

Conference Paper

Internet and Social Media As a Tool of Aggregating Protest Moods

Sergey Grigoryevich Zyryanov and Daria Valeryevna Averyanova

The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Chelyabinsk, Russian Federation

Abstract

The ongoing sociocultural transformations contribute to the present the problem of the society and power relationship. Due to the changing forms, methods and channels of communication, including political communication, this article considers the role and place of the Internet, social media in aggregating protest moods. Since there is a lack of a consensus in the scientific literature on the phenomenon of political protest, the authors present a theoretical interpretation within the framework of political sociology supported by the Russian researchers' developments of recent years. Protest political activity is seen as a form of political participation and communication with the authorities. The purpose of the research is to reveal the role of information technology and social media in aggregating protest moods on the basis of analyzing online publications. The scientific novelty is conditioned by a multifaceted study of the role and place of the Internet and social media in aggregating protest moods, the role of horizontal and vertical communications during protests. Methods of the research are theoretical and methodological analysis, ontological and system analysis and questionnaire survey. The sociological study has shown how the society's perception of protests changes in the context of the virtual political space development, which in certain periods becomes more important than the physical political space.

Keywords: political protest, protest activity, protest moods, social media, sociological study

1. Introduction

In modern society, there is a serious transformation of the ways and mechanisms to organize the citizens' participation in political decision-making, as well as the forms and methods of the state and society interaction. Changes are also taking place in the mechanisms of integrating an individual into relations of power; we believe that the basic tendency of our time is not just joining a certain social community, stratum or social class, but also being aware that we have common interests and are ready to articulate them to public authorities. These institutional characteristics are supplemented by other optional methods of political participation, which are set by rather weakly structured and weakly integrated, constantly changing socio-political actors.

Corresponding Author:

Sergey Grigoryevich Zyryanov
director@chel.ranepa.ru

Published: 21 January 2021

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

© Sergey Grigoryevich Zyryanov
and Daria Valeryevna
Averyanova. This article is
distributed under the terms of
the [Creative Commons
Attribution License](#), which
permits unrestricted use and
redistribution provided that the
original author and source are
credited.

Selection and Peer-review under
the responsibility of the XXIII
International Conference
Conference Committee.

 OPEN ACCESS

Nowadays in the context of turbulence of economic and political processes in Russia and other states, society and government communication is mostly expressed through civil protest. According to the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center, the level of the population's readiness for protest activity over the past five years is ranged from 30% to 40%, that is, approximately one out of three Russian citizens participates, or is ready to participate in protests, if they take place in their city or area [5].

2. Methodology and Methods

The purpose of the study is to demonstrate the methods and mechanisms transformation of citizens' participation formation in political decision-making, forms and methods of state and society interaction, and the changes of the mechanisms of engagement an individual in relations with authorities. The author demonstrates these changes on practical examples, as well as through the analysis of sociological research.

To study the forms of political participation, and to demonstrate the role and capabilities of social networks in the aggregation of social protest sentiments, methods of theoretical and methodological analysis, ontological and system analysis, and generalization of independent characteristics are used.

The main research method is the correlation analysis of sociological research data based on the study of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. This method helps to capture current trends. Forecasts are based on a variety of analytical methods.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis has fixed the increased role and place of the Internet and social media in political participation and communication of civil society with the government. The sociological research has shown high public awareness of protests, the prevalence of approval of political protest as a form of political participation in the public mind and opinions that law enforcement agencies used tough methods when accompanying the protest actions.

Protest behavior as a form of political participation and communication with the authorities has been studied by researchers of political life for quite a long time. There are a number of approaches to understanding political protest behavior. The first approach has been conventionally named the concept of collective behavior. Protest behavior in the framework of this paradigm is considered as one of the manifestations

of collective action, and the concept of social and political protest is likened to the concept of “crowd”. In addition, this approach implies that a protest is a socio-political phenomenon called a form of unconventional political behavior in the context of ineffective use of traditional and regime-approved political means of protest [3. P. 4].

The second approach is known as the concept of resource mobilization. Protest behavior in the framework of this approach is presented as a natural form of conflict relations between power structures and society, which has a latent character [3. P.5]. According to the authors who share this point of view, there always exists a conflict in society, but active actions are possible only if there are two simultaneous factors: dramatic increase in public discontent with the situation in the country and the resources that contribute to mobilizing citizens.

There is a third approach — the concept of relative deprivation, in its framework the root cause of social and political protest is seen in the discrepancy between an individual's economic expectations and his real capabilities [7. P. 23].

We believe that it is better to consider all the formulated concepts as a whole, since their complementary nature can be clearly traced. The protest can have different nature: it can be economic, social, and political. The research focuses on political protest. Its reasons can be both economic and social, but most often the cause of political protest is the powerful institutions' activity, and more specifically decisions made by them. Let us consider the approaches and the definition of the concept “political protest”.

M. Yu. Shulgina considers political protest as a type of social action of a relatively small or large community of like-minded people, targeted at expressing opinions, and possibly taking actions directed against the political system or its particular elements, perceived as an obstacle to supporting normal human life [10].

According to V.V. Safronov, political protest can be defined as unconventional and unauthorized, but not accompanied by violence, form of collective political participation. Speaking about the concept of political protest, he excludes those actions that do not pose a threat to the existing political regime, including the opposition's support, absenteeism in elections, as well as extra-parliamentary speeches made within the legal framework [9. P. 45].

A. Ya. Antsupov and A. I. Shipilov share a different position, believing that speaking about political protest this concept includes both legal and anti-constitutional manifestations [1. P.347].

The researcher O.S. Pustoshinskaya speaks of political protest as a descriptive concept that has an ontological meaning, objectified by the source of its formation. At

the same time, its explication in accordance with the requirements of scientific completeness and rigidity due to the intangible and complex nature seems problematic. She gives a rather broad definition of political protest, noting such elements as determinacy with the vital interests discordance and the impossibility of satisfying needs, the justification in public opinion of the confrontation, which aims to adjust the government course, to unconstitutional, aimed at changing the political system [6. P. 5].

It should be noted that the researchers distinguish between systemic and non-systemic protests. It is systemic protests that pose a danger nowadays; they may be spontaneous, based on the desire to resolve a local conflict. However, contemporary world political practice shows that a systemic protest, even organized by a small group, but which acts actively and decisively, can become a catalyst for the change of both people in power and the political regime. This is precisely the danger of protests in unstable political regimes. We should note that the authoritarian regime can be undoubtedly called unstable.

In modern conditions, when the development of the information society ensures even local effective protest actions, it is clear that they are transforming into this status under the influence of new media technologies and media reality. In this case, the concept of “political space” is transformed and understood in two layers — physical and virtual. However, the physical political space is understood as basic, predominant, since by definition it is more real and tangible and more accessible. Virtual space in this sense is often seen only as a place to prepare for the actual expression of the upcoming protest — the Internet space is seen as a place where they discuss a problematic situation, engage in like-minded people, and prepare program documents. It contains a lot of uncertainty. However, directly protest activity as a certain type of communication between society and government is carried out only when going out into the street — that is, in the format of physical political space.

It is worth noting that political protest begins to take new meanings and is considered in two directions: as an event and in its other hypostasis — as a message. Information and communication technologies reinforce the message, since an observer can go in two ways: switch from an observer status to a participant status or remain an observer.

The latest political history shows interesting examples of how online activity merges into offline activity, as well as the fact that a protest rally as a message can be fully realized not in physical, but in a virtual environment. In this sense, the priority of physical space over virtual is very controversial and conditional, and the borders between these two environments, in which the expression of political interests and citizens' positions occur, are destroyed. Virtual space often turns out to be even of more priority and

more significant, and events that occur on social networks are associated with parallel actions that take place in the physical space, for potential and real protesters are no less, and sometimes even more important, than the event of the physically occurring protest action. Such a formulation of the question makes us look at protest activity on the Internet from a fundamentally new angle.

Protest political activity as a phenomenon of our time needs a thorough and comprehensive analysis. Sociological polls can be considered the most common way to analyze protest moods and behavior, since they are designed to study, identify and evaluate the most important problems that society and government are facing at any given moment in time. Opinion polls reveal the most important indicators that capture the current state of political communication between society and the government — the degree of trust in the country’s leadership and assessment of its activities, the level and scale of the current protest potential, and the degree of approving of protests by those citizens who are not included in these moods and actions. In addition, the results of sociological studies help to forecast, though with a high degree of probability, possible actions of political protest in the region and the country.

We consider the population’s perception and their attitude to these actions, on the basis of the data from sociological studies conducted by us in Chelyabinsk and by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center in the Russian Federation as exemplified by the protests held in Moscow and other large cities from mid-July to early autumn 2019, at which they demanded to register independent candidates for elections to the Moscow City Duma,.

Let’s start by studying the public awareness of protest campaigns. Considering that both the Chelyabinsk branch of the RANEPА and the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (RPORC) asked the same question “In the summer and early autumn, there were mass protests in a number of Russian cities. Please tell me, if you know anything about them, you have heard something or you hear about it for the first time now?”, We will present the data in comparison.

TABLE 1: Public awareness of protest campaigns (%)

	RANEPА	RPORC	
	Chelyabinsk	Moscow	RF
I know well, I’m interested in the issue	19.2	33	13
I heard something but don’t know the details	44.9	50	46
I hear it for the first time	27.9	17	41
This topic does not interest me	4.5	33	13
It’s difficult to answer	3.5	50	46

As it can be seen from the data analysis, the majority of respondents were somehow informed about the protests. It is natural that in Moscow the figure is significantly higher than in Russia as a whole and in comparison with the data obtained during the survey in Chelyabinsk. At the same time, the share of those who know well, is interested in this issue in Chelyabinsk is 19.2%, that is, almost every fifth respondent, and in Moscow it is noticeably more — every third respondent (33%). Residents of Chelyabinsk, who heard about it for the first time, constitute a little more than a quarter of the respondents (27.9%), and the data obtained from surveys in Moscow is 17%, but in Russia as a whole it turned out to be a rather impressive share of citizens — 41%.

In terms of socio-demographic characteristics of those Chelyabinsk residents who represent the groups of informed and uninformed, it is worth noting that young people aged 18-24 years are more likely to be informed about past protests, namely students and those whose level of material security is above average. Among those who are not informed, there are residents aged 45-59 and over 60 and people with a low level of material security.

Chelyabinsk residents' attitude to the protests is of particular research interest. Let us consider the answers of Chelyabinsk residents to the following question: "How do you feel about the protests that took place in the last 2–3 months in large cities of Russia?"

TABLE 2: Chelyabinsk residents' attitude to the protests (%)

Positive	35.2
Negative	14.2
Indifferent	21.7
It's difficult to say	28.9

Most of the respondents (35.2%) are positive about the protests that took place in major cities of Russia. This evaluative position is most often chosen by residents of Chelyabinsk aged 25-44 years with higher education, namely employees of private enterprises with an average level of material security. The survey showed that there is some interconnection between the level of awareness of protests and their approval. The percentage of those who approve of these actions is much higher in the group of those who are well aware of them.

Every fifth Chelyabinsk citizen (21.7%) is indifferent to such actions. Apparently, this topic is not interesting, important and exciting for this part of the respondents in Chelyabinsk. Among them there are more often respondents with a general secondary, special or incomplete higher education, as well as citizens with a low level of material security. In this group of respondents there are more people who hear from the

interviewers about the mass protests held in the summer in Russian cities for the first time.

14.2% of respondents showed their negative attitude to protests. More often this position is held by Chelyabinsk citizens over the age of 60 who have higher education, mostly individual entrepreneurs, heads of organizations and pensioners — both working and non-working.

There is some correlation between the population’s awareness of protests and their assessment. Among those who positively evaluate the protests, there are more people who are somehow informed about them — know about them well (+ 17.7%) or have heard something about them (+ 11.8%). The informed ones also prevail in the group who have negative attitude to the protest rallies — there are more people who know about them well (+ 8.9%) or have heard something (+ 11.2%). But among those who are indifferent to the protests, there are naturally more people who say that they are not interested in this topic (+ 20.5%).

The direct participants in the protests, as well as the observers, evaluated the actions of the police and riot police differently — both completely legitimate and justified, and tough, with excessive reliance on coercive force. And outsiders’ assessment of these actions is an extremely important point in the analysis — both sociological and political.

Let us turn to considering the respondents’ answers to the following question: “How do you assess the actions of law enforcement agencies when accompanying unauthorized acts?”

TABLE 3: Assessing the actions of law enforcement agencies when accompanying unauthorized acts (%)

Their actions were adequate, within the law	17.5
Their actions were tough, they unreasonably used force	30.2
It's difficult to say	52.4

Only 17.5% of respondents considered the actions of law enforcement agencies within the limits of the law, that is, one out of six respondents. Much more Chelyabinsk informants (30.2%) considered that law enforcement officers used force toughly and unreasonably, that is, one out of three. It is also typical for the current state of Russian political culture that most of the respondents found it difficult to give a substantial assessment of the law enforcement officers’ actions when they accompanied the uncoordinated actions.

It is worth noting that among those who consider the law enforcement agencies’ actions to be adequate, there are more Chelyabinsk citizens over the age of 60 (+ 10.1%) and those who assess the protests negatively (+ 28.7%). In the group of people

who consider the actions of law enforcement agencies to be unjustifiably harsh, there are more young people aged 18–24 years (+ 15.5%) and 25–44 years (+ 5.6%) and respondents positively related to protests (+38.4 %).

The All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (RPORC) asked slightly different questions about the protests in Moscow in July 2019 [2]. So, for example, the population was asked whether the protest action was agreed upon with the authorities, that is, whether it was a permitted action, or unauthorized. In response to this question, the majority of Russians (39%) and Muscovites (58%) said that it was unauthorized. In addition, the following question was asked: “On July 27, an unauthorized protest rally was held in Moscow. Do you agree or disagree with the opinion that in such situations the government should act in accordance with the law, even if it is necessary to apply harsh measures?” and the majority of Russians (69%) and Muscovites (61%) replied that they rather agreed.

Internet sources that published the opinion poll data from the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center completely differently commented on the results obtained during this study. Quite widespread in the Internet environment was the version that the questions asked to the population were incorrect. So, for example, the question about the measures used the government does not explain what is meant by “harsh measures” and provides data on serious injuries of the protest actions participants as a result of security forces actions [4]. Thus, we can state that the protests and their results were actively discussed on the Internet for a long time, and the participants’ opinions were polarized. Thus, the virtual political space of the protest rallies was on a par with the physical space. And, we venture to suggest that some of the consequences of the actions discussed on the Internet could give rise to new protests. Analysts also noted an increase in the negative perception of the law enforcement agencies’ actions.

4. Conclusions

In addition, we believe that the protests that took place have shown their effectiveness both in ‘vertical’ political communication with the authorities — the protesters somehow conveyed their demands to the authorities making political decisions. But let’s pay attention to the fact that it’s much more important to work in horizontal political communication not only with direct participants, but also with a concerned audience, which includes everyone who does not participate in protests. And in this situation, Internet communication and social media played a rather serious role providing the widest possible discussion of the topic of protest.

Another recent trend associated with the social media development is a change in the technology itself and the way in which protests are formed and organized. Speaking of the modern political process, political scientist I.A. Savchenko notes that today, the so-called spectacular forms – flash mobs, happenings, performances which are becoming more widespread in modern society, are being added to the traditional forms of political protest – rallies, strikes, pickets, demonstrations. Their distinguishing features are the following: you do not need to obtain permission from the authorities to hold an event, as well as they focus on media, rather than the mass nature of the actions [8. P. 254].

The study has revealed some of the most important trends.

The population's attitude to the protests and their approval of course does not mean their readiness to participate in them. At the same time, approving such actions is always a rather alarming trend for power structures and at the same time evidence there is lack of constructive communication between political power and civil society, or that the government does not hear or hears but does not consider it necessary to take into account views of the Russian civil society representatives. The information society development takes the process of political interaction to a new level; we are witnessing reframing of the protest political movement. Political mobilization and protest begins to be reconfigured with the participation of "new media" and here the issue of conversion and transformation of a virtual user – a reader of social networks into a real and direct participant in the protest rally on the street is especially acute.

References

- [1] Antsupov, A. and Shipilov, A. (2006). *Dictionary of Conflictologist*. (2nd ed.). St. Petersburg: Piter, p. 347.
- [2] *Wciom.ru*. (2019, August). Retrieved August 2, 2019 from <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9831>.
- [3] Dementieva, I. (2013, July-August). *Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to Studying Social Protest in Foreign and Domestic Science*, Monitoring of Public Opinion: Economic and Social Changes Journal (Public Opinion Monitoring): p. 4.
- [4] *Meduza.io*. (2019, August). Retrieved February 12, 2019 from <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/08/02/nakanune-novyh-protestov-v-moskve-vlasti-zakazali-sotsoprosy-pro-mitingi-s-otkrovennymi-manipulyatsiyami-v-voprosah>.
- [5] *Wciom.ru*. (2019) Retrieved February 10, 2020 from <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=10066>. [Accessed December 11 2019].

- [6] Pustoshinskaya, O. (2010). Political Protest as a Concept: The Problem of Definition. *Almanac of Modern Science and Education*, vol. 1, issue 32 (2), p. 5.
- [7] Rotmistrov, A. (2009). Social Factors of Russian Youth Protest Behavior: Comparative Analysis of the Situation at the Beginning of the XX and Beginning of the XXI Centuries. Dissertation of the candidate of social Sciences. Moscow, 2009. p. 23.
- [8] Savchenko, I. (2012). Political Protest in Modern Society: Technological Approach. *Theory and Practice of Social Development*, issue, p. 254.
- [9] Safronov, V. (1998). The Potential of Protest and the Democratic Perspective. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, issue 4, p. 45.
- [10] *Socio.msu.ru*. (2019). Retrieved January 31, 2020 from <http://lib.socio.msu.ru//library?e=d-000-00---0lomon--00-0-0-0prompt-10---4-0-0l---1-en-50-20-help-00031-001-1-0windowsZz-1251-10&cl=CL1&d=HASH69a=1>. [Accessed January 29 2010].