Responding to Democratic Decay: Large-Scale Political Campaigning on Social Media in Russia

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This article focuses on the intersection of political engagement, organisation and communication in a non-democratic environment. This intersection remains largely unexplored because the context of non-democratic countries is difficult to study. The approach of the study is informed by political communication, media and social movement studies. It offers the perspective based on the theories of contemporary digital activism. The article reviews the role of communication as an organising principle in digitally enabled social movements and takes an example of the Russian-based campaign of Alexei Navalny in 2017. Using the methods of semi-structured interviews and textual analysis, it proposes the framework for the analysis of hybrid organisational structures associated with a digitally-enabled political group acting in the circumstances of a non-democratic country. It argues that depoliticisation of society is a key feature of democratic decay. By politicising society, pro-democracy activists can challenge authoritarian elites and provide an effective response to a long-term democratic decay.

Introduction

Since the 2016 presidential elections in the US, the theories of authoritarian politics attract the additional attention of social science. Scholars use these theories to analyse the contentious processes in countries that we considered as liberal democracies until recently. For example, the proliferation of anti-democratic elites and authoritarian populism in counties like Poland, Hungary or the Philippines is a widely-discussed phenomenon. However, the ways citizens actively respond to and resist the proliferation of populism and anti-authoritarian politics using digital space are studied less frequently. The cases of countries where a non-democratic political system exists for many years can shed light on the contemporary practices of this resistance.

This paper approaches the nexus between pro-democracy citizens' activism and the use of the internet from the perspective of a non-democratic political system of Russia. It focuses on the relations between the Russian state and pro-democracy campaigners. The state increasingly attempts to control the internet and to undermine democratic institutions. Still, digital platforms in Russia are controlled to a lesser degree than traditional media, but activists are

often persecuted for their use. Political campaigners are represented in the study by the Anti-corruption campaign of Alexei Navalny that took place in 2017 and resulted in one of the most geographically dispersed protest movements in the recent history of Russia. This campaign aimed at overcoming the obstacles and limitation of the internet use in non-democratic society.

The core activists of opposition and dissident groups in non-democracies often meet common challenges. In particular, they need to inform the general public about them despite the limited amount of free press and other forms of information publicly available (Stein, 2016: 23). Many of the limitations on free press are caused by censorship as well as self-censorship of media workers and other related actors. Ordinary people can also self-censor themselves if the discussion touches open "sensitive issues." This self-censorship is often caused by the fear of surveillance and persecution. Still, activists attempt to build effective organisational structures and recruit new supporters evading possible surveillance and prosecution. These four issues – overcoming censorship, avoiding surveillance and persecution and, finally, building effective organisational structures in a depoliticised environment – constitute the four digital challenges of activists in non-democracies.

The aim of this paper is to focus on the final challenge, which is building effective organisational structures in a depoliticised society. The paper contributes with a discussion of innovative ideas that can help pro-democracy activist groups to tackle depoliticisation by building effective organisational structures. It asks *What are the critical organisational mechanisms that allow countering digital communication policies of non-democratic regimes directed towards depoliticisation of society?* I answer this question by looking at the internal organising activities of the movement of Alexei Navalny in Russia in 2017 and the practices of its social media teams as well as at the reaction of the audience to movement's content.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the last of the mentioned digital activists' challenges which is the depoliticisation of a society that experiences democratic setback. Second, I demonstrate how depoliticisation can be associated with the choice of organisational forms of a digitally-enabled organisation. Third, upon presenting the methods of the study and the background of the Navalny movement in Russia, I trace how the activists of the movement countered the challenge of depoliticisation. I associated this countering strategy with a specific model of digital organising that the activists chose to follow. Thus, I characterise the organising of the movement according to its digital networks and other evidence. It also allows me to offer a framework to analyse the hybrid organisational forms.

Fourth, I put movement's organising and politicisation practices in a broader context of democracy setback that is observed around different countries with the emphasis on connecting to people and politicisation of social discussions. Finally, I offer conclusions and policy recommendations that are based on my observations.

Literature review

One of the common aims of many authoritarian regimes is to depoliticise citizens and to encourage mass complacency (O'Donnell, 1978). Based on the studies of authoritarian regimes in Latin America, O'Donnell (1978: 6) defines depoliticisation as the reduction of "social and political issues to 'technical' problems to be resolved by means of interactions among" elites. Such elites' primary objectives are to build public support for regime policies and thwart anti-government collective actions (Stein, 2016: 10). Ensuring the people do not discuss the government, criticise it and act politically is an obvious way to preserve support for the regime. In authoritarian Egypt prior to the revolution of 2011, many future leaders of the protest movement tried to shed away from political discussions believing that they "could not do anything to change the status quo" Ghonim (2012: 28). An Egyptian activist and one of the digital leaders of the 2011 protest movement Ghonim (2012: 39) recalls himself repeating "I'm not into politics" whenever a critical subject came up into the discussion. Fear and disbelief are, therefore, common feelings experienced by political activists in non-democratic states. Fear, disbelief and other negative feelings associated with politics are the results of repressions and control imposed by a non-democratic regime to deactivate society politically.

Depoliticisation is directly connected to media industry and political communication. Political fear might cause self-censorship. Ordinary citizens along with journalists perceive self-censorship as a strategy that helps to avoid political persecution and surveillance. For instance, Stockmann (2013: 39) argues that Chinese media are supposed to remain apolitical to represent "ordinary people" and discuss social issues. As a consequence, media organisations in non-democracies such as China are prevented from "critically interrogating the broader social and political structure" (Stockmann, 2013: 156). Thus, while authoritarian governments try to depoliticise citizens, another common challenge for pro-democracy activists is to politicise the public agenda and to make people talk politics.

Depoliticisation of societies can also be observed in some countries that experience the proliferation of authoritarian populism and the growing influence of anti-democratic elites.

This process is perhaps not imposed from above but might be encouraged by those elites. For instance, Fuchs (2018: 4) argues that "political alienation in respect to political system" is one of the conditions that generate "destructive collective anxiety." According to the 2017 survey in the US (Drutman et al., 2018), collective anxieties associated with a certain perception of community disorder makes people more inclined towards an authoritarian leader. Moreover, the same survey shows that "the highest levels of support for authoritarian leadership come from those who are disaffected, disengaged from politics and the party system." In fact, earlier studies argue that depoliticisation of young voters is a prominent feature of political engagement in the US (Zukin et al., 2006: 206).

In the EU countries that experience the growth of authoritarian political elites, the political participation remains low compared to other EU countries. According to the European Commission (TNS Political & Social, 2018), in Hungary, only 2% of adults participated in the activities of a political organisation or party in 2017, which is a 2% decline since 2014. The same percentage of the citizens of this country participated in the activities of an organisation promoting human rights or global development. In Poland, these numbers were 6% and 4% respectively. Therefore, these two countries that experience democratic decline (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2016) are also characterised by particularly low levels of political engagement comparing to other EU democracies such as Sweden (9% participated in party activities, 16% in promotion of human rights or development), Croatia (10% and 2%) or Greece (5% and 5%). The EU average for both categories was 7% in 2017. Therefore, the rise of right-wing authoritarianism in some democracies might also be linked to depoliticisation and political disengagement of certain populations.

The literature on political participation in mature democracies offers some insights into the process of politicisation and political engagement. This literature is puzzled by the question whether media use and citizenship norms might work together to influence different modes of political participation (Copeland and Feezell, 2017: 806). This question is part of the large debates about the extent to which people participate in politics in democratic countries. These debates often focus on the two types of citizenship norms. The first type of norms is observed in the actions of "dutiful" or "actualising" citizens who choose government-arranged paths to participate in politics like elections. This type of participation is often described as electoral participation. The second category is "critical" citizens who are more likely to engage in non-electoral participation such as attending a rally. Critical citizens prefer non-electoral participation "because they have a weaker allegiance to the state and view politics in a more

individualized way" (Copeland and Feezell, 2017: 806). In many non-democracy countries such as Russia, critical citizens often do not have other ways to participate in political rather than engaging in non-electoral and often radical acts. It is because government-arranged participation paths such as elections are perceived with scepticism (White and McAllister, 2014).

Bennett et al. (2017) associate the rise of neo-authoritarian political parties in mature or established democracies with the growing inability of centre and radical left parties "to connect" with their voters. Due to various external issues, those voters are driven to the right. Consequently, some political "progressive" parties, the radical left in particular, are less represented in the parliaments than radial right while centre parties are losing their position in the legislatures. Bennett et al. (2017) define citizens involved in this political shift as "disconnected" or "disillusioned" voters. The authors associate this disconnection with the challenges that are experienced by radical left parties in building structures that would correspond to the demand of their critical voters. Such voters, as Wells (2015: 214) argues, are often sceptical of institutionalised political organisations. They also prefer more innovative horizontal non-hierarchical models of organisation (Bennett et al., 2017).

The active citizens in non-democracies such as Russia that have radical demands for political change might also be described in Bennett et al.'s (2017) terms of citizens disconnected from politics. And to connect with these more radical and perhaps critical people means, in a case of an authoritarian country, to politicise them. Hence, politicisation might also be defined as connecting to citizens who were deprived of their political voice because of elections falsification and the bans on non-electoral participation. Thus, disconnected and depoliticised citizens are a common feature of both mature democracies and some authoritarian states. This suggestion points out that the capacity of political organisations to connect with these disconnected citizens might be crucial for the ability of those organisations to advocate radical political change.

Unfortunately, political participation theories largely draw from the case studies of western mature democracies. Few studies examine more challenging environments where political participation is limited like contemporary Russia. These few studies emphasize repressions and opposition of established order to active citizens' demands as factors that influence the levels of political participation.

Gerlach & Hine (1970: 183) suggest that repressions and other types of opposition of the authorities to citizens' demands can often lead to the politicisation of citizens. For example, young people who witness several large demonstrations in the US during the War in Vietnam

in 1968 reported that "the actions of the police destroyed their face in gradualism, non-violence, and conventional methods of working out solutions through 'lawful means'" (Gerlach and Hine, 1970: 184). Such violent confrontation with the police often politicises new followers of a movement. In other words, the opposition of the police and other authorities often pushes new followers into political sphere and enhances their movement.

Prior to mobilising people on the streets, a contemporary movement should connect with and politicise citizens online. To politicise citizens using digital platforms, a movement should possess some digital infrastructure built according to a defined organisation principle. In the next section, I discuss theories that help to analyse the organising of digitally-enabled political organisations.

The organisational logic of digitally engaged civic groups is closely studied by some authors including Bennett and Segerberg (2013), Bimber et al. (2012), Chadwick (2013) and Wells (2015). However, many more studies ignore the organisational layer of digital politics, the literature suggests (Bimber et al., 2012; Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Karpf, 2016). Internal organising like the backstage practices of social media teams of digitally-enabled groups is a particular "victim" of this attitude (Gerbaudo, 2017; Treré, 2015). Karpf (2016) argues that the crucial questions we face is what

an organisational form to choose for digital political activities especially in the case of larger groups that communicate with thousands or even millions of followers.

The literature suggests three categories of organisational forms that a political group can choose to build. First, a group can stick to a conventional political organisation – a leader-focused, centralised, bureaucratic, hierarchical, ideologically-driven organisation. Many social movements or political parties of the past, as well as of our days, were organised according to these conventional vertical principles. Normally, it is easier to coordinate a coherent and integrated organisation (Bennett et al., 2017: 1656). Such organisations can also be integrated into the conventional political process easier (Wells, 2014). In addition, a clear leadership that such organisation often has helps to receive legitimacy in the eyes of the authorities (Tufekci, 2014). However, if activists in a non-democracy rely on a conventionally structured vertically integrated organisation, they can be exposed to a higher degree of surveillance and monitoring of their communication. It might be easier to identify a group's leaders and core activists once the centre of a group is known (Gerlach and Hine, 1970). By contrast, the state should spend more resources to identify and to monitor the separated segments of a loosely integrated organisation.

Second, a group may try to build horizontal and leaderless structures. Such structures are often coordinated based on participatory decision-making (Bennett et al., 2017). Social movement and communication studies associate horizontal components of movements' internal coordination with the rejection of fixed roles of centralised bureaucracy, the division of labour, equality and adoption of consensus-based decision-making procedures (Gerbaudo, 2017: 194). In digitally-enabled movements, collective consensus is often negotiated through a series of meetings and discussions conducted both online and face-to-face (Gerbaudo, 2017: 194). During such negotiations, social media teams that try to adhere to horizontal principles of organising often develop guidelines that define the group's identity and mission (Gerbaudo, 2017: 194).

Still, informal hierarchies are persistent across all kinds of organisations that adhere to horizontal principles but use social media as communication channels (Gerbaudo, 2017; Kavada, 2012; Poell and van Dijck, 2016). The core activists of a decentralised organisation may find it difficult to gain the trust and attention of their supporters (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). In addition, such non-hierarchical, non-institutional structures have limited capacities in the struggle for power with more conventional organisations (Wells, 2015). Other well-known problems of decentralised organising include opaque structures and informality, which may lead to disagreement, tensions between groups within a movement and eventual splits (Benford, 1993; Bennett et al., 2017; della Porta, 2005: 82; Hathaway and Meyer, 1993). Therefore, the key organisational dilemma of digital activists is associated with what kind of organisational structures to build: integrated and hierarchical, which might be more effective in coordination, or segmented and horizontal, which are potentially more secure.

This organisational dilemma is also associated with the question of how to satisfy late modern citizens' demands and to build a structure that is capable of contesting actual power. Some authors suggest that hybrid organisational forms might provide a better solution to his dilemma (Chadwick, 2013; Karpf, 2014; Wells, 2015). Still, how exactly that "hybrid" organisational form should look like is not clear yet. From this perspective, "the great task facing us, then, is to understand how successful events combine the creativity and energy that digital media can engender with the strategic capabilities found only in [conventional] organizations" (Wells, 2015: 214).

Background. The anti-corruption and election campaign protests in 2017-18 in Russia

Alexei Navalny is a dissident, who is often considered as the main figure in radical political opposition in Russia. In March 2017, he and his organisation the Anti-Corruption Foundation started a campaign that exposed the wealth of the Russian prime-minister. This campaign gradually grew into another campaign demanding to register Navalny as a candidate in the 2018 presidential elections. After the authorities refused to register him, Navalny started his third campaign that year. During that campaign, he tried to organise the independent monitoring of the presidential elections while arguing voters to boycott the elections. I call these three campaigns 'the Navalny campaign' as they logically constituted one year-long campaigning process associated with the opening of political opportunity during the presidential elections.

In this paper, I am focusing on the anti-corruption stage of the Navalny campaign in March 2017 and its consequences observed up to the summer of 2017. In particular, I focus on the series of the protests of 26 March 2017. This was one of the most geographically spread waves of protests seen in Russian since the 1990s. It involved at least 88 cities according to the author's research and from 37 000 to 88 000 people in total according to independent media reports (Meduza, 2017).

The activists of the Navalny movement and journalists perceived those protests very positively. For instance, one of the leaders of the Navalny campaign in Moscow Vitali Serukanov (Serukanov, 2017) believed that 26 March "was a historical date […] when we saw that the protests could be organised even in Siberia and the Far East." An influential independent Russian journalist Oleg Kashin described the 26 March rallies as "the miracle which determined the content of all or almost all political news in Russia for six months ahead" (Kashin, 2017). Initially, the Navalny campaign was run from Moscow by a tiny group of individuals whom I define as the core activists of the movement. Following the 26 March protests, the campaign structure has expanded significantly and incorporated a vast network of the local representations of the campaign.

Methods

This paper originates from long-term research about pro-democracy digital media activism in Russia and Belarus. I use an inductive grounded case study of the Navalny movement in Russia. The study employs methods of semi-structured interviews and textual analysis of the posts by campaigners. In particular, the analysis is based on the 14 interviews with the

leaders of the studied campaign, activists involved in the coordination of its digital communication as well as some ordinary activists. The interviews lasted from 22 to 77 minutes; consent was received from all the interviewees. The interviewees were selected because of their direct knowledge of coordination and social media operations of the campaign. The sample included activists from six regions across Russia: St Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, Moscow, Nizhniy Novgorod, Ufa and Chelyabinsk. Textual analysis complements data from the interviews. To prepare data for textual analysis, I collected all the public posts of the Navalny Team page – the main page of the campaign on digital platforms – from 16 February 2017 to 24 March 2017. I collected these materials with Popsters on 25 March 2018 (122 posts were analysed). I also use the cases of historical social movements to compare the processes observed by me in the Navalny campaign with other cases.

Results

A case study of the Navalny campaign offers a chance to analyse how pro-democracy activists can contribute to politicisation of society with the use of digital media. The case study shows that the politicisation of critical citizens in an authoritarian country is a long process that includes several phases of activities. This process involves but is not limited to the dissemination of information about a contentious issue through an arranged digital infrastructure, exposure of wider social groups to that issue, mobilisation of these groups and opposition of the government to mobilisation that additionally pushes some mobilised people to engage in non-electoral political acts.

That is how the process of politicisation looked for the Navalny campaign. First, the core activists around Alexei Navalny articulated their strategy for the upcoming presidential elections period. Second, using their previously occurred skills and experience, the core activists prepared a contentious and politicised message that would appeal to their base. This message was broadcasted in the form of an investigation video “Don’t Call Him Dimon” that revealed the lavish lifestyle of the Russian prime-minister and accused him of corruption. The video helped to create a discourse that could unite people with diverse ideologies and views. Third, the activists used the message to find and attract potential ad hoc leaders to join the campaign in the provinces. The movement encouraged those people to become the administrators of campaign platform pages in their regions. Many of those administrators later turned into connective leaders of the campaign – users who “centrally position

themselves in social media-facilitated networks" and employ sophisticated strategies to connect other users (Poell et al., 2016).

Fourth, these connective leaders helped to create the digital infrastructure of the movement. The infrastructure included hundreds of pages, groups and channels on such digital platforms as VK, Telegram, OK and Facebook. Fifth, the campaign employed the infrastructure to disseminate its messages to a wider audience, potentially connecting with those people who did not receive independent political information. This allowed circumventing the traditional media controlled by the state and potentially politicise those Russians who normally receive political information from traditional media and do not follow independent political accounts on social media. Finally, the core activists and some local connective leaders have experienced opposition of the police and other authorities and subsequent repressions. This opposition along with other actions of the campaign helped to mobilise newly politicised publics and to organise one of the most geographically dispersed series of rallies in the modern history of the country.

The goal of this paper is to discuss the last phase of this process that resulted in the politicisation of a wider public. In this section, I analyse the mobilisation prior to the first series of the protest held on 26 March 2017. I demonstrate how the police opposition to this mobilisation and subsequent repressions have contributed to the process of politicisation of Navalny's base prior to the key date of the rallies.

The VK platform was largely apolitical when the digitally-driven pro-democracy movement first challenged Putin's power in 2011 (Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2016), demanding pro-democracy reforms. In contrast to this and other earlier pro-democracy protest movements in Russia, Anti-corruption campaign flooded VK with political discussions. Figure 1 shows how users responded to the movement's posts on the Navalny Team page, its main page on VK, before and during the Anti-corruption campaign. The most *viewed* posts at this stage were the announcements of the format of collective action as well as the news associated with the preparation for action in the provinces.

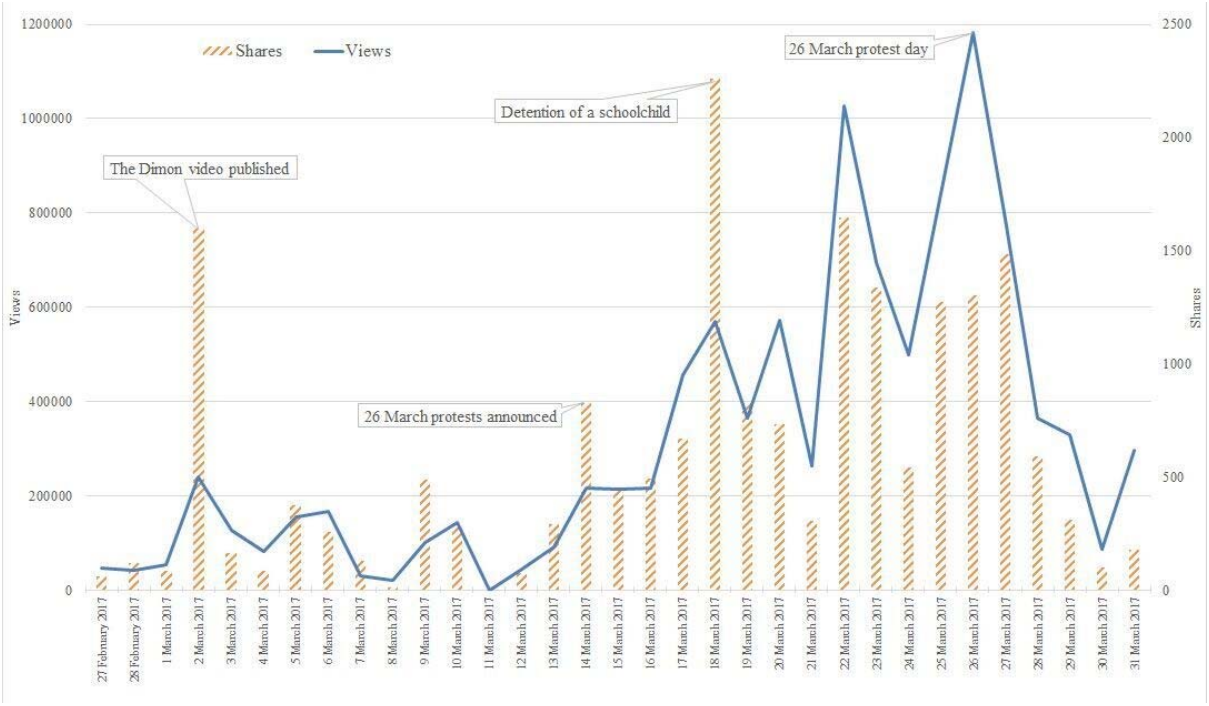

Figure 1. User activity on the main VK Navalny movement page before and during the Anti-corruption campaign

A number of *shares* of the page posts picked two times during this period. First, it happened when the "Don't Call Him Dimon" investigation was published. Second, 16 days later, when the campaign shared how the police pressures one of its connective leaders. This post was, however, not about the corruption in the government or Putin's criticism. The most shared post of this stage of the campaign was about a schoolboy from a western region of Bryansk. A schoolboy was a supporter of the campaign and tried, like many other supporters around the country, to organise the 26 March anti-corruption rally in his region as a volunteer. However, four days after he created a protest page and announced a collective action, the police came to his school, brought him to a police station and detained him. Following his detention, his protest page disappeared from the platform. Still, the news about the schoolboy's detention disseminated via the emerging campaign infrastructure and received 2 261 shares and 570 654 views (Figure *1*). The schoolboy also helped to disseminate the message about his story. He recorded a video telling the story about his detention and the authorities' opposition. In the video, he never showed his face and his voice was modified. A new protest page was soon created by other connective activists, and the rally in Bryansk attracted about 300 people (Meduza, 2017).

The case of the detained schoolboy demonstrates that the authorities direct their opposition to perceived campaign leaders and try to apply repressive measures against them. More than

thousand protest participants were detained during and following the Anti-corruption rallies on 26 March. The leader of the Anti-corruption campaign Alexei Navalny spent in prison some 60 days in jail in 2017 in total. At least 21 out of 70 local coordinators of the campaign were detained by the policy at some point of the campaign in 2017.

However, the use of digital infrastructure allowed the leaders to document and disseminate information about the repressions quickly. This information helped to politicise more citizens as they reacted to the repressions emotionally and started paying more attention to authorities' opposition and other political events. Gerlach & Hine (1970: 183) argue that the leaders of some political movements like the Black Power or the student movements of the 1960s in the US "seek out, welcome, and plan for such opposition." Similarly, the core leaders of the Navalny campaign also emphasised and benefited from the repressions against their connective activists.

The case of the schoolboy also shows that, in order to trigger politicisation, the Navalny movement, first, had been able to attract the authorities' opposition, so to possess enough threat in their eyes. Second, it had built a digital infrastructure to formulate and disseminate the message about the resulted repressions.

These two abilities might be associated with the choice of organisational forms in a digitally-enabled protest movement. I argue that the Navalny campaign built a hybrid organisation that combined elements conventional and horizontal organising forms. I define a type of a hybrid organisation that the Navalny movement has built as a conventional form of organisation that adopts some elements of more decentralised and segmented structures but largely retains its bureaucratic logic. This hybrid nature of the Navalny campaigns was revealed by the examination of the campaign's organisational culture as well as its networks on Telegram and VK (see Table 1).

First, the examination of the campaign network on Telegram demonstrates that local communities of the movement were linked on digital media both hierarchically and horizontally. The network of local Telegram groups and channels were united in a centralised, hierarchical network headed by the main campaign channel. At the same time, professional segments like IT-teams or affiliated social media pages were not included in the hierarchy of the organisation. This was particularly valuable for overcoming the challenge of digital censorship and filtering of the movement's websites.

	Vertical elements	Horizontal elements
Digital linkages between local communities	Telegram groups and channels: united in a centralised, hierarchical network headed by the main campaign channel.	Professional segments like IT-teams or affiliated social media pages were not included in the hierarchy of the organisation.
The principles of organisational culture	Internal organisational culture was mostly corporatist, startup-like and bureaucratic.	The campaign partly followed the principles of openness and transparency.
Control of content dissemination	VK content of the local representations of the campaign was edited by the core activists in Moscow.	A network of connective leaders was normally activated during the critical for the movement events. These leaders could disseminate information free from the core activists' control.
Decision-making and deliberation	Few decision-making tools and procedures were offered to the activists/followers.	The 26 March protest and Telegram networks: horizontal decision-making and deliberative features.

Table 1. Vertical and horizontal organizational elements of the Navalny campaign.

Second, the administrators of those pages and groups on Telegram and VK encrypted their identities and organisational interactions. This helped to avoid the usual pitfalls of an integrated organisation which are associated with full exposure to surveillance and monitoring. This also created a network of anonymous connective leaders that was normally activated during the critical for the movement events like rallies. It made the movement a combination of semi-autonomous segments which was harder to surveil and persecute. However, most of the content published on the campaign pages was controlled by its core activists in Moscow.

Third, the campaign incorporated horizontal decision-making and deliberative features in its 26 March protest network of 88 VK pages. Simultaneously, vertical and hierarchical organisational structures of the campaign were crucial for launching this network in March 2017.

Discussion

Recent prominent anti-government political campaigns in Russia such as the Strategy-31 protests for the freedom of assembly or the elections to the "Coordination Council of the Russian opposition" to unite the pro-democracy groups failed to reach similar levels of politicisation and proliferation in the Russian regions (Gabowitsch, 2016; Toepfl, 2017). They also failed to coalesce into lasting and genuine movements (Gabowitsch, 2017). Based on the presented results, I discuss how hybrid organisational forms allowed the Navalny campaign to counter depoliticisation practices and connect with a wider audience in contrast to the previous digitally-enabled campaigns in Russia. Political participation theories provide several hypotheses that can link organisational forms, politicisation and use of digital media.

1. Use of digital media and platformisation

The studies of political participation in the US observed correlation (but not causality) between critical citizens' political engagement and digital media use (Copeland and Feezell, 2017). The same pattern of use of digital media by more critical to the government citizens can also be observed in non-democracies. In such countries, more critical citizens turn to digital media in search of political information in the circumstances when traditional media are censored or flooded with disinformation (Robertson and Greene, 2017). However, large numbers of population in non-democratic countries remain politically disengaged despite their growing use of digital media. It can happen for several reasons. Disengaged citizens might be simply not interested in politics, receive no political information online or receive information that is generated in the same censored/propaganda tradition in which pro-government media normally operate. At the same time, even in non-democratic countries, an increasing number of political organisations use digital platforms actively. Furthermore, having an interest in politics prior to engaging with media might be a more important predictor of political participation than many other variables (Copeland and Feezell, 2017). Thus, contrary to expectations for mature democracies (Jorba and Bimber, 2012: 37), the growing use of digital media does not contribute to the growing numbers of critical or engaged citizens in authoritarian states on its own.

2. Political participation theories

According to Bennett et al. (2011), more critical citizens who feel disconnected should prefer non-electoral political engagements that are organised by more horizontal and leaderless

structures. These citizens also prefer digital media to traditional media (Copeland and Feezell, 2017). In contrast, people who exhibit a preference for top-down, authoritative structures like to connect with others through traditional, hierarchical organisations. The Navalny campaign appealed to critical citizens and actively used digital media to involve them in non-electoral behaviour. However, the Navalny campaign was designed as primarily hierarchical and top-down/vertical and had one authoritative leader. If to follow the mentioned political participation theories, critical citizens with a demand for horizontal interactions are expected to be sceptical of the Navalny organisation. Therefore, the political participation theories that are based on the studies of democracies can hardly explain the ability of the Navalny campaign to connect and politicise its base.

3. Hybrid organisation

As I have demonstrated, the concept of hybrid organisation describes the form of the Navalny campaign more accurately. The adoption of hybrid communication and organisational structures are common for internet-based activism (Gerbaudo, 2017; Postill, 2014) and political movements (Bennett et al., 2017). For instance, Barcelona en Comú, a party active in Barcelona, Spain, combined a highly centralized and hierarchical formal party network with an informal supporter network outside formal structures (Aragón et al., 2016). These two networks formed a hybrid organisation that formed a municipal government in Barcelona in 2015. The organisational adaptations that I discussed earlier place the Navalny campaign in the list of hybrid organisations too. Such organisations have the institutional capacity to contest political power and are successful in knitting "together autonomous, creative expression with traditional organizing" (Wells, 2015: 214).

At the same time, power stratification and digital media architectures make even the most radical and high-minded "horizontal" organisations more "vertical." For example, the platform-like political party Five Star movement in Italy tries to represent itself as a horizontal organisation. Politi & Roberts (2017) report that the movement attempted to introduce horizontal-style decision-making but still retained covert internal structures and leaders. These real leaders select the design for its horizontal deliberative platform and, thus, introduce an essential hierarchical element of control in the party structure. In other words, as Gerbaudo (2017), Kavada (2012), Poell & van Dijck (2016) and other theories of the platformisation of politics have demonstrated, it is very hard to find a successful digitally-

enabled political organisation that would correspond to the theoretical ideal of an open, horizontal and leaderless organisation.

However, when discussing the organisational structures, the theories of the platformisation of politics rarely consider the advantages of hybrid organisation. My analysis of the Navalny campaign has confirmed that hybrid structures are one of the types of organising that can help to connect with and to politicise critical citizens. This type of organising is based on combining strategic capabilities of bureaucratic control of digital content and hierarchical structures with the principles of openness and transparency, participatory decision-making and creative content dissemination during the crisis events. If an organisation finds a balance between the two poles depending on a context, the challenges of disengagement and depoliticisation can be tackled.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to identify critical organisational mechanisms that were used by the Navalny campaign to counter restrictive digital communication policies of the Russian state. The Navalny campaign demonstrated that it is possible to organise collective actions and to counter digital communication policies of an authoritarian regime using digital platforms. The analyses of this campaign documents the response of the digital activists to a long-term democratic decay in Russia. This response was focused on the politicisation of its base and, later, a wider audience. The organisational forms that facilitated this politicisation were hybrid. Thus, the case of the Navalny campaign demonstrates how digitally-enabled civic organisations can benefit from hybrid organisational forms.

The study also offered a framework that helps to analyse hybrid organisational forms. This framework is based on four components: digital linkages between local organisation communities, control of content dissemination, decision-making and deliberation as well as the principles of organisational culture. This framework can be used to compare the organising and politicisation of citizens during other prominent pro-democracy campaigns in Russia. This comparison can further link politicisation and organisational forms and put emphasis on other variables that were not discussed in this paper at lengths such as the role of charisma, identity, ideology and commitment. Still, from the perspective of digital political participation theories, this link is essential for an understanding of the nature of the success of digitally-enabled organisations in specific media environments.

The findings of this article have some implications for scholars and activists. Scholars involved in analysing contemporary digital activism might reconsider their understanding of democratic decay and disconnection of mainstream politics from its base in mature democracies. The concepts of politicisation and hybrid digitally-enabled political organisation could be scrutinised and debated in the context of democratic decay. I hope that these concepts and the framework for analysing them proposed in this paper will allow scholars to explore the process of depoliticisation in other contexts and to examine the impact of specific organisational designs.

Activists are advised to pay more attention to hybrid structures as well. Such structures should allow wider political participation and, at the same time, devise political practices that can restrain non-democratic leadership. Thus, hybrid organisational forms can enable politicisation processes in a society that experience democratic decline. Finally, funding bodies that provide international and domestic support for pro-democracy groups in authoritarian countries should reconsider their approach to the issues of unity and fragmentation of civic groups. There are strong pressures on these groups to conform to the standards of conventional political organisation united under a strong leader (Silitski, 2005: 88). That is because hierarchical organisations are believed to be more politically effective (Kreiss and Tufekci, 2013), beneficial to attractiveness to coalition partners and access to resources (Bennett et al., 2017: 1658). The use of digital platforms enables more diverse forms of organising and make more decentralised, fragmented and dispersed organisations potentially more effective in advocating pro-democracy changes if they adopt a right balance of organisational hybridity.

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