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# Digital Activism in Russia: The Evolution and Forms of Online Participation in an Authoritarian State

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## 8.1 INTRODUCTION: EVOLUTION OF ONLINE ACTIVISM IN RUSSIA

The development of digital technology, particularly Internet, social media applications, and mobile communications has in many ways changed the nature of activism: citizens' ways of addressing and resolving social, cultural, and political issues. For an individual citizen it is today cheaper and faster to seek, debate, and distribute news, facts, and falsehoods worldwide concerning a wide variety of issues.

Digitalization has also enabled new, “connective” and horizontal modes of mobilizing citizens, which has changed the role of social movement organizations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Numerous examples from the Zapatistas, Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, and the #metoo-movement to color revolutions of Eastern Europe and the Russian opposition protests of 2011–2013 have demonstrated the importance of online actions in informing and mobilizing citizens. These actions may be carried out by one person or by twenty

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million people; they may—depending on the context—be legal or heavily sanctioned, result in praise or imprisonment, start revolts, and overthrow governments (cf. Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Theocharis 2015; Earl 2016; Kaun and Uldam 2018).

On the darker side, digital technology may also be used to obstruct and annihilate human and political rights as the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar or Russia's meddling in the 2016 United States (US) elections have illustrated. Moreover, digital technology also enables completely new ways of monitoring citizens both by profit-seeking enterprises and governments. Video surveillance, automatic face recognition, and accumulating databases on users' health, consumption habits, and movements enable new modes of control: data given out voluntarily or unknowingly on social media platforms make it possible to predict users' sexual orientation, political affiliation, ethnicity, and many other things with a high degree of accuracy (Kosinski et al. 2013).

In democratic countries the misuse of digital technology can be exposed and countered by independent professional media and democratic political institutions. In authoritarian countries lacking such counterforces, new digital media have provided governments with unprecedented tools for regulating and controlling citizens' on- and offline behavior.

Russia is a specific example of an authoritarian country with a well-educated population, widely available broadband access and a social media ecosystem dominated by domestic applications. Russia is, for example, one of the few countries worldwide, where Facebook is not the leading social network site, losing clearly in popularity to its Russian counterpart VKontakte ("In contact," more commonly known as VK). In political terms, Russia is an example of "electoral authoritarianism": a system of political governance where unfair elections are organized to furnish the ruling elite with a veneer of democratic legitimacy (cf. Gel'man 2017).

During his first term in office, President Vladimir Putin subjected Russian traditional media to state control while the Russian-language sector of the Internet (often dubbed Runet by the Russians—for more, see Chap. 16) remained practically free. Before the opposition protest wave in 2011–2013, lively discussions on social, cultural, and political issues took place on the Runet; well-known opposition activists from across the political and cultural spectrum deliberated on the LiveJournal blogging and social networking site, which, prior to the protest wave, was considered the hub of political debate in Russia (Etling et al. 2010).

The magnitude of the opposition mass protests in fall 2011, that erupted in response to the falsification of the results of the parliamentary elections and swapping of chairs by Putin and Medvedev,<sup>1</sup> came as a surprise to protesters and the Kremlin alike, which for the first time felt the political force of social media. The years 2011–2018 were marked by an intensive, state-led campaign to regulate Runet and curtail freedom of expression, which we have dubbed the "occupation of Runet" (Lonkila et al. 2020; for more, also see Chaps. 5 and 2).

The occupation marked a transition from lively online political debate and activism to a mode of oppressed activism in which expressing openly anti-Kremlin views in Russia has become risky. This has resulted in a “nymphosis” of activism: many former anti-government protesters have left politics (e.g., Pussy Riot member Maria Alyokhina) or turned inwards to family life in a Soviet manner; others have emigrated (e.g., Yevgeniya Chirikova, Boris Akunin and Ilya Ponomarev) or turned to less dangerous topics. However, as suggested by Svetlana Erpyleva (2019), a new generation of Russian activists may be emerging which merges politics and solving concrete, daily life problems.

Compared to the situation ten years ago, in 2020 Russia has only a handful of anti-Kremlin activists openly expressing their views on Rунet. LiveJournal, which banned political agitation in 2017, has lost its position as the hub of activist debate to Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram.

In the next section we will present our notion of online activism, define the focus of this chapter, describe the variety of forms of online activism and discuss these with reference to the theory of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). In Sect. 8.3 we will first present survey results concerning Russians’ participation in various forms of activism and then investigate in detail two of the most noteworthy recent cases of contentious online activism in Russia. These two cases address first, the campaign conducted by Alexei Navalny and his FBK (*Fond bor’by s korrupciej*, Anti-Corruption Foundation), and second, the battle by the Telegram messenger service to provide online communication services that are protected against state monitoring. Telegram is a messenger application which works on many platforms, among them mobile applications (Apple’s iOS, Google’s Android) and desktop applications (Windows, Linux, and MacOS). It offers communication via text messages or voice calls and claims to be the most secure messenger on the market because of its custom encryption protocol and end-to-end encryption in secret chats. This means that the content of a secret chat can only be decrypted by the recipient of the message but not by a third party, including Telegram personnel. This feature makes Telegram a pivotal application for activists challenging the powers of the Russian state.

## 8.2 THEORIZING ONLINE ACTIVISM

### 8.2.1 *Defining Online Activism*

We define online activism, modifying the term “digitally networked participation” by Yannis Theocharis (2015, 6) to cover *citizens’ voluntary actions to raise awareness about or exert pressure in order to solve a political, cultural, or social problem.*<sup>2</sup> Our definition thus covers a wide variety of issues from social and environmental problems to human rights, local disputes, and more. In terms of organizational forms, it governs a continuum of actions and activists ranging from lone hackers and sporadic flashmobs organized by anonymous

individuals to established movements with their entrenched social movement organizations.

The definition excludes institutionalized party politics and politicians, as well as political actions by the state (e.g., state-organized trolling, individuals affiliated with or sponsored by the state, covering also indirect sponsorship and informal approvals),<sup>3</sup> but includes actions by citizens, such as opposition leader Alexei Navalny who have been excluded from institutionalized politics but who nevertheless try to influence the political process.

The attribute *online* refers to a mode of web-based activity that has become possible and ubiquitous thanks to digital technology, Internet, social media, and mobile communications.<sup>4</sup> Although our focus is on activities conducted completely or partly on the Internet, we do not consider online to be an ontologically separate sphere since the boundaries between on- and offline are becoming increasingly blurred.

Some forms of online activism resemble and overlap with their offline counterparts. A politician may, for example, be contacted either through social media, via email, or personally, and a petition can be signed both on a website and on paper. Notably, our definition includes posting, commenting, sharing, and “liking” various items in social media, but not merely reading a post or watching a video.<sup>5</sup>

Other forms of online activism are, however, qualitatively different from the traditional means of protest and are only feasible online, for example, creating, reworking, and distributing Internet memes or hacking into a computer database. Similarly, some forms of *offline* activism have characteristics which cannot be transferred online—for example, the feeling of a riot policeman’s stick hitting a citizen’s jaw.

In this chapter we first present in detail two cases of contentious action which explicitly challenge the Kremlin. We have selected these cases because they are among the most prominent and well-known forms of Russian online activism, and have also managed to incite related street protests. In addition, we will present examples of visible and significant, but non-political forms of activism.<sup>6</sup>

Although the focus of this chapter is on online activism, one should remember that an important part of the political activism in Russia is still conducted entirely offline. During the campaigns of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, for example, volunteers distribute printed leaflets in the staircases of apartment blocks in Russian cities to inform people about forthcoming street protests.

### 8.2.2 *Types of Online Activism*

There are multiple types of online activism. The list of new forms is continuously growing with the development of technology, and various forms have been actively employed by both international and Russian activists. Among the most prevalent forms are the *posting, debating, and sharing of relevant information* online in various social media applications such as social networking

sites. Another important form of online activism is *mobilizing and coordinating* actions, for example, setting up an event or group site on Facebook. Through *witnessing* activists transmit information about events ignored by the state-controlled media in Russia, for example, by streaming videos of opposition street protests in real time. The video *On vam ne Dimon* (He is not Dimon to you) published by Alexei Navalny's team and accusing prime minister Medvedev of corruption also utilized *social media doxxing*: finding and publishing private information about an individual—this time the prime minister of Russia—on the Internet.<sup>7</sup>

*Crowdfunding and crowdsourcing* have been used, for example, to collect money to fund Boris Nemtsov's pamphlets about Putin, to support the independent channel TV Rain (*Dožd'*), to raise money for Navalny's anti-corruption project *RosPil*, to pay the fines imposed by the court on the Russian liberal magazine *New Times* and to investigate the downing of Malaysian Airline flight MH17 (cf. Sokolov 2015).

Still other forms of online activism include, among others, *leaktivism* (e.g., wikileaks), *hashtag activism* (raising awareness of an issue across various social media platforms; e.g., the #metoo movement, #Navalny2018) and *hacking* and *distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks*.

To manage this growing multitude of types of online activism, we propose, modifying Sandor Vegh's (2013) classification, to divide online activism into *communicative activism* and *technoactivism*. *Communicative activism* refers primarily to human-to-human interactions: exchanging information and raising awareness of societal problems and issues among people. The second form of communicative activism includes mobilizing and organizing people to act either on- or offline—for example, to sign an e-petition or to participate in a street protest. Communicative activism usually takes place on widely available platforms, such as popular social networking or video sharing sites. Since it requires no sophisticated technical skills, it is the most common type of online activism.

By *technoactivism* we refer to the actions by humans to manipulate technological systems. These may include hacking into a central bank database, programming bots, or mounting digital resistance as in the case of the instant messaging service Telegram's efforts to avoid blocking by the Russian state (see Sect. 8.3). A second form of technoactivism is data activism, by which we mean the use of either publicly available or open, but not widely known, datasets to bring about a change in society. In comparison to communicative activism, technoactivism typically presupposes technological know-how and competences, which exceed those of an average Internet user.

Russian examples of data activism include exposing corrupt state-sponsored purchases, such as buying luxury cars for the Ministry of Emergency Situations instead of fire trucks<sup>8</sup> or publishing data on expensive property belonging to modestly salaried Russian state employees. Still another example concerns using data available in a specific industry (e.g., a list of blocked Internet Protocol (IP) addresses and websites) to publish unfair or erroneous actions by

state agencies such as the Internet watchdog Roskomnadzor (see <http://rkn.gov.ru/>).

In empirical cases, different forms of online activism may blend into a combination of these types. In their anti-corruption campaigns Navalny's staff, for example, combines forms of communicative activism (YouTube videos and blog posts) with forms of data activism and social doxxing (using public databases to identify and disclose assets and properties of Russian politicians or oligarchs at home and abroad).

### 8.2.3 *Online Activism as Connective Action*

We relate online activism to Lance Bennett's and Alexandra Segerberg's theory of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The authors contrast traditional collective activism to the "connective" variety, the latter being only possible via new digital media.

In traditional collective action the advocates of a cause share the same collective action frame and the actions are coordinated by a social movement organization in a top-down manner. To put it bluntly, the members of the traditional communist movement shared the Marxist ideology and the movement's problem consisted of selling this common ideology and action frame to followers.

In connective action, by contrast, the participants may find their own, easily personalized action frame and entry point to activism with no obligation to adhere to a clear-cut ideology. The volunteers and supporters may only share a vague and inclusive action frame (e.g., "we are the 99%," "for fair elections")<sup>9</sup> and their grass-root actions are not dictated from above but there is room for creativity and improvisation.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 756) distinguish between three forms of connective action. In the first ("self-organizing networks") the action is completely grass-roots based and mobilized horizontally by the users via Internet without a central coordinating organization. In the second form ("organizationally enabled networks"), there is an organization coordinating action in the background but giving leeway for users to find their own, personal ways to participate. In the third form ("organizationally brokered networks"), there is strong organizational coordination of action.

In our empirical cases of online human and technoactivism presented in the next section, the three-fold classification above can be thought of as a variable of increasing organizational coordination. In the crowdfunding instances of Russian activism (e.g., saving the magazine *New Times*, initiatives conducted through [change.org](http://change.org)), there is usually little or no organizational coordination since the action consists of donating money through a ready-made online platform. In other instances, such as in the campaigns by Navalny's team described in the next section, hierarchical organization coordination is combined with a horizontally networked group of volunteers.

### 8.3 ONLINE ACTIVISM IN TODAY'S RUSSIA

In this section we first present empirical data on the on- and offline forms of activism in Russia based on the 2016 European Social Survey data in comparison to four European countries. Second, we illustrate communicative and technoactivism based on two case studies. The two cases are selected because we consider them to be among the most prominent and successful campaigns so far in a struggle against the Russian state's "occupation" of Runet (Lonkila et al. 2020). The first case is an example of communicative activism conducted by Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation and the second an example of technoactivism conducted by the Telegram messenger service.

#### 8.3.1 *Empirical Data on Russian Activism*

Table 8.1 summarizes Russians' participation in various forms of activism based on the results of the eighth round of the European Social Survey in 2016—the first year when a question explicitly measuring online participation ("have you posted or shared anything about politics online") was added to the survey.

According to the table, the Russians were lagging behind in most of the traditional forms of activism compared to Germany, France, the United Kingdom (UK), and Finland, with the exception of working in a political party or action group, where the Russians were as passive as the citizens of the four European countries. In addition, the Russians were only slightly less keen to wear a campaign badge or sticker than the Germans. They also took part in lawful public demonstrations less frequently than the French and Germans, as often as the British but more frequently than the Finns.

**Table 8.1** European Social Survey questions on various forms of activism (European Social Survey Round 8 Data 2016)

	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Russia</i>
Voted in the last national election	72.1	75.3	54.9	70.2	46.8
Contacted politician or government official last 12 months	15.7	18.8	12.9	17.3	4.9
Worked in a political party or action group last 12 months	4.1	3.3	2.8	3.1	2.9
Worked in another organisation or association last 12 months	29.0	38.1	13.7	7.4	3.8
Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months	5.2	19.8	10.1	9.7	4.3
Signed a petition last 12 months	35.4	35.6	30.5	44.1	7.4
Took part in a lawful public demonstration last 12 months	10.3	3.8	14.9	5.3	5.2
Boycotted certain products last 12 months	33.3	36.9	30.8	21.1	2.3
Posted or shared anything about politics online last 12 months	21.5	20.9	20.7	29.9	4.7



Most interestingly from the viewpoint of this chapter, only 4.7 per cent of the Russians—three to four times fewer than the Germans, French, Finns, and the British—had posted or shared anything about politics online during the 12 months preceding the survey.

However, the mean percentages presented in Table 8.1 hide the polarization of Internet use: heavy Internet users are typically young urban Russians, while Internet use is less prevalent in the rural areas and among the elderly. Moreover, the European Social Survey (ESS) questions do not cover the wide variety of non-political forms of civic activism. According to Sobolev and Zakharov (Sobolev and Zakharov 2018), for example, increasing numbers of Russians have been participating in recent years in charity, volunteering, and also in actions to improve their immediate surroundings.

### 8.3.2 *Communicative Online Activism: Alexei Navalny and the Anti-Corruption Foundation*

Alexei Navalny is a Russian lawyer, anti-corruption fighter, and political activist born in 1976, who rose to fame on the Russian political scene during the opposition mass protests in 2011. In 2019 he remains the only credible challenge to Vladimir Putin from outside the political establishment and the only opposition leader who can mobilize nation-wide demonstrations in major Russian cities.

Navalny's online activism is conducted and coordinated by his professional social media team at the Anti-Corruption Foundation on several platforms such as his blog (<https://navalny.com/>) Facebook, VKontakte, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube (for more, see Chap. 16). In his campaigning, Navalny has utilized several variants of online activism ranging from data activism and crowdsourcing (the anti-corruption project *RosPil*, <https://fbk.info/projects/>), witnessing via YouTube videos, to hashtag activism (#Navalny 2018), social media doxxing, and educating users on information security issues (NavalnyLIVE/cloud YouTube channels).

According to Dollbaum et al. (2018), Navalny's campaign for the 2018 presidential elections, from which he was banned, combined a strictly hierarchical coordination of action by the Anti-Corruption Foundation and its regional offices with the work of a large network of volunteers all over the country. The core of the campaign consisted of a broad anti-corruption stance, which allowed various political actors with a common interest in opposing the ruling regime to participate. In terms of "organizationally enabled connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), the campaign offered a low threshold for participating:

*It required little prior knowledge, and participation was framed as fun, hip, and sociable. Each of the 80 regional offices recruited several dozens of active volunteers, most in their teens and early twenties, who distributed flyers, gathered signatures,*

*and registered supporters. Furthermore, the offices evolved into hubs for civic activity, connecting to other oppositional activists on the ground, hosting lectures, film screenings, and discussions. Besides nurturing a collective identity and strengthening social ties, this activity was explicitly aimed at involving young people in political discourse, combating apathy and depoliticization.* (Dollbaum et al. 2018, 5)

One indication of Navalny's success in reaching out to young Russians is the new law signed by Putin on December 28, 2018, which clearly connected to the fact that the street protests of 2018 saw the participation of many teenagers: The law punishes the organizers of unsanctioned public gatherings with participants under 18 years of age with 15 days' imprisonment or fines (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2018).

However, although Navalny's campaign utilized a wide variety of social media platforms and its broad anti-corruption message gave supporters much leeway for personalized connective action (e.g., in the form of constructing and sharing Internet memes), its hierarchical organization led to an inbuilt tension in the campaign. At the heart of this tension was the clash between the logics of goal-oriented political action and a movement of volunteers and activist recruited through street protests. (Dollbaum et al. 2018, 6).

A unique feature of Navalny's online presence is a series of exchanges of YouTube videos with the Russian political elite. The Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov as well as the head of the Russian National Guard, Viktor Zolotov, have responded to Navalny's provocative YouTube videos exposing their alleged corruption by publishing their own YouTube video replies—to which Navalny has retaliated with further videos. This exchange of public videos stands in stark contrast to Putin's and Medvedev's total ignoring of Navalny in their public appearances.<sup>10</sup>

Navalny's 2019 campaign "*umnoe golosovanie*" ("smart voting", <https://vote2019.appspot.com/>) targeted the 2019 Moscow city council elections and some regional elections, which happened at the same date, September 8, 2019. In the related instructional YouTube video, he urged people to vote for the candidate of the party—with the exception of the ruling party United Russia—which polled the most votes during the last election in their voting district. Exact candidates to vote for were suggested by Navalny's team, which followed the results of their own polls. The suggestions were sent to voters by email, made available via Telegram bot, and at the campaign website.<sup>11</sup>

In all, the particularity of communicative online activism in Russia consists of a cat-and-mouse game between activists and the Kremlin. In this game, the Kremlin has succeeded in recreating an atmosphere of fear where all anti-government expression online in Russia has become risky.

Alexei Navalny is one of the few who, thanks to his popularity, can afford to run this risk, and continues to speak directly to the people through social media, thereby circumventing his ban on state-controlled media. Navalny's political campaigning strategy seems to more or less consciously implement a strategy dubbed "the cute cat theory" of online activism by Ethan Zuckerman

(2007). According to Zuckerman, under authoritarian conditions opposition activists should rely on popular platforms (on which non-political pictures of cute cats are posted). Due to the popularity of these platforms, their shutting down by the government is risky since it may annoy a large part of population—also those previously not interested or involved in politics.

### 8.3.3 *Technoactivism: The Example of Telegram*

In addition to Navalny's campaigns, the battle waged by the Telegram messenger service against the Russian state has been among the most noteworthy events of Russian online activism in recent years. In this conflict the Russian state tried to block the messenger service, whose global image and marketing campaigns focus on encryption and privacy. In particular, Telegram assures its users that, unlike other messengers, it is able to protect the users' chats from strangers' eyes and denies any cooperation with secret services. In line with this, the company refused to collaborate with the Russian security service. It therefore allowed activists to continue publishing and distributing their anti-governmental views anonymously.

The case of Telegram constitutes the most significant example of a successful struggle against Internet control by the increasingly authoritarian Russian state. Telegram used its knowledge and understanding of Internet protocols, as well as mechanisms for updating smartphones from mobile application stores to circumvent blocks. Telegram combined this with a major crowd-sourcing initiative to fight for the free exchange of information protected against state monitoring.<sup>12</sup>

This section sheds light on the legal, technological, and societal aspects of the struggle which also had an offline form of mobilization: On April 30, 2018, thousands of protesters marched in Moscow and threw paper planes—the symbol of Telegram—to protest against the state's decision to block the service. Because of its visual nature, the action succeeded in gaining media attention and in showing support for Telegram. However, unlike the technological online resistance described later in this article, this offline public support action had no sequels and was ignored by the Kremlin.

#### 8.3.3.1 *Telegram's Legal Battle Against the Russian Security Service*

Although state pressure on free expression and on Telegram's founder, Pavel Durov, have a longer history, the actual start of the conflict between the company and Russian state can be traced back to July 2017. In July, the Russian federal security service FSB (*Federal'náá služba bezopasnosti*) required Telegram to create a way for the FSB to intercept communications on Telegram. To be more precise, the FSB asked Telegram to hand over the encryption keys, that is, digital passwords, without which it is impossible to read communication content. The security service justified its requirement by the need to decrypt terrorist messages sent via Telegram in connection with the terror attack on a St. Petersburg metro train on April 3, 2017. Telegram responded

by stating that the company did not have the keys because the application keeps them only on users' devices. In addition, the founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Pavel Durov, noted that the FSB's request was contradictory to the protection of privacy of communication guaranteed by the Constitution of Russia.

In October the FSB filed a formal complaint with the court, which fined Telegram for non-compliance with the FSB's request (Bryzgalova 2017). The FSB defended its position claiming that providing the FSB with a technical capability to decode messages still required the FSB to seek a court order to read correspondence from specific individuals (Pis'mennye vozraženíá FSB 2017). On March 20, 2018, Russia's Supreme Court rejected Telegram's appeal, after which the Russian Internet watchdog Roskomnadzor announced that the messaging service had 15 days to provide the required information to the security agencies—otherwise access to Telegram in Russia would be blocked.

### 8.3.3.2 *Technological Resistance by Telegram*

On April 13, 2018, the Taganskij court in Moscow ruled that access to Telegram in Russia should be blocked due to the failure of Telegram to provide the FSB with the encryption keys. In technical terms, the FSB required Telegram to rewrite their messaging application from scratch to enable the FSB to read all messages sent via Telegram. The requirement was based on the federal law “on information, information technologies, and the protection of information.” Refusing to comply, Telegram deemed the law and its implementation unconstitutional.

How did Telegram resist the state's attempts to block the use of the service?

When Roskomnadzor told the Internet service providers (ISPs) the addresses of the Telegram servers, the ISPs disabled the connections to these servers. As a response, Telegram assigned them different addresses, making it challenging to discover the new addresses and to communicate their location to the ISPs fast enough. (ISPs in Russia are obliged to download a register of addresses to block daily, and Telegram can change addresses several times per hour).

However, Telegram cannot assign random addresses to its servers because they must be in a range owned by the company at which Telegram keeps the servers, such as Google or Amazon. Thus, Roskomnadzor's attempts to block large ranges of addresses belonging to these companies led to a temporary block not only of Telegram but also of many other websites. Google and Amazon, for example, provide hosting for many companies worldwide, including companies operating in Russia. Internet services not related to Telegram were merely affected because they had servers in the same range of addresses as Telegram.

As a wealthy company Telegram could afford to rent many large ranges of addresses from giant hosting providers. Blocking all of them would have meant collateral damage to Internet services, which are essential for many people in

Russia. Thus, Roskomnadzor was able to block only some of them, and Telegram used the remaining part.

In addition to the actions described above, Telegram took several steps to avoid blocking imposed by Roskomnadzor.

First, the company encouraged users worldwide to run so-called proxy servers, that is, intermediary services with ample capacity to forward Telegram traffic to actual Telegram servers. Pavel Durov, the CEO of the company, even announced a grant program promising financial support to individuals who develop and run proxies for Telegram users on their own or rented servers.

Second, Telegram encouraged people to use virtual private networks (VPN). VPN allows establishing an encrypted connection from a laptop or smartphone to a location outside their country. A VPN server there serves as an intermediary allowing connection to Telegram from that location.

Third, Telegram uses so-called push updates (similar to message notifications in messengers such as WhatsApp) to notify the Telegram application of any server address changes. If Roskomnadzor had blocked the push notifications, it effectively would have blocked all notifications from Apple and Google servers to all applications on all Android and iOS smartphones in Russia. It would have disrupted many services, including popular online banking applications, which Roskomnadzor did not dare.

In sum, Telegram's technoactivism is a form of activism intended to resist attacks on civil rights, such as freedom of speech and freedom of communication. Technoactivism often requires extensive technical expertise and money to build a technical solution and a relatively large community ready to support, popularize, crowdfund, and help technically with its implementation. Its success depends on technical abilities, expertise, and the limitations of its opponents.

### 8.3.4 *Non-contentious Forms of Online Activism*

Our definition of online activism includes forms of action which are not contentious or political in nature. They do not directly challenge state power but are rather targeted at resolving social, cultural, or local problems. Such activities are relatively common in Russia; they address a wide variety of issues and usually do not require an organization to coordinate operations. These activities may, however, become politicized and transformed into protests when, for example, the discussions approach the fields of healthcare, education reforms, taxation, or parental interests; when residents start opposing the planning of new garbage dumps nearby, or when apartment owners begin to mobilize against the replacement of a neighborhood park with an apartment block. Nevertheless, some topics such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, gender identities or sexual and domestic violence have already been politicized in official discourse in Russia regardless of the initial nature of the public debate or intentions regarding contentious mobilization.

The range of non-political issues and social problems addressed by online activists covers a wide variety of everyday problems from animal rights to parental movements, car owner rights, and so on. Below we will illustrate some of the most noteworthy examples of non-political online activism related, first, to environmental and housing issues and, second, to women's and LGBT rights.

The issues related to *environmental topics and problems related to real estate ownership rights* (e.g., five-storey building renovations in Moscow) were not originally politicized in public discourse. Activism around these topics usually begins as an attempt to solve local problems and becomes politicized in the course of events (cf. Erpyleva 2019). Numerous small local environmental initiatives in the middle of the 2010s, mainly aimed at cleaning green zones in urban areas, shared the ideology of “small steps,” which implied the idea of making life better by improving the immediate surroundings. One of the first big ecological movements was the defense of the Khimki forest (Moscow region) 2007–2011. It became politicized relatively quickly, but involved negotiations with the authorities, communication with them, and even their sporadic support for the movement. The garbage protests (2018–2019) in Moscow region and Shies (Arkhangelsk region) had clear anti-government significance right from the outset, and with this agenda and the use of social media (Facebook and VK) and thematic sites (Шлес.рф, Bellona.rf) they easily reached a nationwide audience.

Examples of the movement defending real estate ownership rights include joint action by apartment owners of the same block of flats, who create groups on the social networking site VKontakte to solve various housing management problems, such as maintenance and repair of the building's infrastructure (water pipes, heating, elevators, etc.) or construction of a playground in the yard. This type of activism has been common in campaigns organized by local residents against urban construction projects and for the protection of parks and green urban zones in Russian cities (see Gladarev and Lonkila 2012 and 2013 for an example in St. Petersburg). In Moscow, protests against the plan initiated by the city government to demolish and rebuild whole neighborhoods of Soviet-era tenements were coordinated through thematic Internet sites (for example, <http://renovation.tbcc.ru>) and Facebook groups in 2017–2018 (Rosenblat 2018).

The disputes concerning *women's and LGBT rights* present, by contrast, an example of online activism on a topic that has already become highly politicized as part of conservative and nationalist political rhetoric, also at the state level. Domestic violence and LGBT rights have been discussed not only by liberal activists, but also by conservatives, who reported websites to the Russian Internet watchdog Roskomnadzor for allegedly containing prohibited “gay propaganda.” In particular, the group *Deti-404. LGBT-podrostki* (Children 404. LGBT teens) on the popular Russian social network site VKontakte was blocked by a court order in 2015 after being found guilty of propagating “non-traditional sexual relationships.” Elena Klimova, the founder of the group and a project

bearing the same name, was sentenced to pay fines and she and other participants of the project became targets of online hate speech (Children-404 n.d.).

Another case of activism in defense of women's and LGBT rights was the *#yaNeBoyusSkazat* (I'm not afraid to speak) movement—the Russian equivalent of #metoo—in 2017, which was a hot topic among Russian users of Facebook. Victims shared their accounts of sexual harassment in an attempt to create visibility for the sexual and domestic violence agenda (Zhigulina 2016; *Dviženie #MeToo god spustâ* 2018). These actions were repeatedly commented on by high-ranking state officials and Duma (the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia) deputies, who denied the relevance of the issue, referring to traditional Russian family values, such as patriarchal family relations.

The examples presented above of online activism demonstrate its significance in protecting human rights, solving everyday problems, and making the authorities aware of them. They also highlight the thin and easily permeable line between non-political and political activism in Russia. (cf. Erpyleva 2019)

## 8.4 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have illustrated through selected cases the ways digitalization has affected activism in Russia. The two cases of contentious activism presented above describe variants of “organizationally enabled” connective action, where central coordination is combined with grass-root activism in digital media. In the case of the communicative activism of Alexei Navalny, the coordination was implemented by his team at the Anti-Corruption Foundation. Although Navalny's team also engages in data activism—for example, when investigating the property of Russian politicians abroad—the ultimate aim of its digital activism is to gain support and raise awareness in order to exert pressure on the government and ultimately to gain political power.

Telegram and Pavel Durov lack similar political ambitions. The technoactivism of Telegram showed that with sufficient technical expertise and financial resources it is possible to develop relatively sophisticated and distributed protection against the blocking of web resources by the state. Before the battle between Telegram and the Kremlin, all efforts of the Russian state to block Internet content had been successful: the torrent tracker [rutracker.org](http://rutracker.org), for example, was blocked due to multiple copyright violations, and the service remains inaccessible from Russia unless its user connects to it via VPN. The success of Telegram showed technoactivists that digital technology can be used not only for state monitoring and control, but also to protect freedom of expression and users' right to private communications.

Both of these two cases have been rare examples of visible and contentious online activism enabled by digital technology in Russia. In both cases hierarchical coordination was combined with grass-root actions by citizens who could develop their own ways of participating under fairly general slogans against corruption (Navalny) or for freedom of expression (Telegram). Both

campaigns have also managed to recruit young Russians into contentious online activism.

In addition, our examples of the non-contentious forms of online activism illustrate the flexible and contested line between non-political and political forms of activism. Some topics, such as those related to sexuality, marriage, and religion have already become politicized in official discourse and through legislation while other, at first sight non-political problems, such as those related to parenting or housing, may become politicized when people start to view them as examples of bad governance.

In a country as large as Russia, nationwide contentious action is not realistic without the Internet and modern digital technology. The acid test for online activism is, however, how to influence the societal and political affairs *offline*. Jennifer Earl (2016) suggests that online activism has added to the traditional repertoire of social movements an alternative, “flash-based” power—rapid, temporally limited, and massive, but not necessarily continuous mobilization—which may also die out quickly. According to Earl, online mobilization may draw a greater number of people to flash activism, which reduces the cost of participating in otherwise high-risk offline demonstrations. This kind of flash-based power was manifested at the beginning of the Russian opposition mass protests in 2011 and it has been shown to be able to overthrow governments, for example, during the Arab Spring—even though many of the uprisings were subsequently repressed.

In the traditional model, the power of protest emanates from continuous mobilization and pressure exerted upon the state. This requires transforming grievances into stable political programs, institutions, and structures and thus a transition from connective activism to more traditional forms of collective action. Such a transformation was attempted in Russia, for example, during the protest wave in 2012, when over 80,000 people participated in the online elections of the opposition coordinating council. However, both as a result of internal tensions within the council between the nationalists, leftists, and liberals and the tightening repression by the state, the resistance faded at the end of the one-year term and the council was dissolved (Toepfl 2018). Another and partly successful attempt to transform online actions into offline political capital and structures was Navalny’s initiative of “smart voting”, which very likely contributed to the poor performance of United Russia in the Moscow city council elections on September 8, 2019.

In 2019, with the Russian state continuously introducing new constraints on freedom of expression, online participation in Russia has become risky (Lonkila et al. 2020). As a consequence, many activists have ceased to participate in online discussions, many have moved to social media platforms based outside Russia, such as Twitter or Facebook, and others have opted for emigration. Still others have directed their energy and attention towards the non-political problems of everyday life.

However, Russians’ struggles to solve local daily life problems are often the results of policy failures and the online connections made through social media



between similar local struggles elsewhere may result in the generalization and politicization of individual and local grievances (cf. Gladarev and Lonkila 2012, 1386–7; Erpyleva 2019). Digital technology offers both new means to mobilize people and share these grievances, as well as new tools to monitor and repress them. The outcome of this tension between emancipatory and repressive aspects of digitalization is uncertain and merits further research.

## NOTES

1. This expression refers to the statement in the fall 2011 announcing that Prime Minister Putin would run for president in 2012 and, if successful, would appoint the then president Medvedev to prime minister.
2. Cf. Theocharis' original formulation: "digitally networked participation can be understood as a networked media-based personalized action that is carried out by individual citizens with the intent to display their own mobilization and activate their social networks in order to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of, a social or political problem" (Theocharis 2015, 6; see also Van Deth 2014; Ohme et al. 2018).
3. There are individuals and groups of citizens involved in "online vigilantism" with diverse ideological convictions and ties with state organs in Russia. An account of such organized groups as the *Molodežnaâ služba bezopasnosti* (Youth Security Service) sponsoring an emergent "cyber Cossack movement" and the *Liga bezopasnogo Interneta* (Safe Internet League) can be found in Daucé et al. (2019). The authors also discuss the hearings at the Russian Civic Chamber on a bill on "*kiberdružiny*" (cyber patrols). They find a tension between politically involved organizations and дума members supporting the bill and the experts criticizing the bill for its inefficiency.
4. A non-exhaustive list of terms in literature trying to cover the phenomenon of online activism includes digital activism, cyberactivism, Internet activism, web activism, digital campaigning, online organizing, electronic advocacy, e-campaigning, social media activism, and e-activism.
5. On the debate on slacktivism and "liking" in social media see Earl 2016, 374–5; Theocharis 2015, 8–9.
6. Our focus does not imply that we consider non-political forms of activism less important in Russia. First, many forms of social and cultural activism are indispensable as such—e.g., in taking care of social or health care services not provided by the state. In addition, the non-political forms may function as substitutes for political action; as ways to create alternative cultural framings which mirror, ridicule, and contest dominant cultural codes (Flikke 2017); and as platforms to form horizontal ties in civil society (Gladarev and Lonkila 2013) which may later on serve as precondition for explicitly political resistance. Finally, as explained later in this chapter, the boundary between political and non-political activism is fluid and contested: from the viewpoint of the Kremlin any independent action organized by civil society may potentially threaten the current status quo and turn into contentious action.
7. In September 9, 2020, the video had 36.2 million views, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7\\_GF9g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7_GF9g).

8. <https://autoassa.ru/novosti/mchs-zakupaet-slishkom-roskoshnye-avtomobili/>.
9. “We are the 99%” was the slogan of the Occupy social movement, referring to the income inequality in the United States. “The movement for fair elections” refers to the mobilization of citizens against the rigging of Duma elections in the fall 2011.
10. The strange and unique exchange between Navalny and one of the Russia’s richest oligarchs Alisher Usmanov started from a video *On vam ne Dimon* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7\\_GF9g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7_GF9g)) published in March 2017. In this video, which by September 9, 2019, had 31.8 million views, implied that Usmanov had bribed Dmitry Medvedev—something that Usmanov denied. In response to this denial Navalny published a follow-up video with almost 5 million views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn0Ah0J5p5Y>). Usmanov, in a move unheard of a Russian billionaire, replied to Navalny in his own YouTube video, which, however, got only 12,735 views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfWB1cKtFws>), whereas Navalny’s further reply to Usmanov’s reply had collected 3.8 million views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwlrKfLeRfs>).
11. Though it is difficult to measure accurately the results of smart voting, it seem to have worked in the *Mosgorduma* (Moscow City Duma) elections in 2019: United Russia lost 13 seats ending up with 25 seats in the 45-seat council, whereas the Communist Party was the greatest beneficiary with 13 seats—8 seats up from previous elections (cf. Pertsev 2019).
12. For a critical look on the political history of Telegram see Maréchal (2018); for a comparison between political uses of Telegram in Russia and Iran see Akbari and Gabdulhakov (2019).

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