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Team Navalny and the Dynamics of Coercion

THE KREMLIN'S REACTION TO ALEKSEI NAVALNY'S 2018 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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Authoritarian regimes frequently employ strategic coercion and repression to prevent or halt mobilization. Russia under Vladimir Putin is not an exception. As the regime became more repressive after the 2011-12 mobilization wave, Aleksei Navalny's 2018 presidential campaign faced familiar obstacles: no authorization for public rallies, detentions, administrative fines, and criminal charges. How consistent was the reaction of the authorities to his campaign? I address this question by looking at data on interactions between protesters and authorities before, during, and after key events of the Navalny campaign: the "He is not Dimon to you!" rallies on March 26 and June 12 in 2017 and the "Electoral Strike" protest on January 28, 2018. These data uncover patterns in state responses to one of the most significant political challenges Putin's regime has faced.

Looking at how reactions varied across 160 locations in Russia, I show that in the course of the campaign, the coercion increasingly concentrated on the activists instead of rank-and-file participants. This came with the consolidation of the Navalny's network and decreasing uncertainty about the campaign's outcome. I argue that both organizational consolidation and uncertainty played key roles in shaping interactions between the regime and the protesters: the March 26 rallies, while taking the authorities by surprise and lacking an organizational core, prompted regime agents to overreact. The mobilization expanded on June 12, but this time, the regime was more certain about the scope and direction of the mobilization; consequently, it employed a more permissive approach. As a result, the latest events analyzed here, the electoral boycott rallies in January 2018, faced the largest amount of targeted preventive coercion. These findings also show how regime agents learn from the past, coordinate, and adapt their strategies in the course of contentious episodes.

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The Campaign

On December 13, 2016, Navalny announced his intent to run in the 2018 presidential elections. By that time, this renowned anti-corruption fighter had become one of the most visible figures in the opposition camp, which had become largely dried up after more than a decade under regime-led siege. He had also acquired precious electioneering experience during his run for Moscow mayor in 2013 and several regional campaigns. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), along with investigations of high-ranking officials, had also learned how to organize massive fundraising campaigns, produce high-quality media content, and manage electoral campaigns. In short, for the regime, "Team Navalny" became not a competitor but a significant challenge. The use of coercion against it was only a matter of time.

At the core of the 2017-2018 campaign stood the development of a network of regional offices (*shtaby*) that would cover almost the entire territory of the country (save for some distant autonomous districts, Crimea and North Caucasus). The network was designed as material infrastructure for the campaign's objectives (voter registration, signature collection, spreading the message, public fundraising, etc.) and included full-paid staff selected on a semi-open meritocratic process administered by the federal headquarters. Regional coordinators were in charge of routine operations and communications. Initially, regional offices were set to open in 77 cities, and by April 14, the team had opened 17 *shtaby* in major regional capitals.

In March 2017, FBK published the 45-minute *"On vam ne Dimon"* ("He is not Dimon to you") investigation, which charged Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev with corruption. The technically well-produced film reached a broad audience: it gathered over 25 million hits on YouTube over the ensuing months, and 38 percent of Levada Center survey respondents indicated that they either saw or had heard of the video. Following the publication, thousands of people in 95 cities went to the streets on March 26, 2017. Surprised by the scale of the mobilization that was reminiscent of the 2011-13 "For Fair Elections!" campaign, the authorities refused to issue a permit for rallies in 77 localities. Consequently, the mobilization elicited a harsh reaction—over 1,600 participants, many of them young people under 18 years old, were detained in 47 cities, and, in most cases, they received administrative charges. In addition, in nine places, organizers and participants were called in by law enforcement agencies for "conversations" prior to the events, and, on a dozen occasions, local authorities attempted to obstruct the rally.

Recognizing the building steam behind the mobilization, the authorities took a more permissive stance toward the next rally on June 12, which attracted between 50,000 and 100,000 participants in 159 cities. The police detained over 1,700 participants in 27 cities, with Moscow as the largest share (866 participants) due to Navalny's last-minute call to move the rally from Sakharova avenue to Tverskaya street. Navalny was sentenced to 30 days in jail. However, the authorities almost entirely abandoned preventive and reactive

detentions, and the overall rate of administrative charges dropped to just 20 cases out of 44 unauthorized rallies. In a few cases, non-state actors engaged in violent clashes with rally participants. However, the June 12 mobilization was evidently less heated than the previous wave.

As Navalny's regional network crystallized (79 offices were opened by September 2017), it became a key target for state coercion. Police raids and intimidation routinely disrupted *shtaby's* work, and pro-regime groups like the Cossacks, street gangs, sportsmen, bikers, and even pensioners frequently intimidated the campaign's activists. The prominent case of "Putin's Troops" in Krasnodar exemplifies these agents: sponsored by a local entrepreneur, this group of agitated pensioners frequently raided the regional office and demanded that the activists leave the city. In August 2017, they blocked access to the building, broke through a door, and ravaged the *shtab*. Furthermore, campaign materials were frequently seized by the police, and some offices experienced troubles with their landlords. However, despite this pressure, the network continued to grow.

In September 2017, Navalny announced his second regional tour. This time, the regime tolerated only the initial wave of mobilization: in 19 locations out of 20, applications for public meetings were approved. For the next waves, the local authorities either unconditionally rejected or suggested transfering the date, time, or place of the meeting, or even refused to respond to the application. Navalny held his eighth rally in Arkhangelsk on October 2. The next day, he and his chief of staff, Leonid Volkov, were arrested. Increasing pressure on the activists also manifested itself in detentions, fines, and repeated office searches. By the end of October, out of 1,276 applications for meetings, only four were authorized unconditionally, another 57 Volkov called "negotiable." In yet another turn, the regime largely accepted the nomination event that took place December 24 in 20 cities, when initiative groups voted for Navalny's candidacy, but denied his registration a week later.

In response, Navalny called for an "electoral strike" with the aim of lowering turnout and organizing monitoring at polling stations. The rally under the same name took place on January 28, 2018, and marked the last major interaction with the regime within the campaign. The regional offices became major targets of coercion: the police raided more than 30 *shtaby* prior to the event and detained activists in roughly the same number of regions. The NGO "Fifth Time of the Year" that channeled money from donations to regional offices was liquidated by the court. On December 27, the police blocked access to the Navalny headquarters in Moscow and detained seven members. In 52 out of 159 documented meetings, the local authorities refused to authorize rallies, though only 350 participants were detained, and in 24 cities, they were charged with administrative cases. In short, the focus of coercion shifted from participants to activists and from reactive to preventive measures.

Patterns of Coercion

What patterns emerge from the variation in deployment of the coercive measures across localities?

Table 1 summarizes the responses to each wave of mobilization, their timing (preventive, reactive, and simultaneous), and subcategories. For starters, there's a marked difference between the cities that mobilized from the beginning and those that joined the second wave—93 and 67 cases for which the data were available, respectively. The authorities responded harshly to the first wave with almost universal rejection of authorizing rallies followed by detentions (before and after the events) and administrative cases. Across all three mobilization waves, the authorities in the "first wave" cities rejected 47 percent of the applications throughout the campaign as compared to the overall rejection rate of 20 percent in the cities that joined only on June 12. The first wave cities also employed a much wider spectrum of instruments. The authorities in Vladivostok, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Tula deployed almost every instrument—from preventive detentions and raids to the use of force during the rallies and subsequent charges—to contain the mobilization.

Summarizing the coercion tactics and dividing the cities into groups above and below the average, we can see that the first wave cities are almost evenly divided between low- and high-coercive categories, while for the second wave only 29 percent of the cases are classified as high-coercive (see **Table 2**). However, despite the high risks of detentions and prosecution in the first wave, the link between unauthorized rallies, detentions, and administrative cases was far from being deterministic; only in 60 percent of the March cases did participation in unauthorized rallies led to administrative charges (most were later dropped).

The number of rejections plummeted in the June 12 event partially due to the addition of 56 localities to the list of protesting cities, which mostly were medium-size towns without a history of mobilization and presumably with less coercive capacity. But in the first wave cities too, the drop in the rejection rate was evident. Again, preventive measures dominated. In 36 percent of the cases, unauthorized rallies led to detentions, which, in turn, led to administrative charges in about half of the cases (15 out of 27). The signal to the public was: participation in opposition rallies would put rally attendees in danger of prosecution.

Physical violence on behalf of the police was detected only in Moscow, though its scale was enormous: over 800 participants were detained (in St. Petersburg, the numbers were similar with 658 detained, but no violence was reported). In five locations, the violence came from government-affiliated groups. For example, in Makhachkala, unknown thugs tried to push activists from the event's location, and in Vladivostok, Cossacks forcefully took a Russian flag away from activists and poured bright green antibacterial liquid ("*zelenka*") over them—a frequently used tactics against opposition politicians in Russia.

For the last event in the analysis—the electoral strike of January 28, 2018—the authorities shifted the focus of the coercion from rally participants to activists: preventive detentions and raids became more common, and the rejection rate for the rallies also rose from 27 to 33 percent. The spatial pattern stabilized: out of 157 locations that staged June and January meetings, 133 kept the initial strategy toward the authorization.[2] Similarly, in 135 out of 157 locations, the authorities held the same detention strategy.[3] In other words, the cities where protesters were "at risk" of experiencing coercion were largely the same across the last two waves of mobilization.

Conclusion

What does this analysis show us? First, contrary to the idea of a coordinated regime response to the mass mobilization, it shows that subnational authorities have considerable discretion in choosing courses of action—albeit within a limited set of options. While the high rate of rejections in March and Autumn 2017, and its dissipation in June and January, appear to be a directive from the federal center, the inconsistency in the follow-up tactical choices—to detain or not, to prosecute or not—points toward the autonomy of the regional authorities in these areas. The fact that the strategies were very different in proximate locations lends additional support to this conclusion. Consider Surgut and Nizhnevartovsk, two cities in the Yugra region that are about a two-hour drive from each other: in the former, the authorities permitted the meetings without further attempts to undermine the mobilization, while in the latter they consistently denied authorization for the rallies and used other coercive means. We might rule out the hypothesis that this happened due to a difference in mobilization—both involved relatively similar small-scale meetings with 150-200 participants.

Second, the analysis demonstrates that local regime agents adapt their strategy over the course of mobilization. The initial reaction aimed at preventing mobilization altogether did not work and even might have encouraged higher turnout. Consequently, the volume of preventive coercion was adjusted prior to the June 2017 wave. Likewise, as soon as the organizational structure of the campaign crystallized, the local authorities started to increase pressure on the activists, but not ordinary participants. Despite generally consistent repertoire choices in most of the cases, in a solid fraction of cities, the authorities did not exhibit a consistent reaction pattern across the mobilization waves.

Third, preventive tactics seem to play a key role in the overall strategy. Arguably, the authorities prefer to freeze mass actions at their embryonic state, even at the risk of running into an unauthorized rally. During the first wave, when the Navalny regional network was in its nascent form, local regime agents approached organizers for conversations and engaged in preventive detentions. Also, preventive measures appear

[2] Correlation coefficient of 0.65[0.54;0.73], $p < 0.001$.

[3] Correlation coefficient of 0.52[0.40:0.63], $p < 0.001$.

to be a pretext for retaliation in the form of detentions and administrative/criminal charges. However, the link between them was far from mechanical: on many occasions, the authorities refrained from punishing violators of the law during public demonstrations, effectively admitting that the current regulations in this area can be circumvented.

Finally, the analysis sheds light on the overall regime strategy, which can be characterized as a "politics of fear" only with some caveats. Far from being successful in inducing fear in the population (after all, as a recent Levada Center poll indicates, only 7 percent of respondents said they feared repression when asked in an open question), the regime rather prefers to raise the bar for participation in collective action and to target those who jump much higher than the bar. For the apt and committed activists, an exercise in street politics might easily turn into the facing of real bars in a prison cell. For the rest, who barely or occasionally clear the bar, it is enough to remind them of the futility of these actions or additional costs they might bear due to their participation.

TABLES BELOW.

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Table 1. Distribution of Acts of State Coercion by Type and Action

Sources: OVD-Info, Novaya Gazeta, Meduza, Mediazone		March 2017	June 2017	January 2018
Preventive coercion	**Total**	**91**	**59**	**119**
including	Permit rejection	75	44	52
	Conversations with organizers and potential participants	8	10	4
	Office raids and/or seizure of the campaign's materials	0	1	32
	Detentions prior to the event	8	4	31
Coercion during protest events	**Total**	**67**	**33**	**35**
including	Detentions	46	27	29
	Violence against participants	4	1	3
	Non-violent actions from government-affiliated agents	13	1	3
	Violent actions from government-affiliated agents	3	5	0
Reactive coercion	**Total**	61	25	34
including	Office raids and/or seizure of the campaign's materials	0	0	4
	Detentions after the event	13	3	6
	Administrative cases	45	20	24
	Criminal cases	3	2	0
No reaction		**7**	**89**	**62**
Total		**93**	**159**	**160**

Table 2. Distribution of Localities by the Level of Coercion and Mobilization Wave

Source: author's calculations

	Low level of coercion, count / %	High level of coercion, count / %	Total rejections, count / %	Consistent rejections, count / %
"First wave" cities	47 / 51%	45 / 49%	131 / 47%	33 / 35%
"Second wave" cities	48 / 71%	19 / 29%	40 / 20%	16 / 24%
Total	**95 / 59%**	**64 / 41%**	**171 / 35%**	**49 / 31%**