of my interviewees’ earlier cultural alignment. As outlined in Chapter 4, their lived experiences of the system and/or interaction with the alternative proximate influentials resulted in structural grievances and system and political distrust, which facilitated congruence with the signifying work of the alternative mass influentials, making them resonant in terms of external consistency.

My interview narratives thus emphasise the importance of this type of congruence to cultural resonance and elaborate on the role of macro-level economic and political strains and subsequent perception of violated rights in protest mobilisation in both authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes (Bailey et al, 2022; Busygina & Paustyan, 2022; della Porta, 2015; Glazunova, 2020a; Greene, 2013). At the same time, there was another kind of consistency that also mattered to my interviewees. Benford & Snow (2000) and Noakes & Johnston (2005) defined “consistency” as congruence between the communicators’ proclaimed beliefs, framings and actions. However, this was different from what I call external consistency because it was more about the consistency within the alternative mass influentials’ signifying work. I therefore propose to call this **internal consistency**. Navalny’s use of evidence and other alternative mass influentials’ appeals to rationality and logic made them more resonant in this regard. This partially corroborates Glazunova’s research on Navalny’s signifying work, which also stresses his use of evidence (2020a; 2020b), and offers further insights into the success of these alternative mass influentials. Overall, while my research builds on the work of Snow, Benford, Johnston and Noakes, it suggests a more nuanced version of the resonance framework, which differentiates between quantitative – (rhetoric balance) and qualitative (symbolic clarity) cultural compatibility, external and internal consistency.

As a result of the aforementioned resonance, Navalny and other alternative mass influentials encouraged my interviewees to develop their cognitive agency and anti-regime attitudes, acquired during their earlier cultural alignment, by seeking out new information to confirm their growing oppositional knowledge. As a result of this, my interviewees began to explore other areas where the power elite and the system may have failed them and change their broader perspective. This suggests that, using Snow and his colleagues’ (1986) terminology, cultural transformation in one domain is likely to extend to others and progress into a more global transformation, pushing one further in the oppositional direction and making them more culturally aligned with the protest movement. However, my data suggested that not only did resonance lead to gradual cultural transformation, but it also led to trust.

While the elite-aligned mass influentials enjoyed the same levels of competence trust when it came to the agenda not related to politics, the systematic non-resonance of their frames related to the power elite and the system had negative implications on this type of trust. In

addition to this, they were also unable to maintain goodwill trust because my interviewees considered them to be representing the interests and principles of the distrusted power elite. At the same time, when it comes to the alternative mass influentials such as Navalny, their "coherent", "convincing" and "correct" frames and their systematic resonance resulted in competence trust, as reflected in Karl's narrative. This appeared to be a matter of process-based trust, which develops as a result of the trustee repeatedly confirming themselves to the potential trustor as trustworthy by deed (Zucker, 1986). This is in line with the findings of Wenner & Lieberherr (2022), except while in their research on movement leaders and trust in India the deeds that secured trust were material, in my Russian case study they were cultural (provision of resonant frames), suggesting an alternative path to process-based trust for alternative mass influentials. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of process-based trust to resonance and the mutually reinforcing nature of this relationship, thus prompting the addition of trust to the resonance framework, whereby it goes beyond perceived expertise-based credibility (competence trust) and also includes honesty-based credibility (goodwill trust).

Further-reaching potential of resonance and trust was demonstrated in the narrative of Tatyana, who had previously felt isolated and "suffered" due to the elite-alignment of her proximate social networks and sense of being alone. Navalny appeared to restore her ontological security, making her feel "normal", rendering her emergent active citizen identity positive and thus moving it up the identity hierarchy, as per Stryker's SIIT scholarship (Turner, 2012, p. 336). In the same vein, Navalny also emerged as the embodiment of the active citizen identity for the apolitical yet enthusiastic individuals like Marina and others who were keen to have someone new, not related to the obsolescent elite, to proffer new norms to them, represent their values and direct their aspirations for a new, fairer society. Their perception of Navalny as reflecting and signifying their cultural frameworks, embodying their values and providing them with an emotional sense of security and well-being, along with their subsequent active citizenship performance, suggested that to them he became a charismatic leader of active citizens, whose leadership was maintained through goodwill trust. Tatyana's and Marina's narratives reflected Weber's ideas about charismatic leadership based on perceived "revelation, heroism or exemplary qualities" of the leader and the followers' "devotion arising out of enthusiasm, or despair and hope", with a subsequent "reorientation" and "radical alteration of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems of the 'world'" (1968, pp. 216 & 242-5). Not only is this analysis in line with recent research on Russia's protest movement that emphasises the centrality of Navalny's figure (Glazunova & Amadoru, 2023; Lonkila et al, 2021), but it also explains the mechanisms and processes behind this development. These narratives suggest that, in combination with suffering and desperation or enthusiasm and hope, resonance may lead to goodwill trust in the mass influential and perception of their charismatic leadership, which calls for further exploration of this aspect of protest mobilisation, particularly in authoritarian contexts where the power elite has overt control over the media and significantly limits the emergence of new political actors.

Furthermore, Marina's fascinating narrative suggests that Navalny enticed her with a prospect of discovering a new cultural framework and a new self. This echoed Ehrenberg's idea mentioned by McDonald (2002) - protest participation as a "struggle for identity". Hence, Navalny's signifying work appeared to generate an **identity-building** motivation. This motivation was not simply about acting in line with one's identity, but it was rather about learning how to perform and embrace this identity, how to become an active citizen. This stresses the potential of well-crafted signifying work by a charismatic leader for enticing apolitical individuals with no protest experience - by offering the cultural incentive of learning about new cultural frameworks and the psychological incentive of building their emergent identities. This is another fascinating finding because it takes us outside of the current

motivation framework used in collective action research (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023).

At the same time, it must be reiterated that not all of my interviewees had full trust in Navalny. As already mentioned, there were some individuals who were sceptical of him and preferred the more expert-type mass influentials such as professors and analysts, which is in line with recent research that highlights the emergent role of experts in the societies with low system and political trust (Seyd et al, 2024). Others preferred moderate alternative media outlets such as *Echo of Moscow*, human rights organisations like *OVD-Info* or proximate influentials such as their family and peers as the signifying agents and sources of oppositional knowledge. Nevertheless, Navalny and his team were more significant to action mobilisation than any other alternative influentials.

In 2017 and 2021, all of my interviewees participated in the protests that had been organised by Navalny, and almost all of them were mobilised directly by his online calls-to-action. This corroborates Klandermans and his colleagues' study (2014), which cites open channels such as the online media among the most common recruitment paths for unaffiliated protesters, but proffers a lot of nuances in this regard. Navalny was crucial in setting the agenda by introducing Medvedev's and Putin's alleged corruption schemes in 2017 and 2021, respectively, as well as Putin's alleged plot to have Navalny assassinated in 2021. In other words, not only was he able to frame certain situations, but he was also able to introduce those situations to their audiences and convince them of their authenticity. This appeared to have been facilitated by the resonance and trust mechanisms analysed earlier. At the same time, alternative mass influentials were not as crucial in this regard when it came to Navalny's incarceration in 2021 and Putin's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty in 2022 because these situations were widely recognised as facts.

The same can be said of framing. While the framing in Navalny's "Don't call him Dimon" and "Putin's Palace" was most likely adopted by potential protesters in the process of watching these videos, my interviewees' narratives suggested that when it came to the previously known situations such as Navalny's incarceration and Ukraine, any signifying work most likely confirmed the framings my interviewees had developed prior, upon learning about these situations. As noted in Chapter 2, within the action frame (Snow et al, 2018), the movement leaders must articulate a diagnostic frame (stating the problem and assigning the blame), a prognostic frame (suggesting a course of action) and a motivational frame (offering the reasons for taking a particular course of action). However, with the exception of the grievances about Medvedev's and Putin's alleged corruption schemes presented in Navalny's 2017 and 2021 *YouTube* films, most of my interviewees appeared to generate those action frames independently, with the likes of Navalny merely confirming and amplifying them.

Movement leaders' action frames did matter, but their function was more nuanced, as suggested by the narratives in Chapter 5. Navalny and his team were often successful in either generating or amplifying grievances and anger, in line with much of the recent collective action research (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023; van Zomeren et al, 2018). At the same time, my research suggested Navalny's most important function was not necessarily generating action frames but rather providing the outlet for action by specifying the time and place of the protest event, cultivating a sense of efficacy and hope and mitigating perceived risks.

Finally, the motivation narratives from 2022 suggested that, with Navalny incarcerated and his SMOs banned, the first protest in February 2022 was spontaneous, and most of my interviewees came out to the main squares of their cities without any prior organisation or

coordination. In political communication scholarship, agenda-setting and framing are often mentioned alongside priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This concept has also been applied in social movement studies, whereby priming is about one's reaction to something based on (often, systematic) "exposure to an earlier, similar stimulus or experience" (Snow and Moss, 2014, p. 1134). Therefore, the cultural processes described in Chapters 4 and 5, and particularly successful mobilisation by the likes of Navalny, cultivated not only the positive politicised mobilising citizen identity with the concomitant norm of protest action but also connected and culturally tied this norm to a particular venue. This demonstrates how protracted priming by alternative mass influentials can turn organisation-enabled networks into self-mobilising networks, thus suggesting the role of priming as a potential precursor to Bennett & Segerberg's (2012) ultimate connective action model of contemporary protest movements.

7.3. Failure of authoritarian demobilisation

7.3.1. Risks, soft authoritarianism & oppositional knowledge

My third and final research objective was to understand why the higher risks of repression and lower chances of success fail to stop protest mobilisation in authoritarian regimes. In the context of my case study, my data revealed the crucial role played by the politicised active citizen identity, as well as a similar role played by congruent patron identities, as analysed in the first section of this chapter. The salience and prominence of these identities as well as my interviewees' commitment to them was so high that the moral and psychological incentives performance thereof offered outweighed the potential risks. At the same time, non-performance thereof boded shame and threatened one's self-concept. As already noted earlier in this chapter, this is consonant with recent research that highlights the role of morality and politicised activist identity in collective action (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; van Zomeren et al, 2018), as well as with the symbolic interactionist scholarship on moral identity, verification and shame (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Carter, 2011; 2012). Nevertheless, despite identifying as caring active citizens, as well as sons, mothers, husbands and teachers, my interviewees often had a very good understanding of the opportunities and risks involved, as well as resources available to them, suggesting an interplay between the cultural and material dimensions of protest mobilisation.

The soft nature of Russia's authoritarianism at the time meant that the likelihood of being assaulted by the police was very low, and the costs were unlikely to exceed a fifteen-day administrative arrest (with no criminal record), community service or an affordable fine. This is where the opportunities and risks of Russia's soft authoritarian regime were in harmony with the resources my interviewees understood to have at their disposal. Most of them were young adults with good health, which, as suggested by Gavrila, made them unafraid of police, short-term detention and community service. This is consistent with and partially explains research that highlights the dominance of young adults in contemporary protest movements, in Russia and around the world (Buscemi, 2017; Fomin & Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Hussain & Howard, 2013; Jabar, 2018; Tang, 2018). This finding also suggests health and resilience as the moderators between youth and protest participation, which may be applicable more generally seeing as the risk of police brutality, incarceration and fiscal punishment in the context of street protests exists not only in authoritarian, but also in the more democratic regimes such as France, the UK and the US.

Many of my interviewees were also well-paid professionals employed in the private sector. On the one hand, this is consistent with other research that highlights the predominance of affluent professionals in Russia's protest movement (Hagemann & Kufenko, 2016; Levinson, 2017) and the positive relationship between affluence and protest preparedness across different states, regardless of the regime (Dalton et al, 2010). On the other hand, it contrasts with recent research on protest mobilisation in China that suggests a negative relationship between economic resources and protest participation in authoritarian regimes, whereby the wealthier individuals with higher income and savings have more to lose (Ong & Han, 2019, p. 227). This was the crucial difference between my interviewees and their Chinese counterparts – the former did not perceive such risks. They were confident that they could pay the fines, which were relatively low at the time, and did not fear losing their jobs. This can be explained by the narrower opportunities offered by China, where the participation in anti-regime protests boded proportionately higher fines and longer prison sentences, and the state authorities had a greater reach than their Russian counterparts, which often extended deeper into the private sector (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Thus, the Russian authorities were more limited in their ability to cause material damage to affluent protesters working in the private sector. This suggests that in soft authoritarian as well as democratic regimes, where the private sector is relatively free from state interference and punitive measures for protest participation are relatively low, greater economic resources and private sector employment are likely to mitigate potential risks.

While the above opportunities and resources were important to mitigating risks, what was of greatest importance was my interviewees' knowledge of them. As suggested by Jasper (2017) and Noakes & Johnston (2005), as well as Kraus (2015) and Charmaz (2006), the material dimension is important as its sets the living conditions, but so is the cultural dimension. The above opportunities and resources would not have mattered had my interviewees not perceived them as such. The cultivation of this knowledge was enabled by Russia's soft authoritarian regime, which had mostly tolerated the emergence of the counter-public sphere on the Internet, particularly the non-Russian media platforms such as *YouTube*. Furthermore, as mentioned by Tufekci (2018), *YouTube* algorithms tend to recommend the material that is more radical than that already watched. Hence, anyone watching any moderately oppositional videos would soon find themselves directed to the content of protest movement leaders such as Navalny, as reflected in the narratives in Chapter 5. In the same vein, the Russian state had rarely intervened in the private sphere, proximate social structures such as family and educational institutions, where the proximate influentials could engage in alternative socialisation. The alternative influentials were thus able to diffuse and cultivate the oppositional knowledge, which included not only diagnostic frames but also the information about the extent of opportunities, resources and risks (e.g., *OVD-Info*'s legal aid and advice). At the same time, the relatively low (albeit growing) level of repression between March 2017 and February 2022, as well as relatively low potential costs and availability of well-paid private sector jobs facilitated the material base for this oppositional knowledge.

My research suggests that a soft authoritarian regime with a counter-public sphere enabled by a platform controlled from a foreign state (out of political reach of one's home state) facilitates cultivation of the oppositional knowledge, much like in a democratic state, which builds on the previous research of the role of digital media platforms in authoritarian states (Busygina & Paustyan, 2022; Ruijgrok, 2017; Weidmann & Rød, 2019). The detail that comes from my study is that the alternative mass influentials hosted by such technology make the potential protesters aware of the opportunities, costs and resources available to them, stressing the soft aspect of their authoritarian regime, thus mitigating their perceived risks. This highlights another similarity between soft authoritarian and democratic regimes, which stresses the need to pay greater attention to the nuances of particular authoritarian (as well as democratic) regimes and for a more detailed and nuanced scale of regime classification.

7.3.2. Low efficacy & mobilisation

Oppositional knowledge diffused by the alternative mass influentials through their signifying work was important for mitigating risks, but it was just as important for cultivating a sense of group efficacy. As evident from the narratives in Chapter 5, some of my interviewees became convinced of the group efficacy in respect of their prospective protest action after watching certain videos by the likes of Navalny, Shulman and others, which corroborates recent research on the positive relationship between the digitally enabled oppositional knowledge diffusion and efficacy belief (Hsiao, 2018). Furthermore, this efficacy belief was also facilitated by the soft authoritarian regime, which occasionally released regime critics following protest campaigns (as with *Meduza* journalist Ivan Golunov in 2019) and imprisoned corrupt officials (as with Minister for Economic Development Alexei Ulyukayev in 2017). This is in line with recent research that suggests "vicarious experiences" based on the knowledge of previous collective action successes as one of the predictors of the efficacy belief (Salanova et al, 2022).

My narratives suggested that the group efficacy belief was sometimes amplified by a personal efficacy belief. This was illustrated by Io's and Galya's conceptualisation of their protest participation as a "tiny little grain" and a "small brick", respectively, towards a big cause, which also echoed the "small person in a big country" self-identification from O'Brien and Cretan's (2020) study of the protests in Bucharest, whereby one's efficacy was not extinguished by the perceived minor size of one's contribution. In fact, it appeared to be facilitated by my interviewees' active citizen identity and knowledge of the free-rider problem. This was most evident in Alex's reasoning that "if there is a certain critical mass of people, yeah, they will be able to make change happen somehow", which, combined with his active citizen identity and knowledge that many will want to "just sit this one out", endowed him with a greater sense of responsibility. This suggests a positive relationship between the active citizen identity identified in this research and personal efficacy belief, which may be explored further in other studies where such an identity may be identified.

At the same time, my data also revealed that the levels of efficacy were fluctuating among my interviewees, and they appeared to have decreased for some between 2017 and 2022 as a result of narrowing opportunities and negligent results. This was amplified by the increasing levels of elite-aligned media propaganda that created a cultural atmosphere of widespread support for the power elite and the regime. However, this did not result in demobilisation for my interviewees, but rather their active citizen identity and various levels of efficacy belief resulted in different types of motivations in addition to their active citizen identity norm motivation.

Those whose group efficacy belief was slightly impaired due the perception of relatively insufficient numbers resulted in a **strategic instrumental** motivation, whereby protest participation was necessary for achieving visibility and growing numbers as to subsequently achieve the more tangible, long-term goals, as reflected in Petya's narrative. In fact, quite a few strategic instrumental narratives about 2017 and 2021 protests mirrored his multi-goal vision. This may also explain the absence of protest fatigue in most of my interviewees' pre-2022 accounts. Coming out for the automatically attainable (albeit less tangible) goal of visibility and perception of recruitment made every protest action a success. This along with having even greater goals that were to be achieved in the distant future mitigated any disappointment from not achieving the more specific immediate goals such as having Medvedev investigated or Navalny freed, which were also mentioned by some of my interviewees. This was also consonant with Buyantuyeva's (2020) research on Russia's

LGBT movement, which also highlighted visibility as part of a long-term instrumental strategy.

There were also the likes of Valera, whose group efficacy belief was absent due to an extremely low numbers belief, which resulted in what I call a **proto-instrumental** motivation, whereby they went to the protest to see that there were active citizens outside of their proximate social structures – sufficient numbers, human resources, for future success - as to then restore their own group efficacy belief and "get rid of this feelings of hopelessness", to be able to develop an instrumental motivation once again.

Then, there were those who had even lower efficacy, resulting in an expressive motivation, (which also appeared as a result of one's active citizen norm identity alongside an instrumental motivation regardless of the efficacy belief). Those who also felt a sense of empathy with the injustice recipients, as was with Lidya vis-à-vis Navalny, or apathy towards the injustice perpetrators, as with Katya vis-à-vis the authorities, developed a motivation to make their counterpart experience positive or negative emotions, thus attaining the incentives of moral and psychological satisfaction whilst not expecting any tangible change, which I call a **semi-instrumental** motivation.

Finally, there were also those whose embeddedness in the proximate social networks dominated by the elite-aligned individuals led to them developing a sense of ontological insecurity, whereby they felt like their alternative, oppositional interpretative framework may be invalid. This was illustrated by Klava's narrative, whereby her perception of "everyone supporting the violation" made her doubt her "normality", her capability of interpreting reality. Their participation was thus about seeing like-minded others, fellow thinking-caring-active citizens, to restore the belief in own interpretative capacity and the validity of own cultural framework, thus attaining the psychological incentives, which is why I call this an **ontological security** motivation as it corresponds to Giddens' (1991) framework mentioned in Chapter 2. These last three motivation types also reflect Chong's (1991) ideas about the "narrowly rational incentives", which are more about the internal cognitive and affective processes than any tangible change.

The above findings mostly demonstrate that the absence of a strong efficacy belief, typically arising from narrow opportunity structures, may be mitigated by a mobilising politicised (active citizen) identity, resulting in a variety of motivations rather than demobilisation. They also show a variance in efficacy beliefs, which stresses the need to pay attention to the nuances thereof. This means that the efficacy belief should be conceptualised in terms of a gradual scale rather than as a binary present/absent variable, which is the current standard in collective action research (Agostini & van Zomeren; Hsiao, 2018; van Zomeren et al, 2018).

Finally, not only does this research offer a better understanding of protest mobilisation amidst low levels of perceived efficacy, but it also allows one to address the missing knowledge in regard to the motivations outside of the existing framework, the gap that was identified by Klandermans and his colleagues' (2014) study. My research allowed me to identify several new types of protest action motivations along with the concomitant incentives, which can be added to the current taxonomy and tested in other contexts. The updated action motivation taxonomy is likely to be applicable in other strong authoritarian regimes, where the narrower opportunities are likely to lead to a lower sense of efficacy. At the same time, it may prove useful in research on strong democratic regimes where the power elites do not appease many protest campaigns and maintain their ideological control through the media (on TV and online), keeping the most critical voices on the margin. The strong control that these power elites exercise is likely to result in a variance in efficacy

beliefs among protest participants, whose motivations are thus likely to be accommodated by my proffered taxonomy.

8. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to show how a wide range of unaffiliated individuals can come together in a collective protest, how some actors are able to succeed in generating attention, resonance and political action amidst information profusion, low levels of trust and political apathy, and why the low chances of success and higher risks of repression may fail to stop protest mobilisation in authoritarian regimes.

This study, based on 35 interviews with participants in recent protests in Russia and accompanying contextual research, has allowed me to explore the underrepresented perspective of unaffiliated protesters comprising the majority in many contemporary protest movements and answer the above research questions.

8.1. Identity & mobilisation of unaffiliated individuals

Based on my data analysis, I identified the thinking-caring-active citizen identity as the potential formula that explains the processes behind the mobilisation of unaffiliated individuals. At the individual level, it is a chain of person (thinking and caring) identities that lead to and form part of a role (active citizen) identity. In other words, one who perceives oneself as a thinking person, thinking critically and independently of the frames proffered by the elite-aligned signifying agents, generally in opposition to them, must identify injustices when they take place, which, as a caring person, one must then internalise as own grievances, and as an active citizen, one must act upon, by means of protest action. At the group level, it is a connective identity based on a category that active citizens share, yet it only briefly reifies as an instrumental collectivity, whereby groupness is merely a means to attaining shared goals, perceived only in the run-up and during the protest. Otherwise, it remains a categoric identity at the individual level, tied to one's belief system as a thinking-caring-active citizen. The non-group-based nature of this identity is what makes it robust as the ultimate politicised identity in the context of protest mobilisation. It does not depend on any other occupiers of this category as the appraisers thereof, which leaves the individual as one's own appraiser, whom one can neither lose nor avoid. With non-verification arising from non-performance carrying a risk of shame, a carrier of this identity has no other option but to act upon the injustices they identify. Moreover, its positive positionality (in relation to the ignorant-indifferent-passive others) and the resultant positive effect on one's self-esteem is what maintains its salience.

These findings are important for three reasons. First of all, they proffer a detailed explanation of the identity processes that sustained protest mobilisation in Russia until 2022. Secondly, they suggest how unaffiliated protesters may be mobilised in other contexts. Thirdly, they prompt us to reconsider the (Social Identity Theory-based) frameworks currently employed in traditional collective action research (van Zomeren et al, 2018), which have proved insufficient in explaining the identity dynamics behind the mobilisation of unaffiliated protesters (Klandermans et al, 2014). My research identifies those dynamics and demonstrates the utility of the Symbolic Interactionist Identity Theory's framework (Stets & Serpe, 2013) in this regard.

My research also highlights an important role played by citizenship in contemporary protest mobilisation in Russia, which is likely to be relevant in other contexts as well. Citizenship has a great potential as the foundation for the mobilising identity content. In other words, regardless of how many identities one may have in the context of a contemporary fragmented society, a citizen identity derived from one's citizen status is highly likely to be one of them, and regardless of the nature of the political regime, the concept of citizenship

along with the concomitant rights and obligations are likely to be present in the normative foundation of any society in some shape or form. The rights one perceives to be derived from their citizenship status then form the basis for one's interests and principles, the violation of which is likely to be recognised to some extent. Furthermore, if one embraces a globalist perspective on citizenship, whereby the rights are perceived to extend beyond the borders of one's state, to other states and citizens thereof, in the context of a global community, it is likely to have further implications.

This research highlights that it is not only the mobilising active citizen identity but also the ascribed state identity that may matter to action mobilisation. If one perceives one's own state to transgress the rules of the global community by violating the rights of another state and citizens therein, it is likely to be perceived not only as a violation of one's principles, but also as a violation of one's own citizen identity. The general idea is that by violating the rights of another state and its citizens, one's power elite attempts to redefine the identity of their own state's citizens in negative terms. The ascribed aspect of the citizen identity means that it is likely to define its individual carriers to the citizens of other states. Therefore, if the latter perceive the former in terms of the negative version of this citizen identity (created by the state's power elite's normative transgression), this may result in cross-identity contamination, whereby all the identities of the transgressing state's citizen become tainted by the negative version of their state-linked citizen identity. Thus, the identities such as a friend of the injustice recipients, as well as the personal identity that one carries everywhere they go, come to be at risk of non-verification and subsequent shame. This triggers a representational motivation, which makes protest action the ultimate way to salvage one's identities from being negatively appraised by others – by reappropriating the signification of one's ascribed citizen identity from the transgressing power-elite and redefining it to the audiences in the global community in positive terms.

This motivation, which was identified in my research, allows me to make a contribution to the current framework of protest action motivations (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023), which has previously been proved insufficient for identifying all motivations of unaffiliated participants (Klandermans et al, 2014). Furthermore, it allows me to explain the cultural processes behind the Russian protests against the war in Ukraine in 2022, and it may also explain other similar situations such as the UK and US protests against the war in Iraq (Iyer et al, 2007).

In addition to this, as shown by my research on the anti-war protests in 2022, my interviewees were dismayed that Putin violated a country that was "super-close", "people who speak a language we understand" and "our neighbours". This highlights very particular identity dynamics in the context of the 2022 protests, suggesting that a certain degree of cultural, ethnic, geographic and historical proximity between the two conflicting states is likely to trigger more complex identity-related processes. In other words, these narratives suggest that one's perception of cultural closeness and sense of group semi-identification with the citizens of the violated state may amplify their mobilising grievances. As indicated by my research, this has been the case for Russians vis-à-vis Ukrainians in 2022, but this mechanism may be found in other contexts. For instance, its presence can be explored in relation to non-Iraqi or non-Palestinian Muslims in the UK and US and their perception of fellow Muslims in Iraq or Palestine, building on some of the earlier research (Appleton, 2006). At the same time, Irina's and Lidya's narratives showed another variation in this regard, suggesting that if a citizen of the transgressing state has one parent (e.g., mother) who is from the violated state, the citizen's semi-identification with the violated state through this parent may result in empathy with the citizens of the violated state and a partial sense of victimhood, whereby one's violated principles partially turn into violated interests. This may be applicable in other similar situations, for instance, to explain the experience of young British Iraqis following the US and UK power elites' invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Ali, 2019).

Furthermore, there are a number of other congruent identities that may play a role in the cultural processes behind contemporary protest mobilisation. Some of them may be merely person and role identities that coincide with the various aspects of the mobilising (active citizen) identity. There may also be salient peer identities, which may mobilise unaffiliated individuals without an underlying grievance. At the same time, my research has identified a very distinct group of identities, which had been implicitly noted but never articulated and examined in research on protest mobilisation. Patron identities - such as those of a mother, a son, a priest, a teacher or a husband, - are role identities defined by a norm of looking after their role counterparts, especially in high-risk situations. When the carrier of such an identity has frequent interaction with their identity counterparts and/or a high number thereof, they are likely to be highly committed to this identity. This high affective commitment, along with a high likelihood of them invoking this identity in various situations (salience) and high importance of it to their self-concept (prominence), create an obligation to be next to their role counterparts when the latter are in a high-risk situation such as street protest. Hence, while not necessarily politicised, a patron identity may also function as a mobilising identity for unaffiliated individuals. As noted in the previous chapter, this may be applicable beyond Russia and authoritarian regimes because street protests are also likely to be considered high-risk situations in the more democratic contexts such as France, the UK and the US, where there are also risks of detention, fines and police brutality.

8.2. Micromobilisation amidst deficit of attention, trust and political will

While looking for the answers to my second research question, concerned with the capacity of certain actors to generate attention, resonance and protest action among others in contemporary societies, I found that family, peers and teachers may influence these processes in a number of ways, some which had not been previously articulated or examined through the extensive lens of qualitative research. Situated physically within the proximate social structures of their role counterparts, they are ideally placed to secure the attention without having to compete with online algorithms. When it comes to parents, they are likely to be the first to secure the trust of their children as a result of the similarity and familiarity derived from early interaction and the resultant thick interpersonal trust. Partners, peers and teachers are likely to generate this type of trust later in their counterparts' lives, with the teachers also initially aided by the system trust derived from their association with the trusted institution of education. This thick interpersonal trust endows them with the power to function as the agents of alternative socialisation – cultivating anti-regime sentiments, political and system distrust, as well as cognitive identity, consciousness, or morality, citizenship norms and other aspects of the future mobilising active citizen identity. These trusted alternative proximate influentials may also act as cultural intermediaries, or "connective leaders", connecting their counterparts to the alternative mass influentials such as movement leaders. Moreover, alternative proximate influentials may also aid the movement leaders' micromobilisation efforts by motivating their role counterparts to participate in the protest, either directly or indirectly, by activating their counterparts' patron identities.

This part of my research is important for two reasons. First of all, while it builds on the previous research that highlights the role of family and friends in mobilising unaffiliated individuals (Klandermans et al, 2014), it uses the scholarship on trust to explain the enabling mechanisms of this phenomenon and, more importantly, elaborates on the different roles these proximate influentials may play such as agents of alternative socialisation, cultural intermediaries (or connective leaders) and mobilising agents. This opens a potential

direction for research on the role of such proximate influentials in protest mobilisation across other contexts. Secondly, my research demonstrates the benefits of the flexible approach to leadership that focuses on "participants in an action or process, who potentially affect the trajectories of movements" (Rohlinger, 2019, p. 725) rather than movement leaders in a classic sense. This is likely to generate more fascinating results on the role of other types of actors in protest mobilisation across different contexts.

At the same time, my research suggested that the mass influentials such as movement leaders play the central role of in the processes such as cultural alignment and action mobilisation. Despite the profusion of multifarious online content, as stated earlier, their content can be shared with the potential movement participants by the alternative proximate influentials. The attention may also be secured by a popular social media platform such as *YouTube*, especially if it is headquartered in another state where the power elite of one's home state is unlikely to have any significant influence on the platform's output and provided that the said platform's algorithms are perceived as neutral by the potential movement participants. Under such circumstances, it may become the counter-public sphere where oppositional knowledge, including anti-regime frames, can be diffused. This highlights the extant perception of US-based platforms such as *YouTube* as neutral, at least among Russia's protest movement participants, and the resultant credibility that facilitates the counter-public spheres and alternative mass influentials it hosts.

Furthermore, my research suggests that while the relevance of the alternative signifying work is important, its cultural compatibility with the potential participant's interpretative framework matters too. The proffered frames in communication must maintain the rhetoric balance (quantitative compatibility) - by avoiding high-intensity propaganda, - and symbolic clarity (qualitative compatibility) – by employing the language, images and ideas that one is familiar with. There must also be a high degree of external and internal consistency, whereby the proffered frames are congruent with one's understanding of the reality and logically linked with one another, supported by evidence. Furthermore, a wide range of alternative mass influentials catering to different social groups is likely to optimise the scope of the audiences forming the counter-public. Thus, as noted in the previous chapter, my research builds on and adds nuance to the earlier resonance frameworks proffered by Benford & Snow (2000) and Johnston & Noakes (2005).

The resultant resonance may lead to domain-specific and then global cultural transformation, whereby the potential participant would change their understanding of one aspect of their lifeworld and would proceed to explore other aspects thereof that could be subject to change, gradually becoming more culturally aligned with the protest movement as a result. The cultural resonance is also likely to lead to process-based trust. This can be competence trust, based on the more rational, cognitive evaluations of systematic resonance. At the same time, as illustrated by Marina, who was enthusiastic about the new oppositional knowledge offered by Navalny, and Tatyana, who "suffered" from her cultural isolation, resonance, combined with certain levels of enthusiasm and curiosity, or desperation and suffering, may also result in a perception of the alternative mass influentials as charismatic leaders. In this case, trust therein may be further consolidated through its ethical-valuative and affective dimensions, whereby the charismatic leaders are seen as the signifiers of the emergent movement identity and empowering their followers, increasing their self-esteem, and generating goodwill trust. This may also result in an identity-building motivation, whereby the leaders' charisma and their signifying work would arouse curiosity in some of their followers, and thus protest participation would offer the cultural incentives such as building one's emergent cultural framework and the concomitant movement identity.

This part of my research is important for two reasons. First of all, it complements Benford & Snow's (2000) resonance framework by highlighting the importance of goodwill trust in addition to competence trust, or credibility, as well as stresses the mutually reinforcing relationship between the resonance of frames and trust in the frame articulator. Secondly, it

connects the scholarship on trust and charismatic leadership in the context of protest mobilisation, which may be explored further in the Russian context and other contexts, in particular authoritarian states where the power elite exercises a relatively high degree of ideological control and limits the emergence of new, oppositional political actors.

My research also suggests that, in the context of Russia's protest movement, the leaders' action frames were more instrumental in linking the already formed action frames in thought of the potential protesters to a material outlet (time and place), which was their main function, along with combining their resonance with previous instances of successful mobilisation to amplify the potential participants' sense of efficacy and mitigate their perceived risks. In the long term, this consistent priming and the movement participants' habitual protest participation created self-mobilising networks of unaffiliated participants who no longer required movement leaders to specify the time and place for their protest as these will became habituated overtime. These findings point build on the scholarship on action frames and action mobilisation (Klandermans, 2014; Snow et al, 2018) and provide a more nuanced outline of how these frames may function, which could be explored further in other contexts. Moreover, the long-term effect of these frames suggests the role of priming as the precursor to the ultimate connection action articulated by Bennett & Segerberg (2012).

8.3. Countering demobilisation in authoritarian settings

My third research question was concerned with why the higher risks of repression and lower chances of success fail to stop protest mobilisation in some authoritarian regimes. Based on my research, I posit that a high-commitment mobilising identity - such as the active citizen identity or a patron identity outlined earlier, - and the concomitant moral and psychological incentives may play an important role in mitigating potential risks, making protest action appear less costly in comparison with shame that non-performance of such an identity may result in. At the same time, the opportunities and resources also matter in this regard. As my findings suggest, in a soft authoritarian regime, with a private sector that is relatively free from state interference and relatively low fines for protest participation, a high-salary job in the private sector is likely to neutralise the risks of losing a job and economic resources. Furthermore, perceived health is likely to function as a moderating variable between one's age and protest preparedness, whereby the younger participants feel more confident in their health and are thus prepared for short-term detention. This part of my research is important because it addresses the ambiguity regarding the relationship between repression, resources and protest participation mentioned in Chapter 2 (Ong & Han, 2019), and suggests how certain nuances of an authoritarian regime may impede the demobilising effect of repression.

Furthermore, even in most authoritarian regimes, there is likely to be some flow of alternative frames, which may include oppositional knowledge, even anti-regime frames, which may be proffered and cultivated by alternative proximate influentials (e.g. family members), as well as alternative mass agents online, depending on the level of Internet regulation in the given state. This is likely to facilitate alternative socialisation and create a foundation for future protest action. Oppositional knowledge and action frames are also important when it comes to amplifying the efficacy beliefs. As my findings suggest, trust in the experts' competence and the movement leaders' previous successful mobilisation, along with some previous instances of the government's appeasement of protesters' demands, are likely to have a positive effect on a sense of group efficacy. At the same time, a high-commitment politicised mobilising identity and the knowledge of the free-rider problem is likely to increase one's

sense of personal efficacy. Furthermore, in the context of a soft authoritarian regime, the high-commitment politicised mobilising identity is likely to function as the key deterrent from demobilisation. Hence, lower efficacy beliefs and the various degrees thereof are likely to result in a variety of motivations rather than demobilisation. These may include strategic instrumental (to create a foundation for future success), proto-instrumental (to restore one's belief in sufficient numbers, human resources required for subsequent success), semi-instrumental (to restore justice in a non-tangible way by making the injustice recipient or perpetrator experience a positive or negative emotion), expressive (to express one's views and feelings) or ontological security (to see like-minded others to restore one's faith in one's interpretative capacity).

This part of my research is important for three reasons. First of all, it proffers a number of plausible explanations in regard to protest mobilisation in Russia. Secondly, it reiterates the role of the active citizen identity identified in this research and shows how it interacts with various degrees of efficacy belief, suggesting the need for a more gradual and nuanced measure of efficacy in collective action research, which currently conceptualises it as a binary present/absent variable. Thirdly, it introduces a number of new motivations, which can be added to the current framework of protest action motivations (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023) and tested across different contexts. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a sense of low efficacy may be typical in authoritarian regimes due to their narrower opportunity structures. At the same time, low efficacy beliefs may also be present in strong democratic regimes where the power elite does not appease most protest campaigns, and efficacy may also vary across individuals, as shown in my research.

8.4. Reflections, contribution and recommendation

The qualitative interview-based approach that I employed in this research allowed me to identify the complex cultural processes and explore the meaning-making behind contemporary protest mobilisation. Using semi-structured interviewing as my primary data collection method has been crucial in this regard in that it allowed my interviewees to use their own words to describe at length their experiences and interpretations, which a more controlled data collection method would not have accommodated. As a result, not only did my data corroborate the existing scholarship, but it also complemented and challenged some of it, by proffering new terms and concepts, mechanisms and processes.

As with any research, there are a number of potential issues that may have affected the quality of my data. My interviewees' recollections may not have been entirely accurate due to the imperfection of human memory. They may have also intentionally moderated their narratives, for instance, to appear more agreeable. My own interpretative framework is also likely to have influenced my efforts in regard to co-creation and interpretation of the data. More generally, as noted in Chapter 3, the limitations of human cognitive and perceptual capabilities mean that one can only produce one's own interpretation of reality rather than an accurate reflection thereof. At the same time, the case study methodology inspired by life story research allowed me to situate the interview narratives within the context, the actuality shared by the interviewees, the author and the reader. My data was further strengthened by data type, source and method triangulation. I also took a number of measures to ensure the maximal neutrality of research questions and supporting documentation (e.g., PIS), the optimal power balance during the interview and minimally intrusive and maximally

accommodating interview conditions, as outlined in Chapter 3. These efforts were in part enabled by my native proficiency in Russian, which optimised my primary and secondary data collection as well as the analysis phase of my research.

This thesis builds on a vast body of previous scholarship and fuses various sociological traditions, symbolic interactionism in particular, with social psychology while occasionally reaching into political communication, thus contributing to the interdisciplinary project championed by a number of social movement scholars mentioned earlier. The main contribution of this study is that it shifts away from the traditional scholarship's focus on SMO-brokered collective action to the currently underrepresented and vastly underexplored perspective of unaffiliated protesters and identifies the complex cultural processes behind contemporary protest mobilisation.

Deriving its strength from the qualitative data-driven approach, my research addresses the debate on the identity dynamics in contemporary protest movements, partially corroborating, partially complementing and partially challenging the existing theorisations thereof. My research demonstrates what identities can mobilise unaffiliated individuals, where they come from, how they develop and how they enable and sustain protest participation. Furthermore, as a result of my flexible conceptualisation of leadership, my research articulates the role of patron identities and proximate influentials such as family, peers and teachers in contemporary protest movements – from alternative socialisation to action mobilisation. In addition to this, my research proffers a more nuanced framework on cultural resonance and a significantly updated version of the protest action motivation framework. This thesis adds new knowledge in relation to Russia's protest movement by engaging with some of the most recent manifestations thereof and draws attention to the nuances of authoritarian regimes that enable protest mobilisation amidst narrow political opportunities. Overall, this thesis makes a substantial contribution to social movement studies and more specifically to Sociology as well as to Russian Studies and Democracy Studies by showing how unaffiliated individuals may be mobilised to participate in protest action amidst information profusion, trust deficit and widespread political apathy, and how protest mobilisation is possible even in authoritarian regimes like Russia.

All in all, this thesis provides the groundwork for studying unaffiliated protesters and establishes several potential directions for future research. The findings and propositions in regard to the mobilising politicised identity formula for the mobilisation of unaffiliated participants may be tested by social movement scholars across a variety of contexts. It may also be taken onboard by the practitioners from the NGOs tasked with cultivating democratic participation as well as by various alternative influentials, grassroots activists and movement leaders. The findings in regard to the patron identities and alternative proximate influentials open a possibility for a new strand of research across a variety of contexts and situations. This, in addition to my findings on the alternative mass influentials and my nuanced resonance framework, can also be built on in future research, including inter-disciplinary studies by sociologists and political communication scholars. The updated version of the protest action motivation framework can be tested by symbolic interactionists and social psychologists studying different contemporary protest movements around the world. Finally, my findings in regard to the protest-enabling features of authoritarian regimes and the Russian regime in particular may result in the development of a more comprehensive regime classification model and more nuanced approaches to various regimes as well as provide a greater understanding of the Russian context, crucial for any future research of this increasingly inaccessible and unpredictable state.

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Appendix: Table of interviewees

Name	Sex	Year of birth	Place of birth (City, Federal District, or country if abroad)	Education	Occupation	Protest location
Karl	M	1997	Southern FD	Master's	Media editor	Moscow
Io	F	1989	St-Petersburg	Bachelor's	Translator	St-Petersburg
Marina	F	1995	Ural FD	Master's	Department manager	Kazan'
Mikhail	M	1995	St-Petersburg	Master's	Account manager	St-Petersburg
Oksana	F	1991	Central FD	College	Entrepreneur	St-Petersburg
Irina	F	1985	Moscow	Master's	Teacher/Entrepreneur	Moscow
Lydia	F	2000	Volga FD	Bachelor's	Job seeker	Moscow
Guram	M	1994	Moscow	Master's	Unemployed	St-Petersburg
Galya	F	1990	Kazakhstan (abroad)	Bachelor's	Housewife	Novosibirsk
Karina	F	1994	Volga FD	Master's	Project manager	Yekaterinburg
Tatyana	F	1976	Siberian FD	College	Manual worker	Moscow
Klava	F	1999	Moscow	Bachelor's	DJ	Moscow
Boris	M	1993	Volga FD	Master's	Unemployed	Samara
Konstantin	M	1985	St-Petersburg	Master's	Tour guide	St-Petersburg
Natasha	F	1992	Volga FD	Bachelor's	Tattoo artist	St-Petersburg
Yakov	M	2001	Volga FD	School	University student	Kazan'
Gavrila	M	1993	Novosibirsk	College	IT Developer	Novosibirsk
Arseniy	M	1994	Central FD	School	Retail assistant	Moscow
Valera	M	1994	Novosibirsk	College	IT Engineer	Novosibirsk
Denis	M	1997	Ural FD	Master's	IT Support Assistant	Moscow
Ivan	M	1994	Siberian FD	Master's	IT Specialist	St-Petersburg
Lyudmila	F	1964	St-Petersburg	PhD	Lecturer/Entrepreneur	St-Petersburg
Petya	M	2000	Far Eastern FD	Bachelor's	Unemployed	Kazan'
Mitya	M	1991	Perm'	Bachelor's	Graphic designer	St-Petersburg
Danya	M	2000	Krasnoyarsk	Bachelor's	Teacher/Photographer	Krasnoyarsk
Yegor	M	2003	Kazan'	School	Print shop assistant	Kazan'
Alex	M	1981	Southern FD	Master's	Photographer	Moscow
Antonina	F	1969	St-Petersburg	Master's	Teacher/Entrepreneur	St-Petersburg
Gosha	M	1992	Southern FD	Master's	Marketing specialist	Moscow
Grigoriy	M	1966	Nizhny Novgorod	Master's	NGO director	N. Novgorod
Iskander	M	1978	Moscow	Master's	Teacher/Priest	Moscow
Katya	F	2000	Volga FD	Bachelor's	University student	Yekaterinburg
Sara	F	1991	Israel (abroad)	Master's	Photography director	Moscow
Marat	M	1995	Volga FD	School	Graphic designer	Moscow
Verner	M	1985	Kazakhstan (abroad)	Master's	IT Administrator	Moscow