

The Impact of Social Network Sites on Youth Political Engagement in Russia

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that social network sites (SNS) do not just reflect already existing patterns of offline political engagement among youth networks, but also transform and augment these patterns, creating patterns that are wholly unique to youth networks operating through SNS. Political socialization through SNS can partly explain the shift in citizenship norms seen among Russian youth, in turn motivating youth toward networked activism aimed at issues of a highly localized and personalized nature. Russian state demobilization efforts have forced opposition networks to reshape and restructure their political engagement so that the political acts are declaratively “apolitical” or so those political acts that may have taken place “in real life” can only be observed online, thereby decreasing likelihood of persecution. Although a direct causal link between SNS usage and anti-regime youth alternative political engagement cannot be drawn, this type of political engagement in Russia is only possible thanks to SNS.

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“Likes, retweets, and comments confirm that this is not just some narcissism, but that someone is really watching this. And if on another planet only a select few can feel as though they’re a star, ours gives this feeling to everyone. It turned out to be easier for us to create a new world, than to conquer television.”

— Elena Bazina¹
April 2014

“Today, a lulling Instagram has become our cradle, and an updated Facebook feed has become our alarm clock.”

— Elizaveta Yakovets
April 2016

Introduction

The 2017-2018 country-wide anti-corruption street protests in Russia were the first to have entered the public consciousness as a youth-dominated event (Erpyleva 2020; Krawatzek 2020). The subsequent protests in 2019 and 2021 continued with the same narrative of youth-driven political engagement (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021; A. S. Arkhipova et al. 2019). This is in no small part due to the Russian state propaganda which sought to dismiss the protests through the notion that they were mainly attended by underage youth who are, in the words of a Russian television news presenter, “pliant and gullible, [and] easily led astray” (Luxmoore 2021). Meanwhile, Russia’s liberal public saw youth participation as a sign of the younger generation’s dissatisfaction with Putin’s regime and rising demands for political changes (Moroz 2020). Either way, youth presence in public demonstrations in the period of 2017 through 2021 (the period that will be explored in this paper) was perceived by many to be so

¹ Both epigraphs are from a collection of autobiographical essays on the subject of Russian youth, entitled *Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete: pokolenie Z* [You don’t even represent (understand) us: generation Z] (Sverdlova, Mishchuk, and Vyzhutovich 2018)

significant that “young faces have become the image of protests in Russia [...]” (Krawatzek 2020).

Inasmuch as the 2017-2018 protests were seen as youth-dominated, they were also perceived to have largely originated on the internet—more specifically, on social network sites (hereafter: SNS) (Erpyleva 2020; A. Arkhipova et al. 2018; Gabdulhakov 2020; Shomova 2022; Wijermars 2021; Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021). Though it must be noted that, for Russia, this is nothing new—the 2011-2013 protests (known colloquially as the Bolotnaya Protest after the Bolotnaya Square where much of the protesting took place) had also been coordinated and promoted largely through SNS (Vendil Pallin 2017; Wijermars 2021; Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021; Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a; Zherebtsov and Goussev 2021; Toepfl 2018). This is scarcely a surprising circumstance if we consider that the vast majority of print and TV media have long been seized by the Russian state, with the implication that their materials must strictly follow the approved government line (Becker 2004).

The extent to which Russian youth are present and active on the internet and SNS can hardly be overstated. Sociological surveys point to internet usage and media consumption habits as the “most obvious important difference between young Russians (aged 18-25 years) and their older fellow countrymen” (Volkov 2019). SNS are Russian youth’s primary source of political news (Krawatzek and Gwendolyn 2018). Naturally, this is paralleled with a sharp decrease in the usage of television as a source of political news (Krawatzek and Gwendolyn 2018). The same cannot be said in relation to older generations—the adoption of the internet as a source of political information has proven

to be a much slower process within this group (Volkov 2019). Considering the profound ties of Russia's contemporary street protests with SNS, the link between Russian youth's social media habits and their well-known political engagement in street protests becomes an intriguing avenue for academic study.

The link between contemporary media habits among youth and their political engagement has seen much debate in the academic community (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). However, the existing research on this subject-matter has largely been dedicated to Western states whose governments display relatively high degrees of tolerance for freedom of expression on SNS (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Copeland and Feezell 2017; Lee, Shah, and McLeod 2013; Shehata, Ekström, and Olsson 2016). Though state and state-adjacent online interventions in the form of SNS manipulation and surveillance do exist in Western states, the scale and extent of online state-intervention in semi-authoritarian regimes such as Russia is profoundly more pronounced. In the Russian context, state intervention has a powerful influence on SNS users that affects even their most mundane and minute actions, as demonstrated with the hundreds of criminal charges initiated against users who "liked" or "reposted" SNS publications that are critical of the state (Gabdulhakov 2020). At the same time, as I will argue in this thesis, many of the same trends—such as a turn to more local issue-based political activism—seen in Western states remain applicable (if not more salient) in the Russian context.

The research question I will be exploring in my study is as follows: how do social network sites influence anti-regime youth political engagement in Russia? I will be considering Russia's youth media habits, and the subsequent link to anti-regime

alternative political engagement, through the theories of political socialization, connective action, and the dutiful/actualizing citizenship model. For the purposes of this study, “Russian youth” will be defined as Russian citizens between the ages of 14 and 29. With regard to “anti-regime alternative political engagement,” I will be operating on a definition which will encompass any deliberate and voluntary actions taken by Russian citizens outside the auspices of routine state politics (outside the traditional political arena, such as voting, joining a party, running for office, etc.) and the aims of which are to express disapproval of certain policies, or the general performance of the government (regional or federal). The study will largely be limited to the period between 2017 and 2021, though the 2011-2013 protests will be discussed for contextual purposes. The recent events related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and its impacts will not be discussed.

The theory of political socialization allows us to understand how various agents of socialization (such as parents, peers, school, media, SNS, etc.) are able to make an impact on an individual’s political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours and the ways in which those manifest at various stages of the life cycle (Neundorf and Smets 2017; Landtsheer 2014). This will be pertinent to this study as SNS have become a vital agent of political socialization in contemporary Russia and have a peculiar link to anti-regime political engagement among Russian youth (though it must be noted that other agents may hold no less of an impact on anti-regime political engagement). I will also be exploring how the socialization of Russian youth in the digital contemporaneity has contributed to an evolution in their perception of citizenship and civic engagement where youth are becoming weary of all the appurtenances of traditional politics, and are gravitating more

toward issue-based (such as environmental issues or those of corruption) and local politics (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Svensson 2011).

SNS users are both producers and consumers of information—production costs are significantly lower as compared to traditional media (Svensson 2011). As noted by Svensson, digital networks make it increasingly difficult to “tell where professionals leave off and the amateurs take over” (Svensson 2011). As a result, digital networks take on a horizontal structure—eschewing the top-down approach of more formal establishments such as parties or civil society organizations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The same structure is becoming increasingly common in contemporary political movements where there is no single organization or leader one could point to as the primary driver of political engagement (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). As such, engagement tends to be more personal and individualized, based on an intimately personal connection to the cause and to the leaderless collective of individuals who constitute one’s digital network—a network whose constitution the individual perceives themselves to be capable of managing and developing independently.

Since there can be as many different digital networks as there are users, SNS is able to offer those users a more personalized and granulated information diet, as compared to traditional media that will often seek to cast as broad of a net as possible to gain a larger audience (Ohme and Vreese 2020). In the Russian context, this characteristic of SNS takes on an especially important role. Since traditional forms of media almost never deviate from the official state position on important political matters (Becker 2004), SNS is one of the few information spaces where Russians can select into an information diet that is divergent from the official state position (Moroz 2020;

Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). Notwithstanding the opaque workings of SNS algorithms discussed below, the output provided to an SNS user in the form of political information is largely dependent on the user's input. In other words, the information a user sees on their SNS feed are by and large a reflection of their existing political beliefs, values, and attitudes (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). As such, it is not clear to what extent SNS is capable of altering its users' preconceptions or, indeed, if this ever occurs on a large scale.

Furthermore, since the Bolotnaya Protests in 2011-2013, the Russian state has learned to deftly navigate SNS, creating entirely new networks of pro-government media accounts (some genuine, some operated through bots), and taking control of most domestic SNS to regulate the flow of information from within (Gabdulhakov 2020; Vendil Pallin 2017). As will be discussed below, Russia's intervention in SNS has had a significant influence on the online media landscape in the country and, in turn, on youth political engagement.

In this thesis, I will be arguing that SNS do not just reflect already existing patterns of offline political engagement among youth networks, but also transform and augment these patterns, creating patterns that are wholly unique to youth networks that operate through SNS. Political socialization through SNS can in part explain the shift in citizenship norms seen among youth in Russia (and elsewhere in the world), in turn motivating youth toward networked activism aimed at issues of a highly localized and personalized nature (seen, for example, in environmental and municipal protests). Russian state demobilization efforts (including hostile takeovers of domestic SNS; obscure legal frameworks and extrajudicial harassment that target those who are engaged

in anti-regime alternative political engagement online; and flooding techniques that overwhelm the digital information landscape with various kinds of disinformation) have forced opposition networks to reshape and restructure their political engagement so that the political actions are declaratively “apolitical” or so those actions that may have taken place “in real life” can only be observed online, thus decreasing the likelihood of persecution. Although a direct causal link between SNS usage and anti-regime youth alternative political engagement cannot be drawn, this type of political engagement in Russia is only possible thanks to SNS.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. The next two sections will consist of a review of the existing literature and the methodology that was used in this study. I will then discuss the theoretical background for this study (focusing on the theories of political socialization, connective action, and the actualizing/dutiful citizenship model) and define key terms that will be used (defining, for example, SNS and Anti-Regime Alternative Political Engagement). Next, I will be situating SNS and anti-regime alternative political engagement in the Russian context—for this, I will be discussing the history of SNS in Russia and the decade of street and online protests (a brief history of contemporary Russian protests, beginning with the 2011 Bolotnaya Protests and ending with the 2021 protests in support of Alexei Navalny). Finally, in chapters five and six, I will be presenting my findings and concluding the study.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

There is currently little literature that directly deals with the subject of Russian youth and their involvement in the protests of 2017 through 2021. One such study by Erpyleva compares the political attitudes of youth who have engaged in the 2011-2013 Bolotnaya protests and those who have participated in the 2017-2018 anti-corruption rallies (Erpyleva 2020). This comparative study describes how the attitudes and practices of youth have evolved in such a manner that their self-perception has changed from viewing themselves as “immature kids” to “fully-fledged political actors” (Erpyleva 2020). This trend is explained through McAdam’s theory of biographical availability and prior contact.

Biographical availability refers to the notion that “those with less time to engage in activism or more personal responsibilities constraining involvement will be less likely to participate even if they are so predisposed” (McAdam 1986). Biographical availability is most often found among youth in the narrow span of years when they are independent from their parents and relatively free from adult responsibilities. Prior contact describes the process by which nonactivists are pulled into protest movements through networks, relationships or communities. Erpyleva suggests that the youth of the Bolotnaya protests served as a “prior contact” for the youth of the 2017 anti-corruption protests (Erpyleva 2020).

Another study was conducted by Krawatzek (who was interviewed for this study) with a focus on the perception of the 2017 anti-corruption protests among Russian youth—including youth who support the regime, those who are politically ambivalent, and those who are against the regime (Krawatzek 2020). Importantly, this study found

that “young people who maintain frequent political discussions with friends or have friends who have participated in protests are substantively more likely to participate in protests of any kind themselves, particularly political protests [...]” (Krawatzek 2020). These findings will be discussed here in the context of SNS and how youth maintain such friendships online.

Nikolayenko’s study finds that university students were more likely to be involved in the 2017 anti-corruption protests than their peers without tertiary education (Nikolayenko 2021). The study showed that “anti-corruption protests were larger in Russian cities with a larger university student population” (Nikolayenko 2021). However, the abovementioned Krawatzek study did not find statistically significant correlation between education or being a student and the likelihood of either finding the protests to be legitimate or participating in said protests (Krawatzek 2020). As such, whether or not education level and student status has a correlation to protest participation in the 2017 anti-corruption protests is a debated subject in the literature.

Most of the studies relevant to the link between SNS use and protest participation were undertaken based on the 2011-2013 Bolotnaya protests, rather than the more recent protests, and had no youth focus (Placek 2019; Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a; Zherebtsov and Goussev 2021). One exception is an article by Moroz, who focuses on the significant impact made by the opposition leader Navalny since the 2017 anti-corruptions protests (Moroz 2020). Navalny’s impact on youth political engagement can hardly be overstated, as will be discussed below. As argued by Moroz, Navalny and his team provided youth (though certainly not only youth) with the tools and resources to become politically engaged in the increasingly repressive conditions of the Russian political

landscape. This was done by and large through SNS and many of the ways in which youth use SNS have been deftly exploited to attract more youth into the Navalny network (such as, for example, the production of viral TikTok clips).

As will be discussed below, the success of Navalny's protests in 2017 can largely be attributed to his ability to apply a suitable interpretive frame to the cause (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). The frames used by Navalny were successful in attracting a large number of participants due to the high capacity for those frames to be relatable. As I will argue below, because SNS are designed for their users to employ them in their identity negotiation, these sites became an irreplaceable instrument for Navalny's mobilization strategies. Less relatable themes did not attract as many participants (instead, they mostly attracted his core supporters) and based on polling data, Navalny himself was far from the primary motivator for anti-regime alternative political engagement among youth and protest participants in general (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021; Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022).

Even during the 2021 protests when Navalny's arrest sparked the protests, polling data shows that only 22 percent "fully trusted" Navalny, while 64.3 percent were more cautious in their positive assessment of Navalny ("somewhat trusted"), and 5.6 percent either "fully distrusted" Navalny or "somewhat distrusted" him (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). Among 86 percent of the respondents at the February 14th, 2021 protest, the primary reason for participation was related to "the way in which the state (*vlast'*) treats [the participants]: absence of political freedoms, irremovably of power (*nesmenyaemost' vlasti*), police arbitrariness, and repressions" (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). These were indeed the very themes that were developed

extensively by Navalny and his team, further proving the power of Navalny's protest framing. As will be discussed below, the political actions undertaken by Russian youth with the support of Navalny and his team can be described as organizationally enabled connective actions.

As mentioned above, there is a rich corpus of literature on the subject of SNS and its impact on protests in Russia, however, there are more studies dedicated to the 2011-2013 protests than there are to more recent protests. (Besides the simple fact of being more recent and thus less studied, the 2017-2021 protests saw a much greater interference from the Russian state, making such studies more difficult to conduct.) The article most relevant to this study, by Nechai and Goncharov, presents a social media analysis of Twitter during the 2017 protests (Nechai and Goncharov 2017). They find a clearly distinct separation between two groups of users—the anti-regime participants and regime loyalists. The distinction is found not only in terms of the content that is produced by the two groups, but also in terms of the tactics employed by the users to spread the content and the overall end-goal for such engagement. They found that anti-regime participants rarely shared direct political statements and largely used Twitter as an organizational tool for the protests. Regime loyalists, on the other hand, used Twitter as a communicative tool with a focus on tarnishing and “trolling” the other group with “fake news” and other forms of slander and disinformation. This links to one of the points that will be made in this thesis regarding the manner in which SNS can serve as “an instrument for developing [...] social and political identities across highly polarized spectrums of the Russian political and civic engagement” (Nechai and Goncharov 2017).

Government intervention in the SNS media landscape since the 2011 Bolotnaya protests have been well documented in the academic literature (Wijermars 2021; Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021; Flikke 2016; Gabdulhakov 2020; Vendil Pallin 2017; Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2020). All of the literature points to the 2011 Bolotnaya protests (as well as the concurrent events of the Arab Spring and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine) as a watershed moment when the Russian government began to understand the power of the internet and the need to intervene in order to prevent further mass protests. The Russian government undertook various tactics to achieve this goal—starting with hostile takeover of SNS (as in the case of VK) and various independent publications with large online readerships (such as Lenta.ru and Vedomosti) to control the flow of information from within, and ending with large scale “flooding” tactics where SNS were inundated with pro-regime content (often with bots or users who were paid a certain sum for each post or comment) with the aim of overwhelming users with often highly contradictory information that is designed to lead one into the conclusion that the real truth is impossible to know.

Government intervention is seen not only online, but also in schools where the state program known as “patriotic education” has been launched to socialize youth into a specific government-approved mold (Sanina 2018; Hemment 2012). The stated goals of the program are to ensure:

a growth in patriotism in the country, an increase in the social and labour activities of citizens, particularly youth people, and their contribution to the development of the main spheres of life and activities of society and the government, the overcoming of extremist displays by certain groups and other negative displays, the rebirth of spirituality, socio-economic stability, and stronger national security. (Sanina 2018)

With the Russian state's recent declaration of Navalny's organizations and anyone associated to Navalny as extremists, it is clear what the wording of "extremist displays" in the program statement is meant to address.

Lastly, the corpus of academic literature on the theories of political socialization, connective action, and the dutiful/actualizing citizenship model are plentiful, but these theories have for the most part not been applied in the context of Russian protests or Russian youth political engagement. What reference to these theories do exist in the literature on Russian protests are either made in passing with little elaboration or specific focus, or these references have no particular link to SNS or youth.

Toepfl (who was interviewed for this paper) investigated "why, how and with what consequences a heavily digitally enabled 'connective action network' has transitioned over time to a more traditional 'collective action network,'" based on the 2011-2013 Bolotnaya protests (Toepfl 2018). The distinction between connective and collective action networks was introduced by Bennett to illustrate the differences between the actions organized online, with a horizontal approach that eschews hierarchical structures, and those organized offline with a more rigid hierarchy often found in political parties and civil society organizations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). More on this theory and the further distinction of connective action into self-organizing connection action and organizationally enabled connection action will be discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

Situating this thesis in the literature, I will be seeking to fill the gap on the influence of SNS on youth anti-regime alternative political engagement in the context of the Russian protests of 2017 through 2021. The theories of political socialization, connective action, and the actualizing/dutiful citizen model will be applied in this

context. As mentioned above, these theories have largely been applied in the context of Western states. As such, this paper will also endeavor to have application in studies that relate to hybrid regimes and electoral authoritarianisms.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This thesis relies on a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methodology. Regarding qualitative analysis, first-hand interviews were conducted with academic experts from various fields related to the subject of this study. (The list of interviewees with short biographies can be found in appendix A of this thesis.) These interviews informed much of the quantitative data discussed below by tying together different forms of political engagement with SNS use among Russian youth and by providing a historical and contextual background to the role of SNS and state digital intervention since the period of the Bolotnaya protests. Throughout this thesis, excerpts relevant to the use of SNS by Russian youth are presented from a collection of autobiographical essays on the subject on Russia's Generation Z, entitled *Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete: pokolenie Z: popytka avtoportret* [You do not even represent (understand) us: generation Z: an attempted self-portrait] (Sverdlova, Mishchuk, and Vyzhutovich 2018).

Information and data on the Russian state's oppressive actions against those who have engaged in various forms of alternative anti-regime political engagement were found in the annual reports made by *SOVA* Information and Analytical Center (Verkhovskij 2013; 2018) and the human rights media project *OVD-info* (Durnovo 2015; OVD-Info n.d.). This thesis also analyses a number of Russian laws that were specifically designed to demobilize the opposition through judicial intimidation and those laws that are abused by the authorities thanks to their broad and far-reaching language (State Duma 2012; 2013; 2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2019a; 2019b; 2021).

Analysis of online activism in Russia—especially as it relates to the dichotomy of “virtual” and “physical”—was found in a report published by the Russian Public Opinion

Research Centre (A. Arkhipova et al. 2018). Some of the information on the Navalny movement was found in the reports of the Anti-Corruption Fund and Navalny's own online publication (Navalny 2011; Anti-Corruption Fund 2014; n.d.). Lastly, throughout this thesis, Russian-language journalistic articles on Russia's protest movements, oppressive laws, and SNS political engagement are used for contextual purposes (Meduza 2016; 2021; BBC News Russkaya Sluzhba 2019; 2021; RBK 2018; Torocheshnikova 2018; Radio Svoboda 2019; Deutsche Welle n.d.).

Quantitative analysis was performed with datasets from the "FES Youth Study Russia 2020" which was undertaken by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation ('Pokolenie Z' 2020). These datasets contain sociological polling data with responses on a wide variety of questions (e.g., their experience and desires in various aspects of life, such as education, employment, political participation, familial relationships, leisure activities, digital technologies, as well as beliefs, moral values, and life principles) from 1500 respondents whose ages range between 14 and 29 years old. These surveys were conducted in 2018.

Responses from these datasets were re-coded and cross-tabulated in order to analyse patterns of political behaviour that are discussed in this thesis. The extent to which SNS usage impacts participation in issue-based and local activism was inferred from certain proxy variables in the FES survey data—namely, regular volunteering (at least once a month), having participated in civic movements or organizations, and signing petitions. The measure of how active the FES survey respondents are on SNS was extrapolated based on their network embeddedness—i.e. the size of their online network (number of "friends"). The proxy variables, along with variables such as participation in

demonstrations and interest in various levels of politics were cross-tabulated with the measure of embeddedness and frequency of SNS use to analyse the impact of SNS on youth anti-regime alternative political engagement. The effect of other agents of political socialization—such as parents and peers—on political engagement were also analyzed based on data from the FES survey. The statistical significance of the presented data was not examined, however, the percentages in the crosstabulations do show a notable trend that is consistent with the analysis. Appendix B contains figures and tables with bar-charts and cross-tabulations that are discussed throughout this thesis.

Data from a Russian independent investigative media outlet Proekt was used in this thesis for statistics on arrests and apprehensions during the 2021 protests in Russia (Proekt 2021). Data on the number of participants involved in the protests relevant to this study was found in a report by *Fond Liberalnaya Missiya* [Liberal Mission Fund] (Fond liberal'naya missiya 2021). This thesis also makes use of sociological data found in a 2019 report produced by the Levada Centre—a Russian independent, nongovernmental polling and sociological research organization—and published by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (Volkov 2019). Lastly, another report from the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre contains sociological polling data—including the age of participants, as shown in figure 23—on the participants of the 2021 protests in Russia (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Background and Defining Key Terms

3.1 Political Socialization

Merelman defines political socialization as “the process by which people acquire relatively enduring orientations toward politics in general and toward their own political system” (Merelman 1986). Because SNS will be explored in this study as agents of political socialization it will be important to discuss some of the logics and reasonings behind the notion of political socialization and how it is related to youth. This section will endeavor to do so, and will begin the review of political socialization agents with parents, schools, peers, and period/cohort effects. The influence of political socialization agents is not exercised independently by the respective agents, but in concert with one another (Lee, Shah, and McLeod 2013). As such, before discussing the power of SNS as an agent of political socialization, other agents should be explored, especially since the findings of this study point to an intimate connection between the use of SNS and the frequency of political discussions with parents and peers in how these two factors impact the political behaviour and norms of Russian youth.

At the most basic level, the product of the political socialization process is political knowledge, norms, attitudes, and behaviour (Ohme and Vreese 2020). Political knowledge is related to the degree to which one is aware of political information such as the function of various government institutions or the current state of political affairs in one’s country. Political norms, according to Ohme, “describe the perception of ‘behavioural regularities,’ for example considering casting a vote as a civic duty or seeing volunteering as an important value in society” (Ohme and Vreese 2020). In the third section of this chapter, I will discuss how these norms have shifted in youth who were

socialized in large part through SNS. Political attitudes describe people's positions vis-à-vis specific long-term developments, such as, in the case of Russia, one's position in relation to the anti-corruption protests or in relation to corruption itself. Lastly, political behaviour describes voluntary acts of a political nature, such as participating in a protest or participating in an election.

There is a large body of literature that explores the extent to which early life experiences are capable of forming the foundation for political norms, attitudes, and ultimately behaviour (for a literature review see Neundorf and Smets 2017). Much of this literature relies on the notion of impressionable or formative years which transpire sometime between childhood and adulthood. It is thus believed that during the formative years, political socialization is most impactful since young citizens have yet to develop political attitudes or habits and are therefore “more easily influenced by external factors”—as compared to later stages of the life cycle when political attitudes and habits are generally considered to be less malleable and more entrenched (Neundorf and Smets 2017). There seems to be little consensus in the literature as to when exactly the formative years take place.

Traditionally, the beginning of the period of impressionable years has been attributed to the age of seventeen; however, recent research suggests that children may be socialized into politics at a much younger age—possibly as early as 7 years-old (Bartels and Jackman 2014). According to most of the literature on this subject, the socialization process appears to be all but complete by the age of 25 years-old (Neundorf and Smets 2017). In the later stages of the life cycle, political socialization is generally much less impactful as political behaviours and attitudes become more and more entrenched with

fewer chances for adjustment. In this vein, studies show that political behaviours learned in the early stages of one's adult life, such as voting or non-voting, predict behaviours in the later stages of the lifecycle (Neundorf and Smets 2017).

The intrinsically impressionable nature of the early stages of the lifecycle, combined with the relative openness to novel political knowledge, norms and behaviour, are characteristics of youth that lead to impassioned contests by various actors to win them over (politically or otherwise). This study is in large part an exploration of this contest in the Russian context—especially as it concerns the Russian state and the opposition. In relation to the process of political socialization, these actors are known as agents of political socialization (Merelman 1986).

These agents are the sources from which children learn about political and social issues, directly or indirectly. There are a multitude of such sources, such as—*inter alia*—family, peers, school, and mass media. In their study of how youth are able to be active participants in their own socialization process, Lee et al. make a distinction between communication competence and communication mediation (Lee, Shah, and McLeod 2013). The former pertains to the skills needed to be actively engaged in political life and navigate toward citizenship—especially as it concerns media use—while the latter is related to the manner in which media consumption and political discussions “shape and direct social structural influences on civic and political engagement” (Lee, Shah, and McLeod 2013). This perspective emphasizes the interdependence of various agents of political socialization, as well as its bidirectional nature. In other words, the salience of some agents of political socialization will rely on the socialization effects of other agents (for example, parents may play a role in how much of an impact schooling has on their

child, peers may have an influence over what kind of, and how much of an impact media has on youth, and so on) and the flow of socialization is not strictly agent to youth—youth themselves can have an impact on how peers, media, school and parents socialize them. The latter point is especially salient vis-à-vis SNS, where youth have a pronounced ability to determine their network and thereby their socialization.

As one might expect, parents are one of the most significant sources of political socialization and their influence is often associated with the development of party identification, political ideology, and political participation (Neundorf and Smets 2017). However, this influence is determinant on several factors—such as the degree of politicization in the family environment. Highly politicized parents can act as role models for their children who will mimic their parents’ political attitudes and behaviours according to the knowledge passed onto them by their parents (Beck and Jennings 1982). Indeed, as discussed in the findings below, youth who report having frequent political conversations with parents and peers are the ones most likely to also report having similar political positions to those of their parents.

The socioeconomic status of parents may also act as a determinant in the political socialization process since high socioeconomic status is associated with high levels of education which, in turn, are capable of imparting youth with a particular set of political attitudes and behaviours (Beck and Jennings 1982). In other words, as noted above, parents are an important variable in the kind of political socialization their child will receive in school (Lee, Shah, and McLeod 2013).

It is important to note that youth are not necessarily bound to adopt a mirror image of their parent’s political attitudes and behaviours—Westholm suggests that

instead of viewing the parents' influence as a conditioning factor, we should view it as an intervening factor (Westholm 1999). The likelihood of a direct adoption of political identification from a politicized parent is mostly associated with the adolescent stage. In the subsequent young adult stage, it is possible for children of politicized parents to revise their political identification because "those who are politically engaged are most likely to be exposed to new political stimuli in early adulthood" (Dinas 2014). In such a case, the influence of familial political socialization is still quite notable insofar as the child has acquired from their parents the needed communication competences and political norms to have a curious and inquisitive disposition towards fresh political knowledge and attitudes.

As noted above, level of education can be associated with certain political attitudes and behaviours. Consequently, schools are a notable agent of political socialization, however, the exact way in which school influences students is unclear and depends on a multitude of factors (Neundorf and Smets 2017). One possible manner in which schooling contributes to political socialization is through dedicated civics classes—naturally, depending on the school and the region in question, the manner in which the civic class is taught will vary drastically. Russia's patriotic education model will differ greatly from the model adopted in many Western countries that encourages budding citizens to adopt a critical attitude in relation to their government. In this vein, Torney-Putra found that the extent to which students experience a sense a freedom in their classroom—the reassuring sense that they can speak their minds and have their political expression be respected—has a significant impact on the student's political

attitudes, behaviours and knowledge (Torney-Purta 2002). So much so, that civics training is able to fill in gaps left by less politicized family dynamics.

In the findings section of this thesis, the effects of Russia's state-run and state-sponsored youth fora are discussed—the findings reveal that the manner in which the materials are presented matter more than the actual matter being presented (Silvan 2022). For example, allowing youth to voice their thoughts during political discussion, and thereby providing them with a sense of agency, is more impactful than the more top-down approach of an instructor forcing youth to adopt a specific point of view.

Besides parents and school, a vital source of political socialization are peers. This is a key agent of political socialization for this study as mobilization among youth mostly takes place through peers (Neundorf and Smets 2017). As will be discussed in the findings, Russia is no exception to this—peers were a crucial motivator and mobilizing agent during the 2017-2021 street protests in Russia and a significant predictor of political interest and engagement. Not only are youth mobilized by their peers, they also “discuss sociopolitical issues together, share popular culture, and develop (common or opposing) sets of values” (Neundorf and Smets 2017). Being part of a social network (not to be confused with social network sites—social network here simply refers to a network of peers or an extended group of friends with varying degrees of linkages) introduces youth to essential communication competences, as well as democratic and economic principles that manifest in the exchanges of goods, services and information (Cochran and Brassard 1979). As such, Lee et al. argue that “the capacity of peer norms to boost civic engagement depends on its impact on political discussion within a social network.”

Before discussing SNS, it would be helpful to say a few words on the effect of political events and how such events can act as agents of political socialization in and of themselves. Since the political context in which a given generation is experiencing its formative years will always be different from that of the last generation, one can expect that the patterns of political attitudes and behaviour in the emergent generation will be manifestly unlike those of the previous ones.

This is known as a *period effect*, when a major event, such as a war or large demonstrations, have an effect on an entire population, regardless of socioeconomic factors (Neundorf and Smets 2017). During such events, young adults are often disproportionately impacted since they are going through the stage of identity formation and such major disturbances will have a direct impact on their political make-up (Jennings 1990). Therefore,

the political significance of the crystallization process lies in the content of that which is crystallizing, the social political, and historical materials that are being worked over and experienced by the young during these formative years. For it is this content that colours the cohort. If the colour differs appreciably from that attached to past cohorts, we have the making of a political generation (Jennings 1990).

Cohort is defined as a “number of individuals who have some characteristics in common” (Glenn 2005)—most commonly, the shared characteristic is having been born in a proximate span of years. Erpyleva argues that the events of the 2011-2013 Bolotnaya protests were such a crystallization process whereby the cohort of youth in the subsequent 2017 anti-corruption protests had been socialized in an entirely different political context as compared to those of the previous cohort, with appreciably different political attitudes and behaviours (Erpyleva 2020).

Besides the period effect, there is also the *cohort effect*, defined as “*the result of cohort members having shared similar socializing experiences* [emphasis added], especially during late adolescence and early adulthood” (Markus 1985) The subjects of this thesis, Russian youth between the ages of 14 and 29, I will argue, have shared similar socializing experiences through SNS. The emergence of SNS as a powerful agent of political socialization and media instrument coincides with the late adolescence and early adulthood of this generation. The impact of this coincidence is most saliently seen in the political norms of young Russians, which are manifestly different from the older generations whose political socialization was not impacted by SNS.

3.2 Network Logics and SNS as an Agent of Political Socialization

To begin, it would be helpful to define Social Network Sites (SNS). SNS are

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature of nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

Russia’s predominant SNS and the extent to which they fit this definition are discussed in section 4.3 of this thesis. Ultimately, SNS are defined by their social element—with their interactive design, users are invited to contribute to these sites and are able to select into an information diet of their choosing (Svensson 2011). The next few sections in this chapter will seek to examine some of the ways that SNS can act as agents of political socialization and thereby impact the political behaviour and norms of youth.

The perceived self-determination that is associated with SNS as an agent of political socialization is part of what sets it apart from other such agents. Parents, school and even to some extent peers are not sources of political influence that youth have as much control over (Ohme and Vreese 2020). SNS users construct their own networks that are often based on loose connections—connections that are often far weaker than personal offline networks (Ohme and Vreese 2020). The consequences of this are manifold. Since the information that a user sees on SNS is dependent almost entirely on their self-constructed network (with the caveat of information algorithms on SNS being a highly opaque mechanism, as discussed below), this information can seem more trustworthy and therefore be far more impactful than the same messages communicated through more traditional forms of media—such as print media or television—with which the consumer has little such interaction (Boulianne 2015). Much of the research done in the past decade confirms this trend (Bode 2012; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Ohme and Vreese 2020; Aruguete and Calvo 2018; Svensson 2011).

It must be noted that although SNS provide its users with the sense that they self-select into the sets of information that become available to them through their own manipulations on the sites, the process and mechanism through which SNS distributes this information is far from transparent. SNS algorithms for information distribution are often described as a black box due to their lack of transparency and, as argued by Pasquale, the “values and prerogatives that the encoded rules enact are hidden within black boxes” (Pasquale 2016). The nature of power on SNS—where it is often unclear where exactly the power to persuade and influence lies—is intervened by the enigmatic black box that cannot with any degree of certainty be said to represent a neutral variable

in the dynamics of power and influence. Deliberately or not, SNS algorithms can promulgate specific values and points of views over others—it is certainly possible that this may have taken place in the Russian context. This study largely focuses on the users’ perceptions of SNS and their subsequent political behaviour, rather than the exact technological nature of information distribution on SNS. Nevertheless, the intervening power of SNS algorithms should be kept in mind and should not be dismissed.

As a consequence of the perceived self-determined nature of SNS, the circulation of political information is de-professionalized and the top-down elite fashion of information distribution is exchanged with co-production and crowdsourcing (Ohme and Vreese 2020). Since users on SNS do not have to cater to the greatest common denominator, as is most often the case with traditional media, much more niche interests can be adequately accommodated for by bringing together those who share the same interests within a digital network (Ohme and Vreese 2020; Svensson 2011). SNS can afford to do so in large part thanks to its ability to eliminate the constraints of time and space that are often associated with communication on niche subjects. In other words, such communication is instant and the distance between network participants is of no matter. Olga Selezneva, a Russian youth who contributed to a collection of autobiographical essays on Russia’s youth, describes this as follows:

I go onto the ‘Cynical Journalist’ [SNS community] page. There I see this post: “They instructed us to hand over the material by today - I sent it in at 23:59.’ God, this is from my life! Like. Subscribe. “There are 24,237 of us!” Great, now I’m there as well. There are 24,237 of us, almost randomly gathered people. It’s a success, certainly. (Sverdlova, Mishchuk, and Vyzhutovich 2018)

Not only is the information seen by SNS users “pre-vetted” through the user’s own choices over whom to include in their network, the information is also demonstrably

“pre-validated” by the network itself through the function of “likes,” “reposts,” “favourites,” and other forms of interaction that SNS offers to its users, providing users with a kind of “stamp of approval” (Jost et al. 2018). It’s possible that these features do not just reify users’ existing political attitudes. According to the shared reality theory, individuals are motivated to establish a mutual understanding of reality with those who are close or valued to them (Hardin and Higgins, n.d.). To this end, users will adjust their political attitudes and behaviours in such a manner that will be in accord with those they are close to. The same tendency is replicated with online networks, especially considering that in being part of a network, a user is encouraged to be in constant communication with their network in order to establish and negotiate their online identity and thereby determine their own place in the network (Svensson 2011). Elena Bazina, another Russian youth from the abovementioned collection of essays, describes this as follows:

A simple symbol in the form of a heart or a thumbs up, which originally expressed the user's positive attitude towards the [publication] under which they click “Like”, has long turned into just a way of reacting to an event. We use “like” as a response to the news and actions of friends. Accordingly, the posts that gather the most “likes” are not the texts, photos or videos that are the most interesting and original, but those that have been viewed by the largest number of users. Thus, when formulating our thoughts, shooting videos or taking a photo, we are trying to fit into certain frames: even originality should be in moderation. A kind of originality that is bound to a template. With enviable regularity, publications appear that destroy old patterns and create new ones. Social media trends change faster than those in real life. Invariably, only one thing remains in fashion – the raised up finger [of a like button]. (Sverdlova, Mishchuk, and Vyzhutovich 2018)

Svensson argues that “an important aspect of the emerging network logic is that it disciplines us to be constantly updated in the double sense of the word—to be updated of the doing in the network as well as update the network of our doings, thoughts and feelings” (Svensson 2011). The nature of the connectivity within online networks treats all interactions among users as a reflexive project in which the user is continually

building and maintaining their online identity. SNS have no closing hours, so the reflexive identity-building communication never sleeps. With the simple publication of a link to another profile within the social network site (whether it is the profile of a public figure or an organization or a movement), the user is “freeloading on their supposed connotations, connotations to which we wish to tie images of ourselves” (Svensson 2011).

The freedom that SNS allows its users in building their online identities through information consumption and (re)distribution would be far too overwhelming in the sea of information that is present on SNS. In order to sieve through this mound of information, users “need guidance and this is one way our networks are increasingly influential, amplifying certain sites, while sorting out others since it would be impossible for us to process the value of all different sites on offer” (Svensson 2011). As such, SNS can act as a powerful conduit of peer pressure and influence and, most importantly, as an information filter. In the subtleties of the mechanisms and logics of information exchanges within SNS, it is difficult to make heads or tails of where exactly the power of influence lies (especially, as discussed above, when one considers the black box of SNS algorithms).

As discussed by Svensson, “it is not at all obvious whether being watched online and being used by others in their identity negotiation is exercising power or being subordinate to power” (Svensson 2011). Network authorities and opinion leaders on SNS are those who are able to deftly maintain their friend or follower list and are able to match their input—in the form of multimedia publications—with a significant enough output—in the form of user interaction (through features such as “liking,” “sharing,” or

“commenting”). As mentioned by Bazina above, being able to achieve this match is reliant on having a keen sense of what interpretive frame to use in publications—knowing which frames are “in fashion” and which no longer so (Sverdlova, Mishchuk, and Vyzhutovich 2018). Interpretive frames will be discussed in more detail below, especially it concerns those of Russia’s opposition leader Navalny.

As noted before, the construction of an online network is a highly personalized process. As such, when individuals construct these networks, they “actively seek content that is cognitively congruent with their preferences and prior beliefs” (Aruguete and Calvo 2018). This phenomenon is what Aruguete et al. refer to as selective exposure (Aruguete and Calvo 2018). In effect, selective exposure will assure that the user’s SNS feed consists almost entirely of publications that validate their own assumptions. Consequently, composition effect is the resulting groupings of social media interpretive frames that are distributed across various online networks in response to a political (though certainly not only political) event (Aruguete and Calvo 2018). As will be discussed in the findings, Russia’s SNS are by and large an “echo chamber” and there is very little overlap or interaction between the state-loyalist and opposition networks.

Through user interactions such as “sharing” or “liking” SNS multimedia publications, these interpretive frames are established as certain publications with their respective frames are interacted with more than others. In essence, users “vote” on interpretive frames that are most agreeable with their political attitudes—the most voted on publications will have a dominant position within the SNS news-feed among the network users. To maintain their influential position in the network, network authorities must have a keen sense of how to frame important political events in such a manner that

is agreeable with as many network participants as possible. Indeed, as will be discussed below, having a successful interpretive frame is what can make all the difference in SNS-enabled protest mobilization (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022).

Notwithstanding the “hive-mind” nature of online networks, it is important to note that by the very fact of having a potentially limitless number of permutations for networks and respective interpretive frames, SNS can open up to its users a cornucopia of constantly updated information that would otherwise be challenging or impossible to come across (Ohme and Vreese 2020). In the context of Russia’s information landscape, seeking and distributing anti-regime information has been increasingly difficult and often highly dangerous. As will be discussed below, since at least the 2011 Bolotnaya protests, SNS provided the only plausible means through which to organize mass protests (Vendil Pallin 2017; Gabdulhakov 2020; Flikke 2016). In this sense, it can be argued that SNS have contributed to an overall more diverse information topography.

The personalized and reflexive nature of SNS information exchange and the de-professionalization of the media space afforded by SNS, has contributed to the rise of single-issue engagement that is based on a highly localized stratum of the political landscape where users are suppling a biographical approach to their participation (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). In other words, political engagement in the modern digital era is based on an individual’s own intimately personal connection with the cause—whether it be their hopes, lifestyles, or grievances—that is more often than not expressed through SNS to a highly curated network of like-minded individuals. This trend is especially prominent among youth who are becoming increasingly jaded with traditional hierarchical structures of parties and civic

organizations, gravitating more towards horizontal networks and reflexive engagements in lifestyle politics (such as climate and consumer related issues). Section 4.2 and 4.5 of this thesis discuss this shift in the context of Russia’s street protests between 2011 and 2021—especially as it concerns various “apolitical” movements that sprung up following the 2011 Bolotnaya protests. The findings of this study also discuss youth involvement in these “apolitical” movements and presents data that suggests SNS use is a strong predictor for volunteering, participation in civic movements and organizations, signing petitions, and interest in local (municipal) politics—all of which are qualified in the findings as proxy variables for issue-based and local activism.

3.3 Linking SNS to Anti-Regime Alternative Political Engagement and the Theory of Connective Action

For the purposes of this thesis, anti-regime alternative political engagement is defined as any deliberate and voluntary actions taken by Russian citizens outside the auspices of routine state politics (outside the traditional political landscape, such as voting, joining a party, running for office, etc.) and the aims of which are to express disapproval of certain policies or the general performance of the current government. With the rise of SNS as fora for political discussion, much research has been dedicated to the subject of digitally networked political participation and how such participation can be characterized and conceptualized. Early research often dismissed online political engagement as “slacktivism” which is defined as “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (Theocharis 2015). These accusations have largely been levied due to the perceived relative low cost of online engagement and its “purely symbolic”

nature. As will be discussed in the findings of this study, Russian youth are by and large skeptical of the impacts of online political engagement, especially as juxtaposed with the danger related to the government's enforcement of laws designed to repress such engagement (as discussed in section 4.4 of this thesis).

More recent research is not so quick to dismiss online engagement. Jost et al. analyzed the role of “peripheral users” (those whose contributions to the digital network communication mostly consisted of low cost actions, such as “liking” or “sharing” the publications of “core users”—the most active users who produced the vast majority of the content) in the context of the Gezi park demonstrations in Turkey, the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States, and the Indignados movement in Spain (Jost et al. 2018). They found that the power of the peripheral users consisted in their numbers—the overall contribution to the exchange of information was greater than that of the core participants. In other words, “the influence of core participants would have been diminished greatly had it not been for the forwarding activity of peripheral members of the network” (Jost et al. 2018).

Moreover, relative costs of political actions or their symbolic nature are not criteria that are considered in any existing definitions in the literature on political participation (Theocharis 2015). (Not to mention that online political engagement *can* have an exceedingly high associated cost when, as discussed below, even as minute of an action as liking a post that is critical of the government can carry with it arbitrary and disproportionately punitive criminal liability.) What makes political actions what they are is the expression of political aims or intentions. The act of liking or reposting in and of itself is not the political act, but the subsequent redistribution of the liked or reposted

political information within one's online network is. Although the intentions behind "liking" or "re-posting" may be more modest, "in digital media platforms, what may often be a simple expression of preference may end up having serious consequences" (Theocharis 2015). Furthermore, low-cost political actions, even unidimensional SNS user interactions (e.g., liking), can be the first steps of what may lead to what is perceived as high-cost political engagement.

McAdam's model of recruitment to high-risk/cost activism starts with an individual who has an attitudinal availability—the fitting political attitudes that are gained through various agents of political socialization—which leads the individual to an initial act of low-risk/cost activism where they are exposed to a greater likelihood of making contact with an activist that will in turn introduce them to high-risk/cost activism (McAdam 1986). The last step depends heavily on the individual's biographical availability—the notion that "those with less time to engage in activism or more personal responsibilities constraining involvement will be less likely to participate even if they are so predisposed [...] to do so" (McAdam 1986).

SNS are fertile grounds for McAdam's model of recruitment. To begin, in being a powerful agent of political socialization, SNS is potentially able to socialize users into a certain set political attitudes, depending on the user's network (as described above with the shared reality theory). This may lead to an attitudinal availability. Low-cost political actions—in the form of "likes," "shares," or even "tweets" that may reveal the author's personal ties to the cause—take place directly on the SNS. In turn, since SNS are specifically designed to make contact with like-minded individuals more likely, such online forms of communication as liking, sharing or commenting on political content

may then lead to contact with activists who are involved in high-risk activism. The popularity and spread of SNS among young adults is a well-known phenomenon (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014). Many of these young adults are at the exact stage of the life cycle when biographical availability is often argued to be plentiful—in the narrow span of years when they are independent from their parents and relatively free from adult responsibilities (McAdam 1986).

In practice, the subject of whether SNS participation leads to high-risk participation, such as street demonstrations, is heavily debated in the literature. Enikolopov et. al found that during the 2011 Bolotnaya Protests in Russia, the social network site VK had a profound effect on protest activity in places where VK penetration was high (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). A 10 percent increase in VK penetration increased the likelihood of a protest by 4.6 percent and the number of protestors by 19 percent. However, it is important to note that the same study found that this increase was not so much due to the spread of anti-regime content as it was about reducing the costs of coordination. The findings of this study indicate that embeddedness in an online social network (i.e. how many “friends” one has on SNS) is a notable predictor of how likely a Russian youth is to have participated in a demonstration.

The ability of SNS to reduce the costs of coordination is reflected in the conclusions of Nechai and Goncharov who studied how users on Twitter acted during the 2017 anti-corruption protests and discovered that there was a clearly distinct separation between two groups of users—the anti-regime participants and regime loyalists (Nechai and Goncharov 2017). They found that anti-regime participants rarely shared direct political statements and largely used Twitter as an organizational tool for the protests.

Regime loyalists, on the other hand, used Twitter as a communicative tool with a focus on tarnishing and “trolling” the other group with “fake news” and other forms of slander and disinformation. Likewise, in a study of the Euromaidan demonstrations, Onuch found that SNS were first and foremost an organizational tool that “allowed activists to facilitate connectivity, coordinate the mobilization process, speed up the flow of information, and create opportunities for grassroots self-organization by ‘ordinary’ citizens who participated in the protests” (Onuch 2015).

In the context of SNS, organizational mechanisms are more personalized than in the context of more traditional forms of political organization which are largely based on social group identity, membership, or ideology (Jost et al. 2018; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Bennet argues that “these multi-faceted processes of individualization [...] include the propensity to develop flexible political identifications based on personal lifestyles, with implications in collective action and organizational participation” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). As such, personal expression dominates over common group or ideological identification. Bennett refers to these mechanisms as the logics of connective action. Networks based on flexible social weak ties have become in and of themselves core organizations, transcending the more rigid structures of the traditional forms of organization.

Logics of connective action are largely based on “personalized action frames” that will include “political content in the forms of easily personalized ideas” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Slogans—such as the popular “we are the 99 percent,” or, in the Russian context, “*My Vdes' Vlast*” [It is us who rule here]—resonate strongly among individuals involved in digitally networked actions. Content such as this must be

inclusive to the various personal narratives for being involved in a cause. What has been an especially powerful tool in personalized communication is memes, which are defined as “network building and bridging units of social information transmission similar to genes in the biological sphere” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Memes will often manifest as images that are easily transformed to fit a great variety of personal narrative frames. In fact, this transformability is what makes them memes. Slogans (that are often shortened to hashtags²) and memes is where interpretive frames are manifested most saliently in the logics of connective actions.

The success of Navalny’s demonstrations in 2017 hinged almost entirely on his ability to create fitting and successful interpretive frames (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). The slogans and memes that were generated by Navalny and his team—and, subsequently, in a more spontaneous fashion, by the online opposition community in which Navalny and his allies are among the network authorities—acted as a conduit of these interpretive frames and are in no small part a reason for the success of the 2017-2021 protests. As will be discussed in more detail below, using SNS to evoke concrete grievances—such as frustration with corruption and nepotism—that users can easily identify with and thereby utilize in their SNS-enabled identity-building projects (in turn, having the consequence of others in their network adopting the same interpretation frames in their identity negotiation), is a pivotal element of mobilization in the logics of connective action.

It is at this point important to mention that the line between online and offline political engagement is becoming increasingly blurred. In differentiating offline political

² Defined by Merriam Webster as “a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text (such as a tweet)” (“Definition of Hashtag” n.d.).

engagement from the online, one should not limit themselves to the associated costs. As noted above, political engagement “on the streets” has often been considered by academics to be of more value and consequence than so-called “slacktivism” by virtue of the associated costs (Theocharis 2015). In the context of Russia, however, the costs associated with online political engagement have been increasing drastically each year with the arbitrary application of intentionally vague laws that stipulate harsh criminal sentences for “extremist” publications that Russian authorities could claim almost any SNS post critical of the government to be (Gabdulhakov 2020).

Curiously, as will be discussed in the findings, even defining offline political engagement as an action that takes place in “real life” and “on the streets” can be somewhat misleading and limiting in the Russian context as many such events take place solely for the purposes of creating political content to share online (A. Arkhipova et al. 2018). (Such as solitary pickets where a sole individual will hold up a banner with a relevant political slogan in a public place and then publish a photograph of them doing so online.) As such, a purely offline form of political engagement in contemporary Russia is difficult to conceive of and even more difficult to define.

Likewise, when it comes to mass demonstrations, qualifying them as a purely offline form of political engagement could undermine much of the vital work that is being done online to ensure that these protests can take place on the ground (Jost et al. 2018). This is not only related to the mobilizational efforts taking place prior to the demonstrations, but also during and even after they have taken place. Because SNS has the ability to enhance the quality and speed of information that users receive in relation to political actions (especially in undemocratic states where other forms of media and

information distribution are controlled by the state), users can be better informed of the actual costs of participating in such actions in real time, as the demonstrations are happening (Jost et al. 2018). For example, users will have a better grasp of how many people are participating in a protest (especially if their network connections are sharing their participation experiences on the SNS) and what legal and medical services may be available to the protestors. If there are many participants and if these services are readily available, the associated costs may be perceived to be lower, thereby encouraging more users to participate.

To this end, the Russian human rights organization *OVD-info* maintained a Telegram bot that assisted those who were arrested at the demonstrations and assigned them lawyers who would represent them in court. During the “Free Navalny” protest in 2021, the organizers created a site where Russian citizens could publicly register their intention to participate and simultaneously submit an anonymous mark that would appear on a virtual map, showing how many people intent to attend the protest across Russia (‘Svobodu Navalnomu!’ n.d.). The intention behind this campaign was to create the sense that those intending to participate are not alone in their intentions.

However, if the user is left with the impression that few are involved in a political protest, they may become less inclined to participate themselves. Moreover, factors such as police presence and the occurrence of violence may also discourage potential participants—however high their attitudinal or biographical availability may be—from participating. It would be naïve to assume that the state in these scenarios is not itself heavily invested in seeking ways to control and monitor SNS. By the very nature of displaying intimately personal information on SNS, users are exposing themselves to

risks associated with state surveillance (Jost et al. 2018; Svensson 2011). Section 4.4 of this thesis discusses in more detail how the Russian state has aggressively intervened in the SNS sphere of political information distribution, seeking to disempower and demobilize SNS users.

Bennett distinguishes two different types of connective action: self-organizing networks and organizationally enabled networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The former is characterized by having “little to no organizational coordination of action; large-scale personal access to multi-layered social technologies; communication content [that] centers on emergent inclusive personal action frames; personal expression shared over social networks; and collectivities often shun involvement of existing formal organizations” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) The latter is characterized as having “loose organizational coordination of action; organizations [that] provide social technology outlays-both custom and commercial; communication content centers on organizationally generated inclusive person action frames; some organization moderation of personal expression through social networks; and organizations in the background in loosely linked networks” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Departing from the realm of connective action, a strong organizational coordination of action is described by Bennett as organizationally brokered collective action.

Understanding that the somewhat anarchic nature behind self-organizing networks is thus often vulnerable to the concerted and well-organized counter-efforts of the state, some integration of more traditional collective action methods may take place in an effort to envenom anti-regime political actions with a more structured and organized force. This may warrant a shift to organizationally enabled connective action (hereafter:

OECA). As will be discussed below, OECA can describe the mobilizational tactics used during the 2011 Bolotnaya protests and by Navalny and his team in the 2017 anti-corruption demonstrations where Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation operated a network of regional offices with young volunteers who were recruited primarily online (Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021).

The shift to OECA may take place naturally in reaction to a triggering event that “[transforms] a latent form of identification into a highly salient and explicit one” (Jost et al. 2018). Subsequently, the following is observed:

(1) with increased salience and strength of group identification, the likelihood of participating in collective action on behalf of that group grows, and (2) participation in collective action increases the salience and strength of identification with the group whose grievances are addressed through collective action (Jost et al. 2018).

In this sense, SNS is still a powerful tool of mobilization since online networks are designed to bring together like-minded people, including those with shared grievances. Moreover, McGarty et al. argue that collective action is “more likely when people have shared interests, feel relatively deprived, are angry, believe they can make a difference, and strongly identify with relevant social groups” (McGarty et al. 2014). SNS are exactly the kind of fora where individuals with shared interests can express their anger, and publish vital mobilizational information with the direct intent of making others in the network believe they can make a difference (for example, through information about participation costs relative to achievable outcomes). Furthermore, as mentioned above, even with the simple act of a “repost,” for instance, the user is freeloading off the connotations behind the original post, thereby proclaiming their identification with the group or cause of the original post (Svensson 2011). Therefore, the logics of collective

and connective actions must be considered as a kind continuum where these logics are not mutually exclusive—to the contrary, they are synergetic and will feed into one another (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). This is especially evident in how a significant number contemporary political and civic organization have at least in some way utilized the mobilizational and organizational tools that are provided by SNS.

3.4 Shifting Citizenship Norms

Besides the more particular distinctions in the logics of collective and connection actions, scholarship has found that the rise of SNS has also contributed to a more extensive evolution in the manner in which citizenship is viewed and actualized. This is particularly evident in the case of youth whose political socialization took place in large part through SNS. Bennett refers to individuals of the novel form of citizenship as actualizing citizens and those of the more traditional form of citizenship as the dutiful citizen (Bennett 2008). The former is associated with a disenchantment with mainstream political parties and organizations. It is expressly not an apathetic stance toward politics, but is instead a displacement of the traditional forms of political engagement with alternative forms of engagement that are “increasingly characterized through networking practices” (Bennett 2008). Youth-oriented engagement sites that are run by governments or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are often far less appealing to the young actualizing citizens than the more spontaneous and creative forms of expression that are created online (Bennett 2008). Even when governments and NGOs themselves attempt to enter the online space, youth will often consider this attempt not to be an honest and sincere form of expression since the same political structures are behind them.

Dutiful citizens, on the other hand, are characterized by their sense of obligation and civic duty vis-à-vis government-centered activities, such as voting—a practice that dutiful citizens will consider a core democratic act (Bennett 2008). The actualizing citizen/dutiful citizen model (AC/DC model) has been used to explain the phenomenon of a nearly universal decrease in voting among youth world-wide. It is argued that instead, youth are increasingly seen to be participating in “community volunteer work, high levels of consumer activism, and impressive involvement in social cases from the environment to economic injustice in local and global arenas” (Bennett 2008). Involvement in volunteerism, civic organizations and movements, petition-signing, and interest in local (municipal) politics were chosen in this thesis as proxies for the political values of the actualizing citizen. As will be discussed in the findings, there is a significant link between the use of SNS and engagement in these proxy behaviours.

Academic studies on the AC/DC model have produced mixed results, suggesting that this model is as much a continuum as the logics of connective/collective actions model. In this vein, Shehata et al. suggest that the two models of citizenship are “complementary, rather than competitive” (Shehata, Ekström, and Olsson 2016). Empirical evidence suggests that the same youth who engage in alternative political engagement may also be interested in electoral engagement—and vice-versa (Shehata, Ekström, and Olsson 2016). Indeed, Copeland et al. found that dutiful citizenship norms were not associated with a higher likelihood of electoral participation, while actualizing citizen norms were found to be positively associated with both electoral and non-electoral participation (Copeland and Feezell 2017). The same empirical study found that digital media does contribute to non-electoral and personalized forms of political engagement,

but not electoral participation. Indeed, the individualized path of political engagement that is afforded by SNS does have a corresponding effect on individuals' political habits and identity. These results are also consistent with the study by Lee et al., which highlights the preeminent role of online communication in boosting youth political engagement since "the consumption of online information, in general, tends to exert a stronger influence on civic engagement than does traditional news use" (Lee, Shah, and McLeod 2013). The mobilizational force of SNS is also emphasized here in relation to active engagement with civic and political life.

SNS are a powerful agent of political socialization and an equally powerful mobilization tool. It is a unique form of media in that it is largely self-determined and allows its users to build an identity within their network—often through the identity-building products of others in their network. Its users benefit from reduced costs of political participation, as well as from a wider array of political and mobilizational information than what is available to traditional media consumers. SNS can have a great effect on youth through political socialization, stimulating an evolution in their perception of how citizenship can be actualized. This evolution should be understood as a continuum where the traditional institutions of political engagement are at one end of the spectrum and non-hierarchical individualized digital participation is on the other. SNS have the power to make the later end a reality, while also having a significant effect on the former. The next chapter will discuss SNS in the context of Russia's digital contemporaneity, especially as it concerns the manner in which the Russian opposition

took advantage of the powerful workings of SNS discussed above, and how the Russian state attempted to demobilize the SNS-driven opposition.

Chapter 4: Situating SNS and Anti-Regime Alternative Political

Engagement in the Russian Context

4.1 2011 Bolotnaya Protests and the Start of Connective Action in Russia

To have a better understanding of the digital information landscape of the period explored in this thesis, it would be helpful to first examine the origins of connective action in Russia. It is especially important since much of what will be explored in this thesis in relation to the late 2010s and early 2020s, had already taken place one way or another in the early days of Russian online activism.

The information topography of Russia's internet and SNS in the period until the 2011 Bolotnaya Protests enjoyed relative freedom from government interference (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021; Flikke 2016; Vendil Pallin 2017). In the aftermath of the state's actions to take full control of the television media (epitomized with the hostile takeover of NTV in 2001—a formerly independent news channel that ran programs critical of Putin's regime—and the forced disconnection of Dozhd'—another channel critical of Putin—by TV providers in 2014), many of Russia's public figures and journalists who were denied access on television turned to the internet as a free-speech refuge and a tool for communicating with their audience (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). In the 2000's, the most popular platform for political discussions was LiveJournal (hereafter: LJ) (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Wijermars 2021). LJ is a social network site where users are able to publish blog posts and maintain a “journal”—a page that displays the user's blog posts and “friends” list. The “friends” functionality allows users to build networks where the users share blog

posts amongst one another. The media format on the Russian segment of LJ tended to favour lengthy text-based publications with political analysis.

The rise of LJ was marked by the presence on the site of a wide range of media, cultural, business, and political elites who were well known to the broad public offline (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). Even as early as the 2000's, online networks began to “set the news agenda” and led to the creation of “blog-waves”—massive networking campaigns that occur when a particular blog raises an issue that spreads rapidly across networks, eventually reaching traditional forms of media (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). For example, the famous “blue buckets” campaign—which criticized the use of emergency signals on the cars of Russian officials and encouraged people to protest by affixing a blue toy bucket (resembling emergency signals) to their cars—began on LJ.

Most notably, LJ is where Alexei Navalny—who became known as the leader of the Russian opposition and the leading figure behind the 2017-2021 protests—rose to prominence (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). It was on LJ that Navalny began some of his investigative projects on government corruption. In 2009, the then-president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, who focused much of his presidency on innovations and technology, launched his own journal on LJ and encouraged other official to follow his lead (Wijermars 2021). By 2010, “some 35 percent of Russian regional governors had a blog, a third of which emulated the videoblog format exemplified by the president” (Wijermars 2021). However, Medvedev’s blog on LJ was often criticized for a lack of interactivity—Medvedev published video-blogs, but was reluctant to respond to feedback from other users.

By the time that the Bolotnaya Protests began in 2011, half of the Russian population had access to the internet, which made Russia the largest internet market in Europe (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). Moreover, SNS were already making a significant impact on people's information consumption habits. In 2010, 88 percent of Russian internet users had at least one SNS account (comparable with some of the most developed nations), and the average time spent on social media by Russians was 9.8 hours per month, which was more than any other nation in the world (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a).

The popularity and spread of SNS made it a powerful mobilization tool in the 2011 Bolotnaya protests. The Russian state did not anticipate the sheer scale of the demonstrations that erupted in response to the mass electoral fraud reports and the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency after Medvedev's relatively liberal period of rule, often dubbed "Medvedev's thaw" (Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021). Protestors used SNS, crowdsourcing platforms and "dedicated websites to monitor electoral fraud and to coordinate different type of offline activity and protest against the rigging of both the parliamentary and presidential elections" (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). One example of the use of SNS was the creation of an "event page" on Facebook that invited people to the protest on the Bolotnaya Square in Moscow on 10 December, 2011. More than 35,000 users had publicly marked themselves as "going" (planning to attend), and according to various sources between 25,000 and 50,000 people attended the protest on December 10th (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Toepfl 2018).

During this time, the Russian segment of the internet—known as Runet—saw a shift from blog-based social network sites to pure social network sites that are most

popular today, such as VKontakte (the name was later shortened to VK), Odnoklassniki (likewise, the name was shortened to OK), Facebook, Twitter, and so on (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). This shift carried with it the implication that SNS were being used by the anti-regime activists less for sharing alternative content in the form of lengthy blog posts, as it was for mobilizational and organizational purposes. Koltsova and Shcherbak note this shift by arguing that: “political activity on the Internet is not simply an online projection of offline political activity: it can itself provoke activity in offline political life” (Koltsova and Shcherbak 2015).

To this end, crowdsourcing³ and crowdfunding⁴ were used extensively by opposition groups before and after the Bolotnaya protests, whether it was 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 courts on the Russian liberal magazine New Times and to investigate the downing of Malaysian Airline flight MH17” (Wijermars 2021). Navalny’s anti-corruption project *RosPil*—which exposed embezzlement schemes amounting to more than 1 trillion rubles per year through the Russian state’s publicly available procurement system GosZakupki⁵—had taken advantage of crowdfunding by encouraging SNS users to donate money to their Yandex.Money accounts (an electronic payment service) (Navalny 2011). Within three hours of publishing the call for donations,

³ Defined by Merriam-Webster as “the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers” (‘Definition of Crowdsourcing’ n.d.)

⁴ Defined by Merriam-Webster as “the practice of obtaining needed funding (as for a new business) by soliciting contributions from a large number of people especially from the online community” (‘Definition of Crowdfunding’ n.d.)

⁵ Part of an open government initiative that began under Medvedev’s presidency and sought to bring more transparency to the government and turn Russia into an “Information Society” (Wijermars 2021)

they managed to gather more than 157 thousand rubles and had reached the daily limit of transactions. Another one of Navalny's crowdsourcing projects, *RosYama*, will be described below in relation to localized protests.

SNS had a significant impact on the organization and promotion of the 2011 Bolotnaya Protests (Vendil Pallin 2017; Wijermars 2021; Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021; Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a; Zherebtsov and Goussev 2021; Toepfl 2018). Based on online surveys of protest participants, "67 percent learned about the upcoming protests from VK, while another 22% obtained this information from other online social media platforms or online newspapers" (Dokuka 2014; Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). The leading oppositional organizations—such as the election-monitoring group *Golos*, human rights group *Memorial*, and opposition party *PARNAS* (People's Freedom Party)—were important actors in the mobilizational process, however, as argued by Toepfl, because the Bolotnaya protests largely relied on the connective model of action (as described in the previous chapter), these organizations were "relegated to background roles" (Toepfl 2018; Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

Indeed, this stage of the protest can be largely be defined through Bennett's conception of organizationally enabled connective action. The protests were coordinated through the "Protest Action Organization Committee"—a highly informal group where anyone was welcome (Toepfl 2018). This Committee would meet occasionally in public spaces and would include "journalists, oppositional politicians, artists, writers, bloggers, celebrities, and ordinary citizens" (Toepfl 2018). Since anyone was welcome, it was a common occurrence for up to 300 individuals to show up to the meetings. During these

committee meetings, rallies were planned, money was raised, and other logistical issues were discussed. The Committee had no formal organizational structure as such, and mostly relied on technologies, such as SNS (Toepfl 2018). Facebook and VK groups that promoted rallies and protests were not tied to any organization either. Through Facebook and VK groups, users could “elect” certain individuals to speak on the stage. Personal action frames (discussed in the previous chapter) were also employed with the slogans such as “For Fair Elections” and “We Were in Bolotnaya Square and We Will Be Back” (Toepfl 2018). These two slogans gained popularity due to being the names of the largest Facebook groups dedicated to the Bolotnaya protests.

In late 2012, the informal and non-hierarchical Protest Action Organization Committee had transformed to a much more formalized and hierarchical structure that became known as the “Coordination Council of the Opposition” (hereafter: CCO) (Toepfl 2018). This can be described as a shift from organizationally enabled connective action to organizationally brokered collective action. The CCO was a “superordinate leadership body of 45” that was elected online and was designed to lead the entire protest movement (Toepfl 2018). The primary motivation for its creation was to deal with the so-called “legitimacy crisis” of the previous Committee. This crisis occurred due to ideological differences among the participants and a growing disconnect between the leading activists and the grassroots activists. Internet-based elections to the CCO was an attempt to give it an air of legitimacy. Despite wide approval for the idea from activists of various ideological backgrounds and an impressive number of participants in the election (more than 80,000 registered users casting their vote), the CCO had disbanded soon thereafter.

Some of reasons that were often cited regarding the failure of the CCO were its inability to reconcile the ideological differences between the participants (such as the nationalists, leftists, and liberals) and the inability to effectively centralize power through internet voting (Toepfl 2018). Most importantly, however, in the period of the creation of CCO, the window of political opportunity had narrowed significantly with the state intervention in the opposition movement and the beginning of state intervention in the digital communication landscape. Many of the council members were arrested or forced into exile. After one year of existence, few wished to participate due to the risks involved. Medvedev's period of modernization, when the state had a relatively high level of tolerance for dissent, had come to a crashing halt with the return of Putin to the presidency in 2012.

4.2 Youth in the Bolotnaya Protests and Apolitical Activism in Post-Bolotnaya Russia

Before moving on to discuss online state intervention, a few words must be said in relation to youth involvement in the Bolotnaya Protests and “apolitical” local activism in Russia prior to and after the Bolotnaya protests. This is especially important to consider in relation to the theory of actualized citizenship since much of this activism has been coordinated via SNS with very loose organizational coordination.

As opposed to the 2017 protests, youth anti-regime alternative political engagement was not so prominent in the Bolotnaya protests (Erpyleva 2020). Neither anti-regime nor regime-loyal media had reported on youth engagement as being a notable factor in the protests. Erpyleva observed that during the Bolotnaya protests, underage

youth largely engaged in “kid-appropriate” forms of actions, such as distributing leaflets and sending out emails with agitational information (Erpyleva 2020). Direct involvement in the rallies was seen as “inappropriate” since politics in Russia is often seen as corrupt or dishonest—a “dirty” environment not suitable for children.

This could be seen as a product of a period effect where “the political culture in Russia since the collapse of the USSR has been characterized by alienation and escape from any political and public experience” (Erpyleva 2020). Youth in the late 2000’s and early 2010’s had internalized these sentiments from their parents who forbade their children from attending the protests. As will be discussed in this chapter, this dynamic has seen a sharp transformation in 2017. However, in the 2011-2013 protests, Russian society tended towards a “patriarchal and apolitical culture, with a cultural desire to protect ‘innocent’ children from ‘dirty’ politics” (Erpyleva 2020). This apolitical culture, however, did manifest local-level activism where youth were often involved.

Prior to these protests, local activism was the dominant form of activism in Russia. It was positioned as a professedly “apolitical” form of activism that was an important way for ordinary people to mobilize and voice their grievances pertaining to everyday, tangible issues such as “the number of public parks being cut or historical buildings being demolished” (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2020). Activists made the deliberate choice to distance themselves from politics (a term and concept that is often associated in Russia with corruption and dishonesty) and to instead embrace “anti-ideological belief in the authenticity of ‘self-evident’ facts” (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2020). In other words, they did not want to be seen as “protestors” against the

regime, or any other grandiose description, but instead simply envisaged their goal as “getting real things done” (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2020).

In the late 2000’s, mobilization for local forms of activism often took place on SNS, contributing to a growth of issue-based campaigns initiated on the internet. For example, one of the most significant campaigns in this vein was the response to the wildfires in 2010, where Runet users coordinated civic mobilization through crowdsourcing platforms (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). In the same year, Navalny’s first online project dedicated to monitoring the rampant issue of potholes on the roads, RosYama, was launched. This project used digital crowdsourcing platforms, allowing users to upload photographs and the location of potholes and other road hazards in Russia. Although Navalny’s campaigns had some organizational qualities and would thus be best described as organizationally enabled connective action, most of the “apolitical” activism was far less organizationally structured and should be viewed as self-organizing connective action.

During the Bolotnaya protests, entirely new forms of local activist groups were created where grassroots activists engaged in “observing election procedures, solving local problems, discussing local political campaigns, and participating in municipal elections” (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2020). Following brutal state crackdowns on the Bolotnaya protests, many of these activists had turned to the same “apolitical” forms of activism that existed prior to the protests, with the same local focus on everyday issues ranging from certain trees being cut or buildings demolished. However, as argued by Zhuravlev et al., “although the activists claimed they were involved in ‘civic’ rather than ‘political’ action, they consider this action to be a continuation of the struggle

against Putin’s regime that had begun at the rallies” (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2020).

As such, the Bolotnaya Protests had the effect of politicizing local activism as many of the protestors from the Bolotnaya protests sought some way to continue their activism. Though it must be noted that not all of the post-protest activists had an anti-regime stance. In any case, “apolitical” local activism became a widespread form of activism in large part due to state crackdowns on any declaredly anti-regime political actions, since the domestic security agencies were less likely to target activism that did not have an overtly anti-regime narrative.

4.3 Predominant SNS in the Russian Context

Before discussing Russian state intervention online, it would be useful to conduct a brief tour d’horizon of the predominant SNS in the Russian context. Section 3.2 of this study provided an academic definition of SNS. This definition is fitting for most of the SNS used in Russia—such as VK (formerly VKontakte), OK (formerly Odnoklassniki), Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Each of these sites is unique either in the kinds of users they attract and/or the manner in which users interact with the sites. This is also complicated by the Russian context, where the userbase and the uses of SNS are not always consistent with those of other countries. For example, Facebook and Twitter are known as a kind of “Western liberal bubble” and generally attract those who are more educated (Gaufman 2022). As discussed above, once LiveJournal fell out of favour, most of the opinion leaders shifted from blog-based social network sites to the more modern SNS, such as VK, Facebook and Twitter (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017).

(Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian government has blocked all SNS owned by the company Meta (Facebook and Instagram)—nevertheless many still use these platforms through the use of VPN⁶. As mentioned above, this study focuses on the pre-war period and will not be exploring the events associated with the war in Ukraine, however, much of what is discussed here serves as an important prelude to what is currently taking place in Russia.)

VK and OK are Russia’s domestic SNS that were created prior to Facebook localizing its site to be available in the Russian language (Gaufman 2022). At its inception, VK was a near clone of Facebook and had solidly positioned itself in Russia’s SNS market—so much so, that—up until 2022 when the state blocked access to Meta products—Russia was the only country amongst those where Facebook was not blocked to have a domestic social network site that was more popular than Facebook (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). Besides its localization benefits, VK also had a plethora of pirated content that was freely available to all users—a “feature” that was available up until the Russian government instituted online copyright laws (Gaufman 2022).

Interestingly, there has been a significant generational divide between VK and OK, with the latter having a reputation of being more popular among the older generations and the former among the younger generation (Gaufman 2022). This is likely due to the manner in which they attracted users in their initial stages—VK followed Facebook’s example in limiting the user-base to university students before opening registration to all, and OK (its original name, *Odnoklassniki*, meaning “classmates”) was advertised as a social network where people could find their old classmates and

⁶ VPN stands for Virtual Private Network and allows Russian internet users to circumvent government restrictions on access to sites that are part of the “Unified Register of Prohibited Sites.”

university peers—appealing, thus, more to the older generations (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020b). The generational divide is seen even more prominently in the user-base of TikTok, which is popular among the very young Russians—largely those in their early twenties and younger (Gaufman 2022). TikTok is also unlike other SNS in that users interact through short clips—these clips will often riff on a fashionable “trend.” The events surrounding Russia’s 2019 protests became a kind of “trend” on TikTok that had a significant spread and attracted many youth to participate in the protests.

YouTube and Telegram are important SNS to discuss in the context of this study, however, they are outliers in the sense that they do not neatly fit into the definition set out in section 3.2 of this study. Neither of them provide a way for their users to “articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection” or “view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” YouTube is a video-based social media platform that is especially popular within Russia’s opposition networks—the opposition leader Navalny uploaded all of his videos to YouTube and a great number of other opposition figures maintain a YouTube channel where they publish vlogs, interviews and other video-based media (Gaufman 2022; Wijermars 2022). Links to these videos are then shared and re-shared on the SNS discussed above. As with all of these SNS, the Russia’s state-loyalist media also have a heavy presence on YouTube.

Telegram, as will be discussed below, was created directly in response to government pressure put on VK and other SNS to disclose user information to the security services. So as to make such a request impossible to fulfill, Telegram uses end-to-end encryption and “secret chats” that erase the chat history within a user-defined

amount of time (Gaufman 2022; Wijermars 2022). As such, it became popular within the Russian opposition network.

Despite being marketed as a messaging service, it is better described as a hybrid between messaging apps (such as WhatsApp and Viber) and micro-blogging platforms (such as Twitter) (Dargahi Nobari et al. 2021). Users are able to create public or private “channels”—pages where they can publish multimedia posts and share them with an audience of any size. Users of this audience will then share these publications either directly with their contacts or with “group chats” where contacts can chat together. Users are not able to see their contacts’ own networks or the list of channels that they follow. However, because channel publications shared among Telegram contacts reveal the original source of the publication (i.e. the channel where the publication was first made), and because channels are often difficult to find without the help of other contacts and channels (the app has no central page with popular channels and does not make algorithmic channel recommendations), online networks are therefore built through this peculiar flow of information. Despite not fitting into the above definition, this flow of information on Telegram is in many ways similar to that of other SNS. As such, this study will be applying the same standards to Telegram as to those SNS that fit the above definition.

To conclude this section, the use and contextual backgrounds of various SNS in Russia were described by Tatyana Afanasyeva, a contributor to the collection of autobiographical essays on Russian youth, as follows:

In my Instagram feed, photos appear every 10 minutes. To capture the best and most timely photo of an event is the goal of all those who actively maintain their profile on Instagram. Those who promote their Twitter blog will want to express a witty opinion about what is happening and to be original in their statements.

LiveJournal gives everyone the opportunity to try on the role of a journalist, to tell those many (or few) readers what newspapers or magazines missed. Facebook was created for like-minded people. Here there is an exchange of views on political issues, jokes are told, photos and videos are posted. It is popular among those who study at university or are looking for a suitable vacancy: it is convenient for communicating with professors and for researching employers, but hardly anyone communicates with their friends through Facebook. For this, there is VKontakte: an accumulator of music, movies, videos, news and stupid jokes from MDK⁷. (Sverdlova, Mishchuk, and Vyzhutovich 2018)

4.4 Russian State Intervention in the Digital Information Landscape through Hostile Takeovers, Obscure Legal Frameworks, and Extrajudicial Harassment

It would be impossible to have a comprehensive grasp of Russia's digital information landscape of 2017-2021 without first discussing the impact the Russian state had in suppressing online speech and its attempts at demobilizing youth online. The findings of this thesis have to be understood in conjunction with these oppressive acts to make sense of how and why youth are involved in anti-regime alternative political engagement online. Although SNS provided Russia's opposition networks with the only organizational and communicative tools available to take thousands to the streets and to create a lively digital platform for public discussions aimed at criticizing the government, even the internet—the last bastion of free speech in Russia—had become subject to oppressive state interventions. Some of the ways in which the Russian opposition had adapted and re-shaped their political engagement to these oppressive interventions will be discussed in the findings of this thesis.

The 2011 Bolotnaya protests marked a turning point in the Russian government's approach to the internet and SNS (Vendil Pallin 2017; Flikke 2016; Asmolov and

⁷ MDK is a popular Russian community page on a number of SNS. MDK primarily publishes memes and various entertaining posts.

Kolozaridi 2017). The state understood that the success of the Bolotnaya protests could in large part be attributed to the capacity of SNS for rapid mass mobilization. As established by Vendil Pallin, since the protests, the state's official documents and speeches increasingly portrayed the internet as a "threat to Russia's security and sovereignty" (Vendil Pallin 2017). Besides the Bolotnaya protests, the role of SNS in the Arab Spring and the colour revolutions also had an impact on the Russian state's position vis-à-vis the internet and SNS. This is evident from Putin's public statements expressing his view that the Arab Spring and the colour revolutions were orchestrated by the West in the same manner that the "internet was initiated as a special project of the US Central Intelligence Agency" (Vendil Pallin 2017). In this vein, political opposition emerging from the internet was framed as foreign threat. Naturally, this logic extended to SNS—for example, Twitter was framed as a company that acted in the interests of the US government and was "a global instrument for promoting political information" (Vendil Pallin 2017).

Some of the first attempts by the Russian state to control the spread of information on the internet resembled the tactics used by the state to take control of television media, namely hostile takeovers (Vendil Pallin 2017). This effort is especially evident in the history of VK and Telegram. In the late 2000's and early 2010's, when Facebook enjoyed a lion's share of the global market of SNS, the Russian SNS market was dominated by VK (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). Its functionality was similar to Facebook—it allowed users to "create an individual profile, add friends and converse with them, create events, write blog posts, share information (textually and in audio or video format), etc" (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). It was founded

in October of 2006 by Pavel Durov and his brother Nikolai Durov. Akin to Facebook, it began on a university campus—invitations to join the network were sent out on the Saint Petersburg State University online forum. Only a month later, VK was open to the public and within the matter of 3 years, the number of users on VK exceeded 100 million, becoming the most visited website in Russia (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a).

VK became an important source of alternative political information during the Bolotnaya protests. As a result, for example, polls indicated that VK users were more likely to be aware of the independent election-monitoring organization *Golos* (Robertson 2017; Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). Likewise, Reuter and Szakonyi found that Russian SNS users were better aware of the electoral fraud that took place during the December 2011 elections (Reuter and Szakonyi 2015). As mentioned above, online surveys of protest participants showed that 67 percent learned about the protests through VK (Dokuka 2014). Besides alternative political information, VK was an important tool for mobilization as users could join online anti-regime communities where protests activities were often coordinated, as discussed above. According to Enikolopov et al., “out of 133 cities that had protests, 87 had VK communities or events created with the purpose of organizing protest demonstrations” (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020a). Speaking to how rapidly protest mobilization can be manifested on the internet, most of these communities were created within days following the December 2011 elections.

Pavel Durov was vocally in support of freedom of speech online and had demonstrably refused to provide the Russian security services with the user data of protest participants when requested (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Enikolopov,

Makarin, and Petrova 2020a; Vendil Pallin 2017). Soon thereafter, between 2013 and 2014, a hostile take-over had taken place in which actors close to the Russian state—in this case, the actors were United Capital Partners (owned by Igor Sechin, a close ally of Putin) and Mail.Ru Group (owned by Alisher Usmanov, another close ally of Putin)—became the majority stakeholders largely through underhanded means (Vendil Pallin 2017). Following the acquisition of the majority stake in VK by parties close to the Kremlin, Pavel Durov and his brother fled Russia and began promoting their messenger Telegram which Pavel Durov claimed to have been developed specifically in response to the request by the Russian security services to hand over user data. As such, Telegram was conceived as a platform where such requests could not be fulfilled. In 2018, the Russian state attempted to block Telegram, in accordance with a package of counter-terrorism laws, known as Yarovaya Law.

Before discussing the Yarovaya Law, it will be important to discuss some of the earlier laws passed by the Russian state to stifle internet freedom. Almost immediately after Putin regained the presidency in 2012, several laws were put in place to thwart the opposition (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017; Vendil Pallin 2017). The “foreign agents” law required all non-governmental organizations who received funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents” and “conduct stricter, more regular reporting” (Flikke 2016). The abovementioned organization *Golos*, for example, was forced to register as a foreign agent. In 2014—when the government passed an amendment that the Ministry of Justice could place organizations on the foreign agent registry despite refusal from the organizations—*Memorial* and others faced the same predatorial legal abuse from the state. Aggressive and malicious inspections were conducted in the offices of

organizations declared as “foreign agents.” Interestingly, the foreign agent law had originated on the internet—on a site run by the Kremlin that allows Russian citizens to create petitions (Flikke 2016). Petitions that gathered more than 100,000 digital signatures on this site were to be considered by the government. This gave the foreign agents law an air of legitimacy that obscured some of the nontransparent and mysterious procedures under which the law was actually passed. With time, the Russian state learned how to use the internet to its advantage, as will be discussed below.

From the very onset of the legal salvo coming from the Russian state in the direction of freedom on the internet, the issue of youth and political socialization was one of great concern to the state. The 2012 federal law entitled “On Amendments to the Federal Law ‘On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development’ and certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation on the issue of restricting access to illegal information on the Internet” was, at least titularly, motivated by concerns vis-à-vis Russian youth on the internet (State Duma 2012). In sum, this law introduced a “black list” (officially known as the “unified register of prohibited sites”) of websites and internet resources that internet providers had to block access to. (The varying success in blocking internet resources will be discussed below on the example of Telegram.) Similar to the foreign agents law, it was passed extraordinarily fast, in the manner of less than two months. The law was later expanded with the Lugovoy law which allowed the government to block a website without needing to seek a court order (State Duma 2013). As such, several oppositional blogs and web-sites were blocked extrajudicially, including Navalny’s blog in 2014.

Between 2014 and 2017, the so-called “law on bloggers” required the owners of internet resources and SNS profiles whose audience exceeded 3,000 daily visitors to register with the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (hereafter: Roskomnadzor) (State Duma 2014). Those internet resources and blogs were to be legally treated in the same manner as a mass media, with all the same legal requirements. Effectively, the law was designed to de-anonymize blogs and SNS profiles with a large following—anyone with a readership of over 3,000 people had to publicly disclose their last name and initials that would appear in a public registry. As with many of Russia’s internet censorship laws, they were designed to hinder free speech through intimidation—as claimed by Soldatov “the mere existence of the public list of popular Internet personalities, administered by and conceived in the interest of a governmental body, should have led to a certain number of such personalities thinking twice before making public their criticism of the government” (Soldatov 2019).

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass in 2014 led to a rapid acceleration of the legislative process of expanding the state’s judicial capacities for oppression and “tightening of screws”—what Russians term state crack-downs on the opposition (Vendil Pallin 2017). Many SNS users who made posts or even “liked” posts that criticized Russia’s invasion of Ukraine were charged with production and distribution of “extremist materials” for their online activities (Gabdulhakov 2020). Several amendments were made to a set of “counter-extremism” laws in order to make these laws enforceable on SNS. Viz., article 280, which deals with “public calls for extremist activities,” article 282, which deals with “actions aimed at inciting hatred or

enmity” toward various social groups, and articles 282.1 and 282.2, which deal with the organization of an extremist community and the organization of activities for such a community (State Duma 1996).

Although the wording of the counter-extremism laws does not explicitly suggest discrimination against political opponents of the regime, it includes such vague and far-reaching formulations that it allows for a very broad interpretation in law enforcement practice (Durnovo 2015). As such, they have been used to target nearly all forms of SNS interactions, including “liking” and “reposting” information that security services deem to be of an extremist nature (Gabdulhakov 2020). As argued by a Moscow-based lawyer, “there is no precise definition of ‘extremism’ in the Criminal Code. Even the Ministry of Internal Affairs finds it difficult to define. [...] Extremism is whatever FSB operatives wish to call extremism” (Torocheshnikova 2018). As noted in one of the reports of the *SOVA* Information and Analytical Center, which monitors the abuse of counter-extremist legislation, the legislation itself is “politicized, since it involves the imposition of sanctions for acts motivated ideologically” (Verkhovskij 2013). Its abuse is therefore politically motivated. As highlighted in the report by *OVD-info*, an independent Russian human rights and legal aid media project, these laws are often used against activists of opposition movements and journalists who write articles criticizing the actions of the authorities (Durnovo 2015). With the expansion of these laws to SNS, any user that is engaged in a political discussion could be targeted by these laws.

The most significant expansion of these laws, as well as others, came with the Yarovaya package of laws in 2016 (though some of its stipulations only came into effect in late 2018) (State Duma 2016a; 2016b). Firstly, penal sentencing for breaking the

“counter-extremism” laws was extended from two years to five for article 282.1, and from three years to six for article 282.2. Cases involving article 282 were now categorized as crimes of moderate gravity (part 1) and severe gravity (part 2), giving law enforcement officers a wider range of operational and investigative tools. Due to the quota system, some Russian political commentators have noted that these legal categorizations may give law enforcement officers the temptation to effortlessly fill their quotas for “anti-extremist” reporting, using the opportunities provided by the newly rewritten Criminal Code (Ozerova 2018).

The amendments also intensified the punishment for “calls for terrorism and its justification on the Internet”—SNS users would now be liable to the same extent as mass media, with a maximum sentence of seven years. Indeed, the application of these laws has largely been in relation to SNS users—in 2017, 85 percent of all criminal cases involving article 282 were filed in relation to materials published online (Tororeshnikova 2018). As such, 2017 saw 460 social media users charged under article 282 (Ozerova 2018). Not a single case involving article 282 had been acquitted, which speaks to the rubber-stamp nature of Russia’s jurisprudence in these cases.

Article 212 of the Criminal Code—which deals with the organization of mass riots—was also amended to include a new section that deals with “inducing, recruiting or otherwise involving a person in the [organization of mass riots]” (State Duma 2016a; 2016b). A maximum sentence of ten years is stipulated by this law. Importantly, the Yarovaya package of laws lowers the age for which one can be held criminally liable for all of the aforementioned laws (articles 212, 280, 282, 282.1, and 282.2, among others) to 14 years-old. It is evident that the state is acutely aware of the power of SNS as an agent

of political socialization and has responded to this perceived threat with intimidation tactics involving the legal system and its law enforcement agencies. Indeed, as will be discussed below, the application of these laws is far from consistent—those who are charged with these offences are meant to pose as a threatening example of the consequences of participating in actions perceived objectionable to the state.

Lastly, the Yarovaya law package envisages a mandatory “landing” of online user-data, meaning that any and all personal data of Russian users has to be stored in Russia and has to be readily available for law enforcement agencies for a span of multiple years (State Duma 2016a; 2016b). This specifically targets online services such as SNS, since they are now required to store and provide to the Russian security services, at a moment’s notice, user information such as, *inter alia*, their full name, date of birth, passport information, list of relatives, all text-messages and any other form of correspondence. If this information is encrypted, the Russian security services must be provided with decryption keys. Similar to the Law on Bloggers, this law is an intimidation instrument, designed to scare SNS users away from criticizing the government and becoming engaged in protest politics (Gabdulhakov 2020). Because of the significantly high costs associated with complying with this law, almost no SNS has fully followed through with it (Gabdulhakov 2020). The law does apply to foreign SNS; however, among foreign SNS, the only one ever banned for failing to “land” its user data was LinkedIn, an employment-oriented social network service (Meduza 2016).

This takes us the subject of Russia’s attempt to block Telegram. As mentioned above, Telegram positions itself as a messaging service that is free from state interference as it “assures its users that, unlike other messengers, it is able to protect users’ chats from

strangers' eyes and denies any cooperation with secret services" (Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021). As such, when the Federal Security Service (FSB) requested keys for decrypting communication on Telegram, as per the Yarovaya package, the latter refused to provide them. (Telegram claims that they have no access to the encryption keys which are only stored on the users' devices.) Soon thereafter, on April 13, 2018 Roskomnadzor attempted to restrict access to Telegram, as per a court ruling in this regard. To block Telegram, Roskomnadzor would send the known IP addresses of Telegram to internet service providers who would in turn restrict access to those addresses. Because Telegram was able to swiftly assign new addresses, blocking Telegram became a challenge for the state. Moreover, because Telegram would use IP addresses that were shared among other web-sites hosted by Google and Amazon, including many Russian web-sites, the restrictions had the unintended effect of restricting thousands of web-sites, but not Telegram.

Despite the state's failure to block Telegram, the *de jure* restriction was kept in place up until June 19, 2020 (Griffin and Carroll 2020). As will be discussed below, in the span of time that Telegram was blocked, state-run and state-sponsored propaganda still remained on Telegram. Notably, prior to the lifting of the ban, Russia's Ministry of Health launched a Telegram bot⁸ to answer users' question regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation 2020)—indicating that, despite the *de jure* ban, the Russian government officially acknowledged that the platform remained, *de facto*, a highly popular and influential media platform.

⁸ A third-party application that runs inside Telegram and with which users can interact by sending them messages and receiving an automated response based on the query

With regards to the repressive laws on the use of SNS, the inconsistency in their application is not uncommon in Russia. As argued by Gabdulhakov, “the adapted legislative framework creates an environment in which, if needed, virtually any online activity can be tied to repressive legislation” (Gabdulhakov 2020). An anecdotal, through perhaps telling, occurrence of this trend in action took place when a regional coordinator of Open Russia Foundation (a political organization founded by an exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, that promoted democracy and human rights in Russia) made a VK post with a photo of a Russian parliament member’s shirt that read “Orthodoxy or death.” The person who made the post was charged and fined for the “production and distribution of ‘extremist materials,’” while the parliament member faced no charge. As explained by a Moscow-based rights defender in Gabdulhakov’s study: “It is quite obvious that a person is selected first, and then they select online content that could be attached to the case. It is easy to find something [in the contents shared online] that violated the law” (Gabdulhakov 2020). The aforementioned ambiguity of the counter-extremism laws are weaponized by the state and “while the scope of Criminal Code articles widens, and punishments for offences gets harsher, the officials can interpret a wide range of government opposition as ‘extreme’” (Gabdulhakov 2020).

By 2017, when Navalny’s anti-corruption protests began, the fight against online criticism of Russia’s actions in connection with the Ukrainian conflict gradually began to fade, giving way to the fight against the “revolution” and the opposition. Hence the numerous accusations by law enforcement officers against supporters of Alexei Navalny and Vyacheslav Maltsev (Navalny’s ally and former member of the opposition party PARNAS, who was charged with extremism and forced into exile), as well as

independent local activists (Verkhovskij 2018). Naturally, as argued in one of the reports of the *SOVA* Information and Analytical Center, the expansion and abuse of the “counter-extremist” laws was driven more by a “desire to neutralize political opponents than to take care of public safety” (Verkhovskij 2018). Since then, the obscure legal frameworks described above began to intensify even further.

In this vein, in March 2019, Putin signed into law two bills that made online news outlets and SNS users liable for spreading information that “exhibits blatant disrespect for the society, government, official government symbols, constitution or governmental bodies of Russia,” as well as “unreliable socially significant information” (State Duma 2019a; 2019b). In other words, producing or re-producing so-called “fake news” and information that “disrespects” the government and government officials was made illegal. The violation of these laws carries with it a fine of up to 1.5 million rubles and 15 days in jail. Lastly, in an attempt to gain full control over the political socialization of youth, the Russian government passed amendments to the law “On Education” that allow the state to intervene in any “educational activities” which are defined as “activities aimed at disseminating knowledge, experience, the formation of skills, values, competence for the intellectual, spiritual, moral, creative, physical and (or) professional development of a person, meeting their educational needs and interests” (State Duma 2021). As with the “counter-extremism” laws, the wording is sufficiently broad to allow repressions. How this law will be applied it not yet fully understood, however, it is possible that authorities will begin to block “unlicensed” content online or stop offline events without licenses in various ways.

Lastly, some of the extrajudicial state-led demobilization efforts should be mentioned. Knowing how prominently youth figure in protest movement, Russian authorities took pre-emptive measures aimed at thwarting their participation in protests (Nikolayenko 2021). For example, “a flurry of lectures and informal conversations with student activists were held on the eve of anti-corruption protests. Moreover, students were pressured into attending alternative state-sponsored events or staying at home on the day of the protest event” (Nikolayenko 2021). Expulsion from university was a common threat made against students—university faculty would send messages to students discouraging them from “mindlessly support the crowd,” warning students that they are “personally responsible for participating, for example, in an unsanctioned rally,” and that doing so would “[ruin their] reputation and [cast] a shadow on [their] university” (DOXA 2021). In some cases where youth were the organizers, upon submitting an application for an official permit to organize a protest, university administration would pressure them to withdraw the application or face expulsion (Nikolayenko 2021). Russia’s law enforcement agencies also produce videos in which they remind youth of their criminal liabilities—one such video depicts law enforcement officers congratulating a hypothetical viewer on their 14th birthday and then listing all the acts for which they could be criminally liable, including the Yarovaya laws mentioned above (Investigative Committee of Russia 2021).

4.5 The Street Protests of 2017-2021

The 2017 anti-corruption protests were sparked by Navalny’s documentary film “He is not Dimon to you,” an exposé that details an elaborate corruption scheme

involving the then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021; Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022; Moroz 2020; Wijermars 2021). Much of the evidence presented in the documentary was discovered online through email leaks, a meticulous sifting through the publicly available procurement system GosZakupki, and Medvedev's own social media publications (Wijermars 2021). The film was published on the online video sharing and social media platform YouTube and quickly spread to other SNS. The subsequent protests were also fully coordinated online through all the SNS that were popular in Russia at the time (*inter alia*, YouTube, Telegram, VK, Facebook, and Twitter). This manifestation of organizationally enabled connective action was highly successful—at the first street protest following the release of the film, there were more than 52,700 participants, and at the second demonstration more than 74,000 attended (Fond liberal'naya missiya 2021).

The film was released by the Anti-Corruption Fund (hereafter: ACF) which was founded by Navalny in 2011 (Anti-Corruption Fund, n.d.). To establish ACF, Navalny brought together the coordinators of his previous projects (such as the aforementioned *RosPil* and *RosYama*) into a single nonprofit organization whose aims were to expose corruption among the ruling elites (Anti-Corruption Fund 2014). Corruption is among the most common grievances among everyday Russians, especially young Russians who often cite it as the country's greatest problem (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). The selection of corruption as an interpretive frame allowed Navalny to cast a far-reaching net since this grievance is shared among all oppositional forces, regardless of the political orientations or sometimes even loyalty toward Putin's government. As such,

corruption became the interpretive frame that a great number of Russians could easily identify with.

Navalny and his team were highly adept at maintaining a substantial presence on a large variety of SNS—as described by Moroz, “Navalny and ACF created and continue to maintain a complex media ecosystem consisting of a blog, two websites, numerous different social media accounts, mobile apps for iOS and Android, and iTunes, SoundCloud, and Spotify podcasts” (Moroz 2020). The viral spread of “He is not Dimon to you” paralleled with a pronounced surge of internet memes in which the rubber duck (in reference to the duck house built in the pond of one of Medvedev’s luxury estates) figured as the most recognizable symbols of the protest movement, becoming “deeply rooted in the oppositional discourse” (Shomova 2022). Memes related to the anti-corruption protests appeared even on public SNS community pages where politics are rarely discussed, speaking to just how easily Russian SNS users were able to identify with them and how far-reaching the grievances they’re meant to address were (Shomova 2022).

Indeed, of all the protests that took place in the period between 2017 and 2018, Fomin’s study found that most successful ones in terms of attendance were the initial protests that followed the publication of the exposé, particularly in March and June (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). In the subsequent fall and winter protests, attendance dropped more than threefold. Fomin argues this was caused in part by a failure to frame the latter protests in an appealing manner (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). They were framed less as an anti-corruption event and more as an electoral campaign event for Navalny’s presidential ambitions in 2018. What is notable

here is that the latter protests were mostly limited to cities where ACF had a presence in the form of regional headquarters, likely suggesting that the protests were limited to the core supporters of Navalny (Fomin and Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk 2022). These regional headquarters had a fairly rigid hierarchical structure where “although the young activists work rather independently, they most often carry out the recommendations of the office [...]” (Moroz 2020), They were highly successful in recruiting young volunteers for a number of reasons.

Firstly, ACF did not discriminate based on political orientations, making the issue of corruption the primary unifying factor (Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021). Since the notion of the political carries mostly negative connotations in the Russian public conscious—as a dirty and dishonest affair that is no place for children and youth—framing the ACF as an issue-based organization, rather than a political organization made it more appealing to politics-weary youth (Erpyleva 2020). (As discussed above, political weariness and a turn toward issue-based engagement is not unique to the Russian realities, but a common phenomenon across the world as citizenship norms shift in large part thanks to SNS.) The threshold for joining ACF was low and, as described by Dollbaum:

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 20s, 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 (Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky 2021).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the number of cities in which the initial anti-corruption protests took place extended far beyond the number of cities in which

ACF had regional offices, suggesting that “the protest mobilization triggered by Navalny went far beyond his organizational infrastructure” (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). Indeed, as will be discussed below, the subsequent protests of 2021—which were sparked by Navalny’s poisoning and ensuing arrest—attracted a great number of individuals who cannot be characterized as Navalny’s core supporters due to polling data that show moderate skepticism towards Navalny among a great number of those in attendance (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). (Many would attend to protest politically-motivated persecution, for example, rather than the arrest of Navalny in particular.)

All of this suggests, as argued by Fomin, that the success of Navalny’s mobilization tactics lie in the appropriate framing of the protest and the cause (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). As argued throughout this thesis, this framing is peculiar not only to the contemporary Russian realities, but also to the shifting citizenship norms brought on by SNS and the political socialization of youth in the period of digital contemporaneity where SNS became the primary source of political information. In other words, Navalny has been able to exploit the evolving informational and political landscape in which youth are becoming increasingly disenchanted with traditional politics and instead drawn towards issue-based and localized types of engagement that are driven by the reflexive and highly personalized workings of SNS. Since tangible issues—such as corruption, nepotism or those of a local and regional nature—are easier to identify with than the often ethereal and ambiguous *mise en scène* of traditional politics, Russia’s youth who were socialized through SNS—where identity negotiation is a never-ending and ever-evolving process—are that much more predisposed to Navalny’s

digital activism that is based on those exact issues youth identify with and yearn to share with their digital networks.

In 2018, Navalny ran a presidential campaign, however, the government barred him from participating in the elections, alleging that Navalny's previous convictions disqualified him from the elections (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). In response, Navalny organized an electoral strike protest, however, a significantly smaller number of participants had attended than in the earlier 2017 protest (between 4,700 and 15,000 at the electoral strike and between 49,661 and 98,720 at the June anti-corruption protest) (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022; Fond liberal'naya missiya 2021). This can be attributed to a failure to provide an interpretive frame that a larger number of individuals would feel compelled by (as noted above, the electoral campaign framing was not as appealing to the none-core supporters of Navalny than the anti-corruption frame), however, no less important is the ramping up of government crackdowns on dissent that were described above (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). The latter protests were not permitted by the local authorities and, as such, were inherently more dangerous to attend due to the risk of being arrested. Indeed, arrests at demonstrations that were not given permission by the local authorities were significantly higher, raising the perceived costs of participation dramatically.

In the same period, Russia experienced a wide range of "apolitical" protests movements that were not connected to Navalny and shared the same spirit as the "apolitical" activism that became popular following the Bolotnaya protests, as mentioned above. As such, these protests can also be said to have been manifestations of self-organized connective actions. These include the "rubbish riots" (a series of protests

against the construction of landfills in close proximity to certain neighborhoods), protests against pension reforms, “the March of Mothers” (a protest by mothers against the arrests of young activists), and so on (Shomova 2022). These movements were explicitly apolitical and the participants made a conscious effort to distance themselves from political slogans. For example, in the case of “The March of Mothers,” in the place of signs with slogans, participants were encouraged to bring a stuffed toy (Shomova 2022).

Because of the importance in these movements of personally identifying with the cause, memes “prove to be one of the most fruitful terrains of interactive communication, as well as for constructing the symbols of a collective identity” (Shomova 2022). For example, during the “rubbish riots” in the Arkhangelsk Oblast, the slogan “Pomorye is not a dump” had become not only a meme, but also the name of the VK community page where the protests were organized (Shomova 2022). Curiously, the pension reform protests produced the greatest number of memes, despite the fact that those who were most affected by the pension reforms rarely consume memetic content. In this vein, Shomova argues that “the intensity with which [the theme of pension reforms] was represented in Runet memes show that it eventually managed to get the young users” (Shomova 2022). It is possible to suggest here that even if a certain issue is not obviously relevant to a particular SNS user’s identity, its capacity to be relatable in some way may still be appealing to that user if it is aptly framed, such as in the form of a meme.

2019 saw a great surge of issue-based and localized protests, including a protest against the blocking of Telegram and a protest against Runet isolation (specifically, against the Sovereign Internet law that sought to create a national system of internet traffic routing and instruments for the centralized control over the Russian segment of the

internet by the state); and the Moscow protests that were triggered by the local government's denial to allow independent candidates from participating in the Moscow Duma elections and the subsequent protests calling on the release of those candidates from imprisonment (Kommersant n.d.; Radio Svoboda 2019; BBC News Russkaya Sluzhba 2019). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the firmly enforced restrictions related to public gatherings, 2020 became known as a period of "political coma" due to a significant decrease in the number of protests (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). This is despite the fact that 2020 was certainly not a year that was lacking in pivotal political events, such as the constitutional amendments that "zeroed" Putin's term count (effectively allowing Putin to remain in the presidency for another 12 years), the poisoning of Navalny, and the mass-scale protests in Belarus. This fact speaks to the success of the government's demobilization efforts outlined above—almost none of the protests were allowed by the local authorities, making them dangerous to attend.

The notable exception are the protests in Khabarovsk in support of the local governor Sergey Furgal who was arrested on dubious charges. Despite being a member of a systemic party,⁹ Sergey Furgal enjoyed a great amount of popularity among his constituents and his arrest was believed by many to have been politically motivated due to his unusual popularity for a local governor (Deutsche Welle n.d.). So-called "lone pickets" and "picket lines" were also especially popular at this time since the law allowed a single individual to hold up a sign if they are not gathering with others (OVD-Info n.d.). Following certain resonant political events, such as the constitutional amendments, many

⁹ Systemic parties in Russia consist of seven political parties that are fully dependent on the Kremlin and, as such, present no threat to the ruling elite and the status quo.

individuals and public figures would stand in a long line to hold up a sign in a public place for a short amount of time, until it was the next person's turn.

The year 2021 saw an awakening from the “political coma” of 2020 with the protests in support of Navalny, who was arrested immediately upon his return to Russia from Germany, where he was treated following his poisoning (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). A series of three street protests took place in 2021, with none of them being allowed by the local authorities. Despite their illegal status with local authorities, the protests saw a surprising number of participants, with approximately more than 140,000 participants country-wide in the first protest on January 23 (more than both the Bolotnaya protests and the 2017 anti-corruption protests), 74,000 participants on January 31 and 67,000 participants on April 21 (Fond liberal'naya missiya 2021). State persecution of protestors became the harshest yet, with six times the number of detentions as compared to the protests of 2017 and 2019, and with every third detainee being arrested and held in jail, in some cases for multiple days (Proekt 2021).

The 2017-2021 protests faced the same fate as the Bolotnaya protests in that they were not able to “convert [...] dissent into a longer-term campaign with broader electoral or anti-systemic frames” (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022). On the one hand this can be attributed to the state's highly successful demobilization campaign, on the other hand it can be attributed to the fact that the politically-charged frames of an electoral and anti-systemic nature were not found to be as appealing to the average Russians as more concrete, issue-based activism (Fomin and Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2022).

The Bolotnaya protests were the first large-scale manifestation of connective action in contemporary Russia. Youth participation at this time was not particularly notable, however, youth did engage in “apolitical” forms of activism. Many of the subsequent protests of the period between 2017 and 2021 heavily relied on the organizationally-enabled model of connective action through the ACF and the role of youth was far more pronounced. Political engagement in this period was impacted by the Russian state’s demobilization efforts in the form of hostile takeover of domestic SNS, obscure legal frameworks, and extrajudicial harassment. These demobilization efforts encouraged more “apolitical” activism manifested through self-organized connective action. The next chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to the connection between SNS use and youth anti-regime alternative political engagement in the period between 2017-2021.

Chapter 5: Findings

Before discussing findings related to how SNS affect youth anti-regime alternative political engagement, it will be important to delineate some of the limitations in this approach. Firstly, SNS use is not a predictor of any particular set of political attitudes or values. Despite the fact that SNS can be largely characterized as the only informational space where anti-regime political discourse is possible in contemporary Russia, this does not necessarily mean that SNS users will have anti-regime political attitudes or values.

Because one is able to self-select into the information diet they see on their SNS news feeds (with the caveat mentioned above regarding SNS algorithms), it is only natural that there is a substantial presence of state-loyal accounts and channels on SNS. As discussed above, Russia's digital networks on SNS are largely divided into two large groups of users—the state loyalists and the opposition (Nechai and Goncharov 2017; Zherebtsov and Goussev 2021). The state has devoted a great amount of resources into expanding the former network. As argued by Topfl, “people choose the places they go to on the internet according to their beliefs. *Perviy Kanal*¹⁰ is also on the internet, there are enough pro-regime pages on the internet, so the internet as such is not liberal or oppositional, it does not transport ideology—it's an environment, it's a platform” (Töpfl 2022). The Russian government has expanded nearly all of its propaganda media to be available on all SNS, including those where the opposition networks are far more prevalent, such as Twitter and Facebook.

¹⁰ One of the state-owned TV channels in Russia.

Moreover, the Russian regime has gone to great lengths not only to develop a powerful state-loyal online network on each SNS, but also to throw a wrench into the spokes of the oppositional networks by exploiting the mechanisms of SNS. According to Gaufman, state intervention on the internet began as early as 2012:

At that point in time there was a hack of the then head of the youth agency, Vasiliy Yakemenko. There were a bunch of articles back in the day about this hack [in which] they document the correspondence between him and his assistant Krestina Potupchik¹¹ where they were coordinating some ad hoc bloggers who were supposed to post certain comments on LiveJournal. (Wijermars 2022)

This was the first coordinated attack by the Russian state on a social network site. As discussed above, LiveJournal was the most popular SNS within the opposition at this time. It played a key role in the mobilization of the Bolotnaya protests and the formation of the Coordination Council of the Opposition (Toepfl 2018). At this point, the Russian state began to recognize the power of SNS and, in response, they conducted DDOS attacks¹² and organized what was called “50 ruble commentary,” where the state paid SNS users 50 rubles for each state-loyalist comment left on an SNS post (Gaufman 2022; Wijermars 2022). For most people involved in 50-ruble commentary it was a kind of “side-gig” for extra money and it was not yet centralized in any formal institution. Later on, state-adjacent actors, namely Yevgeniy Prigozhin (a close confidant of Putin), brought this practice into a much more centralized fashion with what became known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), commonly referred to as the “troll¹³ factory” or “troll farm.” The IRA had an “office building where [...] people operate several accounts

¹¹ A popular blogger at the time, who was recruited by the government.

¹² As defined by Merriam-Webster: “an attempt to interfere with the normal operations of an online service (such as a website or app) by overwhelming it with repeated automated requests for data from multiple sources” (‘Definition of DDOS’ n.d.)

¹³ As defined by Merriam-Webster: “a person who intentionally antagonizes others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content” (‘Definition of Troll’ n.d.)

at the same time and they just post pro-government and pro-Kremlin [information] on different social media and with different usernames” (Gaufman 2022). The IRA would also use bots to “swarm the comment section” of news publications, especially when significant events involving Russia took place, such as the downing of the MH17 passenger plane over eastern Ukraine (Gaufman 2022).

These tactics are known as “flooding” and they have gotten more and more sophisticated over the years (Gaufman 2022). At first, flooding simply entailed inundating SNS with nonsense or duplicate comments that would make it difficult to get to the real comments left by opposition group users. With time, SNS developed filters that would sort out these kinds of comments out rather easily, requiring state-sponsored “trolls” to adjust their tactics (Gaufman 2022). Instead of flooding SNS with duplicate comments, they would inundate SNS with a plethora of various false interpretations of events to confuse and overwhelm SNS users to a point where they conclude that it’s impossible to know the real truth. For example, Gaufman mentions that the state propaganda offered at least seventeen different versions of the Skripal poisoning (Gaufman 2022). The same tactics were used following the poisoning of Navalny. This connects to a point made by Topfl that there is a common notion among Russians that media in general is not to be trusted because each media resource will have powerful actors behind them, which in turn makes these media a reflection of those actors’ interests, rather than that of the truth. Part of the success of Russian propaganda is that “people don’t have a trusted news outlet, they see ten different stories and they are left in a state of confusion” (Töpfl 2022).

These interventions were made in parallel with the oppressive legal frameworks described above. The totality of all these interventions is a reflection of just how seriously the government took the threat posed by SNS. The state largely associates this threat with the younger cohorts—those who are most likely to use SNS for the purposes of seeking out political information and those who became the most visible group during the 2017 anti-corruption protests. In an interview, Krawatzek mentioned that in 2020, “three quarters of young people use online media or social networks, [as compared to] 60% in 2018 and 2019. If we place that in the context of the data that we can find from Levada that value had probably gone up a little bit more towards 80%” (Krawatzek 2022). This data remains consistent regardless of city size—those residing in Moscow, for example, are just as likely to be SNS users as those residing in smaller cities. Elena Bazina, a contributor to the abovementioned collection of essays on Russian youth described this phenomenon as follows:

We parted ways with TV four years ago. I got into university, moved into a dormitory, and the windows on my laptop became my window to the world. Now I get all the news from social networks. My parents still get them from TV. When we talk, I get the feeling that we live in parallel worlds [...] On Twitter, VKontakte and Facebook, the way your interesting friend lives their life is considered news. Right now in my personal news release: Artyom flew to the States, Vasya had anchovies for dinner, Sveta celebrates her birthday tomorrow. I agree, it sounds a bit like gossiping grandmothers. But on the other hand, it is kinder and more relevant than what is shown on TV. (Sverdlova, Mishchuk, and Vyzhutovich 2018).

The demobilizing effect of state interventions in the opposition networks, combined with the widespread notion that politics are a dishonest and indecent milieu that is no place for children, is often argued to have led to a sense among youth that they have no power to make any changes in the system, contributing to a general political apathy (Krawatzek 2022; Silvan 2022). Indeed, the Russian state provides little to no

opportunity for youth to meaningfully participate in the political life of the country. The government does run a multitude of youth fora (such as *Territoriya Smyslov* or *Tavrída*) and many of them are considered to be highly prestigious, with a number of high-level guests invited, such as Sergey Lavrov, or even Vladimir Putin (Silvan 2022). They are heavily subsidized, with the government usually paying for “the accommodations, and the food, and all the fun and games that happen at the forums” (Silvan 2022). These fora are especially popular in small rural towns where the youth are more eager than the inner city youth to improve their professional skills, network, and climb the social ladder. However, they have little to no effect on the political system—Silvan described these fora as “really quite tokenistic, and of course it’s not only in Russia, but that’s a global thing that the young people, when they participate it’s not genuinely empowering [...] they’re not considered old enough to actually be able to decide on thing on their own” (Silvan 2022).

As discussed above, this global phenomenon of youth withdrawing further and further from traditional politics is well discussed in academic literature (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014). It mostly stems from the sense that youth are not adequately represented in modern democracies—naturally, this trend is exacerbated in Russia where representative democracy can be described as poor in the best of circumstances. The top-down approach that is often used in so-called “patriotic education” in Russian schools rings hollow with youth who are not given any chance to voice their own views and, most naturally, youth are very critical of this kind of a patronizing education where school authority figures “tell them how it is” without seeking any input from the students (Silvan 2022). At the youth fora, oppositional narratives that one can easily find on SNS are

considered taboo (especially if the narrative is related to Putin or the Great Patriotic War). As mentioned by Silvan, “among themselves, [youth at these fora] can be surprisingly critical [...] but they would not voice that kind of criticism openly” (Silvan 2022). This is notwithstanding the fact that these fora are careful in only accepting certain youth whose activities (such as volunteerism) they approve of.

Before discussing findings on SNS, it would be important to mention some of the other agents of political socialization. As per FES survey data, the fact and frequency of political discussions with relatives and acquaintances is a significant predictor of a wide range of political behaviours and norms (see figure 1) (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2020). Those Russian youth who claimed to discuss politics with relatives and acquaintances on a regular basis are more likely to have participated in a demonstration (18.9 percent, as opposed to 7.1 percent for those who never discuss politics with their parents—see table 1), online political activism (26.4 percent, as opposed to 6.3 percent—see table 2), civic movements and organizations (30.8 percent, as opposed to 20.1 percent—see table 3), to have signed a political petition (31.3 percent, as opposed to 18%—see table 4), and to have been engaged in volunteering (32.3 percent, as opposed to 23.8 percent—see table 5).

Regarding political norms, youth who frequently discuss politics with their relatives and acquaintances attributed a higher sense of importance to political activity (80.1 percent of youth who claimed to discuss politics with their relatives and acquaintances on a regular basis attributed moderate to high importance to political activity, as opposed to 58.5 percent among those who never discuss politics with their relatives and acquaintances—see table 6) and civic activism (58.2 percent, as opposed to

36.2 percent—see table 7). Lastly, youth with frequent political discussions with relatives and acquaintances demonstrated higher interest in politics in general (82.6 percent claimed moderate to high interest, as opposed to only 27.1 percent among those who never discuss politics with their parents—see table 8), national politics (84.6 percent, as opposed to 35.9 percent—see table 9), and regional politics (83.1 percent, as opposed to 33.8 percent—see table 10).

It must be noted that those youth who discuss politics with their relatives and acquaintances often or even just occasionally are in the minority—38.5 percent, as compared with 61.33 percent of those who rarely or never do this (see figure 2). Considering just how strongly political discussions correlate with interest in politics, this data can be seen as a reflection of the aforementioned political apathy among youth. In this vein, Krawatzek stated that “over the last three years, what we see develop increasingly is a sense of pronounced political fatigue [brought on by the sense of] there just being no way of impacting politics” (Krawatzek 2022).

The FES surveys were conducted in 2018, prior to the poisoning and subsequent imprisonment of Navalny. As such, it is possible that the trend of youth political apathy may have worsened since, according to Krawatzek’s data from focus groups, “it’s quite striking how deeply the imprisonment of Navalny hinders any kind of desire to become politically involved, to articulate your political demands. [...]” (Krawatzek 2022). There is a sense among youth that they “risk [their] lives, risk imprisonment and it doesn’t change anything” (Krawatzek 2022). As mentioned above, with the barrage of false information emanating from state-sponsored troll farms, youth are just as vulnerable to being overwhelmed by all of the narratives that exist in the media. According to

Krawatzek this then translates into youth having less of a desire to discuss politics and more of a desire to “withdraw into the private, just trying to survive under the current economic conditions” (Krawatzek 2022).

Because the FES survey data does not separate the frequency of political discussions among relatives and acquaintances, it is difficult to say which agent of political socialization has a more pronounced effect. However, crosstabulation of data on frequency of political discussions with the question of whether the respondent’s political views are in agreement with those of their parents, shows an notable link. Figure 2 illustrates the agreement of Russian youth’s political views with those of their parents—for most of them, there is at least a moderate agreement (with a plurality of high agreement), while 23.7 percent report little to no agreement. When cross-tabulated with data on the frequency of political discussions we can see that the likelihood for frequent or even occasional political discussions is highest in respondents with a reported high agreement of political views (see table 11). Respondents who do not share their political views with their parents are far less likely to engage in political discussions with relative and acquaintances (16.5 percent) and even a moderate level of agreement (what youth rated as being a 3 on a scale of 5) will double the likelihood of occasional and frequent political discussions.

As stated by Krawatzek, “if your parents disagree, you just shut up—you’re not discussing politics at home because it’s too tiresome. You don’t want to have a fight with [your parents], especially if you’re already moved out, and I think that’s translating in the data as there being less disagreement with family members” (Krawatzek 2022). These findings are consistent with the abovementioned theory regarding the effect of parents as

agents of political socialization—a more politicized family environment can confer the requisite communication competences and political norms to have a curious and inquisitive disposition to political knowledge and attitudes (Beck and Jennings 1982).

Besides parents, the influence of peers as agents of political socialization is especially apparent in relation to political behaviour. As argued by Krawatzek, “one factor we can see that drives the protest participation is networks of like-minded friends” (Krawatzek 2022) As with parents, it is expected that the more politicized a social network is, the more likely it is for its members to encourage one another to engage in certain political behaviours together. Krawatzek also discussed surveys that point to biographical availability as being an important factor with respect to participating in demonstrations—protesters tended to be “people in the surveys who did not have children, tend not to be married, and maybe are not in a full-time position as well” (Krawatzek 2022) Lastly, Krawatzek links participation in demonstrations with “having experience a critical moment” (Krawatzek 2022). He gave an example of an activist he interviewed for whom activism began through a “more or less accidental participation” in a protest that led to a “transformative experience.” Following this moment, he “became quite involved as an independent protest organizer.” As such, though many might have grievances and an attitudinal disposition to protests, but it takes a “moment of trigger” for a person to take it to the streets.

It must be noted that anti-regime alternative political engagement is not limited to demonstrations and, as noted above, the blurred line between online political activism and “real-life” activism is increasingly losing its relevance in the context of Russia’s

contemporary opposition activism. Arkhipova makes a compelling argument in support of this idea:

In some cases, “offline” activity turns out to be categorically impossible without the support of Internet technologies [...] The protest as a [political] message can be fully realized in a virtual environment. At a minimum, the priority of one environment over the other turns out to be questionable, and at a maximum, the very boundaries of these environments are destroyed. A number of such examples can be discussed, but the main thing is that the virtual environment often turns out to be a priority, and the events taking place in social networks in parallel with the street action or after it are of no less importance for the protesters than the occurrence of the protest. (A. Arkhipova et al. 2018).

The main argument here is that in approaching the study of contemporary activism in Russia, the researcher should “eschew the notion of ‘real’ and instead draw lines between ‘virtual’ and ‘physical,’ rather than ‘virtual’ and ‘real’” (A. Arkhipova et al. 2018). The virtual environment has provided the opposition with a crucial new dimension through which to stage political actions. In the case of conventional street demonstrations, such as the 2017 anti-corruption protests, the virtual environment is most notable for expanding the possible audience—for example, activists will often publish photos and videos of the protest on their social media accounts. The virtual environment is also notable for its ability to provide real-time support to the protestors—for example, in the form of legal advice and important information regarding the movement of law enforcement officers.

Because of the aforementioned oppressive laws on public demonstrations and pickets, activists who organize these events for a physical audience run the risk of attracting the attention of law enforcement officers (A. Arkhipova et al. 2018). The virtual environment allows activists to organize such events physically with relatively low immediate risk by allowing the addressee of the political message (generally, the

Russian public) to observe the action virtually, as opposed to physically. A notable example of this is the 2015 action titled “Funeral of the Constitution” organized by an unknown group of activists and which took place in a forest, where no one would see them (A. Arkhipova et al. 2018). Photos from the event were published online after the fact. Likewise in 2017, Crimean activists held a picket against corruption in the mountains (A. Arkhipova et al. 2018). Such political actions were even organized on a more mass-scale by Navalny’s ACF—where they encouraged people to go outside on the evening of a certain day and record themselves and their friends with the flashlight on their cell-phones turned on and pointed to the sky (BBC News Russkaya Sluzhba 2021)—and Telegram—where they encouraged people to record themselves throwing a paper plane (in reference to the logo of Telegram) from their apartment’s window at a specific time (RBK 2018).

Despite all of this, online engagement is still stigmatized as “slacktivism” and, based on focus groups conducted by Krawatzek, “very quickly dismissed.” (Indeed, the ACF’s event with cell-phone flashlights quickly became a meme within the opposition networks that ridiculed such actions as inconsequential (Meduza 2021).) They are seen as an increasingly dangerous activity, and participants might “get in trouble for no payoff and no changes in the [political] situation” (Krawatzek 2022). As such, only 11 percent of respondents in the FES survey reported to have participated in online political actions and initiative (see figure 3). Even when cross-tabulated with the number of friends a respondent has on their networks, we see just a modest though still notable increase in the likelihood of having participated in online activism— only 8 percent of those with up to 50 friends participated in online activism, as compared with 15.9 percent among those

with 500-100 friends. It must be noted, however, that the exact definition of online activism can be somewhat unclear and with the attached stigma it is possible that many of those who have engaged in some form of online activism may not have known it or may not wanted to be identified as having done so.

Besides “online activism,” the way in which the “political” is defined in the Russian context is also fraught with complex nuance. The rise of issue-based and local activism is relation to the question of the “political” was described by Silvan as follows:

If you define political very narrowly in terms of party politics then [youth engagement] is quite rare, but that’s not really unique to Russia because we’ve seen that all around the world that less and less young people are drawn toward party politics and are more and more are drawn towards different kinds of movements. So you can see that issue-based movements on the rise also in Russia—for example, environmental issues, such as the construction of certain landfills or the cutting down of certain forests; or the campaign that happened in Ekaterinburg against the building of a church in the local square. So young people’s political engagement is precisely about specific issues. (Silvan 2022).

As discussed above, because of the way that SNS are designed to allow its users to negotiate their identity within their networks, they consequently encourage political engagement that is based on an intimately personal connection with the cause. This is most easily done with local and issue-based political engagement where one can effortlessly embed their identity. The extent to which SNS usage impacts participation in issue-based and local activism can be inferred from certain proxy variables in the FES survey data—namely, regular volunteering (at least once a month), having participated in civic movements or organizations, and signing petitions. The FES survey data shows that those who use SNS at least once a week are more likely than those who never use SNS to be engaged in volunteering (78.1 percent, as opposed to 65.6 percent—see table 12),

civic organizations and movements (25.4 percent, as opposed to 4.7 percent—see table 13), and signing petitions (23.7 percent, as opposed to 10.9 percent—see table 14).

These trends are intensified considerably when we consider the respondents' embeddedness in a social network—i.e. the size of the respondents' networks in terms of the number of “friends.” The likelihood of having participated in a civic organization or movement increases from 18.5 percent among those with up to 50 friends to 43.2 percent among those with 501 to 1000 friends (see table 15). The likelihood of volunteering regularly very nearly doubles between those with up to 50 friends and those with 501 to 1000 friends (see table 16). The same can be said about the likelihood of having participated in a demonstration—7.3 percent among those with up to 50 friends and 20.5% among those with 501-1000 friends (a slightly higher statistical impact than political discussions with relatives and acquaintances) (see table 17).

Lastly, it would be important to note that the likelihood of having a moderate to high interest in local (municipal) politics is also tangibly impacted by the number of friends in one's online network—among those with up to 50 friends, 43.4 percent report having a moderate to high interest in local (municipal) politics, as compared with 59.1% for those with 501 to 1000 friends (see table 18). It must be noted that the data for respondents with over 1000 friends demonstrated a notable decrease in all of these trends. This is likely in part because the sample size is rather low and therefore not as representative (only 26 respondents out of 1500 reported having that many friends on SNS), and partly because users with such a high number of friends are not the usual kind of SNS user—for example, they could be managing a business account.

Curiously, there is a clearly observable link between the agreement of political views among the respondents and their parents, and the number of friends the respondents have on SNS (see table 19). As such, we see an almost 10 percent increase in the likelihood of political agreement with parents from respondents with up to 50 friends to those with 500-1000 friends. This increase is paralleled with a 14.9 percent decrease in the likelihood of having little to no agreement—from 28.5 percent among those with up to 50 friends and 13.6 percent among those with 501 to 1000 friends. This data is consistent with the notion that the impact of various agents of political socialization are interdependent on one another. In this particular case, it is possible to suggest that an amicably politicized family environment will confer onto youth the communication competences and political norms to encourage youth to be more socially engaged and construct larger networks on SNS (Beck and Jennings 1982). Naturally, this needs to be more rigorously researched in the field to definitely confirm this theory.

It must be noted that the proxy variables used above were based on value-neutral questions of whether the respondents participated in certain political acts, without asking those respondents any questions that may help us understand if those acts were anti-regime in nature. With the complexities behind the notions of “political” and indeed “anti-regime” that were discussed above, making these deductions would in any case be fairly difficult in the complex contemporary Russian context. Those notions of “political” and “anti-regime” were eschewed by the participants of the very acts this thesis argued to have been influenced in large part by SNS, further complicating the study. Nevertheless, as mentioned by Krawatzek, “when I did the last survey in 2020, what is quite striking is that those who use online media are also the ones who distrust the government much

more. They're more likely to go to a protest, and whole bunch of those indicators that are more distant to the government" (Krawatzek 2022).

Russia's youth had their impressionable years coincide with a time when SNS rose to prominence as a powerful and increasingly wide-spread information resource. The result of this is a cohort effect that has made a significant impact on how this cohort gets its political news and information, and, in turn, this cohort's political norms and behaviours. The usage of SNS among Russian youth can hardly be overstated and can be qualified as the "most obvious important difference between young Russians (aged 18-25 years) and their older fellow countrymen" (Volkov 2019). As noted above, the vast majority of youth rely on social media and SNS as their primary source of political news and information. The prevalence of youth in political demonstrations is by no means a myth or state propaganda. According to Arkhipova's polling data that was acquired during the first protest in a series of Free Navalny demonstrations (on January 23, 2021), the median age of the respondents was 31 years (see table 20) (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). 29 percent of the respondents were under the age of 24, and 42.7 percent were under the age of 39. (The upper bracket of 39 years goes over this study's defined age of youthhood, however, this data can still be fairly representative of youth's participation in protests if we consider 31 as the median age.)

Crucially, we see that with each subsequent demonstration, the median age of respondents falls considerably—at the last protest that was polled by Arkhipova (on April 21, 2021), the median age was 27, with 35 percent of respondents being under the age of 24, and 42.7 percent between the ages of 25 and 39 (A. S. Arkhipova, Zakharov, and Kozlova 2021). Likely, this is a reflection of the impact of biographical availability—as

arrests and persecutions became more and more strict, the risks involved in participation would dissuade many of those with the responsibilities associated with the later stages of the life cycle (such as full-time employment and having children) from participating in high-risk political actions. Nevertheless, the role of SNS should not be diminished—mobilization for the Free Navalny protests was organized entirely through SNS and, as discussed above, SNS can be credited with putting the wind in the sails of Navalny’s entire movement by providing it the only communication channels available to the Russian opposition in contemporary Russia.

All of the data presented above could benefit from a more dedicated study in the field, in order to eliminate the proxy variables and discuss these subject-matters with youth directly. Unfortunately, the reality of today’s political situation in Russia make this not only more complicated in relation to some of the definitional and conceptual challenges described above, but also because such studies are becoming more and more dangerous to conduct, for both the subjects and the researcher. Nevertheless, the data presented above demonstrates some of the important dynamics and patterns of influence stemming from SNS and impacting the political norms and behaviours of youth.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis sought to explore the connection of two phenomena that can be observed in the context of Russia's digital contemporaneity: the increased relevance and importance of SNS in Russia's opposition networks, and the predominance of youth at the 2017-2021 protests in Russia. Much of the data presented in this thesis shows just how connected Russian youth are and how active they are on SNS, especially when compared to the older generations. Some of the theories discussed in this thesis—i.e. the theory of connective action and the dutiful/actualizing citizenship model—point to a sizable shift not only in the information landscape, but also in the political norms and behaviours of those who use SNS.

In applying the theory of political socialization to Russian youth, this thesis explored the possibility of a cohort effect where those who had experienced their political socialization in the context of digital contemporaneity will have developed a unique set of political norms and behaviours. These norms and behaviours are characterized by networked issue-based activism with issues of a highly localized and personalized nature (seen, for example, in environmental and municipal protests). SNS allow its users to negotiate their identity in relation to their social networks and the user engagement on these sites is designed to be highly personalized—as such, any political engagement that takes place on these sites will take on an intimately personal character. Issues of a local and personal nature are those that are most conducive to user engagement on SNS.

In the protests of 2017-2021 we can observe that the most successful interpretive frames (successful in terms of how many people became engaged) were those that people could easily identify with—for example, issues of corruption and local municipal

elections. Using SNS to evoke concrete grievances—such as frustration with corruption and nepotism—that users can easily identify with and thereby utilize in their SNS-enabled identity-building projects (in turn, having the consequence of others in their network adopting the same interpretation frames in their identity negotiation), is a pivotal element of mobilization in the logics of connective action.

The findings of this thesis show that embeddedness in an online social network (characterized by the number of connections (friends) one has in their online network) has a significant impact on volunteering, participation in civic movements and organizations, signing petitions, and interest in local (municipal) politics—all of which are qualified in this thesis as proxy variables for issue-based and local activism. SNS embeddedness is also a notable predictor of participation in demonstrations.

Nevertheless, the power of SNS in promoting oppositional points of view are in many ways thwarted by the Russian state's demobilization efforts which include hostile takeover of domestic SNS, obscure legal frameworks and extrajudicial harassment that target those who are engaged in anti-regime alternative political engagement online, and flooding techniques that overwhelm the digital information landscape with various kinds of disinformation. The Russian state is well-aware of the powers of SNS (ever since the 2011 Bolotnaya protests) in mobilizing youth and have devoted a significant amount of resources into either forcing youth to feel apathetic towards politics or promoting their own point of view online. These digital interventions have forced the opposition networks to reshape and restructure their political engagement so that the political acts are declaratively “apolitical” or so those political acts that may have taken place “in real life” could only be observed online, thus decreasing the likelihood of persecution.

Despite the elaborate oppressive acts orchestrated by the state, Russian youth have found even more elaborate ways to engage in the increasingly restrained space of Russia's last bastion of free speech. It is important to see through the veneer of the supposed crisis of political apathy among youth to find a kind of political engagement that has eschewed the traditional modes of political engagement in favour of those that are more personal and that are tangibly connected to a whole network of people with whom one could rely on to be understood and appreciated in whatever grievance—whether it is one of a daunting deadline or of large-scale government corruption—even if just with a virtual thumbs-up.

Appendices

Appendix A – List of Interviewees

Dr. Elizaveta Gaufman is an Assistant Professor of Russian Discourse and Politics at the University of Groningen and the author of “Security Threats and Public Perception: Digital Russia and the Ukraine Crisis” (Palgrave, 2017). Her other publications include peer-reviewed articles on nationalism, sexuality, and social networks, as well as regular blog posts at “The Duck of Minerva”. Her research is situated on the intersection of political theory, international relations, media and cultural studies (‘Dr. Elizaveta Gaufman’ 2019).

Dr. Félix Krawatzek is a political scientist and has been head of the research focus “Youth in Eastern Europe” at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin since September 2018. He is also an associate member at Nuffield College (University of Oxford). Félix Krawatzek's research focuses on politics in the Soviet Union as well as in Europe. He is particularly interested in the role of youth, the importance of historical representation in political processes, as well as questions of migration and transnationalism (‘Dr. Félix Krawatzek’ n.d.).

Dr. Florian Toepfl holds the Chair of Political Communication with a Focus on Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet Region at the University of Passau. His recent research has focused on how Russia’s ruling elites seek to influence media audiences abroad. In his previous projects, he investigated the inter-relationships between old and new media and politics in non-democratic regimes, with a strong focus on Russia and the post-Soviet region (‘Professor Florian Toepfl’ 2021).

Dr. Kristiina Silvan is a postdoctoral fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. Her PhD dissertation analyses the changes and continuities in the sphere of government-organized youth organizations in post-communist Russia and Belarus. Her research explores how and why centralized state-supported mass membership youth associations have developed in the last 25 years, as well as the individual experience of state-endorsed youth activism in contemporary societies ('Dr. Kristiina Silvan' 2019).

Dr. Mariëlle Wijermars is Assistant Professor in Cyber-Security and Politics. She conducts research on Internet governance with a focus on the impact of Internet policy on human rights, and on the framing of cyberthreats and policy responses. Mariëlle is the editor of *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (with Daria Gritsenko and Mikhail Kopotev) published by Palgrave Macmillan (2021) and *Freedom of Expression in Russia's New Mediasphere* (with Katja Lehtisaari) published by Routledge (2020) ('Mariëlle Wijermars', n.d.)

Appendix B – Tables and Illustrations (in order of mention)

Tables 1 through 20 and figures 1, 2 and 3 were created with data from ‘Pokolenie Z’ 2020. Table 20 was created with data from A. Arkhipova 2021.

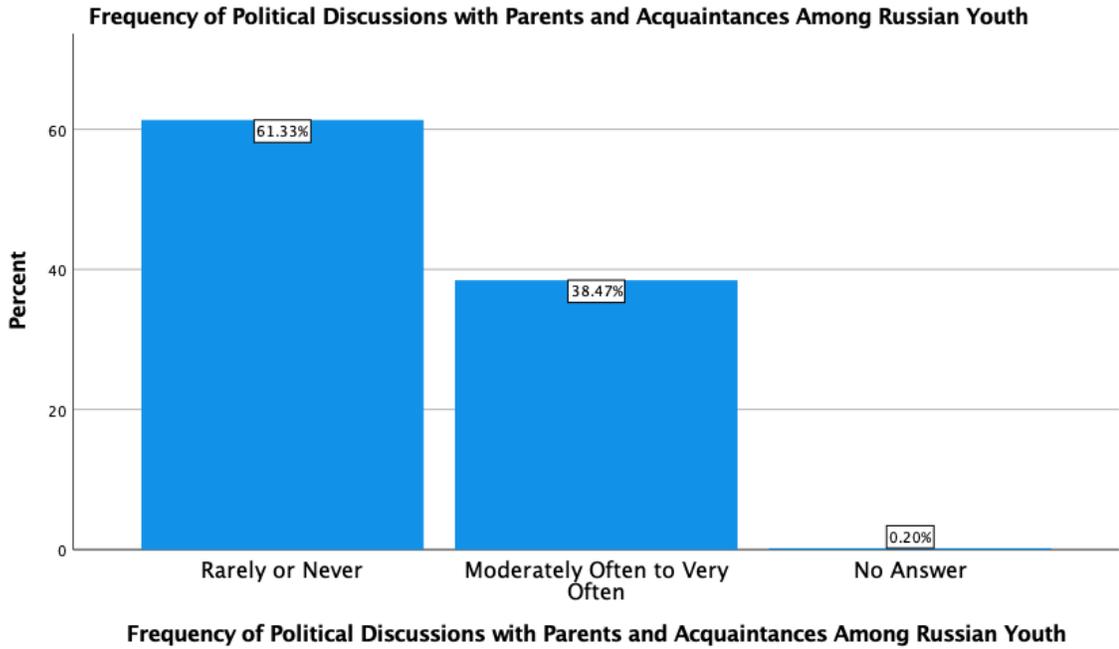


Figure 1: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth

Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Participation in demonstrations Crosstabulation

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Participation in demonstrations				
		Don't know	No answer	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this	No
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	0.4%	0.1%	2.2%	7.1%	90.2%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	0.5%		6.8%	14.4%	78.3%
	No Answer				66.7%	33.3%
Total		0.5%	0.1%	3.9%	10.0%	85.5%

Table 1: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among

Russian youth crosstabulated with participation in demonstrations

Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Participated in online political actions and initiatives Crosstabulation

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Participated in online political actions and initiatives			
		Don't know	No answer	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	0.7%	0.1%	3.6%	6.3%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	0.7%		4.2%	18.4%
	No Answer		33.3%		33.3%
Total		0.7%	0.1%	3.8%	11.0%

Table 2: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crosstabulated with participation in online political actions and initiatives

Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Participation in civic movements/organizations Crosstabulation

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Participation in civic movements/organizations				Total
		Don't know	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this	No	
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	0.5%	4.0%	20.1%	75.3%	100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	0.3%	6.2%	27.4%	66.0%	100.0%
	No Answer	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%		100.0%
Total		0.5%	4.9%	22.9%	71.6%	100.0%

Table 3: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crosstabulated with participation in civic movements/organizations

Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Signing petitions Crosstabulation
 % within Political Discussions with Parents

		Signing petitions			No	Total
		Don't know	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this		
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	0.2%	3.0%	18.0%	78.7%	100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	0.3%	6.2%	27.9%	65.5%	100.0%
	No Answer	33.3%	33.3%		33.3%	100.0%
Total		0.3%	4.3%	21.8%	73.5%	100.0%

Table 4: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crossstabulated with having engaged in signing political petitions

Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Volunteering Crosstabulation
 % within Political Discussions with Parents

		Volunteering		No Answer	Total
		Never	Volunteer at least once a month		
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq	Rarely or Never	75.7%	23.8%	0.5%	100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	69.3%	30.7%		100.0%
	No Answer	33.3%	66.7%		100.0%
Total		73.1%	26.5%	0.3%	100.0%

Table 5: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crossstabulated with having engaged in volunteering

**Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Importance of Political Activity
Crosstabulation**

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Importance of Political Activity			Total
		Little to no importance	Moderate to high importance	No Answer	
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	39.6%	58.5%	2.0%	100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	25.6%	73.5%	0.9%	100.0%
	No Answer		100.0%		100.0%
Total		34.1%	64.3%	1.5%	100.0%

Table 6: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crosstabulated with Perceived Importance of Political Activity

**Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Importance of Civic Activism
Crosstabulation**

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Importance of Civic Activism			Total
		Little to no importance	Moderate to high importance	No Answer	
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	62.6%	36.2%	1.2%	100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	44.4%	54.4%	1.2%	100.0%
	No Answer		100.0%		100.0%
Total		55.5%	43.3%	1.2%	100.0%

Table 7: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crosstabulated with Perceived Importance of Civic Activism

**Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Interest in Politics
Crosstabulation**

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Interest in Politics			Total
		Little to no interest	Moderate to high interest	No Answer	
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	72.9%	27.1%		100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	29.5%	70.4%	0.2%	100.0%
	No Answer	33.3%	66.7%		100.0%
Total		56.1%	43.8%	0.1%	100.0%

Table 8: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crosstabulated with Interest in Politics

**Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Interest in National Politics
Crosstabulation**

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Interest in National Politics			Total
		Little to no interest	Moderate to high interest	No Answer	
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	64.0%	35.9%	0.1%	100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	22.5%	77.3%	0.2%	100.0%
	No Answer	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	100.0%
Total		48.0%	51.8%	0.2%	100.0%

Table 9: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crosstabulated with Interest in National Politics

Political Discussions with Parents and Acquaintances * Interest in Regional (Local) Politics Crosstabulation

% within Political Discussions with Parents

		Interest in Regional (Local) Politics			Total
		Little to no interest	Moderate to high interest	No Answer	
Freq. of Political Discussions with Parents and Acq.	Rarely or Never	66.1%	33.8%	0.1%	100.0%
	Moderately Often to Very Often	25.1%	74.9%		100.0%
	No Answer		66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Total		50.2%	49.7%	0.1%	100.0%

Table 10: Frequency of political discussion with parents and acquaintances among Russian youth crosstabulated with Interest in Regional (Local) Politics

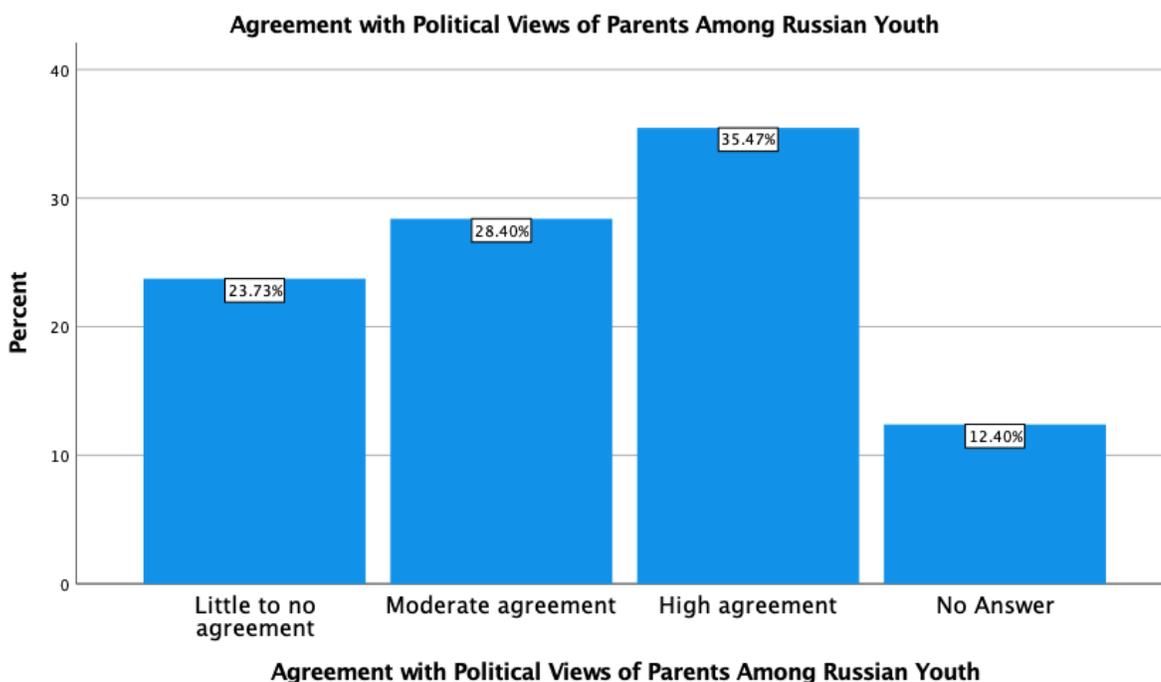


Figure 2: Agreement with political views of parents among Russian youth

Agreement with Political Views of Parents * Frequency of Political Discussions with Parents Crosstabulation

% within Political Views Coincide with Parents'

		Frequency of Political Discussions with Parents				Total
		Rarely or never	Occasionally	Often to very often	No Answer	
Agreement with Political Views of Parents	Little to no agreement	73.0%	18.0%	8.7%	0.3%	100.0%
	Moderate agreement	53.8%	32.9%	13.1%	0.2%	100.0%
	High agreement	47.6%	31.2%	21.2%		100.0%
	No Answer	95.7%	3.2%	0.5%	0.5%	100.0%
Total		61.3%	25.1%	13.4%	0.2%	100.0%

Table 11: Agreement with Political Views of Parents among Russian youth crosstabulated with frequency of Political Discussions with Parents

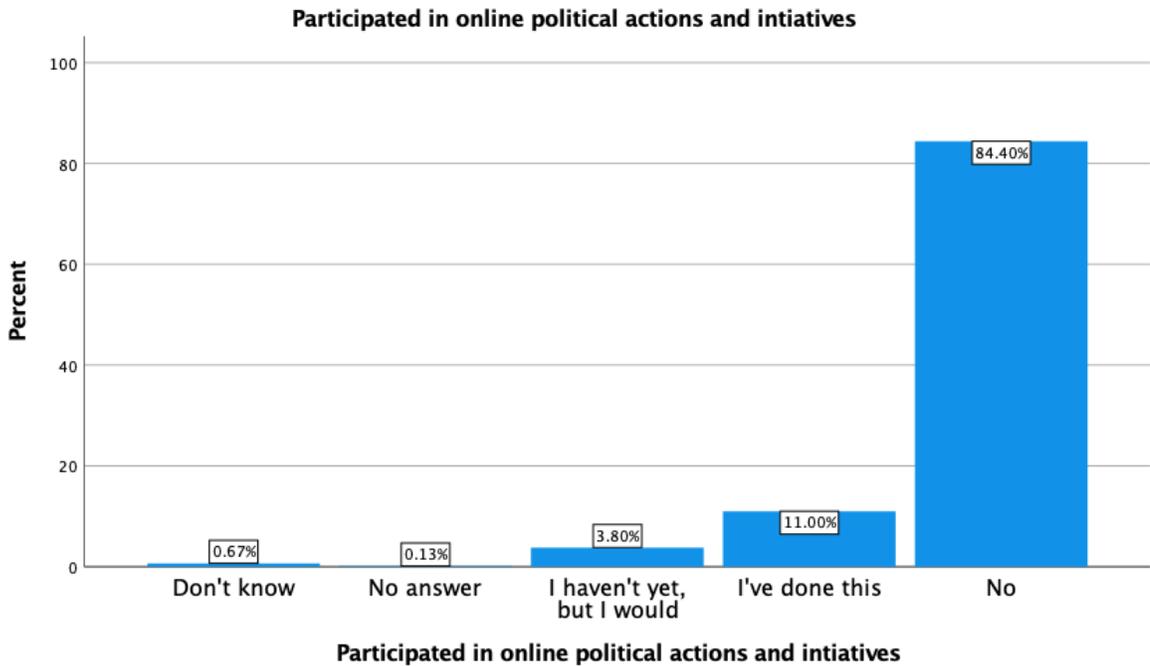


Figure 3: Participation in online actions and initiatives among Russian youth

SNS Use * Volunteering Crosstabulation

% within SNS Use

		Volunteering			Total
		Never	At least once a month	No Answer	
Freq. of SNS Use		84.0%	16.0%		100.0%
	Don't know	28.6%	71.4%		100.0%
	No answer	100.0%			100.0%
	Never	90.6%	9.4%		100.0%
	Often: at least ones a week	71.4%	28.3%	0.3%	100.0%
	Sometimes	78.9%	20.5%	0.6%	100.0%
Total		73.1%	26.5%	0.3%	100.0%

Table 12: Frequency of SNS use cross-tabulated with Volunteering

Frequency of SNS Use * Participation in Civic Movements/Organizations Crosstabulation

% within SNS Use

		Participation in civic movements/organizations			Total	
		Don't know	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this		No
Freq. of SNS use				16.0%	84.0%	100.0%
	Don't know		14.3%	57.1%	28.6%	100.0%
	No answer				100.0%	100.0%
	Never		3.1%	4.7%	92.2%	100.0%
	Often: at least ones a week	0.4%	5.1%	25.4%	69.0%	100.0%
	Sometimes	1.8%	4.7%	11.7%	81.9%	100.0%
Total		0.5%	4.9%	22.9%	71.6%	100.0%

Table 13: Frequency of SNS use cross-tabulated with Participation in Civic Movements/Organizations

Frequency of SNS Use * Signing Petitions Crosstabulation

% within SNS Use

		Signing petitions			No	Total
		Don't know	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this		
Freq. of SNS use				8.0%	92.0%	100.0%
	Don't know		14.3%	42.9%	42.9%	100.0%
	No answer				100.0%	100.0%
	Never			10.9%	89.1%	100.0%
	Often: at least once a week	0.3%	4.7%	23.7%	71.2%	100.0%
	Sometimes	0.6%	3.5%	13.5%	82.5%	100.0%
Total		0.3%	4.3%	21.8%	73.5%	100.0%

Table 14: Frequency of SNS use cross-tabulated with having engaged in signing political petitions

Number of Friends/Followers on SNS * Participation in civic movements/organizations Crosstabulation

% within Number of Friends/Followers on SNS

		Participation in civic movements/organizations				Total
		Don't know	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this	No	
Number of Friends/Followers on SNS	Up to 50	0.4%	5.3%	18.5%	75.7%	100.0%
	51-200	0.3%	4.6%	24.0%	71.1%	100.0%
	200-500	0.4%	5.7%	29.9%	63.9%	100.0%
	501-1000	2.3%		43.2%	54.5%	100.0%
	More than 1000		14.3%	32.1%	53.6%	100.0%
	No Answer	2.0%	2.9%	7.8%	87.3%	100.0%
Total		0.5%	4.9%	22.9%	71.6%	100.0%

Table 15: Number of friends/followers cross-tabulated with participation in civic movements/organizations

Number of Friends/Followers on SNS and Volunteering Crosstabulation

% within Number of Friends/Followers on SNS

		Never	Volunteering Volunteer at least once a month	No Answer	Total
Number of Friends/Followers on SNS	Up to 50	76.4%	23.6%		100.0%
	51-200	72.8%	26.9%	0.3%	100.0%
	200-500	66.8%	32.0%	1.2%	100.0%
	501-1000	54.5%	45.5%		100.0%
	More than 1000	57.1%	42.9%		100.0%
	No Answer	88.2%	11.8%		100.0%
Total		73.1%	26.5%	0.3%	100.0%

Table 16: Number of friends/followers cross-tabulated with volunteering

Number of Friends/Followers on SNS * Participation in demonstrations Crosstabulation

% within Number of Friends/Followers on SNS

		Participation in demonstrations				
		Don't know	No answer	I haven't yet, but I would	I've done this	No
Number of Friends/Followers on SNS	Up to 50	0.2%		4.5%	7.3%	88.0%
	51-200	0.5%	0.2%	3.5%	10.6%	85.3%
	200-500	0.4%		5.3%	11.5%	82.8%
	501-1000			2.3%	20.5%	77.3%
	More than 1000			10.7%	10.7%	78.6%
	No Answer	2.0%			9.8%	88.2%
Total		0.5%	0.1%	3.9%	10.0%	85.5%

Table 17: Number of friends/followers cross-tabulated with having participated in a demonstration

**Number of Friends/Followers on SNS * Interest in Regional (Local) Politics
Crosstabulation**

% within Number of Friends/Followers on SNS

		Interest in Regional (Local) Politics			Total
		Little to no interest	Moderate to high interest	No Answer	
Number of Friends/Followers on SNS	Up to 50	56.6%	43.4%		100.0%
	51-200	47.6%	52.3%	0.2%	100.0%
	200-500	44.3%	55.7%		100.0%
	501-1000	40.9%	59.1%		100.0%
	More than 1000	53.6%	46.4%		100.0%
	No Answer	55.9%	43.1%	1.0%	100.0%
Total		50.2%	49.7%	0.1%	100.0%

Table 18: Number of friends/followers cross-tabulated with interest in regional (local) politics

**Number of Friends/Followers on SNS * Agreement with Political Views of Parents
Crosstabulation**

% within Number of Friends/Followers on SNS

		Political Views Coincide with Parents'				Total
		Little to no coincidence	Moderate coincidence	High coincidence	No Answer	
Number of Friends/Followers on SNS	Up to 50	28.5%	28.1%	33.9%	9.6%	100.0%
	51-200	20.7%	31.9%	34.6%	12.8%	100.0%
	200-500	23.0%	25.8%	39.8%	11.5%	100.0%
	501-1000	13.6%	27.3%	43.2%	15.9%	100.0%
	More than 1000	14.3%	25.0%	46.4%	14.3%	100.0%
	No Answer	30.4%	15.7%	31.4%	22.5%	100.0%
Total		23.7%	28.4%	35.5%	12.4%	100.0%

Table 19: Number of friends/followers cross-tabulated with agreement with political views of parents

Age	23.01.21 Moscow	31.01.21 Moscow	31.01.21 St. Petersburg	14.02.21 Kazan	21.04.21 Moscow	21.04.21 St. Petersburg
# of respondents	370	310	453	122	330	377
Less than 18 y/o	4.4%	1.6%	1.8%	5.7%	3.0%	1.1%
18 – 24 y/o	24.9%	23.6%	32.9%	40.2%	28.2%	34.8%
25 – 39 y/o	42.7%	47.7%	47.7%	31.2%	44.6%	42.7%
40 – 52 y/o	19.5%	17.4%	13.7%	13.1%	13.6%	11.1%
55 and older	8.5%	9.7%	4.0%	9.8%	10.6%	10.3%
Median Age (years)	31	30	28	25.5	29	27

Table 20: Age of respondents in the 2021 protests in Russia (A. Arkhipova 2021)

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