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„Case study analysis of social media and anti-government movements in modern Russia. The communication and mobilization methods of the Russian government opposition in the age of online networking and online mobilization“

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1. Abstract

How has the takeover of the traditional means of communication and information-spreading by the rise of social media platforms been able to impact the integrity and efficiency of the anti-government movements in modern Russia? Analyzed on the basis of the Castell's Network Society Theory, as well as McCarthy and Zald's Theory of Resource Mobilization, this Master's Thesis provides various explanations and observations into the life of the Russian political opposition within the online space and particularities of the anti-government movements in Russia. The research has made a deep and insightful analyzation of the existing empirical literature and conducted the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) of the interviews with Russian opposition activists. As a result, a number of interesting conclusions were made about how various social media platforms were used by the opposition communities in order to mobilize resources and to increase the support of different elite figures during the massive anti-government protests between 2011 and 2021. The research has found that the levels of organization and formation efficiency of the opposition movements in Russia were significantly increased with the introduction of social media communication, and that increased levels of censorship by the government authorities has led to an increased popularity of alternative means of information and communication. The levels of mobilization of the elite pro-opposition figures and the necessary resources were found to only be partially facilitated by the increased communication on social media, which is potentially due to the fact that Russian opposition community lacks in a variety of strong and influential supporting actors. The transfer of resources for an anti-government agenda was also found to be incredibly difficult. While the majority of the research focused solely on the opposition, the analysis was able to establish some strategies, that the pro-government actors employ in order to diminish the anti-government movements online. These online strategies however, were limited to VK (Vkontakte) and did not perform well on other platforms, where the Russian authorities have difficulties in monitoring the anti-government content, such as Telegram and YouTube. Additional results suggest that the introduction of social media platforms, as an instrument of anti-government activities, has been able to decentralize the hierarchy of oppositional activists and also classify the activists into various groups, based on their activity online and their subsequent activity during the physical protests on the streets. The opposition blogosphere has

also shown a huge level of growth, although these bloggers do not possess the influence or the resources to be seen as elite oppositional actors. The analysis further showed that a large portion of activists possess a “club mentality”, while being very united in their motivations to oppose the authorities. The lack of resources and the lack of the elite support, was shown to be able to become compensated through the social media communication, which provides activists in the rural parts of Russia with a wide online exposure and facilitates physical communication between the activists and the local authorities. Finally, it was also discovered that the informational content on social media is largely dominated by the opposition, indicating that the government is yet to get a grasp on the emerging autonomous and decentralized means of the online networking.

Wie hat sich die Übernahme der traditionellen Kommunikationsmittel und der Informationsverbreitung durch den Aufstieg von Social-Media-Plattformen auf die Integrität und Effizienz der Anti-Regierungsbewegungen im modernen Russland ausgewirkt? Auf der Grundlage der Castell'schen Theorie der Netzwerkgesellschaft sowie der Theorie der Ressourcenmobilisierung von McCarthy und Zald liefert diese Masterarbeit verschiedene Erklärungen und Beobachtungen zum Leben der russischen politischen Opposition im Online-Raum und zu den Besonderheiten der regierungsfeindlichen Bewegungen in Russland. Im Rahmen der Forschung wurde eine tiefgreifende und aufschlussreiche Analyse der vorhandenen empirischen Literatur vorgenommen und eine Thematische Inhaltsanalyse (TCA) der Interviews mit russischen Oppositionsaktivisten durchgeführt. Als Ergebnis wurden eine Reihe interessanter Schlussfolgerungen darüber gezogen, wie verschiedene Social-Media-Plattformen von den Oppositionsgemeinschaften genutzt wurden, um Ressourcen zu mobilisieren und die Unterstützung verschiedener Eliten während der massiven Anti-Regierungsproteste zwischen 2011 und 2021 zu erhöhen. Die Untersuchung hat ergeben, dass der Organisationsgrad und die Effizienz der Oppositionsbewegungen in Russland mit der Einführung der Kommunikation über soziale Medien erheblich zugenommen haben und dass die zunehmende Zensur durch die Regierungsbehörden zu einer größeren Beliebtheit alternativer Informations- und Kommunikationsmittel geführt hat. Es wurde festgestellt, dass die Mobilisierung der Elite der Pro-Opposition und der notwendigen Ressourcen durch die verstärkte Kommunikation in den sozialen Medien nur teilweise erleichtert wurde, was möglicherweise darauf zurückzuführen ist, dass es der russischen Oppositionsgemeinschaft an

einer Vielzahl starker und einflussreicher unterstützender Akteure fehlt. Der Transfer von Ressourcen für eine regierungsfeindliche Agenda erwies sich ebenfalls als äußerst schwierig. Obwohl sich der Großteil der Untersuchung ausschließlich auf die Opposition konzentrierte, konnte die Analyse einige Strategien aufzeigen, die die regierungsfreundlichen Akteure einsetzen, um die regierungsfeindlichen Bewegungen online zu schwächen. Diese Online-Strategien beschränkten sich jedoch auf VK (Vkontakte) und waren auf anderen Plattformen, auf denen die russischen Behörden Schwierigkeiten bei der Überwachung der regierungsfeindlichen Inhalte haben, wie Telegram und YouTube, nicht sehr erfolgreich. Weitere Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass die Einführung von Social-Media-Plattformen als Instrument für regierungsfeindliche Aktivitäten die Hierarchie der oppositionellen Aktivisten dezentralisiert und die Aktivisten in verschiedene Gruppen eingeteilt hat, basierend auf ihren Online-Aktivitäten und ihrer späteren Aktivität während der physischen Proteste auf der Straße. Die oppositionelle Blogosphäre hat ebenfalls ein enormes Wachstum zu verzeichnen, obwohl diese Blogger nicht den Einfluss oder die Ressourcen besitzen, um als Elite der oppositionellen Akteure zu gelten. Die Analyse hat außerdem gezeigt, dass ein großer Teil der Aktivisten eine "Klammermentalität" besitzt, obwohl sie in ihrer Motivation, sich den Behörden zu widersetzen, sehr einig sind. Es hat sich gezeigt, dass der Mangel an Ressourcen und die fehlende Unterstützung durch die Elite durch die Kommunikation in den sozialen Medien kompensiert werden kann, die den Aktivisten in den ländlichen Teilen Russlands eine breite Online-Präsenz verschafft und die physische Kommunikation zwischen den Aktivisten und den lokalen Behörden erleichtert. Schließlich wurde auch festgestellt, dass die Informationsinhalte in den sozialen Medien weitgehend von der Opposition dominiert werden, was darauf hindeutet, dass die Regierung die entstehenden autonomen und dezentralen Mittel der Online-Vernetzung noch nicht in den Griff bekommen hat.

2. Introduction

In today's constantly changing dynamics of networks and societies, social media has played an increasing role in the development of mass communications and mass information. Social media platforms, as we know them today, are gaining incredible importance into how people conduct their day-to-day activities, but also influence the economic, political and ideological spheres of modern society. With the development of social media, also came a new opportunity for the transformation of political communication in many states throughout the planet, which in turn transforms the way people perceive communications in real and virtual worlds, which then impacts people's views and values. Social media is a very crucial instrument, that political and non-political actors use in order to efficiently communicate and interact with the general public through a direct way of communication, which allows them to build up and improve relations with each other. As a result, it provides a platform with nearly unlimited possibilities and opportunities to "post", "share" and promote politically related content (Steiglitz et al 2012).

According to Chadwick (2013), the past decade can be characterized as having paved the way for the explosion in popularity of social media, and with just a little bit of time, it has embedded itself in the strategic communication of many fields, replacing the older ways of politician-voter connection, such as short TV-spots and advertisement endorsements. Social Media platforms are able to operate on levels and on specified parameters, that traditional media or other ways of political communication cannot do. Political communication on social media can target various demographics and geo-locations, and on many platforms at once, most notable of which are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

While the majority of literature is focused on the ways of how social media has been transforming political communication, participation and its strategies, there is a growing presence of scientific works on how social media effects a rather understudied aspect of political participation, namely opposition protests and anti-government movements. In the past few years, there has been a serious increase of scientific curiosity to the role of social media during the anti-government movements throughout the world. Starting with the "Green Revolution" in Iran in 2009, the Arab Spring, 2011-12 protests in Russia, ongoing protests in Belarus and many others, the scientific community is putting more and more emphasis on the importance of social media during such events. Social media platforms allow for a very

dynamic, quick and efficient form of communication, that it makes it much easier to coordinate large movements and increase the success of the protest (Shirky 2009). Social media can also have a strong impact on how the growing younger generation perceives authoritarian politicians (Lynch 2011). On the other hand, there is also enough evidence to speculate that social media channels also have an impact on how strong/weak authoritarian regimes perform in a country, as quicker ways of communication aid in spreading fake news and propaganda (Gladwell 2010).

Despite gaining a lot of scientific attention in the past ten years, there are still plenty of debates, and unfortunately no convincing empirical evidence on how social media platforms effect the success of protests or influence many of its other aspects. Apart from the fact that there is a relation between relevant social media messages and future protest activity, which can be seen throughout history, where contents of messages were proportional to the amount of riots, there are not many empirical conclusions in regards to movements and online social networks (Acemoglu et al 2014). As a result, there is a large gap in understating whether social media has become just another form of communication and an instrument of spreading authoritarian agenda, or whether its usage has a serious influence on protests and anti-government movements. Among many reasons as to why the research on social media, political communication and protests has been so scarce, is because there are various difficulties in the methodology of such researches. The spread of mass communication instruments, such as social media platforms, is dependent on many factors, like individual, geographic, regional particularities, or also education, income and other factors, which can be useful in determining the level of engagement on social media and the level of protest activity.

A very large portion of the research of social media channels and anti-government movement has been dedicated to the western countries, leaving heavy social media user countries like Russia out of the picture. In preparation for this master thesis, a lot of resources have been used in order to extensively review the English and Russian written literature on political communication particularities in Russia, specifically how social media is used as an instrument for mobilization during a protest, or to create a continuative sentiment, a developing idea and fundamental base for an anti-government movement. According to the studies on the internet-usage conducted in Russia by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM 2019), it concluded that over 67% of Russian population use internet almost daily, which in fact is nearly

three times more than it was in 2010. Another important thing to mention, is that the number of active internet users in Russia is similar to the number of active social media users.

This master thesis will look to sway away from the traditional, English-speaking scientific focus of western states, and turn the attention to the greatly understudied area of political communication, social media and protests in the Russian Federation. As a native Russian speaker, I will use this opportunity to uncover large quantities of highly valuable Russian written literature on the relations between anti-government activity and social media use, and also, contribute to the overall study on the political communication and protests in modern times. The reason for deciding to focus on social media as the case study of the political communication in Russia, is the personal interest and personal job experience, where I, as a PR and media manager at a private international academy, have to use various social media platforms in order to communicate, advertise and encourage young students, high school graduates and their parents to take various actions. I have also been highly interested in how social media allows for a much open and efficient organization of social/anti-government movements, and have conducted a number of research works on the similar topic, including my bachelor thesis where I analyzed the communication between state and sub-state, anti-government organization in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country.

Based on the lack of research, my personal and professional interest, as well as my scientific motivation, this research will conduct a deep case study analysis on the social media culture in Russia, its usage, particularities and most importantly the research will analyze how the social media platforms can be used both as an instrument for formation of anti-government movements, and then will look at particular cases of protests in Russia to understand what role social media has been playing in those events. This Master Thesis is therefore build on four main research questions:

RQ1: What role have social media platforms played during the political protests between 2011 and 2021 in Russia?

RQ2: How have social media platforms been used in order to mobilize support and resources for anti-government movements in Russia?

RQ3: How has social media platforms been used by the government authorities in order to undermine the political opposition in Russia?

RQ4: What are the particularities of social media and the online resource usage between the government and the opposition in modern Russia?

3. Scientific Relevance

The growing political movements in Russia, Ukraine or Arab states in the past decade have clearly demonstrated that countries, which exercise a more state-centric approach to their governance, are more constantly challenged by the growing popularity and use of social media platforms. According to Hinton and Hiorth (2013), there is an increasing realization that social media has capabilities beyond empowerment of the people and threatening today's political order, and in fact, social media has a potential to completely reshape political communication as we currently know it. The modern communication technologies today allowed social media platforms to go above the boundaries of simply being another communication platform.

In the latest developments of most popular social media platforms, we can see how Twitter has launched its new version of the platform, actively moving in the direction of becoming a form of a news outlet, while other platforms like Facebook, have established partnership with various banks and payment systems in order to improve on the quality and efficiency of their customers and users. In today's world, social media platforms have established themselves as real time retailers, and those platforms, which were initially planned as being used for chatting only, like WhatsApp, WeChat or Snapchat, are now fully functioning multi-profile social media platforms with endless possibilities. Together with the change of the information space within social media platforms, there was also a noticeable change in the legal norms, such as in the case of various journalist. New ethics issues have also been brought up in the scientific community, as right now, anyone with a camera and a social media account can potentially perform journalist functions. If in the past professional journalist had to be granted a special permission in order to record and report on the public events, this has drastically changed, as people are no longer legally constrained by the things they record and report on (Prokopenko 2020).

One of the most important aspect of political science relevance in this research, is the growing influence of new, modern mass-communication instruments on the changing relations between

separate individuals, but also between large and communicative social groups. Particularities, which are seemingly only connected with the emergence of social media are gaining more scientific attention currently, and an important goal of this or any other research on this topic, is to find out and predict the role which, social media platforms are going to play in the socio-political sphere of life in the modern society. There is a great variety of socio-political factors, which fall under the influence of social media, including anti-government movements and protests. Throughout the world, it has been demonstrated that such new communication instrument have a great potential to mobilize citizens for political purposes.

Besides social media platforms gaining attention among scientific community, there is also a growing interest in understanding how to better utilize social media in order increase the effectiveness or efficiency of political messages, such as those during anti-government movements and protests. The events of the Arab spring have shown that factors such as a growing number of younger population, who are so happening to be the most active among internet users, are also most active on the social media platforms, and such factors actually led to the drastic changes in the Middle East, as well North African countries. Large anti-government protests in Russia during the events of 2011-2012 and then following similar events throughout the country's federal regions have also proved that mobilization of citizens and formation of anti-government sentiments will only keep growing as the mass communication instruments and the social media develop further (Kuchukyan 2017).

4. Literature Review

The research questions highlighted for this paper, as well as the existing works on the topic of social movements, political communication and mass communication were thoroughly analyzed and, in order to increase the personal understanding of the field, as well as to contribute to the overall quality of this paper, a large portion of the researched literature included works with various different theoretical and methodological approaches. In order to properly analyze and execute the given research purposes of this paper, it is important to understand the many particularities of the Russian political communication system and also the research on the role and influence of social media on the establishment of new communication

space. Another crucial aspect is the entire process of political communication system development, and its transformation, which takes place due to the rapid rise of new communication technologies and digitalization.

The literature on the issue of protests is rather diverse, but due to a rather recent appearance of social media influenced movements, a lot of things are still yet to be discovered. According to De La Porta (1999, p. 165), protests can be viewed as creating a move towards change in political, social and economic aspect by conducting activities which have not yet been routinized. She further elaborates on the nature of protests, writing that there are many symbolic ways of legitimizing and institutionalizing the status quo and prevent any possibility for a major change, and this is where social movements and protests come into place. While having the same purpose, which is to set a change, social movements are different from protests, in a way that first employs a more mannerist approach and second is aimed at a change in a system of power relations.

There are also different factors, which can contribute to the efficiency or organizational structure of movements and protests, such as the level of oppression within the society, or oppressions, which are organized through an authoritarian state. As Duncan (2016) puts it, there could have been an opportunity to make social movements to be much more conventional and regulated, but for that, there should be an implementation of ways for the opposition to access the decision making processes. The current state, in which society finds itself in, is in fact among the most important determinants of social movement strategies, its tactics and rationality. According to Anna Zlobina (2017), the approval of the general public is another important aspect of peoples willingness and desire to engage in a protest or another anti-government activity. This has to do a lot with the collective action concept, where, if a certain action is welcomed and supported by the fellow citizens, the collective action's strength increases and multiplies.

Another very important, but rather well known factor in how protests or movements gain momentum is through different forms of media. While the majority of the research will be dedicated in finding out the role of social media in protests in Russia, it is still crucial to mention other forms of media, that are potentially responsible for the civil unrests. The traditional, broadcast media like newspapers, television and radios are often tasked with documenting, analyzing and reporting on the moments and protests, thus influencing their dynamics and also

giving attention to protests, which would not have been as active if it wasn't for the media reports (Cohen-Stratynner 2016).

Steinert-Threkeld et al (2016), have further elaborated on the influence of media on the large scale protests, and concluded that with the rise of social networks, the number of protests has grown exponentially. He and his colleagues outline a certain number of "perks", which can be beneficial when organizing a large, anti-government movement. Building up a social media account and becoming popular, does not require an immense amount of resource or time, compared to preparing a for TV session or writing and publishing an article in a magazine. Unlike TV or newspapers, social media has a great potential and opportunity to allow its users to access and spread the information on much quicker frequencies. It also allows the users of social networks to interact with and establish relationships between one another. This in return contributes to the higher turn-out of protests and social movements.

Another important aspect of the protest and social media issues, is the overall transformation of the political communication. Such transformation can be characterized, as having shifted from offline to an online platform and keeps digital ozone further. This transformation can be viewed, as having developed in three different stages. The first stage is described as having a direct connection from a specific offline activity (for example a police arrest) with an online activity (like reposting the call to join an up-coming anti-police brutality protest). Thus, when such connection takes place, people are further encouraged to mobilize themselves as well as mobilize their friends, colleagues etc (Bu 2017). The second stage is based on the overall online communication as a new way of interacting through a new communication tool. It has a more symbolic meaning Bu's (2017) transformation concept. In the third and final stage, there is a so-called "transition" from virtual to actual. This stage also symbolizes the final stage of the chain of events, which first took place offline and then led to the citizens mobilizing themselves and then others as well. The third stage, therefore is the person's actual attendance of the movement or a protest, or an exhibit behavior and actions, which were expected by the protest organizational body (Bu 2017). This simple, but yet highly efficient concept of the three stages, ultimately shows that there is a growing potential for new communication tools to change the way the scientific community has been viewing political communication.

More changes in the political communication systems around the world have been also described by Tufekchi (2017), where the author points out that there are very important differences in the political, as well as cultural aspects of protest compared to for example a

decade ago. These changes however, really took off once the technology has caught up and allowed network societies to organize and perform as efficiently as ever. One important advantage that was present in other political communication forms, is the ability to assemble large groups of like-minded individuals. Simply getting together through social media chatting and movement info reposting is not enough, as there are more organizational aspects which must be covered. Through online networks, the crowds are gathered and sustained with more interested people, but those protests, which solely rely on the organization without social media platforms, are generally the same type of movements which tend to quickly fail and fade away. Therefore, the popularity and quick reach of social media does not equal to the efficiency of the movement. Another interesting thing that Tufekchi (2017) concluded, is that due to social media usage, many informal individuals become similar to how influencers are perceived, and often exercise their voice, which would in turn lack much of the legitimacy. This also possesses a great deal of danger to the overall success of the protest/movement. Once a person is seen as an influencer within the movement, the fellow individuals will look up to the person for an opinion or a direction, although that person has never conducted an agreement with the actual protest organizers, thus exercising opinions and directions, which can potentially be different from the original ideas and concepts. Therefore, there is an issue where social media and digital communication further increase the general tensions within the leadership or the organization inside the movement. There is also, yet another difficulty that social media poses in regards to protest sustainability. While it is true that people online tend to connect to like-minded individuals, there is also a growing consensus that internet usage, specifically social networking, can lead to a serious polarization problem (Dogaru Tulica 2019).

Throughout the past few years in Russia, there has been a visibly increased protest and anti-government activity. According to Maslikov (2016) the boom in protests after the elections to the Government Duma or Parliament, which continued until the end of 2013, are characterized by a new type of behavior and organization. In fact, he points out that the later movements had a much more efficient organization structure, were much more popular and mobilized, and also had the highest percentage of attendants who communicated through social media and other internet resources. There is also a considerable danger that such new movements impose to the duration of the regime in Russia, which Maslikov (2016) exemplifies in the speed and precision of the communication processes within the dynamics of an anti-government movement, including its ability to impact the entire structure of the movement's system, from

its start, as a social media campaign, to the legitimate negotiations with the government. Therefore, the growing protest and anti-government activity online results into mass movements, which means that there is potential threat to the existing Russian institutions and their leadership, but also poses a certain level of threat to the safety of the government and the society.

According to the Russian social scientists Timofeeva (2014), the concept an anti-government movement implies the clashes among the political subjects, who aim at the fulfillment of their own agenda, which cannot be fulfilled in the existing regime or political structure. In the definition of a political protest by Artyikhina and Safronov (2014), the authors describe protests as illegal political assembly of people, which is not regulated by the legal rules, but does not call to violent actions. One of the main characteristics that drive people to be a part of a political movement is a desire for change in socio-political, legal, administrative, cultural and etc aspects of life. A protest movement is also different from an anti-government one in a way, that for it to take place, it requires that there are certain lawful obligations which must be fulfilled, and promises during the organizational negotiations must be kept. In order for a protest to successfully take place, there must be instruments of control, organization, communication and specific groups or social segment targeting (Maslikov 2016).

Another important and very interesting conceptualization of communication systems comes from Luman (2012) , who views communication not as a simple transfer of messages, but as something that is historically shaped and is dependent on the overall context and time. Communication subjects are not considered to be just individuals, but the entire society, and the process takes place as a natural event. Other authors such as Jin Sharp or David Shambo write that during a creating of an event such as a mass movement, there is a very important part which is played by certain theatrics, bright colors, symbols and, as it attracts more people, it soon becomes “mainstream” and attracts further participants.

Such tendency of new communication transformation has also been seen in Russia. It was thanks to the incredibly fast growing popularity of the social networks, that the messages were able to spark large gatherings, especially during large protest at the Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. As Timofeeva (2014) puts it, there are current “wars”, which are the live reports of protests and movements, create an atmosphere of a war like situation, triggering the psychological stress, which is worsened by more similar live reports. It can thus be argued, that

this sort of stress is among the main triggers for the heavy usage of social media during the organization of political protests, and not other forms of communication tools.

According to Krivokora (2012), the role of internet and social media networks within the dynamics of the protests and political movements are becoming critically important during the organization of any form of events, whether political, social or an everyday amenity. The lack of resources required to transmit and spread messages at high rate with different contexts is among the most important transformation aspects, which Krivokora mentions. All it needs is a gadget and person with some basic gadget interface knowledge.

As Maslikov (2016) further puts it, social media and similar networks cause a very large and unnatural exchange of information, making modern communication technologies to constantly influence ones views, values and ideologies in a world that is already booming with all sorts of information and reports. Such unnatural exchange of information at a very high rate also effects people differently, based on their strengths and weaknesses. This again leads to certain significant changes in the usual everyday interactions of individuals and creates a completely new way of human relationships, which can be characterized as virtual, taking place at high rates and large distances.

Dokuka (2014) in her work, "Communication through online networks as a protest mobilization factor in Russia", presented a number of very interesting researches, which led to a conceptual model of different classifications. In this classification model, the first type of part-takers is individuals, who do not consider internet or online communication as an important aspect during the organization of protest movements. Such persons can also be characterized as "internet sceptic" and according to them, the attendants of such movements do not get mobilized through the communication on social media, but are rather mobilized through discussions with family members and friends. They also get their information from other forms of mass communication. However, among all the surveyed people, such type of persons were not numerous. It was also concluded by Dokuka (2014) that those "internet skeptics" were getting most of their information through radio, specifically the radio station "Эхо Москвы» (Écho Moskvii) or Moscow's Echo. They did not watch any television, because they considered TV stations to be government controlled and therefore untrustworthy. Even this type of people however were still getting some form of information and interactions through new information technologies, as every single of them were using modern smartphones and often used the SMS services.

The second type classified by Dokuka (2014) are those who are active internet users. They are considered to be the polar opposite of the first type of respondents, and considered internet, online activists and social media to be very important and crucial in their everyday lives. An interesting observation was made where the given type of people would make up the largest portion of the active protest participants, but on average they did not spend a lot of time at the protests, attending it with purpose of meeting like-minded individuals and socializing. The reason why however such type of persons are especially important in the overall understanding of role of social media on the political movements, is that this type of people are the ones who mobilize fastest and in large numbers. The active internet users use social media platforms such “Vkontakte”, “Facebook” and “Twitter” as their main information hubs, and also conduct a number of protest activities, such as watching opposition news, protest organizational information and also follow opposition incumbents. An important thing to mention is that while these active-internet users are among the most active protest participants, the majority of them do not openly show-case their political activity online and also avoid posting online information regarding their political views. Yet still, social media is seen as the most important mass information tool for this type.

The third type that Dokuka (2014) points out is those who are moderately active as internet users. Although they also use social media platforms like Vkontakte, Facebook and Twitter, the majority of time, if not most of the time, they use social media as means of communication with their friends or for entertainment, and do not use it as a platform for political discussions. Among the top news sources for this kind of people, the author singled out a number of Russian news media outlets, such as Lenta.ru, Newsru.com and Gazeta.ru. One reason, as to why this specific type of people chooses to inform themselves by the state media news channels instead of social media, is expressed in the complexity of the way information structured on social media platforms or forums, while news media structure their news in an easy to read way and simplify the majority of the content, making it more available to be consumed by the viewers.

Many social scientists today view social media as one the single most important tool in modern protest movements. Much of it is attributed to the efficiency and speed of message delivery, but also this new media phenomenon is in constant development. Just a couple decades ago, there was a rather limited and primitive choice of gadgets compared to today, and right now an entry level school students can operate communication on various apps on various highly developed multi-functional gadgets. Besides social media, another top aspect of modern

protests movement organizations are the “independent” radios, which are very debated constantly in Russia, as many Russians see them as provocative, pitting opposition and pro-government masses against each other.

According to Raymgen (2017), there is an urgent need of analysis of social media and other mass communication usage within the political protests, starting from 2012 and those ongoing today. Such analysis must cover various aspects of society such as legal, social, socio-political, cultural and economic. A very interesting and especially relevant for this paper, is the analysis of social media and the features of intermediary ties on social networks by the Institute for Cross-Disciplinary Physics and Complex Systems. It analyzed a number of social interactions on Twitter in order to see which social ties between the virtual communications are strong and which ones are weak. A mention function, which allows Twitter user to “tag” or “mark” their friends on certain posts, blogs or pictures, is mostly done between groups, which could be different in its agenda. Another Twitter function “re-tweet” or re-post, is mostly used by those individuals who are active political participants and are also part of a group, and could be potentially interconnecting with other similar groups.

An analysis conducted in the US Pew Research Study in 2012 showed that there is an increasing number of political encampments online, with two thirds of the grown up population having previously or are currently engaging themselves with politically related content on social media, mostly through Facebook and Twitter. Nearly 40% of the examined persons, admitted that they have liked or shared content, which can be associated with political incumbents. Nearly third of them have also admitted to engage in political discussions online.

Due to a great deal of interested of the scientific community toward United States politics and use of social media during elections, there are plenty of scientific works, which have also been fruitful for this paper. In an analysis by Dutta (2008), during the 2008 elections, when social media was not even yet a mass communication instrument, as it is right now, over two million of Obama supporters were registered on Facebook and over 100,000 of rather active and engaged fans, who uploaded nearly 2000 videos with Obama related content, increasing the subscriber amount of Obama’s official website to 115,000 registrations. As a result, the overall video engagement turned out to be nearly 100 million, with some 18 million visits to the website. John McCain, who was Obama’s presidential opponent at the time, greatly underestimated the power of social media back then, and gained a little over 600,000 fans on Facebook, and racked up about 25 million video views and 2 million website visits.

Among the recent political movements and the role of social media within them, no other event has taken as much as attention of the scientific community as the Arab Spring. According to Mourtada (2011), social media's role was immense during the initial, as well later events of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The online community of the protestors were able to gain a lot of followers and spread the news about the uprisings in a rather short period of time and extremely efficiently. Activists were able to utilize various blogs, forums and other social platforms, and according to a poll, the level of engagement of general public in Tunisia and Egypt was so high that almost every second of the surveyed individuals, was in some form or another, interacting with the protest related content online (Mourtada, 2011). In order to slow down the dynamics of protests, the Egyptian government very quickly realized the root of success of the uprisings and shut-down internet and all online related services. This however, still proved to be too late as the movements had enough time to set their organization through social media beforehand.

It is not possible to narrow down, which aspects of social media in regards to protest is most analyzed in the case studies of Arab Spring. The majority of the literature analyzes how social media presence functions and works in different Arab states, and from such fruitful research on the topic, Anderson (2011) for example, argues that the main part of the protests was not merely the social media and the applying technology, but rather how this technology echoed in the many social and cultural context on the local level. Another important point was made by Hussain et al (2012) who concluded similar things, based on his research of protests and social media in the Gulf Peninsula.

The research work from Wolfsfeld et al (2013) is a great quantitative paper where the authors sought to analyze the role of social media during a collective action within the Arab Spring, and they came to a number of interest conclusions. According to their findings, there is a lot of attention that needs to be paid to political context, such as different political variables, before the actual research on social media takes place. They also emphasize on the cross-national methods when analyzing a lot of countries, and there was also a serious level of correlation of social media penetration and the size/numbers of movements. They also propose a more contextualist approach to this phenomenon, as the role of social media, at least in the case of uprisings during the Arab Spring, can be regarded as slightly exaggerated, but nonetheless incredibly important. In their research to determine the role of politics, before examining the role of social media in the protests, Wolfsfeld et al (2013) also discovered that politics played a

very large part within the protests, as it was through social media that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt for example, was able to win parliamentary and later on, presidential elections.

Even though social media was among the most interesting and crucial parts in the success of the Arab Spring, there is also a large number of perhaps equally important events that gave extra push to the protests on 25th of January. Mubarak's regime was already characterized by very low levels of citizen motivation, decreasing economic performance, high levels of corruption and very low levels of freedom of speech. Since Egypt has arguably been in a very sorry state, both economically and politically for nearly five decades, there was a constant presence of political movements and anti-government protests. According to Essam El-Din (2011), Mubarak not only imposed a great deal of violence on the protestors, he also increased his influence in the judicial system, keeping average citizens in military courts and imposed political restrictions to anyone who would want to run for a government office. As the UNDP (2008) report states, almost twenty percent of people in Egypt lived below the poverty level, and for Egyptian standards poverty levels are much more pronounced as poverty levels in the majority of the European countries.

Success of the January protests in Egypt appeared from the fractured political situation in the country, and geo-political particularities, such as the location to the neighboring Tunisia. Besides that, the Tahrir Square, which conveniently for protestors was located in the very center of Cairo with good infrastructure around, allowed for many thousands of people to gather in a single movement and provided enough space for the foreign press to see and report on the events (Joyella 2011). As mentioned before, social media still remains one of the key aspects of Egyptian revolutions and it can also be clearly seen in Hamdy (2009), where he argues that social media platforms became instrumental in containing and sustaining the protests for a very long period of time. It is also important to mention that Egypt already possessed very advanced forms of communication available for its citizens, such as a free access to internet, cheap computer electronics, and over twenty percent of the population had access online (IWS 2011).

Another important aspect of protests succeeding from online aspects, is the appearance of many political and social bloggers. According to Hamdy (2009) a lot of blogs were first written in English, which was mostly due to the English speaking software. This however quickly changed and developers of the Arabic language software systems have paved a way for more blogs being written in Arabic and thus being able to be accessible by a larger public. The largest

social media platform used were Facebook and Twitter, and served as a necessary learning ground for both the protestors and the government, about how this new way of communication and organization can be successfully tackled.

Although this master thesis will solely focus entirely on Russia, it is also very important to explain in more details the events of the Arab Spring, due to the sheer amount of research done on the topic, but also the visible similarities between situation in Egypt and the anti-government protests in Russia. Among the key aspects of social media use in Egypt protests, many authors point out to how it had influenced the concept of social mobilization. For the first time in many decades, social movements transformed themselves in a way that ensured a quick speed of communication, as well as strategic activities, which were not part of instrument of social movements before, such as posters, flyers or faxes. While they are still used during modern protests in some way or another, they are no longer seen to be as relevant as social media and new forms of communication. As a result, among the key actors during the protests were actually those individuals who possessed sufficient knowledge about social media and its algorithms. With that knowledge, they were able to set up online groups and motivate online engagement among fellow citizens. Later, a number of singled out videos, such as the message from Nawara Negm, have also been able to mobilize a lot of people to go on the streets and attend the protests (Negm 2011). YouTube also played an important role as a separate social platform, as long, motivational to protest videos were posted there.

Social media has also had an important role, which was previously taken by the traditional broadcasting media or newspapers. Political activists began posting up-to-minute updates of what was happening on the streets and have quickly gained interest of the foreign media, which have used those tweets and postings in order to inform the outside world about the events, and also those who have recited near Egypt and Tunisia and did not speak the common language. This new development from citizens transforming into citizen journalists has especially been beneficial when the Egyptian government banned any news reporters from the Tahrir Square, where the largest of the protests took place (Fisher 2011). The significance of advantages that social media gave to the protesters was quickly realized by the government authorities, who shut down the Internet within the country and also cut off any mobile connection. As it was happening, many political activists and blogger have quickly informed their outside allies and foreign reporters through various social media platforms. A large website called "Arabista" has also posted a warning message on its page, stating that internet

connection has been shut down on the 28th of January. Zirulnick (2011) have reported that protesters in Egypt were still able to have somewhat reliable access to the internet through proxies or by directly asking their friends abroad to tweet or post messages for them. Another, perhaps most interesting event, happened when IT engineers and technicians from Twitter and Google have assisted the protesters by establishing a function that converted the spoken tweets or audio messages into written text, where messages ranged from potential use of tear gas to locations where activists could get free food and water. According to Beaumont (2001), social media started losing its significance after the internet was shut down and the communication lines were cut. This however strengthened the motivation and the overall support for the movement. As online means of communication were harder and harder to employ, protestors turned to more common and traditional connection to the masses, such as huge signs where a date and time for the next organized movement will take place. In short, one might argue that social media planted the necessary seed for unity of the protestors and helped it to sprout into an uprising that could not be diminished even without access to the internet.

Another important event, which in scientific literature has often had compared to the Arab Spring in terms on its use of online resources, is the Occupy Movement. The movement, which began on 17th of September 2011, saw the protestors take over the Zuccotti Park in the center of Manhattan, and set an example which led to similar movements in over a thousand of cities in the US, and led to nearly 7,000 arrests within the period of six months, the duration of the Occupy Movement uprisings (Chock 2012). One of the reasons as to why it is so often compared or mentioned in the same research as the riots in Egypt during the Arab Spring, and the riots in Hong Kong from 2014 on, is because all these movements are characterized by very similar tactics and dynamics. They all sought to take over or occupy public places, did not have strong single leaders and were aimed at improving the quality of liberties, democracy and fairness (Castells 2012).

Social media and the new modern communication technologies are considered by many scholars to be among the most crucial instruments for the overall spread and mobilization of activists during the movement. The amount of online activities conducted by the participants has been much more diverse than those during the Arab Spring, as the US government did not shutdown the internet in the country. Organization of the movement was taking place online, through Facebook, and also through other modern technological means, like the creation of the brand

new and autonomous media outlets, such as Occupied Wall Street Journal and web-sites such as the InterOccupy.net. News streams, as well as “on field” live sessions were conducted, which according to Costanza-Chock (2012) gathered nearly 80.000 participants and viewers at once.

The literature on the importance of social media during the events of the Occupy Movement are also highly debated, although both sceptics and proponents of the social media importance during political protests agree on its high level of importance. There is an argument from Earl et al (2014), which implies that the type of engagement that activists exercise is an “ephemeral” one, and it specifies the collective action aimed at aggregation of societies around important problems.

According to Kavada (2015), there was a very clear sign that social media had an effect on how the movement was perceived and attended from outside and the inside of the movements circle of direct influence. With the absence of physical boundaries, and its replacement with the online ones, the movement became highly inclusive and diverse in its form of participation among the activists. The preservation of such diversity among the participant was the responsibility of various social media accounts administrators, or those who were in charge of creating and promoting online movement events. This could also be seen in the various posts that official accounts connected to the Occupy Movement urged people not to consider the movement as a “leftist protest” and constantly stressed out the fact that the movement has no political goals, rather to improve social and economic situation amongst the lower income classes (OCT 12, 2011).

With such broad spectrum of communication means and lack of physical constraints for the movement organization, there was an interesting shift within the internal structures of the movement, where social media users constructed an “outer ring”, where they exchanged news and information, and the user within the “inner circle”, were made up of people who are regularly and actively participating in the movements. The main communication feature of the activist in the “inner” circle was not a separate Facebook group, but actually an email list or a newsletter. According to Kavada (2009), emails were not advertised on the movement’s websites, and were not promoted on the social media platforms, but still included anyone who was willing to subscribe to it. This interesting division also had an impact on how promotional, as well as common writing, texts, reports, messages and various codes were made. Coding was very important during the Occupy Movement, and in fact coding could be used to characterize the majority of the decision making modes within the identity of the Movement. According to

Graeber (2013), the process of decision making took place in special gatherings where activists would reach a common solution or potential actions through consensus. This process was also regulated by trained supervisors and there was also a certain level of order in order to facilitate a more fair and efficient decision making process. Specific sets of rules were therefore employed in various coding forms, which were made into guides and also posted on social media channels and websites.

Such organization of the movement was also very important in the overall ability of the movement to deliver messages and texts. Through this form of organized communication, the activists were able to come up with the document which outline the “principles of solidarity”, where all demands and aims of the movement were written and recorded. The importance of the online media can also be highly seen in this case, as the writing, which were considered to be at the core of movement ideas, were able to be changed at an instance, thanks to all those messages and texts being written on various social media platforms. These texts functioned as guidelines for the activists from all over the country and for everyone who would interact with the press or reporters in order to further deliver the messages to the larger audience. Another particularity of social media use during the Occupy Movement can be found in Kavada (2011), where during one of her interviews, she found out that the digital gathering of the movement would conduct live sessions, where a face-to-face kind of decision making would take place. There was also a concept of a 24 hour possibility to submit wishes or suggestions, and the whole assembly procedure was live-streamed and was seen as very transparent.

While this type of communication and organization was completely new and was not even seen during the events of the Arab Spring, it also posed a number of difficulties. Since participants from all over the country would attend the live online events, where they would also be given an opportunity to make a remark, suggest a course of action or just ask a question, this was often regarded as highly inclusive, but also as highly time and resource consuming. The remote participation further worsened the amount of time needed to come up with an assembly decision. Therefore, among the many motivations which were supposed to be imposed on the activists, the main one was to go outside, impose your presence there and participate in the face to face decision making (Mattoni 2012). One reason as to why face-to-face presence was more desirable than a less engaging social media presence, is that “on the ground” activism facilitates much stronger direct relationships. Besides that, the metrics, such as likes and shares, which are common on social media platforms like Facebook, might create a false sense

of how big the movement is. By the end of the movement, one could speculate that the process of making the special codes and messages for the most part took place in the real physical world, through the face-to-face communication, and the social media played more of a supporting role, where videos were shared, live events were held, and the participants who were not able to interact with other activist, were able to do so through live broadcasting and tweeting. Social media's role could also be potentially narrowed down to the diffusion of overall relevant information, efficient communication and social media also provided metrics about how many people would or have attended an event.

Collective formation is also a very important part of social movements, if not the most important, and will therefore also be covered a lot throughout this work. According to Mattoni (2014), social movements can be seen as live-happening conversations, where multiple publics are talked to at once. Through these conversations and dialogues, there can be a place for a collective action and also provide the very necessary aspect of any impactful social or political movement, the group identity. Once the identity is established, a movement can go in a direction where no inner hierarchy takes place, at least not a major one. Occupy Movement was no exception and emphasized on its leaderless structure, where there was also no single authoritative spokesperson. When interviewed for example, a lot of Occupy participants would constantly refer to themselves as merely activists, in order to avoid confusion and becoming unofficial spokespeople for the movement. In differentiation to this, social media was used in way that once a platform or a group with a lot of participants is established online, whoever is administrating that group, must have spoken in a collective manner and not as a single voice. This was among the biggest and the most under-researched aspects of the Occupy Movement, which considered itself as completely autonomous and with no leaders, had to deal with people becoming the "unofficial spokespeople" of the movement on social media. In order to avoid it, activist made online policies for those in charge of building and sharing the written content, where each of text messages had to be accompanied by initials of the Movement's locations, for example "Occupy Washington". Despite various measures to prevent the integrity of the movement's messages and ideas, there was still already a very significant effect on the overall collective identity, precisely due to the social media platforms allowing everyone to become the voice of the movement. This is where the famous and brand new "Twitter boats" and "Twitter ships" came in play. These, were further messages, employed by the many teams which had a significant part in the organizational structure of the movement, and focused on making the

management of social media channels, including the official Occupy Movement's accounts as transparent and as less biased as possible. This however, also proved to be of only somewhat useful, as the struggle for the collective representation still continued, and various messages would contradict the initial texts within the movement, and there was even reported internal conflicts for the access to passwords and the online administration authority.

Another important event where social media has played a major effect, which was documented by various scientists, is the social media use during the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. The escalations which are thought to have triggered the movement took place on 28th of September in 2014, when the police executives used tear gas and physical force in order to disperse the protesters around the government district of the Hong Kong Island. As a case with many other political and social movements throughout history, this further aggravated the conflict, which later on, grew into massive movements, which lasted nearly eighty days. All characteristics of the Umbrella Movement were very similar to those that took place previously in Europe, US and South America. The norms and traditions of these movements however not the same when compared to other protests, but there were still many similarities. Individuals attending the protests considered themselves as independent, coming to a collective action only when a necessary level of consensus was reached. As a result, these aspects, which were seen in the already mentioned cases of Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, led the Umbrella Movement to be similar in a way that it had no single leaders and no strict hierarchy. This new form of organizations, which have only started taking a place within the last decade and was innovative in a way that it had no restrictions that usual organizations would have and it led to the integrity of the ideology without formal hierarchy (Benett 2012).

Modern digital instruments and its heavy use in organizing and mobilizing masses, especially among the young people is another aspect that characterizes modern political movement, including the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. It is through these two important instrumental parts that modern movement were able to gain so much momentum, the youth and the social media (Livingstone 2002). The importance of youth has increased significantly and it is argued that since younger generations grew up in a world where digitalization is found in every aspect of their lives, there is a very thin line between online and offline protesters, at least in their eyes. Here we can make a clear distinction between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants", where the latter had to integrate into the new digital world, picking up online and computer skills on the way (Prensky 2001). The existing literature on the influence of social

media during social and political movements, constantly emphasizes on the role of young people. After all, it is the younger generations who are best at operating and navigating social media and other online resources.

There is another argument into why younger people have so much impact during modern political and social movements. According to Bennett (2008) there is certain rise of the personalized politics, which also has become popular among young people, who unlike their previous generations, are much more motivated by the personal politics-style representation and not the traditional party politics. This has given a rise to what currently known as “consumer politics”. Bennet also argues, that in terms of action during the movements, personal frames have moved the collective frames to the side. He implies, that politicians are now having hard time addressing certain issues to the public, as the public’s activities are now based on personal views on lifestyle, environment, justice and legal rights. Social media again plays an important in this shift, as it allows for more alternative views to be seen and heard, thus leading to alternate collective action. This trend could also be seen during the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. As the Centre For Communication and Public Opinion (2014) reports, nearly half of young people aged between 18 and 30 have informed and interacted with each other through online resources, such as websites and social networks. Other activist, those who were older than 60 years old, had a little over a quarter of regular internet users. If one had to single out the use of social media, the Center for Communication reports that over 99% of participants and activists of the Umbrella movement between 18 and 30 years old had a social media account or used social media in ways, which did not require creating an official account. The difference in numbers for the older population were, as one might suspect, very different, as over a half of surveyed participants above 60 years old has never ever experienced a direct interaction with social media. Interestingly enough, ten percent of the generation above 60, claimed to be rather active users on social media.

As a case with the majority of other discussed political and social movements and the role of social media in the opposition agenda, Facebook seems to be the most dominant platform for the activists to use. As seen in the Hong Kong movement for example, there was a very popular trend where protestors, who were active online to change their profile pictures to yellow knots or ribbons, which symbolized solidarity and support of the Umbrella Movement. WhatsApp, although not a traditional photo/tweet based form of social media like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, has been quiet popular through the majority of modern social movements. WhatsApp

was used for information sharing, and also used for collective purposes as in the case of the “Scholaris” message group, which was created by J. Wong, a young activist who was later nominated by “the Time” for a 2014 Person of the Year award.

The voter-politician connection is also an important part of the social media’s role in the protests, but even more important is the ability of politicians and public figures to use such platforms to gain resources and spotlight necessary for their political campaign and public activities. With social media networks, also came the ability for the coordination of people with different attitudes and levels to autonomy to gather in a collective action. Benkler (2006) as other scholar already mentioned in this literature review part of the research, has emphasized on how social media networks challenged the hierarchical order of previously researched media influence. He also argues, that there is a clear and developing possibility for democratic improvement through social media, as it offers more possibility to oppressed groups, such as minorities, whether these minorities are political or ethical, to organize themselves and make their presence be felt online. As Benkler (2006) puts it, online resources such as social media sites, allow people to shift into the public sphere, by having an ability to be a direct and not a passive consumer and have an ability to create, share, provide an alternative discord, therefore improving the democratic quality of the Internet space.

Some of the more crucial aspects of social media, which often play against the efficiency of movement formation through online resources, is the spread of false information, commonly referred today as “fake news”. Some of the concrete, lesser researched cases recorded in the analyzed literature is the events in Mexico, Nezahualcoyotl, where social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are constantly used as means of preventing gun violence and other hazards, but are also often used by gangs and cartels so spread around false information. According to Rodriguez (2012), the police authorities of the municipality received about three thousand phone calls in one night, most of which were false reports.

Another lesser known, but rather interesting case of social media use for self-gaining and false information spreading comes from Chalabi (2013) who analyzed the reports of a Twitter account which apparently had an intention of donating 1\$ for the Boston marathon explosion victims for every single of the retweets on his page. Another fake account has been responsible for posting and spreading images of children killed during the Boston marathon attack, and even gained a large following with a total of over 100,000 re-tweets. It was, however later proved that the images from that account were fake.

5. Theory and Hypotheses

5.1. The Theory of Network Society

The Theory of Network society, which was developed by Manuel Castells will be used as the core theory of this master thesis. The theory of network society is arguably among the most comprehensive theoretical frameworks, where there are great possibilities to analyze incredibly diverse issues, which can range anywhere from social protests, riots and revolutions, to democratic establishments and questions of globalization of national economies. According to Stalder (2006), Castell's theory of network society combines over thirty years of research on the concepts of "informational society", as well as "postindustrial industrial society", both of which have only a limited ability to efficiently explain different phenomenon in the modern world or frame the time in a way that would allow the researchers to make appropriate conclusions about such phenomena. Arising from the said concepts, the theory of network society provided completely new points of view, where the world is interchangeable and is highly dependent on rebuilding itself based on new and highly advanced communication tools and technologies. There is thus a great transformation of the majority of society sectors, where the order of things and the status quo is becoming more and more network orientated. Such shift of things also carries not just organizational issues, but also highly influences the cultural aspects. Judging from the developments and use of Castells's network society theory, authors such as Stalder (2006), puts the NST in the same league or cast, as the "Economy and Society" by Max Weber.

The two key aspects of Castell's logic are resting on two important perspectives- multiculturalism and holism. While the holistic logic argues that society cannot simply be divided into different areas, due to there potentially being a multiple sources of transformation, which must be understood and researched on separately, the multicultural logic implies that there is a crucial development of different time-periods, putting the historically established aspects in the front. Although time and historical developments are crucial for analyzing the network society concept, a lot of emphasis is also to be put on the geopolitics of the region where that specific society comes from, it's culture, location and mentality. All these things combined, have evolved with each other overtime, paving the road for network societies as we know them now. The process of transformation as Castel explains it, took place almost randomly and he even describes it as "accidental coincidence". This coincidence came to be,

because of the important events, which are in fact are the very catalysts of the societal transformation in the direction of networking. First event, the development of microelectronics in the field of information technologies, the invention of microprocessor, which started the so called “IT Revolution”, the crisis of the industrialism, as well as statism and the final and arguably most relevant for this master thesis, the liberty-aimed social protests in the 1960s, which set a tone for further challenges of the established culture. While these events happened independently from each other, and perhaps at the first glance do not even seem to be interconnected in any way, there is a clear common path, which was created by those developing events. The emergence of network societies is therefore seen as a very significant historical event, which can also be viewed as the product of the already mentioned events getting transformed. Other instruments which helped to develop and build up the newly established network society can also be attributed to various actors, mostly social ones, who in the struggle to overcome economic and cultural issues, have started to resolve those problems by any means possible and by any means most favorable to them. Overall, the main components of Castell’s Network Society Theory, namely multiculturalism, holistic approach, time and bright spectrum can be considered to be its fundamental base.

As a case with any theory, there is always a certain array of challenges, and Network Society Theory is no exception. Stalder (2006) identifies three major challenges, which the theory has to overcome. First challenge can be attributed to the bright spectrum of analysis and the possibilities of analysis which Castell’s offers. While having an ability to be applied to many disciplines, the Network Society Theory can also be considered as having a framework, which one a researcher can get lost in. The theory indeed has internal contradictions and rather serious gaps, but has a clear objective, which is to determine how we, as a modern society, have entered a new historic period, where communication technologies have assumed a dominant role in society building and organization. The second challenge of Castell’s theory, is its over-reliability and focus on solely empirical research. While having empirical scientific evidence is crucially important, and is often the very goal of a study, in the case of Network Society Theory, Castell’s avoids engaging in theoretical explanations and debates. This has a potential to hinder and limit the explanatory powers of Castell’s concept, as he leaves only little room for transparency of definitions, ideas and contextualization. Castells also employs an approach where his conceptualization is based on practices, providing a good guidance and pathway for the empirical studies, but loses its explanatory powers once the studies can be

analyzed on their own. With such a high reliance on empirical evidence, Castell's theory provides what one might consider as too many case studies, where the theory seems to work well in explaining certain phenomena, but due to the sheer number of different variables and particularities of those case studies, it obscures itself from being a stand-alone explanation to that phenomena. The third and final challenge of Castell's theory can be viewed as his way of injecting or integrating the explanatory potential of case studies into different forms, rather than different conflicts. While it provided plenty of power for the theory, it also made a shift where conflicts were no longer the main catalysts for the change in socio-cultural and socio-economic aspects, to a new dynamic, where catalysts of change are attributed to the social movements. This shift from conflicts to social movements, has also put the actors in the central spot and moved the processes or the conflicts where these actors are engaged, outside of the attention scope. As a result, the absence of processes and conflicts in the Network Society Theory has left a rather serious gap in its explanatory potential.

As mentioned in the beginning of the previous paragraph, Castell's theory can be considered as historically or time period based, where each period or a historical event has many specific particularities, but they all are very specific conflicts and struggles. In the historical time-period where Castell's theory operates best, these conflicts were based on the concept of capital and labor. These type of conflicts also characterized the geo-political relations between many countries. Now, with the shift to the new, modern age on information and communication technologies, these conflicts can be considered to be redefined and take place within excesses of information, intelligence and communication means.

One crucial aspect of Castell's work, which is especially important for this Master research, is Castell's scientific and empirical emphasis on cities. The importance of cities in this research lies in a way that cities, as information and action hubs, produce the most active political actors, be it a politician or a protester with a social media account. The protests and political movements analyzed in this work, all have taken place in cities, and not towns, villages and etc. Castell's aim was to construct a theory, which would allow to follow the concept of a city from a perspective of the process of social change (Castells 1978, 182). The first task was therefore to determine what exactly a concept of a city had in it, that could give a way to analyze the social and structural change. Castell's himself reviewed urban societies as a one single part of a much larger spectrum of structures. While referring to capitalist structure of city societies, Castell's points out that single workers, or units of production have lost their constraints due to the

modern communication and information technologies, which allowed for the decentralization of production establishments (Castells 1977).

Castell's view on the importance of information technologies, and the subsequent changes in the economy and changes among public/private corporations, is further supported but a substantial amount of business oriented literature. Although Castell's views new information technologies as a key instrument and the cause of the transformation, he however, does not conclude it to be the single most important cause. Instead, Castell's argues, that it is not informational technological advancements that are driving society in a direction of increased networking, rather this transformation is caused by an organizational change in many independent events, which were in return enhanced by the development of new information and communication instruments (Castells 1977). While the organizational change and its enhancement by the modern information technologies posed some initial difficulties, different companies and corporations, large and small, were able to make certain changes and adopt to the organizational transformation, making more profit as ever before. This transformation has highly assisted these companies in creating large networks, where intelligence and resources could be exchanged more efficiently, and they themselves experiences a shift from being vertically based, to becoming horizontally organizational entities. Castells further characterizes this shift as international production of services is not operated through multicultural corporations, but are now conducted through various networks of transnational production (Latour 2008).

The shift into the information and communication based economy, as Castells argues, takes place in four separate steps, or dimensions. First, there is trade, then finance, business structure and then labor. These dimensions function independently, but are connected due to the common dependency on information processing, which enhances production and consumption (Castells 1989). This constant and growing impact on information technologies led to an establishment of what Castells calls "Informational capitalism", which is characterized by having a very large array of different networks, including global reach and is information orientated. The organization and structural orientation towards information is also dependent on a number of factors. The networks, which Castells focuses on, can only be established through the implementation of modern information technologies. Such technologies are crucial not only because they allow for a sufficient form of communication and information sharing, but because they are in constant development and are becoming increasingly complex, thus

effecting the operation prices. Higher prices effect production, and through reorganization of information and communication technology processes can even out the costs. This process then goes on, repeating itself, developing a more advanced form of technology, increasing the costs, reorganizing and so on. This also contributes to the never-ending process of looking for innovations, new mechanisms, scientific advancements and more efficient business models.

Through the deep analysis of Castell's work, this research was able to single out one, perhaps not the most significant, but quiet ironic aspect, considering how much attention to information Castells pays. There is little to no exact definition of information provided by Castells. One big piece of evidence for how information should be conceptualized in Castell's case, is that he generally talks about information in a form where information is knowledge or experience gained. However, even defining what this knowledge based information means, is also not clearly pointed out by Castells. He does not treat the concept of information as a product unit, but sees it as an extension of economy, which can assist in acquiring products and then exchange them and etc, thus driving a new market. This new market can be characterized by appearance of the Intellectual property law, including the system patents and copyrights. The role of such new laws and mechanisms is sometimes considered controversial and plays a very large part on the international level, where large global organizations, such as the United Nations, or the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) have the most influence. Rule of law on intellectual property have already caused various debates, dividing politicians on coalitions of basically all areas, such environmental issues, health, liberties, industries and etc. According to Drahos (2002) this new concept of intellectual property and information laws have contributed to the certain actors getting richer and more powerful, adopting intellectual property laws for their own interests, due to having powerful networks and intelligence.

5.1.1. Network Society and Social Movements

Castells pays a great deal of attention to the role of societies, as a major instrument that could set changes to the established way of social and cultural life. He does not however view all social movements as equally relevant. Those movements, which he considers to be more of individual character and which are aimed at self-development, or a certain realization, such as the Falun movements in China, are not included in his theoretical analysis and will not be analyzed in this paper either. Social movements, which are relevant to Castells, are those

movements, which showcase specific cleavages, divisions, as well as the various resources which get utilized in anticipating or organizing a movement. The network societies, which become created during such movements, are treated by Castells (2004) as collective identity. In a more precise definition, political and social movements, aimed at a collective change and are characterized by existing cleavages, are “purposive collective action whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society” Castells (1998). More definition to Castell’s understanding of social movements is provided by Stadler (2006), who clears up perhaps a self-explanatory point, states that in order for the social movement to be considered as such, it is not merely enough to gather a lot of people in a group and conduct a collective group activity, there must be a level of self-conscious understanding of the purpose and the role of the attended movement. This particularity about social movements is also what differentiates them from other forms of collective activities.

There is also another reason why this focus of self-consciousness is important. On the individual level of actions, the traditional social theory for example always separates objective and subjective actions, or whether a thought of an action actually results into an actual action. Castells social theory on the other hand, does not view individual actions as relevant, as the collective ones, and therefore does not differentiate between subjective and objective individual actions. This also implies that social movements are not an outcome of another event, and are exactly what they say they are. They define themselves and attract people whose views or objectives are in line with the movement’s goal and are not controlled by a third party, and are therefore completely autonomous. This is a very important part of Castell’s explanations, as it implies that social movements must be studied deeply and on its own logic (Stadler 2006). Besides treating social movements as their own independent entities, Castell’s also stresses out the importance of not viewing social movement based on their success/failure ration, but rather based on their very existence. With their existence, they drive and increase the movement for a positive social change and formulate new cultural values.

With the appearance of the internet and global networks, social movements now have a chance to be extremely diverse in their structure and organization, but have a fixed and stable identity. They are no longer constrained by geographics and are able to influence many layers of individual understanding, feelings, emotions, personal life, experiences and influence people one way or another. The outdated forms of communication and organization did not possess the potential of spreading quicker and among longer distances without losing its original

message and identity. Social movements also provide a “purpose” for their participation and mobilizes fractured cultures to restructure themselves.

The increasing importance and significance of control over information technology and information flows has also began to drive the race for power among different actors, causing a degree of symbolic violence. This and other symbols, according to Castells, contribute to the way material reality appears to be. In fact, Castells does not even differentiate between symbolic and material aspects of society, as he argues that all realities are interacted through symbols. It is through this explanation, that the research will focus its perspective on, namely the new reality where symbolic meanings, now in an electronic form, come together and shape the “real virtuality”. As Castell’s further elaborates, the symbolic messages, such as those commonly found in the broadcast and social media, are interpreted differently by the listeners/viewers. These differently interpreted symbols or realities are then transmitted to other individuals, through the modern communication technologies. This leads to a teamwork decoding of media messages, and it further leads to restructuring of communities and societies. According to Castell’s it has also led to the broadcast media to change their model and become more of narrowcasting media, where symbolic messages and reality interpretations are aimed at a few specific communities. This flexibility of the new information structure has laid a ground for a wide possibility of customization of messages and their meaning.

Another reason for the importance of social movements in regards to shaping of collective identities, is that the process of creating characterization for these new collective identities, begins within the social movement itself. The movement creates an objective, common idea, from which a culture derived and develop columns or an ideological base, without which a movement would not be possible.

The traditional parts of culture fragmentation, such as religion, language and geographical borders, no longer play a dominant role in social movement understanding, but rather they are now many interconnected, as well as with independent subcultures, all of which have in common the fact, that they are communicatively and informational integrated. An example of such transformation of society can also be seen in how diasporas or migrant communities around the world, where commonalities like movies, music and newspapers do not have as much effect on the unification of such groups, as the modern communication technologies have. While most likely compatible with other social phenomena, Castell’s Theory of Network Society, as proven by this research paper, works best and most efficiently in the analyzation of

social and political movements. Castell's also points out to the potential setback of his theory, as he states that "the more we select our personal hypertext, under the conditions of a networked social structure and individualized cultural expression, the greater the obstacles to finding a common language, thus common meaning" (Castells 2000)

Castell has two types of social movements in his concept of network society, those that are aimed at a form of resistance and those that are aimed at projecting an identity, but it has been suggested that such division is not relevant for this thesis, as Castell's himself does not refer to this distinction himself. Instead it is more important to discuss how social movements are analyzed within the actual theory. As mentioned in the previous chapters, this thesis will attempt to view and characterize social and political movements as they are viewed from Castell's perspective, and in a way that these movements are autonomous, authentic, time dependent and must have a common "conscious understanding". Social movements will also be researched as the key instruments of constructing the new values and the reorganization of institutions.

Hypotheses:

H1: *The increase in modern communication instruments online and the development of communication technology leads to increased levels of organization and formation efficiency of political opposition movements.*

H2: *The more control, monitoring and censorship the government authorities exercise within the social media platforms, the more it leads to an establishment and popularity of alternative and autonomous platforms.*

5.2. Resource Mobilization Theory

This particular theory has an immense potential to analyze and understand social and political movement, as it represents a concept of thought behind the idea of social movements, it also has been very useful in generations of high quality empirical studies, as well as those based purely on theoretical approach. This theory is not however without its complications. Such complications are attributed to differences in the area, where two different schools of thought,

both of which are officially a part of the Resource Mobilization Theory, take place. These different schools are the “professional organizer” concept and the “political process” concept. The first one was established by John D. McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1973), while the political process theory was established by Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam (1982). The main differences in the two concepts revolve around a few, but very important parts, namely, the degrees and levels of participation of the social or political movement by certain elites. This participation is meant to effect the organizational structure, maintenance, as well as the duration of the movement (Pichardo 1988).

According to Waterman (1981), Resource Mobilization’s main use lies in its ability to analyze “rational” goals and goals of the collective behavior within a political movement. Unlike other scholars, who focused on the analysis of behavior within social and political movements, where the behavior of activist is generally explained by their emotions, feelings and impulses, Resource Mobilization theory points out the rational mechanisms. Resource Mobilization Theory also imposes the idea of not only looking at the grievances and motivations of the movement participants, but to find out the level of ability of efficient organization of the movement, including the strategic use of available resources. This points out the main idea of the theory, which is to determine the rationality of the movement in its process from the formation to the end result, whatever that result might be (Fireman et al 1979). In order to properly examine and discover the level and ideas of rationality during movements, the research has gone back to the utilitarian model created by Olson (1965), who sought to understand the mass and collective behavior of activists. Large movements, such as those in Russia are in constant requirement of various resources, technologies and time. In order to see it clearly, Olson exemplifies how certain individuals are willing to lose their job, the opportunity to study in a university or simply go out of their comfort zone, with no reassurance of going back to it. Here comes the biggest dilemma, which is the idea that an individual is willing to take such steps not in order to contribute to the “greater good”, but to enjoy the benefits and fruits of the collective action, leading to the creation of numerous “free riders”. Participation of such events where collective action plays a very big role and can potentially lead single activists gaining more resources than they lost when they gave up on their comfort zone, thus outsourcing the sacrifices. This unusual approach to describing the willingness of certain individuals joining the political and social movements is meant to focus on the reason why

social movements gain momentum, more precisely it analyzes the behavior and factors needed for a protests to gain “resources”.

One very crucial point about the resource mobilization theory is that it puts together the behavior within a social movement with the behavior that is purely political. From the majority of the existing literature, there is a clear consensus that polity connected constructions have a certain level of access to certain types of resources, although this access is rather small, but includes important societal resources. There are groups in such constructions, which have become outsiders, and are not treated in a same manner as other, thus they are not able to have same resources, which then forces them to try to fit in or move towards any possible form on inclusion. This summarizes resource mobilization theory in way that two groups- in and out polity groups, are in constant struggle, where one group seeks inclusion, while the other seeks to prevent it. Those groups, which are excluded the most, cannot hope for any form of inclusion whilst small, and therefore organize into larger, more efficient groups. As Waterman (1981) implies, the act of organizing one-selves into larger masses functions as something where resources can be gained, stored and accessed, along with the formation of proper leadership and organization degrees. In it, the structure of polities is a collection of various autonomous groups, where interests are gathered and discussed, but with no clear indication that these groups are automatically united or are in a strict alliance with one another, and often enough these groups even make a visible level of competition.

On the other side, there is also a certain belief, which could potentially be considered as a false assumption, an idea that social movements are to be seen as a production of individual unfairness, with internal and external factors of development. Internal in this case would be various aspects such as leadership, resources and organization type, while external aspects would include the degrees of exclusion, unfair treatment, oppressions and the level of external support or opposition within a group (McCarthy, Zald 1973). This list of factors, is what should drive the development of the social and political movements. This school of thought however, has often been criticized, especially by Gamson (1979), as it highly focuses on the individual and collective motivations, and is thus not being able to determine the role of collective beliefs. Despite some setbacks, the Resource Mobilization Theory still holds very strong in regards to the role of rationality based on existing individual norms. This emphasis will be thoroughly analyzed in this thesis on the example of anti-government protests in Russia, but it is also very important to mention that resource mobilization theory has evolved beyond its initial thoughts,

and currently includes not only individual rationality, but also rationality of the whole movement as a single actor. This not so new approach, which was developed by Zald (1966) himself, has with time become the most studied and popular logic of the theory. With these new theory developments, happened a shift, which addressed less issues of the movement participants, and more of the issues of the organizational aspects of the movements, and this is where the main differences between the already mentioned “political processes” and “professional organizers” takes place. According to the concept of “professional organizer”, there is a certain level engagement from the external actors, such as different groups and different agents, which in the idea of Resource mobilization theory, appears to come from the elite classes of society, as well as the middle class. These groups are also most responsible for the availability of resources, leadership organization and other necessary aspects of a successful and efficient movement. In the “political process” concept, there is much more focus on the internal capabilities of less prominent groups, such as minorities who contribute to the efficiency of the movements when the elite groups no longer contribute or have achieved the points they wanted to achieve without going much further (McAdam 1982).

5.2.1. Resources

Resources, motivation and political environment are the key three key components, which make up the involvement of elite actors in the movement. These components will also be thoroughly analyzed in regards to the engagement of various actors during the anti-government protests in Russia.

There is an argument by McCarthy and Zald (1970) that, for example in the United States, the main driver for the rise of many social and political movement happened due to the middle class community, who were liberal in their views and were aided by the large actors, such as international firms, corporations and branches of government. They altogether possessed very important resources, such as money, skills and working power. McCarthy and Zald (1970) also argue, that these same groups have played a major part in the success and efficiency of movements, which would have been organized by minorities, implying that without white, rich and powerful elites, pro-minority oriented movements would not have been successful.

Unlike McCarthy and Zald (1970), McAdam (1980) does not share the same notion and does not agree that communities, which are mostly made up of minorities, are automatically unable to establish a form of organization by themselves, and that the majority of already mentioned resources actually come from the elite actors. As McAdam argues, the historical socio-economic developments have allowed for minority communities, especially black communities in the United States, to have the ability to organize themselves into unions. Although this argument does have a legit ground, he himself still admits that even despite the newly gained abilities of minorities to organize, the resource from the outside and from the elites, have also greatly contributed to it. Morris (1981), another critic of the notion that the efficiency and success of the movements relies heavily on the shoulder of elites and their resources, stated that the society and communities of minorities have the ability to gather and organize resources, which are necessary to create and sustain movements. In his argument, he provides yet another US example, where communities of people of color, specifically black communities have gathered enormous support from the “black” churches, who provided them with money, intelligence, expertise, physical space for gatherings, discussion and further planning.

According to Pichardo (1988) there is an important resolution to the conflicting sides of the theory, which advises to look at and analyze the resources in way that is more flexible. The overall amount of money, leadership, expertise and other forms of resources in possession of any group is very different in comparison to other groups, the smaller and less influential groups would not have enough sufficient resources to organize and sustain a large movement, although there is a possibility that they might. Then comes a decision making process, where it is decided whether or not to take the resources offered by an outside actor, which implies a cost and benefit analysis. A final decision of whether or not to accept them, rests in the amount of the initial resources possessed by the said group. The cost and benefit of the decision-making also rests on the actions of the organization structures within the groups.

McCarthy and Zald (1973) also elaborate, that resources can potentially be separated from the movement control group (if such groups is present). It also does not automatically conclude that organization’s fundament of the movement might or might not have full control over the movements leadership, because financial funding and leadership expertise are the types of resources that come from outside of the movement. This can be clearly seen in McCarty and Zald (1973), where the growth and sustainability of the movement, which depend on the resources from one group, while aiming to campaign for another groups, is more dependent on

the group which provides the resources. This implies that despite the agenda of helping minority groups for example, the main support of the group still comes from the main funding group of the movement. This potentially leads to the loss of grip on the movement's true direction, and sways away the movement from protecting and representing the views of the minorities, oppressed and etc.

The biggest dilemma of analyzing the particularities of resources, comes from the type of resources, as well as their levels. A movement can employ the resources from the outside, but these resources are acquired by different groups, which cannot support movements on their own. In other words, if a group does not become strong enough or has, its own impact on the movement, these groups will be dependent on the external resources, dragging the movements into that dependency as well. In order to avoid it, the groups, which are responsible for the efficiency and organization of the movement, must develop a strategy or a way to acquire and provide resources without resorting to diminishing the integrity and the goals of the movement. With this comes a lot of uncertainty, as it is not possible to predict the amount of time needed to acquire this independency from the external resources, which then could lead to even more issues, and potentially harm the efficiency of the movement to a very large extent (Pichardo 1988).

5.2.2. Motivation

Motivation, according to McCarthy and Zald, is another very important aspect of elites getting involved in the process of movements, which implies the motivation to provide resources as well. As McAdam (1982) puts it, the concept of a "professional organizer" considers the elites to be very much eager, and even aggressive in the pursuit to support social and political movements. What motivates them to do so however, is the idea of the common social conscience, while in the "political process" concept, there is an idea that such movements are in fact very dangerous for the integrity of this social conscience. The argument here therefore is that movements have the ability to negatively effect the elites, thus they should not be in favor of supporting these movements. The involvement of the elites, resource rich actors, is therefore seen as protective response to the large social movements. McCarthy and Zald (1973) support this notion to a certain extent, stating that a strong support of the elites does not take place to an extent where the movement becomes dependent on the support of elite actors. As

the main part of the motivation for elites to support and finance the movements, McAdam argues that it is due to the desire to gain profit or exploit the movement in a beneficial way.

As discussed in the last paragraph of the “Resources”, if the elites are involved in the aiding process of the movement due to real concerns and motivation for a better outcome within social structures, the dependency on the external resources is not as dangerous for movement’s integrity. If however these elites are providing the resources in order to gain a certain level of control over the movement or for reaching any forms of individual gains, then it becomes a serious issue.

There is an important notion, that becomes especially crucial in the case of Russian protests, which will be discussed in further details in the next parts of the paper, is that the elite actors tend not to support groups with views, that could potentially be considered as radical.

According to McAdam (1982) it is also not likely that groups which are interested in supporting a movement, would make an agreement or a deal with other groups, which use contra-institutional strategies, as the elite groups are known to get their power and influence through legitimized institutions. McAdam (1983) also argues that these negative and anti-institutional tactics are very attractive to groups which lack power, due to their ability to succeed, precisely because they work outside of the institutional frameworks. This leads to different forms of conflicts within the movement, between the groups which oppose such practices and those who see these practices as necessary or simply too attractive to pass on.

There is also a very strong evidence, that supports the notion, that elite groups aid social movements in order to make certain groups within these movement less radical, as well as taking the radical sentiments out of the movements ideology and agenda. As Green (1979) points out, in order for a movement to exercise their deeds for the better of the society, there must be an organization involved, which would ensure the independency from the outside influences such as powerful elite actors. Thus, the direction of the movement has to remain institutional, as proper and legal leadership has a potential to avoid radicalizing the movement. So far in the existing literature, there has not been a lot of evidence that the participation of the elites in the movement is driven by the sense of social improvement and not by individual motivations. According to Gouden (1971), this is largely due to the fact the decision-making process of the elites is not entirely transparent and in fact it is often kept a secret from the non-elite actors, specifically in the case of resource provisions.

5.2.3. Political Environment

The political environment is arguably the very central factor in the “political process” concept, as it determines the affiliation of various political groups within a movement, and also determines the level to which existing social and political structures can be changed, because of the movements. The political environment however plays a much less of role in the “professional organizer” concept. The important variable here, is the allocation of money or other resources and the fact that elite involvement in this concept is not seen as crucial, and almost automatically assumes the willingness of the elites to participate in the social movement.

The desire of the elites to support social movements based on the political environment and the ideological alignment might not be of the utter concern in the literature on resource mobilization and social movements, but considering that personal gains that the elites might pursue in the aid to the movements, the political environment becomes much more important. According to Perrow (1977), a change in success of various movements of the farm and agriculture workers has highly been attributed to the changing political environment. Which led to the changes in the operation and organization of the farmer movements. That specific change was caused by the farmers allying themselves with liberal coalitions within the government, which led to more resources being available for further advancements in the movement. This can also be explained with the help of the “political process model”, as Perrow and Jenkins (1977) argue that this shift of success during the farmer movements cannot be well explained by pointing out to the changing organizational structures of the movement or by new kinds of social groups, which were attracted due to change in the political environment at that time. The “political process” model also focuses on the internal particularities and more specifically, on the perspective of how these particularities change when there is power shift or rebuilding process of the existing political power structures.

Hypotheses:

H3: *Social media platforms facilitated an increase in communication and mobilization efficiency, thus allowing the opposition community to gain support of the elite actors and mobilize necessary resources.*

H4: *An increase in the opposition and anti-government activities on social media platforms, leads to an increased persecution of such actions offline and leads to a higher level of efforts to diminish anti-government activities online.*

6. Methodology and Operationalization

6.1. Content Analysis

The key methodology of this research is based on a qualitative content analysis as described in the article “Content Analysis: A Flexible Methodology” by Marilyn Dumas White and Emily E. Marsh (2006). The intent of this research is to conduct a proper, scientific and accurate qualitative analysis of various texts, reports and interviews. As in the quantitative form of the content analysis, the qualitative one is also conducted through text sampling or deciding which of the available texts are especially relevant for the aimed research. Utilization of the written content, especially regarding the quotes and written propositions, contextualization of the expert knowledge based on their writings and also the conducted interview will be fundamental to the empirical analysis (Krippendorff 2004).

As Dumas A. White and Marsh (2006) explain, a qualitative content analysis has a humanistic, rather than a positivistic flow, and can often be successfully performed inductively. The meaning of texts and the written content is especially important for the qualitative form of the content analysis, as there is no data that is ready for the researcher to use, rather the researcher has to use the text to identify available concepts, patterns, and findings which were not predicted prior, but turned out to be nonetheless important. When such a pattern is found, it could lead to a number of changes in the analysis, including changes to the whole research question. A procedure of analyzing written content in such a way is well described by Krippendorff (2004), who sums it up as a procedure of “recontextualization”, reinterpreting and redefining the available content until some form of efficient and sense-full interpretation can be concluded. This aspect of the qualitative content analysis is strictly related to the qualitative type and will be the primary procedure throughout the analysis of the texts for this research.

For the sampling procedure, the particular way of qualitative content analyzation will be using an interpretation of the texts with a utilization of a reiterative analysis, in order to decrease of the amount of different interpretations that could appear throughout the reading of the written content. Since the main object of the content analyzation will not necessarily be generalizable, but rather transferable, there will also be no important reason to make sure that all of the analyzed objects got an equal chance of being included within the main sample. In this case, transferability implies a decision of whether the conclusions and findings from one source and its context are comparable and applicable to another context. This research will focus more on a theoretical sampling with purposive elements. Through the analyzation of the texts and reports, the research will attempt to discover as many of the similar patterns as possible, until no sufficient new patterns are discovered.

The rules of coding in this research were adopted accordingly to the summative content analysis by Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon (2005) and basic procedures derived from Mayring (2014). The fundamental action of coding process here is to organize large quantities of available text and empirical research material and organizing them into smaller content categories, which in this case include categories like protest activity, social media, elite support, levels of mobilization and etc. Once the content categories are outlined and compared with the results from the texts, the research must then look at the relationships between the categories. The categorization of the existing empirical data will be made manually due to its supposed higher accuracy when analyzing texts, where contexts and meanings could vary. While framing will not be the main research instrument of this thesis, the qualitative coding will take a form of Hierarchical Coding Frame, as it will assist the research in determining how certain codes relate to one another. The main source of codes and frames will be derived from the existing empirical literature and various reports.

The coding part in this research will be made up of definitions which attempt to predict and theorize the empirical outcome of the research and will be constructed through an inductive process. The research and predictive questions will be combined with the evidence and the available data will thus shape the whole analyzation in the thesis. Through the analyzation of the existing documents, texts and other forms of the written content, the research will single out key phrases, important content segments and every little bit of information that can allow for a comparison with other available data, all of which should correspond to the questions of interest. Through this process, the research will also look at diverse information from the

available texts and determine the alternative concepts and perspective which can be potentially of use for the research question analyzation.

The scope of analysis carries an explorative approach and will not have a specific set of pre-structured categories. The coding units are created with a broader definition, with an exception for a few more narrowly defined ones. In the preparation for the main part of analyzation, the coding units included the relevant and complete statements from the existing literature and the interviews, which potentially provide some form of empirical interest to the main 4 research questions.

Units of Content Analysis:

- Coding units: precise semantic written parts of the texts (code labels)
- Context units: empirical literature and the 3 interviews

Rules for procedure (inductive):

- Research question
- Definition of categories
- Text coding (comparing occurrence of categories with the content-done manually with notes and highlighters)
- Revision
- Category grouping
- Results (see the conclusion part of the Thesis)

Coding (without text/interview passages):

Code label	Characteristic description
1. Social media	Is solely defined by the exact names of social media platforms like VK, Facebook, Telegram and etc.
2. Mass Communication	Includes other forms of social media not included in the description of social media platforms in the research, and also includes exact television channels.
3. Mass information	Refers to mass contents, solely determined to inform citizens about the political, social and cultural events.
4. Political Communication	Communication that comes only for political purposes, and is controlled by political incumbents or elite political figures.

5. Protest Activity	Online and offline activities aimed at a change, excluding those protests which are politically motivated.
6. Anti-government movements	Movements with a political agenda as the driving force.
7. Movement coordination	Refers to all signs of how and by which means coordination of movements was orchestrated and organized.
8. Level of success	Any form of indication of how successful or unsuccessful a social media campaign and subsequent processes have been
9. Citizen mobilization	Refers to indicators which influenced the levels of mobilization of people to conduct political activities online and offline.
10. Anti-protestor/pro-government	Includes action aimed and undermining the activity and the success of anti-government movements, through employment of similar movements, censorship or direct physical prevention methods.
11. Network Society	Refers to the level of cooperation, understanding of other activist that they are all tied through the same network and the ties between offline and online activists.
12. Information technologies	Refers only to physical technologies such as a smartphone, TV, radio, computer and etc.
13. Autonomous platforms	Includes those platforms which have been chosen by the activist or determined to be chosen through the empirical literature, due to higher levels of persecution and censorship.
14. Activist groups	Includes various separate and distinct groups which have conducted offline and online activities.
15. Motivation	Levels of motivation or interests for conducting anti-government activities.
16 Political Environment	Refers to the past/current situation in Russia, which had an impact on how frequent the protests activity took place online and offline.
17. Elite Actors	Includes all powerful and influential supporters of the anti-government movements, who have been able to cause some form of direct support to the activists.
18. User online protest activity	All relevant signs of activity online and its offline subsequent actions. Grouped together and then manually divided into separate activist groups, based on their online/offline activity.

Another crucial part of determining and applying proper methodology for this research, is to differentiate between the units of analysis and the units of the data collection. Through the available texts and reports, the research will most likely be faced with many possible

interpretations to the analyzation of the main research questions, as well as there should be new constructs which might be appearing throughout the interpretation process. This process will be followed the “constant comparison” approach by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in which the analysis will be build upon constantly changing data from the newly tested patterns. This is generally assisted in through the use of memos and comments, but this step will not be done separately, as the results of the notes and comments will be inserted throughout the work, and will be written in a manner which should allow the reader to better understand and follow the analyzation process. The qualitative content analysis in this research will also pay a lot of attention to the carefulness of the coding through validity and reliability. In order to conduct it better, the research will attempt to create a picture of the social movements in modern Russia and its particularities within social media platforms, within the context that is available through the existing empirical literature and not through an objective description of reality. In order to prove that this research will indeed stay truthful and confident in its analytical presentation, the research will use the method of Lincoln and Guba (1985), where the “truthfulness” degree of the qualitative analysis will be determined through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. As they explain, the credibility part is similar to the validity (internal) and implies steps where all relevant factors are identified as they are reflected in the collected data. Transferability is part of the eternal validity and is regarded, as an identification, which shows whether the conclusions from one study can be successfully applied to another study. This specific step will done through the literature data cross checking and from a variety of sources of a specific issue. A large portion of sources used in this research will be sources written in Russian language by the Russian authors and from the Russian speaking online sources, which are often not available for the English or German speaking community. Through the dependability step on the qualitative content analysis, the research will attempt to present the possibility for replicability, or as Lincoln and Guba (1981) describe it, “stability after discounting” with rational changes. The last step, confirmability, is a step that characterizes the objectivity of the study, and in a qualitative analysis will be conducted by observing the empirical data, as long as it is relevant to the conclusion done in the end of the analyzation.

Since the study in this research will be conducted on the qualitative basis, a lot of attention will be paid to the proper integration of the analysis in the coding. While the main idea is to efficiently analyze the main research questions, but since qualitative coding includes unique to the topic predicting or foreshadowing questions/definitions or other forms of results that

emerge during the qualitative coding, the research will remain flexible enough to integrate these results into the analysis. As it is often a case in a lot of qualitative studies, there is a chance that the conclusion of the this particular research will be composed of different aspects of the bigger picture. In this overall picture, the research will combine the cultural, technical, social, theoretical, political and cultural aspects of the social media implications during the anti-government and social movements/protests in Russia during the past decade. The ultimate goal is to present a narrow array of the respectable to the topic particularities and to display it through a deep conceptualization of theoretical methods. The use of computer software will quiet limited as a research instrument, as the qualitative analysis will be relying much more on the help of proper and scientific annotation. In the presentation of the results, the research will use numbers and percentages, as well as detailed descriptions through a textual display with little to no numerical parts. The textual display of the empirical research results is presented in a narrative form of the available findings, and will include a number of quotations to further support the conclusion..

6.2. Interviews and the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA)

While the empirical core of this master thesis is based on analyzing the existing empirical research, especially the Russian written literature, which has not yet been translated to English, but possess a lot of incredibly interesting analyzations and studies. In order to strengthen the basis of the empirical research for this research further, the reader will be introduced to an analysis of three insightful interviews, which were conducted in Moscow, Russia, between 17th and 25th of July. On average, the interviews were a little over half an hour long, with questions covering the most important aspects of the particularities of the modern political movements in Russia in regards to the use of social media, collective networking, resource mobilization, elite support and the importance of the modern communication instruments during the protest activities. Due to the high level of persecution of anti-government activists and protest organizers, all three individuals wished to remain anonymous, although they agree to provide a basic information to their background, such as age, their occupancy, nationality and etc. It should also be noted that the overall search of the interview partners was extremely hard, due to many of the former political activists in Russia being sceptic of any discussions outside of their friends and family circles, which include rather intimate questions about their personal activities and roles during the protests.

The interview questions were structured specifically to cover the most necessary aspects of the Network Society Theory and the Resource Mobilization Theory, although the format of the questions can be considered as semi-structured for an easier flow of information and discussion. As a result, the research was able to obtain a good amount of first hand information about the anti-government movements in modern Russia and the subsequent use of social media platforms within them. Apart from the third interview, which was conducted with an 18 year old male who could not provide sufficient and sophisticated answers to some of the interview questions, the responses were informative enough to build a visible narrative and framing concepts.

In order to conduct a proper analyzation of the interviews, this paper resorted to the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), which is a qualitative method for analyzing interviews and obtaining valuable data from them. TCA was first established through a Grounded Theory Approach by Glasser and Strauss (1967). The main steps of conducting a proper TCA includes the usual procedures such as interview recording, transcription and then a development of different stages after the interviews are transcribed. Burnard (1991), who has popularized the TCA analysis in the social sciences, provides fourteen different stages of TCA, which will also be employed in this research, although with some minor differences, which will be pointed out in the next paragraph.

The first stage of TCA, is basically the general notes, which were taken during the interviews. While this step is a prerequisite to the next steps, the interviews were very clear and some minor notes were taken after the interview was already written down. The second stage calls for a deep internal understanding of the interview narrative, such as remaining aware of the possible change of narrative and second thinking of what the person might have meant to say or wanted to say, but did not. The third stage includes structuring of the notes, which were taken during the second stage, and implies assembling interesting or unclear concepts into groups with headings. In the forth stage, the researcher should make special groups for the found concepts and get rid of those ones, which ca be deemed of the least relevance, in order to maintain a minimalist and a straightforward TCA analyzation. The fifth stage signifies the grouping of everything from the previous four stages and making a list of categories, relevant to the research questions. In the sixth stage, which had to be crossed out due to the inability of physical contact because of Covid rules in Russia, and otherwise would have included two separate individuals to conduct all of the previous steps themselves in order to avoid any

possible bias during the analyzation. Although this step might be important, the nature of the interviews was conducted in a manner, which made sure that a high level of bias during the analyzation would be extremely hard to achieve. The stage seven calls for extra adjustments and a preparation to the eights stage, which requires further organization of the interviewed narratives. The ninth stage requires the researcher to separate all sentences and individual words in order to have a better and more precise view of all possible hidden narratives and framings, in regards to the different contexts of the interviews. The stages ten to twelve are considered to be of extra organizational nature and call for comparison of the listed, grouped and separated parts of the interview to be compared with the original interview transcript, thus leading the TCA to the thirteenth stage, which marks the actual beginning of the written analysis, which in this case, will be presented in the empirical chapter on the Network Society and Resource Mobilization Theory. The fourteenth and the final stage of TCA, calls for a direct comparison between the interview findings and the existing empirical literature.

In order to determine the nature of the social media usage during the anti-government protests in modern Russia and how it can be applicable to the Network Society Theory and the Resource Mobilization theory, the questions were divided in accordance to the main concepts of the theories and the interviewers were asked the respective and direct to the theory questions.

7. An overview of the state of civil societies in Russia and anti-government movements

Political and social movements have been an important part in the development of Russian internal and external policies throughout Russian history. While changes in how such movements are conducted has definitely changed with the rise of mass media communication devices, a lot of researches still argue that civil society did not experience much change since the USSR broke up. It is also true that the majority of the civil societies in Russia, such as various autonomous social groups were fractured, had little power and were greatly marginalized by the end of 1990s, and to the present day, have not had much support available to them. While reasons for it might differ from research to research, there is a pretty large consensus that it has to do a lot with the efforts of the Russian post-soviet government, which remained pretty

much the same ever since, to keep those social organization at bay. This tendency of political domination has also been witnessed throughout the history of the Soviet Union (Lubownikow et al 2013).

During and after the 1990s, the majority of people throughout the entire Russia has been exposed to a large instability socially and economically. The majority of the research on the internal politics in Russia has reached a certain level of consensus, that Russian people had to rely a lot on the traditional networks, such as family and friends, in order to withstand harsh times. According to Sanovich and Jakobson (2010) there was a large degree of distrust in most of the aspects of the every day life, which was supervised through the public sectors, such as different institutions and organizations. This very mistrust towards anything government-related is among the major obstacles to the improvement of civil societies in the post-Soviet Russia. Those organizations, which more or less successfully operate in Russia and are of non-Russian origin are often met with a similar level of mistrust and have not been able to gain much support from the general public, which according to Volkov (2011) is part of the overall negative narrative towards liberal oriented Western based organizations.

After the fall of the USSR, the marginalization of civil societies was clearly seen within the Russian political system, and also within the society itself. The newly non-profit sectors, which then emerged, were characterized by having very weak influence and high levels of fragmentation, along with little to no connection with Russian elites and could not represent the societies efficiently. Civil societies greatly lacked any form of sufficient funding, which is also the case in the modern Russia today (Chebankova 2013). According to a report from Komarova (2010), less than three percent of the Russian based NGOs representatives pointed out the pressure from the Russian government authorities as their main source of difficulties, while nearly sixty percent of the surveyed persons considered the absence of sufficient funding as their primary concern. Asking for increased donations from the general public and Russian citizens was also an almost impossible task, due to the widespread and high levels of mistrust towards social organization, and also the fact the Russian citizens themselves lacked resources as a result of a poor economic situation in the country. According to Lubnikow (2013), the inability to sufficiently provide necessary resources to the social organizations in Russia is the most important source of difficulties in their development.

Another important aspect of success/failure of civil societies is their sponsorship or financial aid by the different businesses. According to Volkov (2011), Russian based business did not show

much interest in supporting local NGOs and other non-profit organizations, although the last few years saw some form of increase in their financial support from various enterprises and corporations. While the increase in such support has been reported, it only concerns those projects, which were approved by the national government and the authorities, while those organizations, which in one form or another have an agenda that is different from that of the Russian government, are in essence impossible. For this reason, the non-profit organizations, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, were heavily dependent on the financial assistance by the local federal governments, and according to Alekseeva (2010), NGOs and other non-profit organization had over forty percent of their overall finances from the programs of the local governments. It is very important to mention that while money was an important part of the overall support, it was also made up of various resource in forms of physical spaces for meetings and organizations, different kinds of equipment, mobile equipment and other important things that were provided by the federal authorities.

A new aspect of financial support, which appeared after the USSR broke up, was the aid from the international community, especially the western countries and their respectable organizations. The support concentration was focused on the organizations, which were advocating for issues well known to western world, such as human rights, and which were established between the end of 1980s and 1990s. The western financial aid did not have a big choice between various NGOs in Russia, and could only support a small number of them, practically because there were not so many existing NGOs in Russia to begin with. Another issue that arose during that time, was that those NGOs that could potentially be sponsored by the West, were not able to represent the interests of the Russian people (Alekseeva 2010). The western donors were mostly working with the non-profit organizations in Russia, and through the financial, as well as educational support, Russian NGOs were able to increase their efficiency, especially in regards to the professional knowledge, but still, the main focus and the most sought out by the receiving NGOs was the financial aid. While those western sponsored NGOs grew in terms of money and could operate more professionally, they became much more tied with their donors and not with their respective domestic societies (Sanovitch et al 2010).

As the current president of Russia came to power, there was a mass reduction in the autonomy of a large amount of institutions, as well as organization, which had some form of influence within Russian society, therefore centralizing the political and economic authority. In the period from the end of 1990s and around 2008, there was a major loss of pluralism, which also

effected the civil societies, especially after the president's second term in 2004. While the government narrative on the civil societies was not necessary negative, the reality does not reflect it, and it is pretty clear that Russian authorities do not view civil societies as autonomous from the influence of the state. As Evans (2006) argues, the concept of civil society in Russia is seen as an instrument of aiding the authorities in their strive to pursue the interests of the state. As he further elaborates, this notion of view of civil societies was also visible during the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, where civil societies were seen and treated as a danger to the wellbeing of Russian people and stability of the Russian government.

There have been various measures, which the Russian authorities implemented in order to contain and in some way oppress civil societies and NGOs. The adaptation of respective laws has often been seen as the most impactful of the measures although, according to (Richter 2013), their effectiveness to tighten the power of non-profit organizations and etc has been heavily debated. For example, the 2006 law on Russian based NGOs, which required those organizations to constantly report to the local authorities, causing a great deal of discomfort to the organizational branches of those NGOs, as filling out reports and collecting intelligence for those reports requires extra time and extra resources (Lubownikov 2013). This however, also had a certain level of the positive effect on the overall position of the larger NGOs, and this reporting procedure implied that the scam or fake organizations would not be able to use their finances other than for the reasons they initially focused on in their agenda. While these laws were aimed for what one might consider a greater good from the perspective of large, well financed NGOs and the government, it turned out that these laws were extremely discriminatory against those organizations, which the government simply considered as harmful. An important aspect of the 2006, according to Lubownikov (2013) was that it made the sponsorship from the foreign aid much more harder than before. In the beginning of 2013 another important and crucial law came to power, which forced those NGOs and non-profit organizations in Russia which received financial aid from the outside sources, to register themselves as "foreign actors" or "foreign agents".

With the decline of the civil society and the growing hardships for the newly established NGOs in Russia, came another important period of time, which by some scholars can be considered as a phenomena. The mass protests, which arose on December of 2011, were seen as an breaking point of the regular state of things in Russian social, cultural and political life. While there were numerous smaller protests in Russia since the collapse the Soviet Union, the number and the

size of those protests had a significant increase after Putin was elected for his second term in 2004. The protests since 2004 were characterized by the focused on those actions of politicians, which were in direct conflict with the interest of the people and occupied a very narrow aspect of issues (Evans 2012). The agenda of the protestors was very clear and very specific and generally addressed the defense of those layers of societies, who were already powerful enough to exercise their voice and had certain agendas to loose. The general population however did not pay much attention to such movements, as they did not feel the need for a change in their lives and they were also not politically active, meaning they did not consider the decrease in the quality of democracy is a serious issue and did not attend events, that could be considered as political. These protests, as a result, did not fit in with the agenda of the majority of the population ,nor did they consider those issue to be of much relevance for their personal gains. This led to the protests being rather small in size (just around 100 people) and also did not gather any domestic or foreign media attention. This is one of the main reasons, why the December protests in 2011 have gained so much media coverage internationally, as many thousands of people took to the streets at once for the first time (Volkov 2010).

7.1. Protest movement in Russia (2011-2013)

The presidential election campaign in 2001 in Russia was characterized by never-seen-before mass protests, which spilled over from the capital of Moscow and into other cities, both large and small. With thousands of protests throughout Russia taking place all at once, it was clear that the movement was much different from the very beginning and could hardly be compared to all other protests before. The main cause of the protests was the suspected falsification of the voting results in favor of the United Russia party, which is the single most dominant party in Russia currently. In a rather quick period of time, the protests grew immensely in size, with Volkov (2013), stating that the beginning of the increase saw tens of thousands of people joining in, while some estimates report that by the end of December in 2011, the protests had a reach of over one hundred thousand activists.

Combined with a very poor economic performance in Russia, many scholars agree, that the anti-government sentiment grew quietly but rapidly. Interestingly enough, the general consensus that is normal for the mobilization of masses during a pre-election period, such as rising optimism for a better social and economic performances and the living standards was not found. The year 2011 was also characterized by an incredible loss of trust and support for the United Russia party, as well as for the single politicians who had high positions within the

government. Thus, the ruling party had a very hard time mobilizing its supporters and voters. As Gudkov et al (2012) reports, there was a very short period of time in the fall of 2011 where United Russia saw a little increase in its support, but that support quickly dropped and reached a record low by that time, as it went down to nearly thirty four percent. There was no feeling of financial stability and the domestic polls constantly reported a huge level of uncertainty about the future among Russian citizens.

According to Miryasova et al (2010), there is an indication that protests in Russia do not necessarily have to be characterized by outbreaks of violence, mass arrests, as there have been plenty of examples of protests in Russia going rather peacefully, albeit not as numerous and focused on different issues. For example, there was large protests in 2005, which was focused to oppose the new monetization policies employed by the federal government; there was an uprising of laborers in 2007; a movement against Lukoil (one of the largest oil corporations in Europe), as well as civil protests against the destruction of historical heritage sites in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The most important notion here however, is that those protests and movements were not political in their nature, and instead are regarded as civil. Many of the oral demands of the protestors, including the unofficial voices of the activists, also point out to the fact the nature of those movements was not political. The demands of the activists however were also regarded as impossible to be met during the political climate at that time, even considering that a lot of those activist and supporting civil societies worked rather closely with the federal government authorities. As an example, Volkov (2012) states that Chiricova, who was an environmental activists when promoting the protection of the forest in the Khimki region near Moscow, did not gain any sufficient outcomes from the United Russia, even though she had quite a lot of support from other activists behind her.

The Russian experts have notably predicted the possibility of a public outrage between 2010 and 2011, as the conflict of the citizens against the political system in Russia grew extremely rapidly (Belanovsky 2010). A very important research was conducted by the "Levada Center", where it was concluded that there was a clear tendency to the rise of a large scale conflict, as the conflicts between the interest of the general public and the agenda of the government authorities, further adding that an escalation of the conflict could be of high possibility. It was also determined that the overall level of the political situation and the livability of the political system in Russia were very unstable (Volkov 2011).

An important notion of the 2011 protest throughout Russia was a great deal of various political scandals. It started with the removal of Sergey Mironov from the Federation Council of Russia or the National Parliament, who at the time was the leader of a rather prominent and popular political party called "Just Russia". This led to great uncertainties if Just Russia would even be able to participate for the parliament election. This issue has made its way to the number of respectable newspapers in Russia, although the articles about it were constantly mentioning the fact the United Russia paved a way and aided in building up the Just Russia party (Kucher 2011). Another scandal concerned the position of another prominent Russian politician Mihail Prohorov, who was "fired" from the position of chairman of the party called "Right Cause", and later on, it was culminated by an official statement from Mihail Medvedev, who decided not to run for a second term of the office, thus allowing Vladimir Putin to run for a presidential chair once again. This move by Medvedev has been a turning point for a lot of Russians who were hoping for legit and modern reforms, as they looked up to Medvedev and then new government to liberalize and democratize the country. As the last tipping action of the Medvedev administration, Alexey Kurdin, who at the time was the Minister of Finance, was also forced to leave his position, further fueling the aggravating the public's rage on the ongoing political climate in Russia (Dmitriev 2011).

With the coming of the official election-day in Russia, the anti-government sentiment from the general public finally started taking shape and people were openly opposing the political authorities. On the 20th of November, during the speech of Vladimir Putin at the Olympic Center Stadium in Moscow, the public loudly booed him off the stage, which quickly caused a lot of turmoil in the media outlets, as it was the first time that Putin had experienced such a negative reaction from a large crowd. Even the most prominent and seemingly pro-Russian government newspapers such as Gazeta, RIA and NTV had a lot of journalists resign from their posts, due to mass scale censorship of coverage of election procedures, as well as the overall election campaign of the United Russia (Vinokurova 2011). This was also not taken lightly by the general public, whose anti-government sentiment further increased when they began realizing that the news coverage of the elections has been heavily censored and underreported. These events have also paved a way for Alexey Navalny, a heavy outspoken Russian anti-government critique, who will be mentioned and discussed in the further parts of this research paper, to gain national attention and collect a large number of followers. He called on to the public to vote for any other party except for the United Russia, which turned into a form of a flesh-mob

and quickly resonated across the country, where the citizens indeed began voting for all other presented parties, but not for the United Russia. This led to a very large improvement of the opposition parties, whose popularity allowed them to have a much better representation in the State Duma (Parliament), especially compared to the previous elections in 2007. In comparison to the 2007 elections for example, the Russian Communist Party gained 92 seats as opposed to 57 previously: the Liberal Democratic Party rose from 40 to 56 sets and the Just Russia Party nearly doubled their seats from 38 to 62 in 2011. The newly gained support also led to some of the party leaders, especially in the Just Russia to become important members of anti-government protests and the media coverage of the protests also saw a very significant increase (Volkov 2012).

The social mobilization of the 2011 protests was taking place in a number of stages. As according to Volkov (2012) the activists, would vote any other party except for the United Russia, increasing the public monitoring of the election processes and voting casts and the actual physical attendance of the movements outside, specifically the protests which took place on the 5th of December in Moscow, prior to the election results. With the general public keeping a very close eye on how elections were conducted, for the first time in a few decades, thanks to modern communication devices and media platforms, the public was able to notice and document the violations, which were taking place. While the election fraud was a well-known occurrence in Russia, especially after election from to the State Duma in 2007 and 2009, it was not be able to get caught red-handed. Although there was not a single person who could be directly blamed for the fraud, it was enough to further increase the anti-government sentiment of the activists and fire up the voices of the opposition, which included prominent Russian figures such as Boris Nemtsov, who was later shot dead near the Red Square, Garry Kasparov, who is currently in a political exile, and also Alexey Navalny, Dmitry Oreshkin, Vera Kichanova and a number of others. With a lot of prominent politicians, journalists, public figures and even some athletes getting involved in the movement, it led to a large expansion in the activist agenda. In order to better organize themselves, political activists developed an ad-hoc establishment, which was meant to aid in the information distribution and do so more efficiently. The early days of December 2011 were among the most important days for the development of the communication processes, which would later play a huge role throughout the other discussed movements in Russia. It started with the creation of the Committee of Rallies, as the activists were preparing for their first large scale movement. The goal of the

Committee of Rallies was to establish an organizational point and an organizational structure where the important decisions would take place, such as the time and place of a rally, as well as it would help the movement speakers to deliver their messages to a larger auditory. The meeting in the Committees were conducted via live sessions on the spot and through social media platforms, where the organizers would often interact with the live audiences and conducted Q&A sessions with the public (Volkov 2012).

Besides the Committee of Rallies, there was another important communication instrument that would highly aid in the movement's communication efficiency called the Workshop of Protest Activities. This particular Workshop had unlimited membership base, meaning that anyone who was interested in attending the movement discussion could become part of it, thus also serving an important communication purpose, as the activists used various social media platforms to promote and encourage the opposition sympathizers to create more networks and distribute information. The further developments of the Workshop saw it turn into a kind of a forum that would held meetings every week for even more information exchange, and also, as a project management station. While making a lot of presence online through the social media platforms, the Workshop of Protest Activities would still be mainly used for the offline protest participation, meaning in physical presence, in a physical location. The importance of this specific establishment can clearly been seen in the fact that the most influential events at the time, namely the "White Bulevard Walks" and a number of others, were organized in that very Workshop (Volkov 2014).

The Levada Centre has presented a lot of interesting facts about the overall picture of the 2011 protests in Russia, and even provided a detailed portrayal of who the activists were, what they were occupied with, as well as a number of interesting statistics. According to the Center, the male population made up the majority of protestors were male, accounted for nearly sixty five percent of all activist, which is especially interesting since the female population of Russia is much larger than the male population. Age wise, the activist were consisted of a rather young population between eighteen and twenty four years old, and then it saw an increase in the age segmentation, with the oldest of the protestors being above fifty four years old, meaning that the age variation was very diverse. Education was another important factor in the protests participation, although it did not seem to be as diverse as the age differences. The majority of the activist were in fact very educated and possessed a formal higher education level, accounting for nearly eighty percent of the movement participants. This is also very important

and quiet interesting, if one keeps in mind that the overall higher education level in Russia is not even one third of the whole population. The financial situation of the activist was also an important determinant in the participation levels. According to the Levada Center, around forty percent of the activists possessed enough wealth to afford their basic needs and even a few luxuries, but did not have enough money to buy and maintain a car vehicle. The part of the movement participants were diverse, ranging from people who could be considered to be below the poverty line and those who had enough wealth to buy more than one middle sized apartment in Moscow. As Levinson (2012) reports, the diversity of the participants in terms of age, gender, wealth, social and financial status, led to a large diversity in the dynamics of the protests, such as different demands, different group clothing, symbols and mottos.

Among the general dissatisfactions with Russia's economic performance, the causes for participation among the activist were also very diverse. For example, around seventy three percent, according to the Levada Center, have attended the protests due to the overall uncertainty in the country's future, as well as due to a high level of dissatisfaction with the internal performance on government authorities. Other important reasons also included the rising concerns for the alleged falsification of the presidential and State Duma votes, nearly total lack of transparency in the government decision making processes. There was also a visible disappointment with the performance of former president Dmitry Medvedev, as the many hopes of the Russian citizens for an efficient and productive country modernization were never fulfilled. What was especially interesting was that one would expect a strong solidarity with the opposition parties, yet according to the polls, only around fifteen percent of the activists have experienced a form of common agenda with the Russian opposition parties. The support of the organizers of the movement was also rather low, at around ten percent, as the majority of the protestors were not motivated by the opposition politicians or the movement's organizers, but by their own understanding that Russia had to make drastic changes in order to improve its economic and social situation. The results from a research conducted by Bikbov (2012) compared with the results of the polls from the Levada Research Center also indicate a very similar characterization of protests demographics and to an extent, similar socio-economic identification. The political preferences of the activists were quiet diverse and saw people from all corners of the political XY spectrum join the movements throughout Russia. As the Levada's polls indicate, nearly forty percent of the questioned people have associated themselves with the Russian democrats, following by the supporters of liberals at around their percent. Polls

also included communists who made up fifteen to twenty percent, and socialist, alongside with the nationalists made up about ten percent of the poll results.

7.2. Anti-corruption movements/ student protests (2017-2018)

While the protests of 2011 were unarguably the most influential in regards to its dynamics, size, overall attention, they also have shown that the Russian people were no longer willing to quietly protest the economic and social uncertainty in the country through a passive manner. End of March of 2017 has seen another mass protest appear on a Russian territory, this time caused by an opposition figure and further fueled by the constant dissatisfaction with the authorities, which has not changed since the end of protests in 2011. What was widely regarded as the main trigger for the outbreak of the protest, was the creation and distribution of an investigative documentary called “He is not Dimon” referring to Russian prime-minister Medvedev being involved in the organized kinds of corruptive schemes. “Dimon” is a common nickname in Russia when an individual is named Dmitriy, similar to “Seppi” when referring to a person named Josef. The key opposition figure, who is also credited for making the documentary was Alexey Navalny, one of the most prominent and followed Russian anti-government critics. After the video was posted on various social media platforms, including YouTube, where it racked up over ten million views in just a little over a week and besides exposing the alleged wrong doings by Medvedev, it also gained a lot of popularity for Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (Lavrinenko 2017).

Among the many aspects of the political processes in Russia at the time, what arguably fired up Russians the most, was most likely the lack of any form of reaction from the Russian government to the popular Navalny’s documentary. There were a lot of estimates for the number of activists which attended the movements in 2017, with Meduza (2017), a rather prominent opposition media outlet based outside of Russia, stating that the protests accounted for anywhere between 30,000 and 90,000 thousand people, with nearly 2,000 arrests on the 26th of March alone. As the key agenda of the activists, many reports point out the dissatisfaction of the Russian citizens with the government, mainly the constant cases of corruptive behavior of the authorities and various politicians who possessed a lot of influence over the policy making in the country. Soon enough, anti-corruption agenda was further expanded to the improvement of the human rights and civil law in Russia, especially after a large number of videos showing activists get violently handed by the police forces, as well the overall suppression of freedom of expression. Alexey Navalny was singled out, along with his

most loyal supporters as the initiator of the 2017 anti-corruption movement. While the movement was indeed large, it was not as massive as those protests in 2011, and were characterized by a number of different features which were not previously seen. There was no centralized organizational structure within the movement, which could also be seen as a move that shifted the concept of the movement and made it more into a sort of a campaign (Meduza 2017). One of the most discussed aspects of the 2017 anti-corruption protests was the participation of young Russian students. While the 2011 movements saw activists from all social groups taking it to the streets and protesting offline, the 2017 movements were characterized by the majority of the participants being young students from various faculties and various universities. The participating students, as according to Levinson (2017), were motivated to protest due to the lack of available and well-paid career opportunities, a near total absence of social mobility and a general uncertainty about the future life. Other reasons also included political dissatisfaction, poor economic performance in the country and unfair distribution of wealth, as well as highly visible propaganda, which was coming from the side of the Russian orthodox church and the conservative politicians.

The mobilization of the masses took place throughout the entire Russia, covering over one hundred cities and various smaller towns. As Baunov (2017) argues, this has once again shown to the general public, that it is possible to gain attention by protesting outside, and also showed that the government the level of political stability in the country was rapidly decreasing. The framing concepts of the protests were also very crucial, as they depicted a clear image of the prime-minister Medvedev as the main politician responsible for not modernizing Russia and destroying the opportunities for the younger generation to have a more reliable and stable future. It has also been argued that the 2017 protests have largely reflected the protests in a number of the European countries, where younger students were also unsatisfied with their job prospects, as well as student debts.

The potential for the size increase of the 2017 protests could have been much more larger, but the government authorities rejected the proposal of the organized movements, stating that at the time when the movements were supposed to take place, other organization such as the United Russia already reserved a sport to hold a rally or an event. According to Meduza (2017) the officials in Russia's largest cities, namely Moscow and St. Petersburg denied to approve of a legal opposition rally, as there was a conservative event from Russia's Liberation Movement which had already registered itself prior on the same day. Similar could be seen in other cities

like Kurgan and Chelyabinsk, where the authorities once again refused to allow anti-corruption movements, as there was an athletic event and a pro-government music concert already taking place instead.

Symbolism played an important role in 2017 movements, especially among the younger people. They would often wear matching clothes, sports shoes, spray themselves with a green liquid and carry rubber toy ducks with them. As Navalny states in his documentary about Medvedev, he used the tax-payer and the corrupt deals money to order over twenty pairs of expensive sneakers in under a month and even built a separate reserve for his domestic ducks on the territory of his real-estate. The green liquid symbolism was a throwback to the time when a pro-United Russia activists sprayed Alexey Navalny with it, injuring his eyesight. As for the movement slogans, the protesters would often shout and carry posters with various contents on them, mostly referring to Medvedev's ducks, expensive shoes and further cases of his corruptive behavior, as was described in Navalny's documentary. The most dominant form of activism was an outside movement, such as rallies, where these symbols could be best showcased. The largest of them were attended by over ten thousand participants, and the movement did not go without some level of violence and clashed with the local Russian police forces. As Vadeneyeva (2017) reports, there was a case in St. Petersburg when one of the activists threw a small explosive at a police officer, injuring him, although not fatally. In Moscow, the protestors would sometimes built barricades, which then led to efforts of the police to demolish them, leading to even more clashes with activists. After Navalny was once again arrested in Moscow and put into a police vehicles, the activist surrounded the car and did not allow it to drive further (Turovsky and Makarya 2017). Even though, there was clear evidence of the 2017 protests being more "campaign like", due to the heavy use of symbols and protest rhetorics, the violence outbreaks from the protestors do not characterize the movement as a whole, and there is currently no empirical ground to believe that violent actions were determined to be of a collective format. Besides the viewers of Navalny's documentary where he exposes the corruption of the Russian political elite, other individuals such as various bloggers also showed their support for the movement. It is also very important to mention that Navalny himself is not a part of any political party in Russia, although he tried to establish one, but did not get an official approval permit from the Russian State Ministry of Law and Justice. Since none of the registered political parties or any formal institutions have shown any form of approval or support for the activists, it is not possible to state with a hundred percent certainty,

to which of the political sides the activist associate themselves with. Even the opposition parties, which to the surprise of many actually do exist in Russia, have not affiliated themselves with the protestors in any way. Therefore, the only way to structure the portfolio of the protestors is to view them as a combination of individual agents with individual agendas. An important part of the 2017 protests, which will be discussed in much more details in the other chapters of this thesis, is that the mobilization almost solely took place online, through the social media or network sites, which is always characterized by the near complete absence of a formal hierarchy and does pose any membership consequences for the activists. The Russian authorities did however try to limit the absence of consequences for those activists, who were especially active within the anti-government content on social media, and even established a task force, which was supposed to monitor the actions of the most prominent Navalny supporters, but since Navalny's party was not registered as one and had no registered members, it was hard to excess the real of activism of his supporters. As has been proven before, a large number of followers on social media channels, such as on Navalny's YouTube channel, does not automatically transform into a large political support (Lavrinenko 2017).

A lot of Russian literature that was available for the review has focused on the participation of students in the protests and rightfully so. After all, it is the younger generation who are most active on social media, where the first sparks, which led to the mass protests have appeared. Social media platforms were also the very first avenues where students have informed themselves about Navalny's activities and which campaigns he had organized. It has also been argued, that the reluctance of the Russian mainstream media, which is heavily supported and controlled by the Russian state authorities, have not informed the general public of any activities conducted by Navalny and his supporters, making those who were interested, to resort to alternative information hubs, such as the social media. Another reason for students to attend the movements in support of Navalny, were the decreasing future opportunities, which have been blamed on the irresponsible and a corrupt behavior of the state. This could also be seen on the various posters, which the students carried with them stating slogans like "Russian corruption has stolen my future" and so on (Meduza 2017). There is also no party in Russia that at least could efficiently represent the interests of the students, which deprives students from a well-structured political representation, further aggravating the dissatisfaction with how Russian authorities treat students. With high levels of corruption, students were also deprived of upward social mobility and since becoming a politician is only possible through corruption

and established networking, students were also deprived of an option of applying for an institutional position in order to improve the lives of the younger generation. As a result, going out to the street and protesting was the only viable option that the students could exercise (Lavrinenko 2017). Sociocultural motivations for protesting were also very much visible throughout the whole duration of the movement, as many students saw themselves get exposed for often and more aggressively to the conservative narrative in various universities, especially in the public universities, where the Russian government remains the main sponsor and the main indoctrinator. A narrow and a specific agenda that universities in Russia have to follow can be traced back to the regime type of the Russian government, which according to the Freedom House (2018) at the time, listed Russia as a country where self-expression and self-determination were present in an extremely limited form. Overall, it is also evident that the entire Russian education system performs a function of educating loyal citizens, who would be beneficial for the goodness of the integrity of the established state, and as the protest have shown, a large portion of the students are aware of it.

As was expected by many experts on the civil societies in Russia, the retaliation and the reaction of the ruling authorities on the protest were incredibly harsh. Activists who were especially active within school and university communities were met with a tough retaliation from their respective higher education heads and administrators. Since the majority of the rallies and protests took place under “illegal” circumstances, the penalties for attending the protest were also made to be extra discouraging for others, and those who were detained by the police had to face very serious consequences. As Meduza (2018) reported, the Russian State Duma has adopted a legislation bill that allowed for large fines and immediate arrests, if someone was guilty of motivating under age people to participate in the anti-government movements and unapproved by the government rallies. There has also been numerous cases of university student being discriminated and threatened, if they decided to attend a protest. Such pattern of threats and intimidations was visible in all Russian cities where the protests took place. According to Williamson (2017), the Ministry of Education in Russia had a very precise role in mitigating the protests, alongside the contra-extremist organizations who conducted a series of lectures in the schools and universities that propagated the participation of anti-government movement as of the same illegal actions as conducting highly extremist activities. As an example from the Meduza editorial (2017), a highly respectable of prominent members of the head committee in Russian law school, during a lecture to his students, said that Russia

currently finds itself in an informational war, where the opposite forces are targeting young students, and the anti-corruption agenda of the protestors is an agenda of a very narrow circle of people who oppose the well-being of Russia and its people. As Suleimanov (2017) also reports, there were numerous cases, especially in the Samara region of Russia, where the local authorities would organize anti-extremist forums, which students were forced to attend and listen about how dangerous for their future the participation of such protests can be. It has even been reported, that universities and schools themselves conducted campaigns against the Russian opposition and against Navalny himself, where he was depicted as a dangerous criminal, who promoted his own selfish agenda under the coat of anti-corruption activists (Lavrinenko 2017).

7.3. Protests in support of Alexey Navalny (2021)

The latest politically motivated protests in Russia started in winter of 2021, as a reaction to the imprisonment of the most prominent opposition figure in Russia – Alexey Navalny. Following the alleged poisoning by a Russian produced nerve agent “Novichok”, Navalny left Russia and went to Germany to undergo special treatment and was immediately detained after landing back in the airport in Moscow. The poisoning of Navalny by Novichok was officially proved and confirmed by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which then led to a number of serious sanctions by the EU member states, as well as the United Kingdom. While the sanction were targeting powerful Russian officials, as well as its chemical facilities, the Russian authorities denied any wrongdoings, stating that the poisoning was a work of the US secret service personal. Alexey Navalny later declared that he knows, that it was the Russian president who personally ordered him to be poisoned and the foreign agents such as “The Insider” and the “Bellingcat”, an investigative journal located in the Netherlands, stated that Navalny’s poisoning was a job done by the Russian Federal Security Service (BBC news, 2020). The reason for his official arrest however, was not his opposition activities, as argued by the Russian federal police, rather it was the fact he broke the rules of a jail sentence, which was suspended on him before the poisoning. According to Moscow Times (2020), Navalny was issued a warning, that leaving Russia would imply that he could be sentenced to jail, and also issued a statement while Navalny was in Berlin hospital, that the imprisonment would be a definite consequence if he is to return back on the Russian soil. In the previous events of Navalny’s suspended prison sentence in 2014, he was accused of illegally collecting over 20 million rubles (around 340,000 euros) from the Yves Rocher-Vostok, which was disapproved

and deemed politically motivated by Navalny himself, as well the European Court of Human Rights. As reported by the BBC News in January 2018, there was no formal trial, and an actual court was quickly set up at the police station where Navalny was held.

As a result of Navalny's arrest, his closest supporters, including Leonid Volkov, the head of Navalny's media network on social media, quickly mobilized themselves and made an investigative video, where they disputed accusations towards Navalny and urged the viewers to participate in the upcoming protests. The video, which was posted on January 19th, quickly received over sixty million views, which led to Roskomnadzor, a Russian communication safety anti-extremism supervisor, urging large popular in Russia social media platform like VK and TikTok to take the video down (Alide 2021). As the video started gaining momentum, so have the arrests of Navalny's associates, who were generally charged with organizing a large public event without a formal governmental approval. Social media channels of the opposition also faced a lot of scrutiny and most of them were banned by Roskomnadzor at the very beginning of the movements.

The 2021 protests were very large even compared to their predecessors. An official estimate by the Russian division of BBC (2021) reported that over forty thousand protestors went to the streets in Moscow alone. The estimates from the Russian authorities were much smaller and do not possess much credibility. The start of the movement can be traced back to the gatherings in the historical squares in Moscow and then spilled over to the prison where Navalny was held, called Matroskaya Tishina. As many journalists have reported and the videos taken by bystanders and the activists, many of the protestors were taken by the police executives as soon as they stepped foot on the territory where the protests were conducted, even before the "official" start of the movement even began (Meduza 2021). There were numerous clashes with the police, where both the activists and the executives sustained injuries with some of them even requiring an immediate hospitalization. According to the reports from Meduza (2021), forty police officers sustained serious injuries, which led to an investigation due to the violence against the public workers.

Large masses of activists also gathered in St. Petersburg, with various sources ranging the number of participants between five and over ten thousand people. The majority of the cities where the protests were happening, were historical and had a lot of media presence there, but mostly, the activists themselves were recording and distributing the on-site videos. This is where the infamous video of a policeman assaulting a woman was recorded, which caused a lot of

outrage, even from the not so government critical celebrities in Russia, who quickly re-shared the video, condemning the police brutality during the movements. That woman was then reportedly taken into hospital due to the sustained injuries, which on the video appear to be as a direct result of a policeman kicking her in the abdomen area. As autonomous human right outlet "OVD" later reported, there was a total of five hundred arrests made on that day (OVD info 2021). As it further reports, other large cities in Russia, such as Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg, Ufa, Perm, Krasnodar, Samara and Kazan also saw a large number of activist protesting on the streets with the a number of protestors ranging from one to ten thousand of people. As a case in Moscow and St. Petersburg, other cities were also prone to witnessing high levels of police brutality, as well as massive arrest with over five hundred people detained per day.

According to the SWP Comment from Sabine Fischer (2021), there are a number of aspects of the 2021 protests in Russia, which were not present during the previous ones, or at least not present on the same level. Firstly, she points out that the scale and dynamics of the latest movements were much more massive, as in February alone for example, nearly twelve thousand people have been arrested or detained. The level of violence was also much more frequent than previously seen, as has been the crackdown on the opposition journalists. The administrative detentions, as they are being called today in Russia, have also skyrocketed in comparisons to the protests in 2011 or student protests in 2017. These detentions were happening based on various offences which the authorities considered to be serious enough for the police executives to intervene in and ranged from participating in the unauthorized public events to motivating minors to partake in the movements or breaking the Covid safety protocols.

Fischer (2021) also argues that the government repression has greatly increased in regards to various groups and organizations which were previously not under the government radar. As an example, she argues that the arrest of Ivan Pavlov, a prominent lawyer who focused on the civil rights issues and worked closely with FBK Anti-Corruption Foundation, is a clear indication that the repressions now have included people of all layers of society, even the famous lawyers. Similar things started to happen to the Anti-Corruption Fond itself, as it was quickly deemed as an extremist establishment, due to its lose ties to Alexey Navalny. In the following days, the Russian state Duma also issued a brand new legislation, which legally branded Navalny's Fond as "extremist", thus making them unable to participate in the elections and run for any public department. It went as far as even labeling the individual donors of the Anti-corruption Fund as

“extremist” and they had to undergo legal consequences for donating money to Navalny’s organization. Besides assets associated with Navalny himself, there were a number of independent news media outlets, such as the DOXA Newspaper, which was found guilty of pursuing minors to participate in the unauthorized movements. Other media outlets such as the prominent opposition news “Meduza” and “V-News” were even declared as foreign agents by the Russian authorities. While classifying the opposition organizations as “foreign agents” is not new, it has never been done on such a large scale as it was during the 2021 protests. Being labeled as “foreign agent” in Russia, requires the organizations to undergo extreme bureaucratic procedures, purposely depriving them of financial resources, money and diminishes any influence these organization could posses (Fischer 2021).

An important point that Fisher (2021) writes in regards to how the 2021 protests are different to their predecessors, is that Russian authorities have decided to break the privacy barriers, which was done in the forms of the police and security forces visiting homes, work places, academic facilities in order to verbally warn individuals not to participate in the movements or detain them right at the spot. For the first time ever, Fischer (2021) argues, Moscow’s CCTV systems were used for mass scale facial recognition, which led to extra bureaucratic issues of those who did not even participate in the protests in any form, but were still questioned because of their friends and relatives who in some form or another were connected to the movements. This new wave of repressions also led to various legislatures, which were done rather quickly and targeted those who, according to the authorities were active in the opposition sphere, and allowed them to be formally branded as “foreign agents”, especially if their finances had some ties to the outside of Russia. With it came the restrictions on the political freedom and written political content was also persecuted, if it did not fit the government agenda. Legislations even touched on the educational aspects, as the academic discussion on politics, as well as political scientific research on Russian and international politics was carefully monitored by the authorities and restricted if they discovered “extremist” content there.

According to the Leva Research Center, there was a serious indication that 2021 have a potential to have an important impact of how the citizen’s view of the Russian government has deteriorated and that the protests were much more larger, than the government authorities officially reported. Twenty one percent of the surveyed Russians have claimed that they were following the protests and opposition rallies very closely, over a half of them said that they

were aware that the protest were taking place and below twenty percent said that they did not hear anything about the protests at all. The remarks that these surveys made, indicate mixed feeling from the Russian citizens, with about forty percent stating that the protests were necessary and important, while another forty percent said that the protest were dangerous and had an overall negative perception on them (Levada.ru 2021).

8. Social Media platforms in Russia

In order to provide the reader with a better understanding of which social media are used in Russia, this chapter will briefly illustrate the history and dynamics of social media usage in Russia, while social media usage for anti-government and political purposes will be discussed in more detail in the next two chapters. According to Slate (2021), the popularity of social media in Russia has exponentially grown, with YouTube currently being the most popular platform (85.4%), VK or Vkontakte (78%), WhatsApp (75.8%), Instagram (61.2%), Odnoklassniki (47.1%), Viber (42.5%), Facebook (38.9%), TikTok (30.3%), Telegram (27.4%), Skype (24.4%) and Twitter (18.6%). Since there is a great variety of social media platforms, this chapter will only give a general overview of the platforms which are relevant to the main topic of the Master's Thesis, as the most important aspects of Network Society and Resource Mobilization for anti-government protests took place on VK, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Telegram. Although not much of the protests activity has been analyzed and recorded on the Odnoklassniki platform, this social platform will still be given a little bit of attention in order to expand the general understanding of the Russian domestic made networking sites.

8.1. VK (VKontakte)

VK (originally Vkontakte) is the single most popular social media platform in Russia with over 650 million personal accounts as of 2021 (Vk.com, User Catalogue). The VK headquarters are based in St. Petersburg and it is available in a variety of different language and has a worldwide access, although the platform was officially banned in Ukraine in 2017, where it was previously the most popular social network (RBK Ukraine, 2020). VK is a multifunctional social media platform, where users can message each other through personal messenger functions, post public posts, establish online groups, create online events with a registration software, share

audio, image and video contents and also interact with other users through browser-based video games and groups events. Overall, VK is very similar to Facebook. VK is also in the top 15 of the most popular social media platforms in the world according to the Similar-Web intelligence provider. VK was first launched in Russia in 2007, with a beta version being created in 2006 and within the first year of the launch, it reached over 100,000 users and quickly became one of Russia's most developed and popular social media networks, reaching over 10,000,000 users in short span of one year. Besides being the most popular social media platform in Russia, VK is also the most visited social network in Belarus, Kazakhstan and is among the top-5 most popular networks in the Baltic states and Moldova according to Alexa (2019).

The CEO and the founder of VK- Pavel Durov, who controlled up to 20 percent of VK's market shares in 2013, was dismissed from his CEO position in the April of 2014, with the ruling board of VK claiming that Durov himself wrote a resignation letter, which Durov then claimed to be an April's Fools joke. However after an official dismissal took place and Durov had no more influence on the VK ownership, he openly stated, that the ruling political party, the United Russia, has taken control over his platform, suggesting that his dismissal was merely a punishment for not willing to provide personal information of the registered users, as well as the details of the VK's ruling board, who have been accused of aiding the Euromaidan protesters in Ukraine. After his dismissal, Durov went into political exile and stated that he had no intentions of going back to Russia (HRW, 2021).

VK possesses a number of important and functional features, ranging from regular messaging and even SMS synchronization services. The messaging functions on VK vary greatly and allow users to message up to 500 other accounts at once, while simultaneously attaching image, video, and audio files, as well as geographical positions with a live default location and written documents. Users also have the ability attach content to their "walls" or the public space on their profiles, with documents, all different form of multi-media and files. These walls also have a function of a newsfeed, where the user can select whether he sees all news or only those, which the users determines to be relevant. Much like a search engine, VK's news feed can generate algorithm based news which the user might be interested in, and it also function as a global real-time search if the user wishes to install it that way. VK's online communities, which are especially relevant to this research, can be divided into three different types of communities. First, there are groups, which are generally utilized by communities with the centralized authority, such as

those that post scientific or entertainment articles. The contents on such groups can be edited by all members, which are registered within the group. VK's public pages is another form of the online community there, which is based on the principles of news feed and are aimed at showing the user as much content as possible, as long as the user stays within the public page. The event community is the last of VK's online communities and are used for an organization of various events like concerts (vkinfo.com 2018), but they can also be used for organizing political events such as rallies and opposition protests.

8.2. Odnoklassniki

Odnoklassniki is another Russian based social media network service that is especially popular in Russia among the older generations and has over 200 million registered individual accounts . In Russia, Odnoklassniki is the second most popular social media network after VK, and it was first launched in 2006 by Albert Popkov, a telecommunication specialist, who currently resides in London. After a year of its launch, Odnoklassniki gained over 4 million users, and in February 2008, I-CD, an internet company where Popkov worked previously, accused him of stealing the concepts of Passado, which was I-CD's social media platform in development. However after an undisclosed amount of financial settlement was paid, I-CD dropped all allegations. By 2009 it was in the top 5 of most used Russian platforms by the Russian population. Similarly to VK, Odnoklassniki was officially banned in Ukraine in the spring of 2017, as part of the sanctions measures after the events in Crimea and Donbass (Ecommercenews, 2016).

Odnoklassniki is quite different from its VK and Western counterparts such as Facebook, in a way that they introduced paid registration in the 2008, which was cancelled later the same year, but there are a number of other unique features. Odnoklassniki, like many other social media platforms, has a group function, which allows many people to gather online at once, and similarly to Facebook, but not VK, Odnoklassniki made a single authorization function, which allows users to gather and interact online with each simultaneously. The groups functions are among the most important features on all social media platforms, especially when it comes to the political activities, and Odnoklassniki created a number of different features in order to not only have a better users experience, but also to allow for a more efficient controlling by the outside actors. In 2015 Odnoklassniki introduced a moderation a public contents within a group, as well as their unique type of groups called "karma" groups, which allow for a multi-stage lock instead a complete permanent ban for those users who violated the community requirements. A year later, in 2016, the group moderators were able to set a fixed lockout

period for the group violators and created a push subscription for the group users. Odnoklassniki has also become a subject to the “Blogger Law” in Russia which was established in 2014 and obliges all owners of internet communication resources with more than 3000 active followers daily to be registered in the Roskomnadzor to be monitored and regulated. This was officially part of a bigger Russian legislation called “The Federal law on information, information technologies and information protection” (insideok.ru, 2015).

8.3. Twitter

Twitter, a much better known American social media platform for microblogging, than its Russian counterparts (VK and Odnoklassniki), currently has over 880 million registered accounts according to the Twocharts (2021), and according to Statista (2021) around 10 million of Twitter users are registered from Russia, with around 30 percent of those users being female and 70 percent male. Twitter can be utilized for a great variety of purposes and has been notably used in protests such as Gaza-Israel conflict, the G20 protests in Toronto, the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement of 2011 and of course the anti-government protests in Russia. While Twitter can be considered, as a rather popular platform among the Russians, especially among the government officials and the opposition bloggers, there has been plenty of controversies concerning the usage of Twitter in Russia and the Russian media censorship programs.

The first acts of censorship did not come solely from the Russian side and can be traced back to 2014, when Twitter cancelled an access to an account of a Ukrainian political party for users, whose geolocation was on the territory of Russia. According to Riesmay (2014), this was retaliation by the Twitter authorities after the Russian government made a statement that it would ban Twitter on its territory, if Twitter fails to censor anti-Russia content. The most serious move by the Russian authorities however took place very recently, in the early spring of 2021, when the Federal Authorities for Communication, Information Technology and Mass Media decreased the downloading and uploading functions of Twitter on the Russian territory by 50 percent, justifying it with Twitter's inability to efficiently censor illegal adult content, such as child pornography and drug use, and further stating that if Twitter fails to improve the situation, they would ban Twitter completely within its national borders. According to CBS (2021), Russian authorities possess all necessary technological capabilities to ban Twitter on its territory and later in spring of 2021, the Russian Federal Court ordered Twitter to pay a monetary fine and prolonged the slow down process of Twitter up and downloading until the end of May. While Twitter obliged and deleted the majority of the online contents which Russia

considered to be inappropriate, the slow down of Twitter on the mobile devices has prolonged indefinitely.

8.4. YouTube

YouTube is another social media platform that is incredibly popular in the whole world, including Russia. While platforms like Facebook, Twitter, VK and Odnoklassniki are message based are used primarily for chatting, YouTube's primary purpose is video sharing. According to Backlinko (2021), YouTube possesses an enormous audience of nearly 2.30 billion users, as it is among the most popular social platforms in Russia, accounting for over 58 million users. The demographics of Russian users on YouTube, according to Statista are generally pointing to the age average of 18 and 24 years old, and the growing population of people from 25 to 59 years old are recorded to use YouTube on increasing basis.

YouTube has a gigantic worldwide reach, and since it was bought by Google in 2006, people now can access YouTube on nearly all electronic devices, including smart phones. The majority of the YouTube content is generated by single users or individual accounts, but it is constantly expanding and allows large multi-media corporations to produce content. YouTube has also had a very important impact between the ordinary citizens, celebrities and the government, and allowed for a much more direct communication between the people and the government, although this is generally reserved for Western developed states such as the USA, where the official account of the White House has hosted live exchanges between government deputies and provided platforms for large news media such as CNN to host Live presidential debates on their platforms (AlphabetInc, 2020).

YouTube has served as among the primary facilitators of the 2017 student protests and the 2021 pro-Navalny protests, as Navalny's large following on this official media platform allowed for the Russian government corruption allegations news to spread at a record speed and cause massive outbreaks of activists going to the streets. Even prior to that however, Russia had a long history censorship efforts on YouTube. For example, the Russian government already been blamed for "forcing" YouTube to delete the videos of the suicide bombings in Moscow in 2010, and alter the same year even went as far as completely disabling public access to YouTube across the entire country, justifying it by the failure of YouTube to remove the content which Russian authorities have deemed as extremist. On a plenty of other instances, Russia has

pressured YouTube to remove content which were connected to the opposition figures and anti-Russia facilitators (DozHd 2021).

8.5. Facebook

Facebook is perhaps the most well known social media in the world and will not be described in much detail, apart that it was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg.. As of April 2021, over 62 million Russians use Facebook, and there over 2.90 billion users worldwide. The largest portion of Facebook users in Russia are predominantly young people, aging between 25 and 35 years old, with only 18 percent of that population accounting for the female Facebook users. The sub-platform of Facebook. Called Facebook Messenger is interestingly enough used mostly by the older generations, starting from 35 years old and is also more popular within the female segment of the Messenger users (Statista 2021).

Similarly to other western based social network platforms, Facebook has also been a subject to controversy in regards to its content and the subsequent reactions from the Russian government authorities. In 2012 Russia established a law which allowed them to blacklist certain individuals on Facebook, whom they considered to be dangerous for the integrity of the state and In 2014 for example, Romskomnadzor issued an official warning to Facebook and a number of other international social media platforms for posting announcement to the start of the artistic movements, which the Russian authorities have compared to the 2014 protests in Ukraine and on other instances, the online opposition groups in support of Alexey Navalny in the same year were disabled for anyone trying to interact with them while on the Russian territory. The latest controversies include fines of nearly 400,000 US dollars, which the Russian government ordered Facebook to pay due to allowing the distribution of the anti-government content (Vindu 2015).

8.6. Telegram

Telegram is an instant-messaging system, similar to WhatsApp in its design and provides encrypted video chat functions, IP telephony, allows users to share multimedia files and is currently stationed in Dubai where its main operational base is located. Unlike other already mentioned platforms, Telegram allows users to conducted the so called “secret chats”, which are only encrypted between the application itself and the providing server. As of 2021, Telegram has over 1 billion users, with around 500 million of them being active users (Durov via Telegram 2021). According to Statista (2017), Russia currently has over 36 million Telegram

users. Telegram and its establishment are closely tied to Russia, and especially the political environment there. It was first started in 2013 by Pavel Durov and his brother Nikolay, who as mentioned before, were the main creators of the VK social media platform, which became a nearly complete subject of the Russian government in 2014 after both brothers were dismissed as the main executives and were forced into an exile.

After the Yarovaya Law, which states that all electronic communications operators must hold on to all messages, including voice and video messages of their users for at least 160 days, became official in 2018, Telegram was also required to oblige and follow the law. According to the explanation from Pavel Durov himself, keeping the records of the user's private conversation on Telegram was technically impossible, as the chat contents would only be stored within the user's electronic devices and were accessible by Telegram. This led to one of the Moscow's top courts putting an immediate restriction on the use of Telegram within the Russian territory in 2018, and in 2020 the restrictions were lifted, under an agreement that Telegram would assist the Russian authorities in prosecuting extremist content.

Besides being incredibly important in the government opposition community in Russia, as will be discussed in more details in the empirical parts of this thesis, the censorship of Telegram has also been directly responsible for anti-censorship movements, such as that in 2018. A movement which was aimed at the support of free speech and free internet took place on the 22nd and 30th of April, after about a week of the restrictions put on Telegram by the Moscow court. The organization and coordination of the movements itself took place within the chats on Telegram, and was also supported by Pavel Durov (Meduza 2018).

9. Testing the Network Society Theory through the existing research

Throughout the conducted research for this Master's Thesis, there has been plenty of evidence, which illustrates how Russia has been becoming a developing network society. The internet in Russia, domestically called the Runet, in its essence is free and available for various forms of utilization. Especially interesting for these studies, is the ever growing presence of the opposition politics, especially within the modern Information Communication Technologies. The penetration of the online resources in Russia further indicates, that the transforming

Russian network society is a very informative case study, that has a potential for a great deal of research, especially for purposes of improving the overall governance levels, as well analyzing the role and importance of the various civil societies in Russia.

A constant increase of online users in Russia is among the most active in the world concerning online networking and social media communication. This has to do a lot with the Russian Internet sector being heavily invested in by the private investors and the states alike, while Russian based internet enterprises are experiencing a high and steady level of growth (Barnett, 2011). As the public online sphere has developed in Russia, so has its influence on the political developments. In an interview with Marina Litvinovich, a very popular Russian online influencer and an online political activist, the networking society in Russia is a key determinant of the political environment there, as the traditional participation forms, such as joining a political party are now shifting towards an online form of participation, where popularity of the incumbents are determined by likes and shares, while communication and distribution of the information is now centered around individual blogging and online networking (Asmolov 2010). The development of political blogging as the most popular form of opposition politics has gained a lot of attention from the Russian government itself, who in the wake of the 2011 anti-government movements and the 2017 student protests, have been constantly establishing their own online presence on the social media platforms (Berkman Center, 2017). This has been especially noticeable in the sudden appearance of nearly every single prominent Russian politician on VK and Twitter, while the establishment of the electronic Government platforms such as "GosUslugi" now requires the majority of the citizen's procedures to take place online, thus collecting the public data more efficiently. While there have been arguments that such new online formats have a potential to increase government transparency and aid Russian civil societies, there is also an argument of such new measures being a responsive action to the growing oppositional online networking. The case study of Russia does not yet provide a compelling evidence of a systematic form of online censorship, but the prosecution of anti-government bloggers is a well known occurrence, especially in the latest events of the 2021 pro-Navalny anti-corruption movements throughout Russia.

The majority of the studies on the online social media blogging among the government opposition in Russia are generally focused on the 2011 winter protests, as they were the first mass scale opposition movements, that used social media networking for a greater mobilization. In the 2010 report from the Berkman Center, it was stated that Russia currently

posses an incredible active networkingcommunity of political bloggers on social media, and more interestingly, the political bloggers in Russia have a unique perception of reality of Russian politics, as the majority of them do not absorb the news and information from the traditional news sources in Russia, but rather they tend to resort to much more independent news sources that can be found and accessed online. According to Federman (2010), the new online network society in Russia can be largely compared to the global online networking trends, as it aids in determination of social issues, questions the transparency of the government decision making and pushes for more government and public responsibility. However, since the prosecution of opposition political bloggers has notably taken place throughout the majority of the anti-government movements in modern Russia, the Russian network society is growing in such a way, that online platforms become highly centralized, encouraging autonomous agenda with as less authority control as possible, and eventually led to a creation of online resources such as the "Livejournal". Yet even these measures by the online opposition communities attract more and more attention from the Russian government, thus facilitating more stricter censorship and control (Federman 2010).

Through the analyzation of various reports and empirical studies on the development of the Network Society in Russia, the research came up with some very interesting examples which should be able to illustrate how exactly certain prominent opposition individuals in Russia use online networking in order to facilitate more efficient way for conducting modern opposition political movements. In a lot of cases, which showcase the extremely high levels of corruption in Russia, political bloggers were able to use online resources, especially their influence on the social media channels to deliver some form of justice and get enough public attention for the events to be known. Anna Shavenkova for example, who was a close relative of a very influential politician in the Russian town of Irkutsk, was involved in a deadly car accident, in which she appeared to hit another automobile, killing the other driver in the process, and was about to get pardoned on parole, but due to the high number of social media posts and a lot of attention from the prominent Russian online bloggers, she was rightfully prosecuted. In Moscow, a similar incident involved the vice-president of Lukoil, and it was only due to the online networking of bloggers and their audiences, that he was able to get a legitimate punishment (Sidorenko 2010). The influence of the networking society for the anti-corruption purposes is also illustrated in the case of Alexey Dumovski, who with the help of his YouTube channel was able to successfully expose the corrupt deeds that the police officers would often

resort to during anti-government and opposition movement (Halpin 2009). Stas Sutyagin, also successfully sued YouTube in order to expose the police brutality in Russia, whose car was badly damaged and used for protection purposes by the police officers themselves, which caused a large number of bloggers to bring the story to the news spotlight and start an official investigation (BBC 2010). Plenty of other examples have been recorded prior to events of 2011 and 2017 protests, and only a few of similar were found in the wake of the 2021 pro-Navalny protests, although these few listed examples alone, already signify that the network society Russia is not simply in the development process, but has already established and embedded itself within the social media platforms, such as YouTube.

Another important observation of the network society particularities in Russia is the ability of the online communities there to set their own agendas and frame the news in a different way when compared to the traditional mainstream state sponsored TV channels. Both 2011 and the 2017 protests have been heavily underreported by the state television, and those reports that were able to get some air time, have been highly misleading in a way that it stated that the protests were well under the executive control and were only attended by a handful of people. The denying of the police brutality and the violent outbreaks between pro and anti-government activists were either not reported on at all, or framed in such a way, that portrayed the anti-government activists as aggressive and radical. Once the videos of the violence from the police side were posted online, and the official hospital admission had registered an increased number of people who were partaking in the protests, the government authorities were “forced” to make an official statement, although Tatyana Golikova, the minister of health still referred to the police brutality videos and injury reports are provocative and misleading (Ferris-Rotman 2011).

The prevalence of the online network society through social media over the government sponsored news can be also seen outside of the opposition politics, in an event that both pro and anti-government supporters could call absolutely tragic, the 2011 terrorist attack in the Domodevo airport. According to report from Lidia Okorokova (2011) in the Moscow News, the social media networks have been the major cause of citizens awareness of what happened, and it also had a big role in shaping the frames of the events as they were the first news sources that the majority of Russian resorted to. It was also further reported that according to the subsequent polls, a lot of Russians did not find out about the events through the state sponsored TV media, but through their online networks on VK and Twitter. One of the women

that was working in the Domodedovo airport at the time the terrorist attack happened, was among the very first people turned citizen journalist on that day and was reporting on the event for many hours through her Twitter account. In the analysis of this event by the Rokoto blogger, it was determined that Twitter has a potential to reach the news out to the general public at a similar time if not faster, than the President of Russia himself (Maxim, Rokoto 2011). A comparative study made by the Slon Information Portal, concluded that social media and online networks based on them, were the most dominant sources of information about the attack, even hours after the first reports were broadcasted on the TV news channels (Naumova 2011). While this particular case does not show how network society within the social media performed in regards to the anti-government protests, it does show the extent of communication power of the opposition, as social media platform are the one and only source that the government opposition in Russia use for communication and information distribution. It also points out the potential loss of credibility of the state sponsored television, thus further strengthening the oppositional network society and since the social media has been able to earn a reputation of the main news source, it can be concluded that the network society in Russia has a serious potential for shaping and framing news coverages.

In his conception of the network society and the modern communication technologies, Castells pays a lot of attention to the influence of the so called “blog waves”, or an ability of an individual to share and distribute his knowledge and opinion with a large audience despite large physical geographical distances. As has been argued before in this research, that Russia shows a lot of sign of having a very active and a highly developed network societies within the various social media platforms, and it is further indicated that opposition bloggers in Russia have a potential to self-communicate on a mass scale and gain/cause support for the networking institutions, which take part within the social media platforms. This can clearly be seen through the Russian search engine software Yandex, where users have a possibility to measure how certain blog topics perform in regards to the same topic but on the state TV channels or other blogs. According to the Berkman Center’s tool called “Media Cloud”, individual blogging in Russia, especially on the issue concerning the opposition politics, have a much more significant impact on the information framing than the traditional media, although state sponsored television is still considered to be more trustworthy and has more overall viewers. The network society and the subsequent development of the blogosphere is also highly dependable on the background of the individuals are running the blog. In case of Alexey Navalny, who is well

known for being the most outspoken opposition figure in modern Russia, he has been able to use his social media blogs and combine it with the network society in such a way that he made it into a very strong and useful tool for gaining more like minded opposition figures and societies, but more of how social media blogging is used to mobilize people and resource will be discussed in the next part of the Resource Mobilization testing. According to Asmolov (2010), blogs are especially useful for causing political pressure and they are also very interactive, and since people can interact with each through such network societies online, there is a possibility for them to translate the online communication into an offline participation of oppositional movements and protests.

One of the most important aspects of Castell's theory is the question of how exactly the societies are linked together through the modern communication instruments and in order to understand how it happens, it is imperative to divide these societies into social media active subgroups. While the opposition network society in Russia, as a whole appears to be very active, it is also important to determine what types of participants and online activists make up this network society. According to the observations by Sophia Dokuka (2014) and the analysis of the Russian Online Protest polls of 2012, the research was able to determine a number of separate groups which make up the opposition network society in Russia and also the functions, which each part of the network societies conduct on the social media platforms and other online communication instruments. The first group of online participants can be characterized as "online sceptics". These particular group can be accounted for every sixth activist of an anti-government movement, and they are among the least active online protest participants. They are primarily made up of older generation people, those have already retired from their jobs and live far away from the large cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, and instead come from rural areas, where farming and agriculture is the most dominant industry. Their anti-government activity online is generally not influenced by interacting with the network societies, but rather was their own decision, based on their own opinion and judgements. It is also very important to note that they are among the most loyal to the opposition cause and those who remain involved in the anti-government activities the longest are very often coming from the online sceptics group. Another important group within the Russian opposition network society, which according to Dokuka (2014) make up about one third of the most active online anti-government participants on social media are the active internet users. They especially have a very high role in the organizational aspects on the social

media platforms and also, play a very crucial role in the mobilization of the opposition elites and the necessary resources, which is more discussed in the next chapter of Resource Mobilization. Active internet users use social media platforms and the subsequent communication resources, such as the online blogs in order to inform themselves, as well as for the self-representation. This groups is mostly made up of younger generation of people, who predominantly live in Moscow, have a university level education and whose jobs are often located in the hospitality sector. Their role within networking society was based on conducting communication and distribution activities at a high rate, but during the offline physical protests participation, they would only be active for an average of a couple of hours. In comparison with the online sceptics for example, active internet users were not so motivated to establish a strong networking during the offline meetings, rather they formed a lot of weak tie networks on the social media platforms, especially on Twitter and VK. Moderately active internet users is another important group that has been singled out through the analyzation of the Russian Online Protest Polls (2012). According to Dokuka (2014), moderate users account for nearly half of all opposition activist online and are considered to be among the driving force of the social media activists. The main difference between the active and moderately active users lies in how often each of the groups generates their own social media content and their general activity within the network societies. In term of demographic characteristics, as well as the job affiliations, the moderately active online users are actually not much different from the active ones, although moderates rarely discuss their personal affiliations online, nor do they discuss their personal stances on politics, thus making only a little amount of online networking connections. An important characteristic of the moderate users however is the way they mobilize, as their political affiliations are not a result of their own beliefs and opinions, but are rather influenced by the more active online activists. Through a further comparison of all three major political movements in modern Russia, it was evident that similar groups of individuals within social media could be found in all of the analyzed movements.

Through the further observation and analyzation of the Russian Online Protest Polls, as well as the cluster and discourse analysis by Dokuka (2014), the research was able to establish further linkage particularities of individuals and groups within the Russian online network society, especially about their motivations for communication and networking. The cluster analysis determined that the largest portion of the online, as well as offline activist could be separated into the following groups: the content consumers, active distributors, content creators, strong

network facilitators and weak network facilitators. In all of those groups however, the main motivation for conducting and remaining within online networks, was the presence of likeminded friends and relatives on the social media platforms, and also the desire by all of the groups to get alternative forms of political information. A very interesting aspect of the network society concept in the minds of the said groups was actually their desire to get alternative forms of information, although it was more concerned with the content consumers groups. Among the more traditional and popular practices of the opposition activist on social media, it was also possible to determine less evident practices, which reflect the usage of social media for opposition purposes.

In order to further understand the particularities of activist actions within the social media in their direct actions, this research analyzed the structure of communication interactions through Online Networks (SCIOM 2013) report, which analyzed around 800 political comments within the Russian opposition network societies on Facebook, most of which were based on the events of Bolotnaya Square in 2012 and 2013. In the discourse and content analysis of the report, it was discovered that over half of the opposition activists were involved in the online network societies as a reason for self-realization and self-representation, and not for the reason of actual networking and communication as was initially expected. The research was also able to determine two very important factors, which had a very strong influence on the facilitation of the communication among the activists online, which were the Facebook group called “Everyone” and an anonymous individual who ran an account called “We were at Bolotnaya”. This appears to be very similar to the dichotomy of “us” and “them”, as the majority of the activists online also appeared to see those with the different political preferences as counter agents, even though their views and values might not have in fact been so much different from each other. The content of the SCIOM Facebook comments were analyzed, according to the procedures of the content analysis and it was evident that there were little to no political arguments, but instead comments were focused on the images of life and professionalism of the prominent political figures in Russia. Also, there was not a focus on one single issue for a prolonged period of time, rather discussions in the comment sections would often switch topics and discourses, which can potentially point out to the “clip” mentality of the online activists.

The results of the content analysis also allowed to formulate the methods under which the network societies on social media operate in Russia. On the first stage, the activists who were characterized as active or moderately active online participants use the social media often

enough to become the facilitators of the online opposition networking, set precedents for online participation and become the carriers of the clip mentality. Then, during the periods of political activity in the country, online users of all groups gain the information from different sources, including the information facilitated by the active and moderately active users, thus influencing the levels of motivation for protesting during the physical offline protests on the streets. Through the interaction of the online users while getting the political information, groups start to be formed, which are based on the principles of online networking and lead to further political discussions. As a result of the online interactions between different groups of social media users, a dichotomy of “us” and “them” takes place. An anti-government political activity on the social media continues to take place even after the offline physical protests have already stopped. These findings were also compared with a similar analysis in Dokuka (2014) and concludes very similar results.

10. Testing the Resource Mobilization Theory through the existing empirical research

According to McCarthy and Zald, the key concepts of the resource mobilization theory can be summed up in five points: (1) all protests are driven by rationality and costs; (2) the aims of the protests are dependent on the conflict of interests that has an influence on the power relations; (3) the mobilization of protests and movements mirrors the availability of the resources, proper organization and levels of collective action; (4) centralized type of organization is stronger than a decentralized one; (5) political situation (environment) has a very high influence on the success rate of protests and movements. In the case of Russia, resources and their availability played a very important role and had an impact on the level of engagement within conflicts, aided in various processes for an organizational structure to appear, allowed for a broader group inclusions of different societies, allowed for a supply and demand form to contribute to the movements size and also, resources played an important role of awarding individuals and groups, who were especially active during the movements.

Through a political process model by McAdams, it was previously determined that elites or influential actors, play a very important role in the success rate of social movements and

political protests. While it was not possible to determine, which specific elites supported which specific movement in particular, and the place where this elite supported movement took place, it was nonetheless determined that some form of elite support was present for the duration of the protests especially in the protests of 2011 and 2021. The political movements in the South of Russia, especially in the regions of Krasnodar and Kabardino-Balkaria, present some interesting studies, which were made possible by Avedissian (2017). The movements in Krasnodar were not able to draw as many activists as has been planned by the organizers, and they also were not able to mobilize much anti-government advocates and online activists, which has been attributed to the reluctance of the influential actors to spend their time and resources, although they were still considered to be the activists allies. While the resource aid was incredibly frail and small, some form of help was still given in the form of increased networks on social media, thus increasing the exposure and legitimization of the movement. In the case of the Kabardin region, it was determined that a single strong ally was not present, and the extremist label, which the local and federal authorities have been branding civil societies with, has impacted the elite involvement in such a way, that any individual or a group who would support the movement could potentially be labeled as extremist as well.

A potential reason for a weak elite involvement in the South of Russia has been described by Avedissian (2017), where through a large number of interviews, it was concluded, that a political movement would most likely struggle to find an elite support in general, especially if those elites are expected to be themselves involved or working directly with the state. Yet, the support for the movements was still found within influential communities outside of the Southern region. A prominent opposition party called social liberal Yabloko, which has a rather large following compared to other opposition organizations in Russia. Its support has been notable in a variety of organizational aspects, ranging from providing actual monetary resources, places to meet such as formal offices, communication technology, online access and even the leader of Yabloko himself, Sergey Mitrokhin has shown verbal support on his YouTube channel and Vkontakte platform, although he was mostly pushing for the reformation of environmental laws in Russia, rather than openly speaking against the Russian government. The first sign of Yabloko's increasing support of the political anti-government movements online can be dated back to 2010, a few months before the 2011 mass protests broke out. While Yabloko's members and like-minded people were quiet critical of the Russian authorities and the anti-protests methods that the authorities imposed on the activist, both offline and

online, their criticism was largely focused on the oil drilling issues in the Black Sea. Similar can be said about the elites from the Russian Communist Party and a number of NGOs who used the momentum of the political movements to establish a presence online and impose their agenda through social media posting, which saw a large number of “shares” among the activists, who in their strive to aid the political activists, also took the opportunity to remind the government that its environmental policies are poor and unfair.

The online involvement of the elites and mobilization of their resources, as an aid to political activists in Moscow has first been recorded in 2011, and was characterized by a very heavy participation from Navalny on social media platforms, from which he supported both individual activists and the groups, generally focusing on the anti-corruption agenda, rather than on environmental issues, as has been recorded previously in the involvement of the opposition elites in Russia. As of September 2013, his Twitter blog alone had nearly half a million followers, and he used this large platform to mobilize activist to remain motivated and remain active during the movements. An interesting aspect of Navalny’s use of online resources, is the establishment of a special crowd sourcing project called “Good Truth Machine”, which came in use in a form of an app, although it never took off, as Navalny and his supporters were expecting. The real intentions of “Good Truth Machine” have been disputed, but since it was done through a close cooperation of environmental activists, it can be potentially theorized that it was an attempt by Navalny to attract for environmental activist to participate in the anti-government movements of 2011. This has been seen in a case of the pro-environmental movements in Krasnodar, where activists would participate in the environmental movements there, while simultaneously conduct online social media campaigning for anti-government movements in Moscow and then later attending the rallies in person. Same can be sad about the anti-government activists in Moscow, who through the online campaigning have shown a lot of support for the other movements in Russia and later attended those movements themselves.

A lot of support on the international social media platforms was shown by Greenpeace, who have supported the environmental protests in Russia, and launched a petition to free the activists who have been detained by the police. Although their aims were no directed at the anti-government prisoners of 2011, the petition did included individuals that have been detained through ecological protests in Krasnodar and specific anti-government rallies in Moscow. Other allies included a number of regional actors, although only those who were

known to be a part of the Russian opposition, and they in fact had the most impact on the resource availability for the activist throughout all movements in Russia in 2011. While some would be more active in regards to movements which were directed in a specific and a narrow issue, such as the environmental movements in Krasnodar, the general opposition consensus that gained a large presence on the social media platforms became combined with those who were opposing Russian authorities on other issues as well, and that led to an increased capacity of activists to maintain and sponsor the movements. Thus, linking together the struggles, which were caused by the status quo government in Russia, activists from all agendas were able to increase each others resources, online presence on social media and the elite support.

North Caucasian regions of Russia had an incredibly difficult situation in regards of attracting influential actors to support the movements, whether those movements were political or environment driven. A lot of the difficulties of establishing elite presence in Kabardin region has been attributed to the harsh power politics in the area, with a lot of aspects generating from the “clientelism”, that imposes a structure where ruling circles have become highly exclusive and narrowed down their agenda in such a way, that only a handful of issues, which might not go in one foot with those of the Kremlin, can be openly discussed and acted upon. While power politics are seen throughout all federal states in Russia, in Moscow for example, activists were still able to extract some form of support from the government elites who were part of the opposition. In case of Kabardino-Balkaria, even that little support from the government opposition in the local ruling circles was nowhere to be seen. While a certain level of support for Kabardin activists came from Yabloko, it has been argued by Maratova (2012) that the support did not come from Yabloko’s alignment with the activist agenda, rather it came from “moral ground” that Yabolko decided to take, as the Balakra, an ethnic group that makes up the majority of the Kabardin region in Russia, had been highly oppressed by the Soviet regime and even sent into exile in 1944. Another possible explanation as to why elites, especially those who are directly involved in the Russian government, tend not to support political activists was given by Grigori Yavlinski, who emphasized that politics in the less populous regiona have to undergo a great deal of transformation in order to efficiently represent a large ethnical diversity in the region, while keeping in line with a very tight budget. Due to the overall area instability, specifically in terms of economics, those resources which were available for the ruling parties do not go towards supporting movements, which might or might not be the case in other nearby Russian regions. Since the resources in smaller regions were so scarce, both in terms of

people and in terms of money, there was no real social media presence of any of the elites who could provide necessary resources for the movement, not even using the online resources for supporting the movements through “likes” and “shares”. A complete absence of empirical data on the use of social media as a resource mobilization tool in the majority of smaller regions further proves that Kabardin region specifically, as well as other smaller areas in the Russian Caucasus, were not able to mobilize any resources, nor elite support. In one of the interviews from Avedissian (2012), who interviewed a number of activist and protest organizers from the Kabardino-Balkaria, it was quiet evident that the majority of the elites were not only reluctant to support political movement due to the lack of resources, but also due to the government authorities being highly against any interference with the civil societies, which the authorities do not approve of. The interviewed individual even went as far as telling Avedissian (2012) that the authorities use scare tactics in order to prevent businessmen and businesswomen from aiding anti-government activists and also use their influence in order to make harm to those businesses directly.

The role of the Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) has been notably evident in some Southern parts of Russia, due to an increased number of individuals who possess a constant access online and who own a smartphone. It is highly debatable whether social media, which is an integral part of the ICT, has been able to replace face-to-face communication among activists and the elites looking to aid those activists, but what can be determined for a fact, is that social media and other Internet Communication Technologies have increased the general communication with new social and political attributes, and allows for poor resources to be compensated with online resources, such as the public exposure. According to the studies conducted in 2017 by the Russian and East European Center of Birmingham, Yabloko played a key role in the online mobilization of the 2011 protestors, by networking with popular social media bloggers, and even invited those bloggers to further participate in the reports by submitting their textual contents and personal experiences. This is a very interesting outcome of how ICTs have been influencing the relations between political activists and the opposition government elites, as it can evidently lead to an increased level of face-to-face interaction. Such observation also aligns with the findings from Bennett (2008) who concluded that social media and internet based communication resources have a strong potential to allow protestors and activists to impose different agendas on a variety of issues, while simultaneously letting them build and elaborate on larger networks and large audiences. Another similar observation was

done in Genin (2013), where it was recorded that increased usage of social media in Sochi and the consequent transformation of political and environmental campaigns from being conducted by more orthodox means to newly established Facebook, Twitter and VK communities, which later resulted into increased attention by the local government pro-opposition elites, who then met with the organizers, thus increasing the resource mobilization and facilitation of online and physical resources. Considering that Sochi has never before been known for its especially active online community, it can be concluded that if not for the social media communication between activist and the pro-activist elites, this communication would not have been made otherwise.

An involvement of the elite actors on activist and pro-government side of the protests, and the consequent resource mobilization on both sides, can be clearly seen in the case of Moscow protests. It is still debatable whether the way the state дума election proceedings were the cause of the protests outbreaks, as according to the report from Gromov (2013), Putin's electoral support actually saw an increase between the winter and spring of 2012. The mobilization however was extremely large and also quite unexpected, and unlike in Northern Caucasus and South of Russia where mobilization took place through a slower pace and without a strong elite involvement, Moscow protests were heavily organized through online resources. The operational sphere of organization within the movement groups was a direct outcome of strict online regulation measures, which were increasing with an increasing activity of the protestors. As the Freedom House (2013) reports, the press and media freedom, both online and offline has increased to such an extent, that it became evident that the government saw the social media platform as the key tool, which could determine the success of anti-government activists. The heavy use of social media, despite the government regulations, became significant as an instrument of politicizing various civil societies, especially those which were based in Moscow and which focused on electoral fraud. According to a very insightful study by Oates (2013), it was determined, that during the protests of 2011 in Moscow, the online internet resources such as social media platforms, had a great impact on how solidarity, which was shown by thousands of people towards activists online, actually translated into an increased physical mobilization of those protests on the streets. Another important observation was made, that concluded that the majority of Russians have topped relying on the mainstream news media, which are fully controlled and approved by the Russian government authorities, and instead tend to resort to online communication tools. However, the state controlled media outlets are still generally regarded as the most trustworthy news sources in Russia. Konradova

(2013) also reports that the rather sudden appearance of online access in Russia and the subsequent establishment and usage of social media channels, had a great impact on the formation of the opposition views throughout the whole country. This is especially seen in the contrast of the information presentation by the state controlled media and online sources, as they also have a social media presence and are constantly operating there. She specifies that it is precisely through the social media individual blogging that opposition views in Russia were able to get themselves in the overall political discourse in the country.

A further sign of increased civil mobilization through social media has been emphasized by the prime minister Medvedev, who himself encouraged a more widespread use of social media blogging, indicating that online internet resources are not solely used by the political activists, rather they are becoming an information instrument that both sides can use, although the Russian authorities made opposition blogging rather challenging, due to a high level of monitoring and censorship (Paulsen, Zvereva, 2014). Resource mobilization through social media had thus been officially acknowledged by the government authorities themselves, and this led to an increased number of pro-government bloggers, who understandably, had much more elite government support behind them. However, as Alexanyan et al (2015) states, the largest portion of the online resources were still used by the opposition, despite them having less physical resources. This also points to an important fact about the social media use for political purposes, that even when money is scarce, elite support is poor, political environment is hostile, it is still possible to establish a strong presence online, and this presence has a potential to mobilize previously unavailable resource, gain elite support and mobilize masses to attend anti-government rallies on the streets.

As described in the section of the Resource Mobilization Theory, the political environment in Russia was among the key aspects of the resource mobilization success of the activists. During the initial outbreaks of protests in 2011 and also the latest ones in 2021, the main facilitators of the political environment in the country were the mainstream media channels, who also had a large and active social media following, especially on the domestic platform VK. According to report from Murphy (2017), there was number of posts and coverages on the anti-government protest activities throughout Russia was anywhere between 26,000 and 65,000, and as expected, they did not report on the reasons why the protests are taking place nor did they post anything related to the ideas and concepts of the opposition movement. In a specifically selected number of interviews chosen by the Pervyi Kanal (First Chanel), the most viewed

Russian mainstream outlet and the top followed pro-government social media channel, the portrayal of the activist was incredibly mocking and created an atmosphere of protests being made up of loud extremist minorities. Another facilitator of the political environment from the side of the state sponsored media is the NTV news channel, which like the First Channel, has a large audience on its social media platforms. As Murphy (2017) argues, NTV had a very specific role in the success of the resource mobilization for the activists in some parts of Russia. It not only portrayed activists in a silly and negative way, but after the protesters gained the momentum by the beginning of February, NTV started framing the activists into a legitimate movement with a legitimate goal, thus increasing the attention of the social media community to the anti-government protestors. The increased amount of protest coverage showed that the political environment started shifting, heavily favoring the anti-government activists. Besides the state controlled channels, a small number of the existing opposition outlets, in all three of the major movements in Russia, were constantly involved in the facilitation of the political environment in favor of the activists and have done so mostly through various social media channels, since the access to the state controlled television was factually non-existent for them. In a report by Greene (2015), who conducted a study on the role of Twitter during the movement of 2011, it became evident that resource mobilization for the protestors was increased through the social media platforms, due to the large presence of various opposition media outlets being highly active through various forms of social media engagement. Moscow Echo, which is among the most prominent of the opposition communication outlets, organized a live stream of the protests on their Twitter channel during the 2017 and 2021 anti-government and anti-corruption movements. A cut out pieces of motivational activist speeches, police attacks and important rally events were also posted online by Moscow Echo, and became a dominant form of online protest reporting, as more people were interested in watching the alternative covering of the movements rather than listening to the state news channels.

In a study conducted by Christina Cottiero (2015), where the author analyzed the online mobilization strategies conducted through the pro-government internet communication resources, with a lot of focus on the “Vesti Nedeli” channel, which is headed by the top pro-United Russia party news moderator Dmitri Kiselyov. The online narrative of various social media posts, and information videos posted by the Vesti on their social media platforms, has constantly included words such as “fascist” and “banderovtsi”, a nickname for the supporters of

the prominent Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera. When compared with the various forms of content posted on the social media channels by Alexey Navalny, it was discovered that the search inquiries for Navalny's content were much more higher, than for those of Kiselyov, potentially indicating that pro-government bloggers, which included the very elite of the Kremlin's media executives, have not been able to embed themselves into the social media platforms the way the anti-government opposition has. This also points out the fact that resource mobilization through the social media, in terms of attracting supporters, despite the negative political environment in the country and despite the lack of the pro-opposition elite support, was working quite well for the opposition and achieved a level of mobilization, which could not have been achieved otherwise if social media platforms were not present (Cottiero et al 2015).

Social media as an instrument for an increased resource mobilization is especially evident when compared to the overall loss of influence of the state sponsored news channels, as the opposition content and anti-government narrative gained a dominant position over symbolic and ideological aspects within the internet communication instruments. The ever growing portion of the Russian population that are becoming active users of the online resources, tend to join the ranks of the opposition, although they are not outstandingly active when it comes to sharing and reposting anti-government content. While the reason as to why 30 to 40 percent of the social media users identify themselves as apolitical (Belousov 2012) is not yet completely understood, it should be noted, that since opposition views have been dominating the social media landscape, and younger generation tend to watch much less state sponsored television than their parents, it might provide another reason for an increased resource mobilization through social media. In a Twitter study conducted by Greene (2017), who analyzed the anti-government online activity during the 2011 and 2017 student movements, he compared those movements with those in Egypt, where the mobilization of resources and masses for anti-government purposes was so evident and the government decided to shut the entire internet in the country completely, and he also compared the cases of Russia to London, where there was a notable spike of the anti-government content on Twitter, although there, it did not correlate significantly with the increased mobilization on the streets. In a similar analysis conducted by Sofia Dokuka (2016), it was concluded that a very special aspect of the success of social media usage for protest mobilization in Russia, was due to a very high level of homophily or a high rate of interaction between people of the same origins, interests, behavior and etc.

In order to have a more objective analysis of how communication on social media facilitates the mobilization resources for protests, the research also looked at the Net Delusion Study conducted by Evgeny Morozov (2012), who analyzed the outbreaks of 2011 protests and compared them with the outbreaks of political movements during the Arab Spring. According to his findings, there is a serious issue of the online social media platforms when it comes to estimating the true potential or a level of mobilization, including resource mobilization and the mobilization of the elite support. As he elaborates, the modern politics are on a verge of inclining towards an online global format, thus making physical protests on the streets to be less likely be a part of the opposition movements in the future. The usage of online platforms can also imply a false sense of high levels of mobilization, as the online communities can be extremely active, but it may not translate in the offline protests attendance when it comes to an actual protest on the street, thus having only a little difference on the overall political environment and status-quo. Further indications of Russian opposition politics transforming from traditional into digital form of participation is further indicated in the works of Sanina (2015), as well as Makarychev (2016), who point out that the online space is becoming a common platform where opposition and government politics are conducted, largely due to high degree of possible anonymity. Makarychev (2016) further argues that the Russian online politics have a potential for mobilization in way that the online content, which is most commonly spread around through the social media platforms, are appearing in many forms, including satires, cartoons and photoshopped pictures and montaged videos, which have a sole purpose of causing disdain for the government and the government authorities. A quick and efficient communication and distribution of such forms of content has an incredible potential for large scale resource mobilization in a very short period of time.

The potential for a significantly increased levels of activist mobilization is further analyzed in a study on influence of social networks on anti-government protests by Barash (2015), who argues that social media platforms are not only crucial in mobilizing various resources, individuals and elite support, but it is also the single most effective and efficient instrument of the horizontal communication in modern society. While the 2021 protests are relatively new and have not yet been as well analyzed, as the 2011 winter movements and 2017 anti-corruption student protests, the contexts of the latter two protests point out to a very specific form of horizontal communication, which is only found within the communication processes on the social media platforms, and according to Barash (2015), this new form of horizontal

communication has a negative impact on the overall efficiency resource mobilization of the protests, but also can harm the processes of elite mobilization. Similar findings were concluded in the analysis of Suvorov (2012), who observed a near complete lack of hierarchical structure in the anti-government protests. According to him, the only organization components during such movements are generally self-proclaimed online leaders and very large masses of people, but in between them, there is a huge organizational gap. Through another observation by Van'ke (2013), during the famous Bolotnaya protests in the winter of 2012, it was also clear that the structure of the movements was not that of traditional movements, where leaders are in a constant spotlight and the hierarchy determines the organizational structure. Instead, the leaders and organizers of the movements in Russia would put a lot of effort into remaining anonymous, thus positioning the anti-government protests into leaderless movements, with only the elite actors such as Navalny, being often referred to as the head of the protest.

Resource mobilization through social media within a leaderless movement is a rather new phenomenon, and as the modern anti-government movements in Russia have shown, socio-demographics of the activists played a very important in the success rate of gaining physical resources and the elite support. Since a legitimate single or multiple leaders were absent (not counting Navalny who has never declared himself as a protest leader), the unity of the activists and the small number of elites was able to come about through a mobilization by the same agenda or idea, rather than being mobilized through various political strategies and goals. It is however debatable as to what extent social media was able to transfer that "common idea" to the activists, but since the speed and the efficiency of communication is enhanced greatly through the social networks, it is possible to conclude that such a form of resource mobilization would have been difficult to achieve otherwise.

The Levada Analytical Center provides further interesting details about which results the resource mobilization strategies for anti-government movements in Russia were achieved. While the statistics do not specify how exactly and through which platforms the masses of people were mobilized, the already mentioned studies, which prove that the mobilization through social media channels was the main factor in facilitating the never seen before numbers of individuals and different social groups attending the anti-government and anti-corruption rallies, it is safe to say that the Levada polls are representative of the population which attended the physical protests through the social media networking. In a sample of 790 individuals, which roughly represent a little under 0,8 percent of the overall number of activists

in the 2011 protests, it was revealed that 38 percent of the poll were highly active on social media and discussed politics regularly, as well as liked and distributed politically related contents within the social media platform. Around 33 percent however, claimed to be politically indifferent and were not engaged in political content on the social media channels. Considering that unauthorized protests activity is highly punishable and the surveillance of such activities is also on a high level, it may be safe to assume that the number of activists who mobilize and mobilize others through social media sites is potentially higher than reported in the Levada polls. The levels of the resource mobilization online, can be further seen in other polls conducted by Levada, as it reports a huge increase in the internet users (not specifically social media networks), with a near 80 percent increase of online users in Moscow alone. Throughout the country, the overall increase of internet users went from 35 percent in 2010 and to over 75 percent in 2015, and the number of internet users has been increasing ever since, although at a decreasing rate. Out of all the internet users in Russia, Levada reports that around 35 percent are active social media users, with people conducting various activities there. Out of this 35 percent, about 17 percent have reported as being active in creating and distributing political content. The period of time before the outbreaks of the 2017 student protests, have shown that the estimated number of individuals who use online source as their main source of information was around 16 percent and 6 percent were using social media networking as the source of news and information. In another poll by the Russian Public Opinion Center, it was reported that the level of trust, and thus mobilization potential on social networking sites was not great, at only 8 percent of the individuals stating that they completely trust the political information that is posted online through the social media. In yet another separate poll conducted by Levada in 2014, out of all internet users, a little over 70 percent had a social media account, of whom, 13 percent were not active and 15 percent decided to abandon social media sites all together. Alarming, only 2 percent of the questioned individuals claimed to have taken a part in a physical collective action, and only a little over 10 percent claimed to have been constantly interacting with like minded, politically active individuals. While this numbers are not great and are not representative of the overall online activist population, they can still indicate a slow, but a steady growth of the social media users in Russia and as well as of people who are politically there.

11. Thematic Content Analysis of the Interviews

The following chapter will also look to expand the analyzation of the Network Society Theory and the Resource Mobilization Theory and its applicability to the case of social media platforms usage during the anti-government movements in Russia. The questions of the three interviews were based in accordance to the main area of interest in this thesis and will attempt to open up more insights about how the protests were organized through the electronically processed social and informational networks; how such networks were used to link groups, individuals and organizations; the possible influences that contributed to the success/failure of mobilization through the social media platforms and the general use of social media platforms for communication.

In the first interview was conducted with an individual who is twenty six years old and is an engineer student. The given answers can be considered as rather insightful, as the individual has personally partaken a role in the protests and showcased a good level of social media literacy in regards to the protests in Russia. The second interview was definitely the most insightful one, as the individual had an minor organizational role in the pro-Navalny protests, she has also graduated with a Master degree in history at the Moscow State University, and has lived a very active political life through the participation in the most major movements in Russia from 2008 and 2021. The third and the final interview that this research was able to accomplish, was conducted with an individual who has not shown much interests in the politics, which can be attributed to his general lack of interest to the field, but also to his rather young age. He has still participated in 2021 protests in Moscow.

11.1. Testing the Network Society Theory

As the Network Society theory suggests, the modern communication is extremely important to society, especially when it comes to the anti-government opposition movements. All three of the interviewers claimed to be rather active on social media, and pointed out Telegramm as their primary communication platform. Each of them also possessed a good knowledge of the YouTube content and used Instagram for the entertainment purposes. Interestingly enough, the use of VK, which for many years has been the staple of the Russian social media network,

was only used by the interviewers on occasions, and all three of them claimed that this is due to the fact that VK is under the government authority control and is heavily monitored by the Russian government.

"..it doesn't make sense to assemble (build opposition groups) on VK anymore, it is all being monitored, so now there is just Whatsapp and Telegram left." (Interview 1, 146)

"...initially, the majority of the protests were organized on VK, but after Durov (the creator of VK) was dismissed, it became senseless, as we give the government all of our personal information and organizational information about the movements on a silver dish" (Interview 2, 52)

"...because of this (government surveillance), I am trying not to "like" anything politics related, as you never know what can happen. They (government) are monitoring VK and Telegram, and if you get caught, it will be hard to find a job afterwards, you might even get expelled from the school or university" (Interview 3, 93)

These answers also point out, to which social media platforms in general are gaining momentum in Russia and which are becoming much less important as they once were, and the most educated out of the interviewers, who also possess the most oppositional activity experience gave a very clear rank of which social media is the least important and which one is the most popular.

"..for some time the protest organizers used Viber, but then it also started to get monitored. Then there was only Twitter and Facebook, and then came Telegram, and these three platforms became the most popular oppositional organization bases, through which protests are coordinated and people get mobilized. I would call Facebook and Telegram as the most important social media platforms as of today" (Interview 2, 56).

As the key communication instrument for the organizational aspects, it was very clear that Telegram was also the primary platform, where individuals and groups would gather and assemble themselves, with a very insightful answer coming from the second interviewer, who in her long and active time period of being an oppositional activists, has also experienced a role of an organizer on the Telegram.

"In the chat (on Telegram), we would post latest news, collect interviews from activists, collected photo and video material, coordinated people at the start of the movements.." (interview 2, 35)

"...we would conduct the secondary role of informants, we helped as much as we could, someone would ask us for money for a bailout, or if someone felt ill while on the street, we would tell them where they could get help" (interview 2, 38).

This response, especially points out to the very core of Castell's dynamics in the Network Society, and shows that social media indeed played a very important role during the political movements, especially it points out to the link between social networks and the protestors. Another form of a link between the political activists was described pretty well by all three interviewers, when asked a direct questions about how plan and organize collective events. Once again, there was a clear tendency for a Telegram usage, as it was not only used for political purposes, but for everyday communication as well.

"if it is an event with friends, for example, to organize a birthday, then we usually create a chat on Telegram. If it is a large event such a protests, where there is a lot of people, we also make a collective chat on Telegram, before it was VK, but now we do it on Telegram" (Interview1, 18).

According to Castells, network society is also highly dependent on the physical electrical instruments, such as various modern smartphones and other devices. When asked about what types of electronics were used in order to access the online networks, it was very evident that smartphones were indeed the single most important electronic instrument used by the protestors, as it is simply much more practical and convenient to use. During the physical movements, on the streets, it is possible to see how important the modern communication electronics for coordination and navigation of the protests in real time, as it was illustrated by an actual example from the first interviewer:

"...it was mostly through phones...as in the movements you are on a go, and the directions of where and when to move could change fast. For example, there was an assigned meeting point, but once we got there it was already taken over by the OMON (special police forces), so we had to look for another place" (Interview 2, 61)

In order to have a better understanding of how links between the online social networks and the people are created, it was also very important to find what type of oppositional content the protests and the organizers used. As expected, the majority of the content was in fact in a

written form, but it did not actually indicate that this form of content was the one that motivated people to connect and protests on the street, instead, the video content from the opposition side seemed to be of the large importance, as through the various videos in forms of documentaries, live recordings, or police brutality outbursts, it was evident, that such form of content played an extremely crucial role and it has also been illustrated by the first interviewer, as well as by the history graduate from the Moscow State University, who provided a very informative and sophisticated answer:

“A lot of people made videos like that of Navalny...there were many videos from different protests where the police beat up the activists, and it had a lot of influence on them. Do you remember this video where a policeman kicks a woman in the stomach? After that even a lot of celebrities started reposting this video...” (Interview 1, 85).

“...the largest portion of the opposition content was in a form of videos, because videos can be re-watched, re-sent, they are informative, interactive, such as the ones from Navalny on YouTube, which I personally consider to be among the most important and successful of the mobilization instruments..” (Interview 2, 99)

Even the third interviewer who was clearly not competent enough about the oppositional social media content in Russia, pointed out the video material as the most memorable form of content:

“...sometimes I stumble upon videos, but I do not look for them on purpose..” (Interview 3, 50)

While thousands of people are known to have attended the protests, the consequences of partaking in an anti-government event, especially if it is considered to be an illegal and unsanctioned protests considered by the government, which is often the case, were extremely dangerous, although this would be described in a separate chapter about the government actions against the protestors. While dangers included imprisonment, hefty fines and even a loss of job, many individuals still took to the streets to protests against the government. This willingness to participate despite the dangers can be considered to be by-product of the Network Society influence and in order to better understand how and why people were influenced to protests despite the possible consequences, the research asked the interviewers a direct question about it. The responses clearly indicated that Network Society influence through social media could play a role, but for the most part, it was the corruption, low living standards, political persecution and other very common for an anti-government protests

factors, that drove activists to take a collective action against the authorities. It was also indicated that people would take the risk of getting punished for anti-government activist according to their demographics, age and social groups, and the second interview also pointed out that young people, although extremely motivated, still assessed the risks before going to protests and tried to be extra cautious.

"I think people are tired of how the government is treating them, small salaries, high taxes, horrible living conditions, product quality, the fact that all money goes to either Moscow and St. Petersburg...our grandmas are eating the last piece of bread, while Medvedev is building his giant villas...more people are finally exposed to it because it gets visibly shown on social media. When Navalny made his documentary about Medvedev people were not even surprised..."
(Interview 1, 103).

"The youngsters attended the protests, perhaps because they knew that they had strength in numbers, and that it is not possible to arrest a whole mass of people at once...They don't lack fear, they thought rationally, and they tried to be very careful" (Interview 2, 135)

The research also tried to establish whether the strength of the Network Society within the online social Networks was able to spill over or get translated into a higher participation of physical, on the street activism. Judging from the results of content analysis of the existing empirical data, it became evident that increased activism on the online platforms also translated into increased activism on the streets. While all three interviewers did point out to the social media platforms and the subsequent networking within them, it is still debatable whether the increased of activism was the result of social media communication or the trivial desire to change the overall situation in the country.

"...the togetherness of the activists online, did spill over to the togetherness of the activists on the streets." "The number one factor of the unified movements I would call the common problems, in the common hope of a better future, but you have to fight for it" (Interview 2, 161, 168)

The process of protests organization through the social media from the perspective of the Network Society, as according to the interview, is also very much similar what has been discovered in the existing literature. A comparison of the interview results with the empirical data from other authors is the key step of the TCA, as has been described previously, and it proves that indeed the movements would most likely not have been the same or reach as much

media attention, including the international media. As Castells predicted, electronic forms of communication prevailed over the older forms for the sheer reason of practicality, and the fact that modern communication can be done faster, efficient and does not require sufficient experience to operate. It was also interesting to see that the video oppositional content on the online platforms played a similar or maybe even a bigger role to the written content in terms of motivating people to translate their anti-government activity from the online networks to the physical protests on the streets. As for the actual communication between the activists on the social media and determining which network specifically was used for coordination and communication of the anti-government activities, the existing literature proved to be slightly outdated to the TCA results that were obtained from the interviews. While the literature constantly referred to the Russian made VK as the primary communication source, all three interviews stated that due to the fact that VK is currently under a heavy government control and is being constantly monitored for the anti-government content, many of the activists have already switched to Telegram as their primary communication tool, which they not only use to organize and coordinate protests activities, but also use it to communicate and interact with friends and family.

An important part of analyzing the particularities of the online Network Society also lies in how one can separate that society into smaller parts, in this case groups and subgroups, which then can be looked closer and lead to some interesting observations. In the previous part of the Network Society, the research determined that the groups of individuals within online Network Society of the Russian anti-government community can be divided into groups on accordance to their online activity. These were the “online sceptics”, which mostly included older people with a fixed and uninfluenced opinion about politics; the “active internet users” who made up the integral part of the opposition and the “moderate internet users” who differed from the active ones in their overall online activity, but also based on the amount of content they produced on the social media. The subgroups included “content consumers”, “active distributors”, “content creators”, “strong network facilitators” and “weak network facilitators” (Dukuka 2014).

The researcher attempted to further elaborate on how the Network Society in Russia can be further divided and the interviewers were asked to divide the anti-government community in Russia into different groups and sub-groups, without specifying the factors and dimensions upon which the division between groups and sub-groups should be done, in order to see how

those who partook in the protests saw the network society through their own eyes. The first individual divided the activists based on their age, stating that the students of high-schools and universities were the most active ones, specifying that during the 2017 protests, he did not see many people aged between 40 and 50 years old. In the 2021 movements however, all possible age groups were present.

“In that time in 2021, there was everyone, even the elderly came, but the largest part was between 18 and 30 years old.” (Interview 1, 193)

Interestingly enough, the individual who claimed to be the least active during the movements, and only briefly took part in throwing a hand-made mini fire torch at the police and claimed to be politically uninterested, divided the activist based on their level of participation, just like Dokuka (2014) did.

“Probably on very active, middle active and not active at all like myself, a never partook in such events before...” (Interview 3, 105)

The most sophisticated and informative answer, as expected, came from the individual who has graduated with a history degree and has previously been very active in the anti-government activities even before the massive movements on 2011. When asked about how she could divide the activists, she pointed out they could be divided into groups based on the age, but stated that the most important division would be in accordance to how and through which resources the activists inform themselves about the political situation and general news.

“I would personally divide them (activists) into groups by which and how they informed themselves and took the information from. Social media is an ocean, a big ocean of non-stop information, where each piece of information carries a certain agenda, if of course we are talking about the information which gets presented by the government or the opposition. There are groups of people who are very active in following what is happening, they follow a lot of opposition outlets, and also government sources, but this does not get translated into political activism. Politically active is someone who follows one point of view and would fight for it, this is how I would describe those who were the most active online and on the street...There are also kinds of people who are not active on social media, but nonetheless go one to protest, and they are sure about their intentions, aims and opinions and they do not easily get influenced by the online content from the opposition and from the government” (Interview 2, 170)

11.2. Testing the Resource Mobilization Theory

Explaining the formation, organization and communication of the anti-government protests in Russia through the perspective of the Resource Mobilization Theory was especially interesting, since there is not much of the existing empirical literature that can point out to the involvement of the elites during the latest pro-Navalny protests, nor has it provided sufficient information about how and why the elites in Russia would get involved at all, considering the harsh measures of the Russian government for anyone who engages in the protests activities, especially if that person has a large following behind them. Political environment and its influence on the level of mobilization might sound self-explanatory at first, but the interviews actually revealed a few very interesting details, which were not found in the existing literature. Finally, the research tried to establish what the best form of mobilization through the online networks was, and all three interviewers, including the eighteen year old anti-government enthusiast, provided very sophisticated and informative answers.

As one of the key elements of the Resource Mobilization Theory, the elites, has not been much discussed in the empirical literature, this research tried to establish whether the interviewers were aware of which elites have supported the anti-government protests in Russia, and which effort they made in order to influence that level of support. Through the discussion, it was evident that Navalny is definitely the most popular and the most prominent among the elite opposition figures in Russia. It was also possible to pinpoint that Xenia Sobchak, the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, who was a mayor of St. Petersburg between 1991 and 1996 and a very close colleague of Vladimir Putin, is among the top opposition figures in Russia as well, although the level of her influence on the mobilization of the anti-government activists through social media in Russia is questionable. When asked about who among the most prominent of the Russia elites has been mobilizing activists to protests, all three interviewers gave quite similar answers.

"..of course Navalny himself, it is already clear, Sobchak is also slowly becoming a large voice among the opposition" (Interview 1, 201)

"Navalny and Sobchak are probably the most popular figures among the young people..." (Interview 2, 272)

"I know Navalny and Sobchak...but not many others were calling for it (the protests).."(Interview 3, 112)

When compared to the existing literature and the empirical research, the results are similar, although none of the interviewers have named the Yabloko political party, as an important organization among the opposition, but the second respondent was able to name a few other actors who were generally connected to the Russian Communist party and were politically independent, such as the famous Russian opposition figure Boris Nemtsov, who was shot near the Kremlin in 2015. While some respondents and the existing reports also point to a very small number of celebrities figures in Russia, such as a rather prominent Russian rapper Oxxymiron and a musician Face, their level of mobilization through the online platforms can be considered as irrelevant, as they have only made a physical appearance during the pro-Navalny protests in 2021 and have not been active on the anti-governments issue on their social media channels.

It was also evident from both the existing literature and the interviews that the key social media platforms and the subsequent mobilization through them was done by Navalny and his YouTube videos, although the small anti-government bloggers have also contributed to the mobilization levels, although they do not count as the “elite” actors. As a method of attracting the activists to come out to the streets and to protests, the research was not able whether one specific resource, such as money was used, as there is not indication of activists getting money for protests nor through the interviews and nor through the existing research. The main motivation for the activists was thus not a material form of resource, but rather a hope for a better future and perhaps their realization that political activism might be the way to move forward and make a change.

“Nobody was offered money, they (activists) fought for an idea, for freedom, for justice, I would say that they attracted activists with the fact that the situation on the country is very sad and it has to be urgently changed” (Interview 1, 210)

In an attempt to make a more clear evidence of how the Resource Mobilization concept, especially the mobilization and the role of elites, could be relatable to the Russian anti-government protests, it was also evident that the elites in fact did not play such an important role in mobilization, as regular people have, which can be attributed to the fact that the number of prominent opposition figures in Russia who would have the ability to mobilize large masses of people to protests, other than Navalny, is simply too small. All of the interviewers have mentioned directly and indirectly that the elite figures in Russia would be more likely in support of the government rather than against it, thus diminishing the overall level of the resource mobilization by the elites.

The political situation in the country is especially important in the theory of Resource Mobilization, and it was very much visible in both the existing literature and the interviews, that the political situation in country played a huge role in mobilizing activists for anti-government activities. This can be seen in the political situation, which spilled over to the social media space, causing high levels of censorship on the networking channels, which were able to get under control of the government, such as VK and the others to some extent. This spill-over caused massive anti-government mobilization on the social media, making Telegram and YouTube the main instruments of the online mobilization. While there is no direct evidence yet, that the online activism was able to successfully be translated into the offline activism on the streets, the interviews point out the fact that mobilizer of the protestors offline were not the elites, but the motivation for a better future, meaning an improvement of the overall political situation. When asked about how the political situation or the political environment effected the levels of mobilization of the activists, the interviewers were all very much in agreement that it was indeed a very important factor, although it was not clear whether the political situation had a positive impact on the mobilization of elite actors, which would support the activists.

“Obviously it (political environment) had an impact...Political situation maybe played a role in pushing the elites to support the opposition, but not a lot. And I think the opposition elites, will not increase as long as the we have the current government” (Interview 1, 241)

“Political situation had an incredible impact, if the situation was any different, there perhaps would not have been any activism at all. The situation and the environment had a very strong impact on the behavior of the participants and on the opposition movement in general (Interview 2, 336).

“It was because of the political and the economic situation that the protests started to happen , and Navalny was probably arrested because of politics as well...” (Interview 3, 137).

Finally, in order to attempt to determine the single most important resource that would be responsible for the high levels of mobilization, the interviewers were asked a final question of pointing out whether the mobilization through the elites and the political environment, money and the material resources or the electronic forms of communications were the key instruments in the massive movements in Russia. As expected, the participants were very much aware of the importance of social media during the protest, as well as the involvement of the elites and the particularities of the political environment, and since the material resources was

not a mobilizing factor, considering that nor the interviews nor the existing literature provide any evidence for it, the number of mobilizing instruments were minimized to the electronic communication, elite support and the political situation/environment. The responses indicated that the social media platforms played the most important role in accordance to the concepts of the Resource Mobilization Theory, as it was the primary “resource” that turned out to be so crucial due to the near absence of material resources, and a very low level of support from the Russian elite actors. Although Navalny and his team played a very large part in the 2017 and the 2021 protests, but even then, this mobilization was exercised through the strategic use of the social media platform and its ability to transfer the information on a massive scale and in a very short period of time. The responses of all three individuals thus correlate with the results from the existing literature to a very large extent.

“I would say that the main resource was exactly the social media networks, through them you could transfer money, have the support of the elite, the whole communication was there..”; “many would have known about the arrest (of Navalny) so quick (if not for social media), because of the TV it was not reported for a long time, and without YouTube for example, Navalny and Sobchak would not have so many followers” (Interview 1, 254)

“I think it was the electronic communications, everyone has a phone now, they go to Telegram where all opposition organizational chats are, and I don’t think money played a big role, because the money is in the hands of the government.., so I think the main resource was the communication through Telegram and maybe other networks.” (Interview 3, 145)

“To be honest, money did not play a big role in 2001, 2017 and 2021 protests, because the money had to be spend on sponsoring the opposition, but who would you sponsor when everything gets organized and coordinated through social media...and yes, the main resource of the opposition were the instruments of mass and fast communication, meaning the social media networks. Without them it would have been impossible to coordinate the movements...(Interview 2, 355).

In order to have a picture of what role social media played in the government vs the opposition clashes in Russia, the research also attempted to establish how and why the government used social media in order to undermine the mobilization of the anti-government movements online and offline. Social media and its ability to suppress the protestors or motivate them for further protests, as discussed in the previous parts of the thesis, has been well known for the Russian

authorities, which has been very much evident in its efforts to ban and censor large platforms, such as Twitter and Telegram, and in the case of the VK, the government saw the immediate threat in the power of mass and quick communication instrument at the hand of the opposition, that they took over the platform completely within a year. The interviews were not as fruitful as was desired in discovering how exactly the government used social media platform for their own benefit, which mostly has to do with high levels of secrecy of how government would conduct their own strategies on the social networks. Nevertheless, it was possible to obtain a general picture of the government use of social media against the anti-government activists through the existing empirical research and through comparing it with the results of the interviews.

It was evident that the government knew about the anti-government activities on social media, begging with the widespread use of VK (Vkontakte), which led to high levels of persecution of the opposition bloggers and arrests of those who were especially active. According to the interview responses, the government measures to suppress the efforts of the opposition were highly dependable on their access to the technicalities and programming of the specific social media networks. If such access was present, the authorities would simply ban individual accounts, groups or online communities. It has also been indicated, that the authorities used a more direct online approach and would employ the use various bots and trolls who would be create an image of a large government presence online and would give an impression that the pro-government content online is incredibly popular, having a lot of positive interactions in the comment sections, as well as having many likes and reposts. Other forms of direct online measures also included threats, which would be send to the opposition users via direct and private messages.

"...if they (government) had access, they would ban, they threatened, made phone calls, talked with relatives and neighbors, they threatened them as well, all methods were good to them" (interview 1, 175).

"There were bots, there were trolls, there were bans, there were restrictive activism measures, there were direct threats in the social media and through phone calls...protestors were forced to delete the content, delete chats.."(Interview 2, 225).

The online efforts of the Russian authorities to diminish the political activists have been often talked about in the media, the empirical research on the topic is still lacking greatly thus making

the comparison TCA step of the interview results with the literature a bit complicated, yet some results were still feasible. According to Remmer (2015) for example, Russia has long been using the online space and the social networks within them, as the means of development of the national power, as well as the status-quo security. His presented data clearly shows, that the Russian authority finger-prints are very much evident in basically all forms of mass communication and mass information instruments, both digital and printed, online and offline. Once the importance of the online based resources was analyzed and the access was gained, Russian authorities quickly infiltrated and in a sense, ratcheted the platforms which were initially designed for a free user experience, and all in the name of the national security.

In order to have a more clear understanding of how this take-over take place, it is possible to pint out to Vladimir Remmer's (2015) research, where he presented three important dimensions, which the Russian authorities use in order to counter the opposition movements within the online space. First dimension according to Remmer, is the e-governance establishment, which was aimed at a more widespread use of the pro-government online resources in Russia, but also aimed at a direct form of communication between the Russian subjects and the government officials. The second dimension, is to make the online network based Russian online resource as competitive as possible to their western counterparts, by attempting to engage as many individuals groups as possible in the development of a conservative form of content, such as the recently established Olgino Project, where a lot of resource were spend to attract and mobilize citizens to positively participate in the development of the pro-government content and the anti-opposition narrative. The third and the last dimension, is the one was fully evident through the interviews and it is the widespread online censorship. According to the Association of Online Users, there has been over 10,000 cases of restrictive measures and legislatures, aimed at pressuring online users and all that in addition to over a thousand banned websites. Remmer (2015) argues that the success of the Russian counter opposition movement by the authorities has largely been successful, and it is also supported by the results of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center.

12. Conclusion and discussion of the results

With the results of the content analysis of various empirical sources and its comparison with the results of the Thematic Content Analysis of the interviews through the analyzation of the how social media and networks for anti-government purposes and vice-versa in modern Russia in the perspective of the Network Society Theory and the Resource Mobilization Theory, the research was able to find evidence for some very interesting particularities of how people in Russia use online resources, and how this usage has been influenced by the development of politics and other significant conclusions.

The first hypothesis can be considered as proven true, as it was pretty evident that an increase in modern communication instruments and the development of communication technology, judging from the existing empirical research and the interviews, have played a crucial role in how the protests were organized in conducted. While it is not possible to say with a hundred percent certainty, which instrument or which factor caused the most success of the protests, the use of Telegram and the fact that nearly all attendants possessed a modern smart phone, has definitely aided in the high levels of organization and opposition movement formation, especially in such a hostile for the opposition environment.

The second hypothesis can also be proven true, especially due to an overwhelming evidence of the fact that due to a complete control of the largest social media platform in Russia, the VK by the government authorities and their complete dominance of the national television, the opposition communities moved to Telegram and YouTube as their new alternative and autonomous sources of content production and consumption.

The third hypothesis was only partially proved to be true, as it was concluded that social media does facilitate an increase in the efficiency of communication and mobilization, although this mobilization was only shown to function in regards to mobilizing masses to protests on the street, but did not lead to an efficient mobilization of the elite actors, nor did it lead to certain increase of resources for the opposition. Political environment however, had definitely played a very important role on the dynamics of how anti-government movements were organized, and it was especially evident in cases when political environment was influencing the online spheres.

The forth hypothesis was also proved to be partially true, as it was concluded that an increase in the opposition and anti-government actions online does indeed lead to an increased

persecution offline, meaning that the authorities would jail, threaten or cause potential harm to an individual or a group involved in the protests activity. While the level of such persecution indicated to be of high level, it was not possible to conclude for certainty of how strict the anti-opposition methods offline really were. It was also not possible to make a conclusion about the anti-opposition measures online, although some social media activity from the government authorities towards the anti-government activists was present. While the empirical goals of this Master Thesis were aimed at proving the hypotheses as true or false, there were also a lot of other interesting findings, which the research was able to discover.

It is very much evident that Russia is experiencing an incredible level of growth regarding the usage of online resources and social media platforms in particular. This growth is not only limited to the opposition, but is also seen in how the government has been conducting its anti-opposition measures. With greater use of social media platforms for political purposes, the online networking in Russia is becoming extremely centralized, as all the means of information spreading are constantly being grasped in the hands of the government. This grasp however plays a very important role in how the network society and the online community in Russia has been developing lately. While the levels of censorships of the online media are rather high, freedom of online speech becomes limited and the state sponsored national television remains the top information source for the majority of the Russian population, it became very evident that this form of control and centralization is among the primary drivers for the establishment of autonomous sources of online information, especially within the social media platforms such as Telegram and YouTube. In regards to the opposition movements, the high centralization of such authority also leads to some platforms being left out completely, like VK (Vkontakte), while other platforms which cannot be subjected to the high levels of centralization due to various technical reasons, like Telegram and YouTube are gaining popularity and are being transformed into powerful oppositional communication instruments. In fact they can be considered as the main social media platforms for conducting anti-government activities. With the growing amount of the autonomous sources of information and the constant development of the new electronic communication devices, the opposition community in modern Russia is experiencing a level of rebirth, which in a way can be compared to the growing opposition movements around the world.

With higher growth of the autonomous information sources, came a new ability of the opposition and anti-government communities to motivate the ever-growing network society to

exercise pressure on the authorities and this aids in pursuing the oppositional agenda. This can be well seen in the various cases of corruption and police brutality accidents, where the perpetrators would generally be able to get away, but a growing online presence of the opposition have successfully used its new online influence to gain enough attention from the Russian people, that the authorities would often give in and prosecute those who previously would have been seen as untouchable. Exposure of corruption and illegal violence through autonomous online sources also has a very important influence on how the opposition evaluates the success of their anti-government agenda and provides further motivation and facilitates an increased online participation of the like-minded thinkers. Since the centralized sources of information either refuse or hesitate to knowledge certain actions, which by the means of Russian constitution are deemed illegal, the decentralized social media platforms have an opportunity to step in and gain attention, and most importantly, various Russian influential figures see this as an opportunity either for themselves or out of trivial goodness, to repost and further deliver such forms of information, thus gaining more public attention for the event itself. While the state news channels remain the most trusted source of information as has been indicated by the multiple empirical studies, it was not clear to what extent the centralization of the media and the appearance on de-centralized online platforms like Telegram and YouTube, shifted the level of trust of the Russia citizens. Although there are multiple sources to conclude that the shift has not yet taken place and the majority of Russian still prefer the state channels over the social media news, the results of the interviews could not prove the same conclusion, which leaves this aspect of the research under a question.

Russia, as many other countries around the world, especially those which can be considered as authoritarian, are experiencing an extreme growth of the online anti-government blogosphere, which are generally represented by various social media platforms. Not only does a high level of growth of autonomous bloggers indicate that Castell's Network Society theory has a great potential to explain the developments of the oppositional communication via social networks, it also points out to further decentralization of the news sources, as some of the individual bloggers are becoming popular and influential enough to cause a great deal of anti-government activity, although not in long term due to high levels of political persecution and a fear of getting an extremist label by the authorities. The existing literature has especially pointed to the extremist narrative, as one of the primary reasons why many of the Russian elites decide not to get involved with anti-government activists openly.

An important conclusion and observations can be drawn from the attempt of this research to divide the oppositional network societies in Russia into smaller groups and sub-groups. Both, the content analysis of the empirical literature, particularly the work of Sofia Dokuka (2014) and the conducted for this thesis interviews with the anti-government activists have shown that the most efficient way of analyzing how individual activists contribute to the online and offline oppositional movements in Russia, is by dividing them into groups and sub-groups based on their anti-government activity within the social media platforms and online networks. The groups, which have been singled out for this research include three primary groups and five sub-groups. First, are the “online sceptics”, who interestingly enough are considered to be the most loyal and the most stable in their oppositional activity when compared to other groups of anti-government activists. Although they do not show a lot of activity online and are made up of the older population, who generally use the state sponsored TV channels as their main information source, they are not easily influenced nor by the government content nor by that of the opposition, but instead have developed their views and opinions on their own. Second, are the “active internet users”, who are the largest producers of the oppositional online content, and account for the largest mass of the activists during the 2011, 2017 and 2021 movements in Russia. They are not as determined as the first groups when it comes to the physical activism and generally spend less time and show less consistency in that regards, but are evidently the moving part of the online network society since they have the highest level of internet participation. The third and final of the major online opposition societies are the “moderately active internet users”, who are similar in a way with the active ones, but are different in how much of the online content they produce and distribute. While the subgroups are numerous and include groups based on factors such as age, education and social status, it is more integral to stay on the main topic of the research and single out those sub-groups who play the most role in the online network societies. These groups and their labels are self-explanatory and include content consumers, active content distributors, content creators, strong network facilitators and weak network facilitators.

A very interesting conclusions about the oppositional network society in Russia, which was especially evident during the analyzation of the existing research, and to a small extent after the Thematic Content Analysis of the interviews, is that a very large portion of the online activists in Russia possessed a clip-mentality. This particular form of mentality on the case of the opposition network society in Russia is characterized by high consumption of information of

social media, where the opposition content prevails, but a pro-government content pops up there and there. Not only is the user then distracted by the different content agendas, the agenda itself changes rapidly, and it influences the audience to different extents, thus not allowing them to focus on one single issue at a time.

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of how opposition in Russia uses social media networks to pursue political agenda, the research also looked at different particularities of the various networks, and most importantly how those networks were used to in order to mobilize not only the masses of Russian citizens, but also the elite actors and their resources in order to increase the oppositional activity during the major modern movements in Russia. This was done based on the Resource Mobilization Theory and through the empirical literature and its comparison with the conducted interviews, some very interesting conclusions were drawn.

The analysis of the elite support in the oppositional movements in Russia has given consistent results throughout the content analysis of the empirical research and also through the Thematic Analysis of the interviews. While Russia does possess a number of anti-government actors in forms of a handful of individuals, organizations and political parties, their support of the opposition movements, both online and offline has been extremely limited. The literature provided a number of interesting examples of how the elites, especially in more rural parts of Russia were incredibly reluctant to support the anti-government agenda or publicly speak up or make online post against the government authorities, due to high levels of persecution of such actions. Business owners for example, even those who supported the opposition financially, were not keen on criticizing the authorities in fear of having their business going bankrupt, while political elites who were part of the opposition parties, did not speak against the authorities, and only did so in regards to very narrow issues, such as the environmental protection. The single most important aspects of the reluctance of the powerful groups and individuals in Russia to support the opposition cause, was the fear of being labeled as an extremist. Once an extremist person or an organization was officially deemed by the authorities as such, extremely high levels of persecution would follow, including huge financial issues and also jail sentences. This has especially been proven through the interview and was successfully compared with the existing research and yielded the same results. Another important reason as to why the elites do not support the opposition movements, is a simple fact that there is only a very small number of the elites who would be in a position to do so. Elites in Russia, as the literature and the interviews proved, are considered to be the elites, because they are in one

way or another are connected to the state and get their support from the government authorities, and this is what makes “elite” at the first place. It is therefore not logical and cost efficient for those individuals and groups to support anti-government movements, as it could potentially lead them to lose their elite status.

From the handful of the elites in Russia who possessed enough popularity to cause increased levels of the resource mobilization during the anti-government movements, the research could identify Alexey Navalny as the key figure, while the rest of the opposition elite figures such as Xenia Sobchak, do not possess a such a large politically motivated audience, as Navalny does on his YouTube, Telegram and Twitter channels, but also are not nearly as active as Navalny and his team at mobilizing masses of people to protests on the streets, especially students and younger people. A very interesting mobilization strategy employed by Navalny in order to gain more anti-government supporters, was his connection with smaller oppositional figures, who as written before, would only exercise their opposition voice for narrower issues, such as environmental protection. By proposing new legislature and criticizing the environmental laws in Russia, Navalny was able to mobilize those groups and individuals who saw the large oppositional gathering as an opportunity to impose their own narrow agenda.

While analyzing how social media has been used as a mobilization instrument and how material resource could have potentially been collected in order to conduct more efficient oppositional activities in smaller regions of Russia, especially in the Southern and Northern Caucasus parts, it was possible to make a very interesting observation of how a near complete absence of resources and the elite support was successfully compensated by the excess to the online social media platforms. An ability of social media platforms, has allowed smaller opposition communities in the rural parts to conduct nation wide networking with like-minded thinkers, and the rapid anti-government content posted by those rural communities was able to gain them momentum, and in some way also generated some form of the support from the local opposition parties, as well as a significant amount of the material resources. By constantly being active and posting large amount of content on the social media platforms, specifically on VK and Facebook and later on Telegram, the rural communities were able to greatly increase the attention that has been given to them by the local authorities and showed increased levels of physical communication between the sides, which could point out to the social media platforms as the key facilitators of the dialogue between the anti-government communities and the local government authorities in rural parts of Russia. It has also shown that this new

method of fast and wide communication can potentially compensate for the lack of resources and the elite support.

Through the interview and the analyzation of the existing researches, it was also possible to determine that the social media space in Russia is for the most part, with the exception of VK, which is currently under a complete of the Russian government authorities, is largely dominated by the oppositional content. This was especially evident when comparing the search inquiries for the online contents of Dmitry Kisilev and the online content from the team of Alexey Navalny. While the state sponsored social media content remains rather popular among some segments of the Russian population, the account of the opposition figures and the number of attention and interactions they get online is much higher.

The political environment is another key component of the Resource Mobilization concept, and it has been concluded, that it is currently facilitated by the Russian authorities, even though the social media is dominated by the opposition. The state sponsored TV channels are still considered to be the most trusted and the most popular information sources of the Russian citizens, which allows the authorities to have more influence in shaping and framing the political discourses in the country. It has not been clear whether such discourses lead to more or less the elite involvement, but it has been clear that it leads to a certain level of agitation from the side of the opposition, which leads to a higher online political participation on social media, where the government facilitators are significantly weaker.

Homophily also played an important role in the overall high levels of mobilization through social media, as according to the conducted interviews and the existing literature, there was a great deal of similarities, between the online participants, especially those who were active in creating and distributing online oppositional content. While the anti-government movements could be attributed to many specific aspects of the Russian modern political environment, it was clear, that the largest parts of the individuals who attended the protests or have been participating in the online support of the protests, were driven not by material resources and not through the support of powerful Russian opposition elites, but rather through hopes of a better future in general. High levels of corruption became exposed through the use of the social media platforms, and its quick and successful distribution also pointed out to high levels of homophily on the social media. Since there was not a great variety of anti-government agendas, there were also no clear leaders that would be responsible for conducting online and offline movements in the name of that specific agenda. The comparison of the interview with

the results of the literature content analysis further indicated that the movements online and offline had little to no hierarchical structure, and the distribution of online content and the physical attendance of the protests on the streets was mainly done autonomously, by the groups and individuals who felt the necessity to do so.

While this research was able to draw some interesting conclusions and make some fruitful observations, there were a couple aspects of the connection between social media platforms and the physical protests, which have remained unsolved, although some light was still shed on them. First, it is not completely clear to what extent the usage and anti-government online content consumption and distribution actually lead to a higher levels of participation on the actual protests on the streets. While it was evident the YouTube documentaries by Alexey Navalny were among the main triggers for the 2017 student protests throughout Russia, the same thing cannot be said about the previous protests in 2011. The 2021 protests on one hand, as has been indicated by interviews, were fired up by the appearance of the videos on social media showing the arrest of Navalny in one of the Moscow's airports, there is still no clear data of whether the subsequent online interactions led to an increased attendance of the protests. In general, the qualitative data does point out to an increased activism mobilization due to online networking on social media platforms, but in order to make a definitive conclusion, more quantitative data must be present. If such quantitative data is to be obtained by more interviews and quick surveys of the political activists in Russia, the actual collection of such information might be extremely difficult and time consuming, as the majority of the activists tend not to discuss such information online and offline, and are also extremely careful of even giving an anonymous survey due to the fear of having legal issues with the Russian authorities.

The reluctance of the activists to give interviews on the anti-government topics and their mistrust towards surveys, which attempt to obtain information about the oppositional movements participation leads to another aspect of this research, which remained unclear. While it was possible to determine some strategies by the authorities in Russia to undermine the online activism on social media, the exact methods through which this was done, remained rather unspecified. It was possible to conclude that if the platforms, for example VK (Vkontakte), was under the monitoring of the government, the authorities would simply ban certain forms of online content and would employ the use of bots and trolls, to create impression that the pro-government contents are prevailing over the oppositional ones. Other methods, such as direct threats and social media messages were known to be among the

strategies to deter the activists from the anti-government activities, but it was not clear which other strategies the authorities use on those social media platforms, where they have no technical advantages, such as on Telegram and Facebook.

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