

Myths about marches. How protest has changed since 2011.

An interview with **Alexandra Arkhipova** by **Sergei Khazov-Cassia**

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24th of December 2011

Since 2011 a group of anthropologists, folklorists and philologists have been conducting research at practically every single mass political gathering — protest and pro-state, marches and pickets, state-solicited and spontaneous. The research is mainly carried out in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but they have also analysed separate activity in Novosibirsk and Vologda. *Radio Liberty* spoke with Alexandra Arkhipova, head of “Monitoring of Contemporary Folklore”, a doctoral candidate in philology, a former research assistant at RANEPa, and a lecturer at the Russian State University for the Humanities’ Centre for Typology and Semiotics.

— *So who actually goes to rallies in Moscow?*

— Muscovites (*laughs*).

— *In an interview, Valeria Kasamara said that a large number of the people at rallies are not Muscovites, in so far as for her, a Muscovite is someone with a Moscow registration.*¹

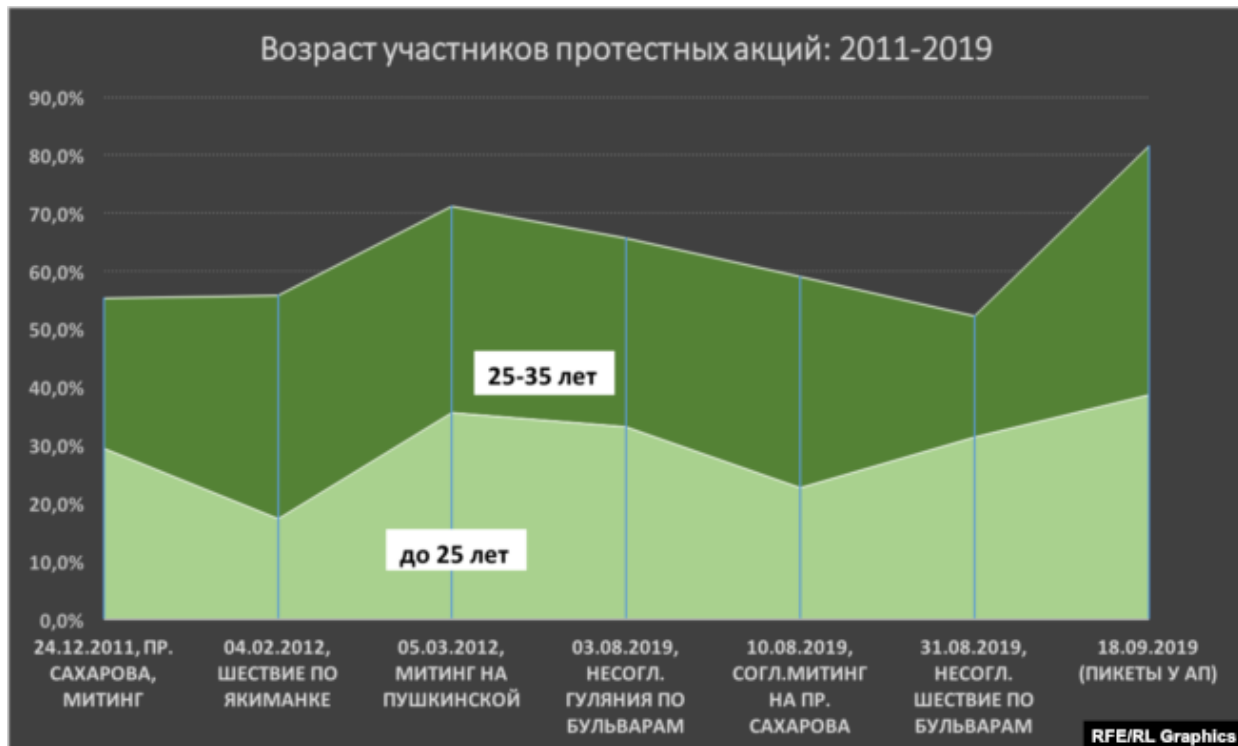
— If her definition of a Muscovite is someone with a registration, that means a huge quantity of people are not Muscovites to her. This question has now lost its soviet element; of those taking part in the rally at Sakharov on the 10th of July more than 80% responded that they lived in Moscow and more than 65% were born here. Moscow is an unbelievably young city, and more than half of Muscovites were not born in Moscow. This is not about elections, this is about civil rights. A person who has lived in Moscow for 20 years considers themselves a Muscovite, and believes that they have a right to speak out on all issues.

Schoolkids in the limelight

— *The last few years have seen young people talk more and more of protest, and some have said that this new generation coming out at rallies form the overwhelming majority. Others have accused organisers of manipulating teenagers, “forcing them under the truncheons”.*

— On the 10th of August 2019 24% of attendants at the Sakharov rally were 25 and under, but the Sakharov rally on the 24th of December 2011 actually attracted a slightly higher number of participants in the same age bracket — somewhere in the region of 30%. Teenagers — that is, young people up to and including the age of 18 — were 5% of participants in 2011 at Sakharov and 8% in 2019, and slightly less at the unsolicited march on the boulevards on the 31st of August. As we can see, the quantity of young people is consistent — roughly a quarter.

¹ Registration is the process by which you officially declare your residence in the city with your local authority — something hard to do if you do not have a valid visa or Russian passport, or if you do not have a permanent local address. This presents difficulties to many people residing in Moscow.



“Age of participants in protest action: 2011-2019”. Dark Green section: 25-35 years old. Light green section: Up to 25 years old. Events along x-axis: 24.12.2011, Sakharov Prospekt, rally. 04.02.2012, March on Yakimanka. 05.03.2012, rally on Pushkinskaya. 03.08.2019, unsolicited walking along the boulevards. 10.08.2019, solicited rally on Prospekt Sakharov. 31.08.2019, unsolicited march along the boulevards. 18.09.2019, (pickets at Presidential Administration).

So why are they saying that only “schoolkids” are coming out? The fact is that in the last few years our relationship to teenagers has changed. Teenagers are no longer simply a subject, an appendix to their family, we’ve begun to perceive them as some kind of self-representative unit. This change took place before the most recent protests: by 2016 the media had already sharply changed its image, writing more and more about crimes committed by teenagers, who became the newsmakers. People like the Pskov ‘Bonnie and Clyde’², the “death groups”³, and Eva Raich, purportedly one of the founders of the “death groups” who gave interviews right and left aged 13. In reality, young people’s involvement in politics, this quarter of protestors, has always existed, and many small protests that we’ve seen, where no journalists were present apart from us, generally speaking have been carried out by very young people, often schoolkids.

In a sense, this is how it’s always been, has nobody told you anything about 1968? It’s been a change in perception: we see them now.

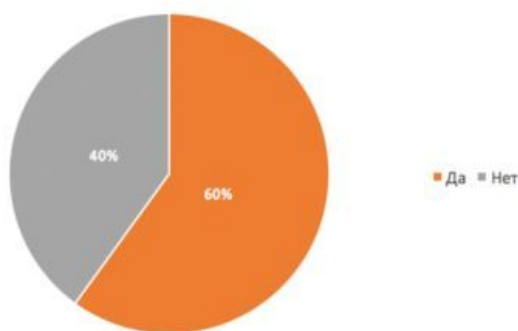
— *Why?*

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37987826>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Whale_Challenge

— In 1970, well-known anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote her book *Culture and Commitment*. In it, she talks about three fundamental types of cultural exchange, based on the possibility of information being received. In traditional culture there is one way to transfer information — from the old to the young. According to this, to give an example from Polynesia, when a grandfather holds a newly born grandchild in his hands, he understands completely and to a precise degree how this grandchild will live its life: in exactly the same manner that its grandfather lived his. The old are the only means to receive information about how to live, the older a person is, the more experience he has that he can pass on. It's impossible to stop evolution, but the speed of change in a traditional society is slower than the length of one person's life. But in the modern world, everything changes very quickly, meaning that receiving information vertically is no longer possible, people learn from their peers as much as from their elders. Mead writes that soon, the cultural exchange will reach the point at which teenagers will learn faster than their elder generations, and then, in turn, a paradoxical situation will arise in which the younger generation will teach the elder, and the elder generation will be deprived of what it perceives to be its most important skill — the passing on of experience. Your experience doesn't seem pertinent to anyone. Today's teenagers, for example, have no need for our experience of standing in queues in the 1980s and the beginning of the 90s. Because of this, writes Mead, a neurosis will develop, an intense stress. On the other hand, such a generational break leads to the conclusion that you have stopped understanding the younger generations. Before, mutual understanding was built on a model: I teach, he understands, if he doesn't understand, I shout at him. But now it's turned out that there's nothing to actually pass on, so the fear bubbles up — if I have no influence on my teenager, who does? The scary sensation that we have lost control over our younger generation begins to appear. We can't understand this entity, it's dangerous, it governs itself by indiscernible rules, and we should follow it at all times, deciphering its behaviour. If we look at the current parental petitions, the same intonation rings out clearly in them all: I don't understand my child.

Пикеты в защиту Павла Устинова:
«Являетесь ли вы артистом?»

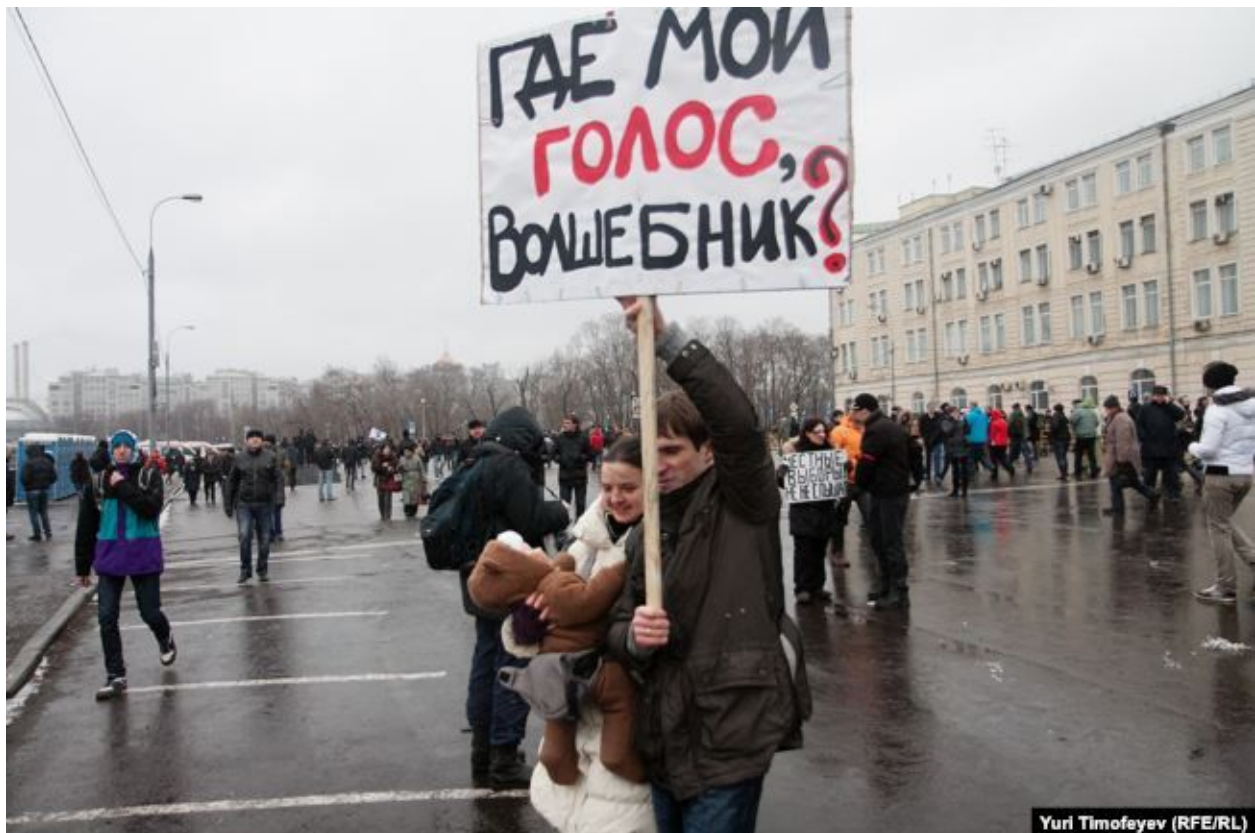


RFE/RL Graphics

Pickets in defence of Pavel Ustinov: "Are you an artist?" Yes (Orange): 60%. No (Grey): 40%.

And so, since 2016 criminal statistics haven't changed, but much more information about teenage crime has appeared in the media. And then Navalny's protests start happening. Before this, the media weren't aware that between a quarter and a third of participants in rallies were young people, and now here they were in the limelight, and the journalists noticed them. When it happened, everyone from *Channel One* to *Rain* asked me: how has Navalny got such a hold on teenagers, how did he get them out on the streets?⁴ I said: he didn't, there was no coercion or zombification here. I recorded a number of interviews with young people, which usually went "I watched Navalny's statements, I agree with him in this case while disagreeing in a number of others, but I want working democratic institutions" — this was by far the most frequent response.

Besides this, the youth have more of a preference for decorating themselves in ribbons and signs (at the rally on the 10th of August the young portions of the crowd did this 15% more regularly than other groups), the signs are often creative, drawing your eyes towards them and creating the illusion that they make up the majority.



Bolotnaya Ploshchad, 2011. Sign reads, "where's my vote/voice, wizard?"

⁴ Channel One is the biggest state-owned news network (website: 1tv.ru), Rain is an independent channel that does lots of live reports from protests (website: rain.ru)

This sensation that teenagers are dangerous, that they are agents of an external force, has sown the entirety of the current moral panic in the minds of law enforcement. When teenagers are arrested at protests, they are interrogated using the methods of the 70s: how did you meet the organisers, what did they tell you to shout at the rally, what signs did they give you in the newspaper? Once again, the prevalent idea for them is that these “schoolkids”, who have no ideas of their own, have been zombified by Navalny, by the opposition or by the state department.

Women at the march

— *Has there been any kind of evolution since 2011 regarding the makeup of participants at protests and political demands?*

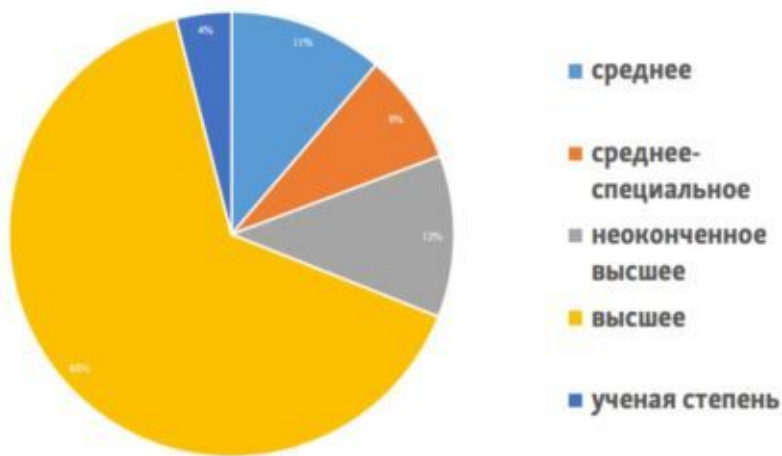


From left to right: journalist Alexandr Pshenichnii, Alexandra Arkhipova and poet Lev Rubinshtein. Summer protests 2019.

— Here’s one interesting thing: there’s been a sharp change not even in the percentage of women, but in how they take part. Men were usually 60% to women’s 40%, but this group of women took poorly to holding signs. If they did take one, it was usually either young girls or, at the other end, pensioners. It was during the moscow protests against renovation and pension reform that the situation changed so sharply: a huge quantity of women activists appeared, women from the ages of 20-50 started actively picking up the placards. At the pickets in defence of [Ivan] Golunov more than 60% of participants were women. In 2018 we frequently saw instances at unsolicited protests, where while police were all around arresting protestors, a

woman would be standing with a sign while her husband walked next to her and tried to look like he had nothing to do with it.

Образование участников митинга 10 августа 2019 года



RFE/RL Graphics

Level of education of participants in rallies on the 10th of August 2019:

- Secondary (light blue): 11%
- Specialised Secondary (orange): 8%
- Unfinished Higher Education (grey): 12%
- Higher Education (yellow): 65%
- Postgraduate Degree (dark blue): 4%

Generally speaking, the forms of protest have changed considerably: there have been lots of new kinds of pickets. The response to the arrest of Golunov and Ustinov, for example, was queues of picketers, each of whom stood for around a minute — I call this a collective serial picket. Or, in another variation, many are fans of walking: a group of people come with rolled up signs, suddenly get up at Lubyanka, unfurl their signs, stand there for 10 minutes until the police come, before quickly rolling them back up and relocating to the next point. This is an example of a collective roving picket.

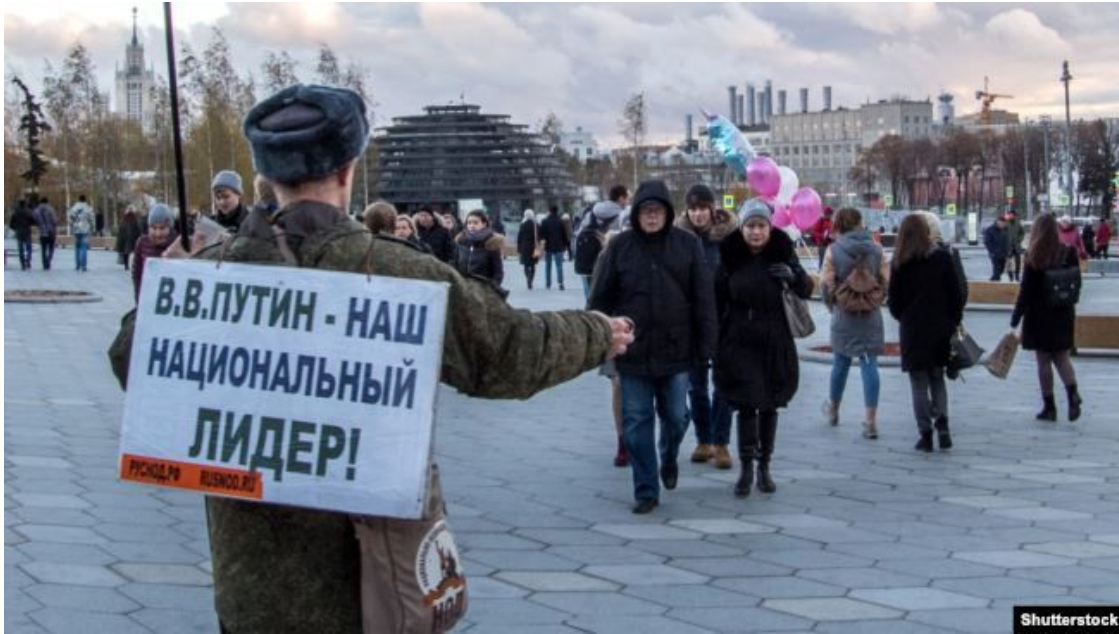
As this continues, it becomes all the more unclear who these pickets are addressed to. Like, there's an elderly woman standing on Marsovy field in Peter[sburg]. It's minus twenty, nobody around, just us and her. We ask her who, in her opinion, will see this sign. She says "they'll see it on the internet: take a picture, upload it onto the internet". She stands in physical space, while her viewers see her in a virtual one. Once the protest has relocated to the virtual space, it's not important where the protest took place, it's important that it's audience sees it and reacts. Or how about people coming to Sakharov square, and being unable to get through the gates, leaving them standing in a queue for ages. They unfurl their signs, take a photo with the crowds

as a background, then escape to a coffee shop to post it online. Were they at the rally or not? Or how about this: after the arrests at the rally on the 26th of March 2017 there were supportive protests taking place, one of which was in Novosibirsk. They were denied the right to have a rally, but they were allowed to picket. A picket differs in that you are not allowed any voice-amplifying apparatus. What did the organisers do? They messaged everyone: get yourself on one of these messaging apps — *Zello*, *Periscope*, etc., and as a result the square was full of people with headphones in, buried in their tablets or phones, from time to time shouting “Yes, we agree!” or simply silently raising their hands. The statements were made strictly through these apps. So, the question is: where did this picket take place? In virtuality or a physical space? It’s important to remember that now, every political event has its virtual component.

Fear of the ruble

— *Is it true that only state-contracted workers end up at the pro-state events?*

— We worked at an event in support of a Putin candidate in Luzhniki before the elections. There were a lot of members of the National Liberation Movement (NLM) there, and as a rule, they truly believe in their ideology. The ideology is a conspiracy theory, they believe that we are being controlled by the Americans who control everything, including the state Duma and Channel One. Their task, therefore, is to liberate Putin from this influence and give him complete control. They stood at this event with posters and leaflets, and people would first wander over to them, before turning around again sharpish, taking some of the free plaited cloth and packets of oranges with them. A few dragged along little Russian flags. I asked one participant why he had so many flags, and he responded: “I’m going to make cocktail straws out of them”. I asked a second man why he was carrying such a huge armful of flags, and he said “to make a fence for my dacha”. NLM activists hate this, they moan, saying that these people are traitors, they’re shaming Russia.

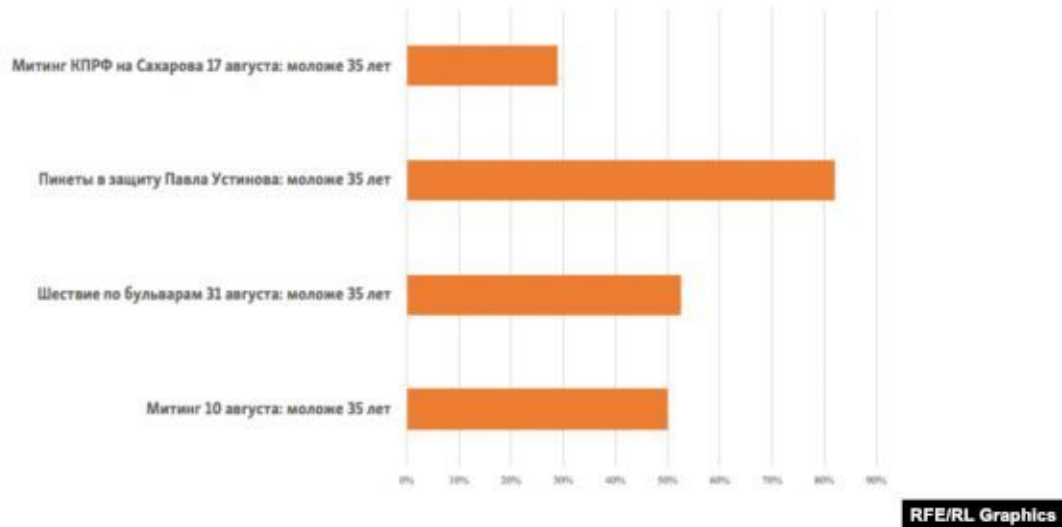


"V.V. Putin is our national leader!"

— *What's the percentage of actual activists to state employees?*

— We don't know. Administrative coercion is huge, but it's often said that 10 teachers from every school must end up going. Generally speaking, the people that go are the ones that are nearby. In other words, administrative coercion is huge, but there's also a kind of innate internal imperative, and if you really don't want to, you don't go. Secondly: at their core these rallies are also soviet-style acts of loyalty and, accordingly, this form of loyalty must be fairly well represented. So starting from Antimaidan in February 2015 and from the rally-concerts in support of unification with Crimea we started to notice some signs which appeared to be written in children's handwriting but had actually been digitally reproduced with a font. We call these pseudo-written signs, they imitate the voice of the people. Another important indicator of administrative resources being used is the percentage of those who refuse to answer any questions. At Antimaidan this percentage was three times higher than at opposition protests.

Возраст участников митингов в 2019 году



Percentage of participants under 35 at rallies in 2019:

KPRF meeting at Sakharov August 17: 29%

Pickets in defence of Pavel Ustinov: 82%

March on the boulevards August 31: 52%

Rally August 10: 50%

— *Some believe that activists for NLM and SERB are just idiots, from the lowest depths of the social order, and they tend to be looked down upon from on high — what do your figures say?*

— We don't have a great amount of statistics, but I have recorded lots of interviews. Generally, they all have higher education, in SERB there are lots of officers, and lots of women with higher education. My typical interviewee from NLM was a woman between 35 and 55. They sincerely believe themselves to be correct. Often, these people have a history of strong trauma, which tends to be linked to Ukraine: someone had someone close die in the House of Trade Unions, someone else fought in the Donbass for one side or the other, someone has relatives. They lived through this vividly, and are scared of it repeating in Russia.

— *Does the state achieve anything through violent methods? Are people more scared?*

— You can force a person not to turn up to a rally, but that doesn't mean they won't be dissatisfied. They'll write angry Facebook posts, they'll stick up leaflets, they'll deface 'United Russia' posters. Take OVD-Info, for example, which over the course of the last year turned from a group of volunteers into an important news source, a source of information and a form of support for political prisoners. Now, can you believe, they have OVD-Taxi, which means if you come out of an interrogation at night, you can call and they will send you a free taxi driven by a

volunteer. Solidarity and support are growing extraordinarily, which is something we can measure in truly enchanting figures: before this summer, OVD-Info collected on average around half a million rubles a month. In March of 2019, 1161 people cumulatively donated just over half a million. In April the figure stayed the same, in May too, then in July 8000 people collected more than 8 million. 13 times bigger! You can avoid the rallies, you can be scared, but you can always contribute.⁵

Any strategy always has its corresponding tactic. For example, previously you could bring practically any sign to a rally. Now they force you to unfold them, carry them through special scanners, then confront you if the sign doesn't correspond to the agreed theme of the rally. Ways of fighting this have cropped up: people have been walking in with blank paper and writing on them afterwards, on location. Lots type something on a tablet and hold it up. One woman carried an enormous artificial silk anti-Putin banner through security in her bra. On Facebook women have discussed the possibility of hiding signs in their bags under piles of tampons and underwear: the police open the bag, blush, close it and let the person through with their sign.



Rally on the 10th of August 2019

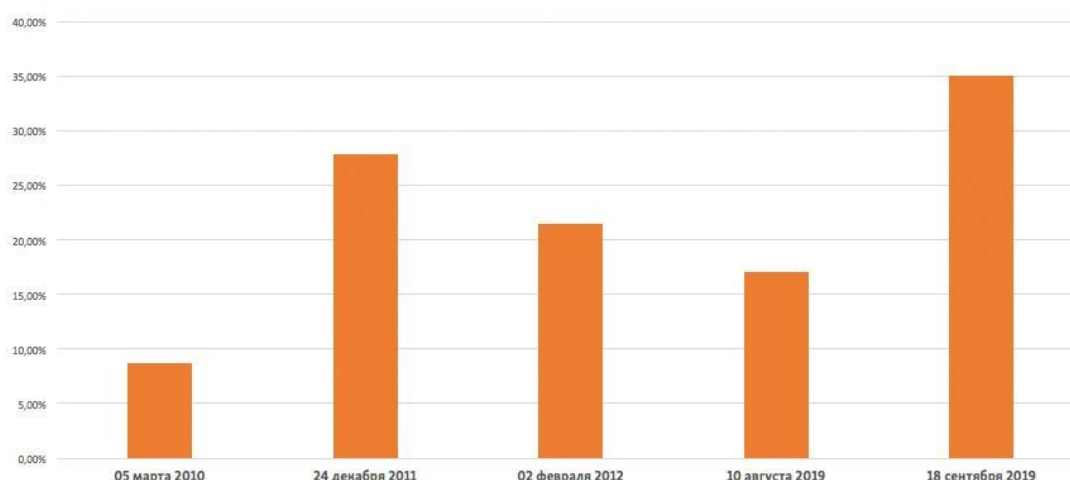
— *Is it the same people time and again at each rally, or are new people being mobilised?*

⁵ As of September 28th, Google valued 500,000 rubles at £6,291.55. 8 million rubles is £100,664.78.

— The ‘closer to home’ a problem is, the easier it is to go out to a protest, so action against police violence is always enormously successful: they could plant drugs on anyone, and anyone can catch a truncheon to the head. Thanks to this, 10-15% of people at the August rallies were first-timers, while at the pickets in defence of Ustinov and Golunov the number was 35%! In light of this we asked everyone about “Smart Vote”: 64% of those questioned at the 31st of August march on the boulevards decided to follow the advice of “Smart Vote”, while at the Ustinov pickets almost nobody in the cohort had ever heard about it.⁶

RFE/RL Graphics

Пришли на митинг первый раз



Percentage tending a rally for the first time. Left to right: 05.03.2010, 24.12.2011, 02.02.2012, 10.08.2019, 18.09.2019.

— *You don't seem to have noticed any pessimism amongst participants: we've been coming out on the streets for so many years, but nothing has changed at heart.*

— The success of political protest doesn't consist of how many people came to the event, that's entirely secondary. The success depends on whether people think that they made a statement.

— *We can think as much as we want, but they still caught Golunov and Ustinov — that's evidently a win for them, and corruption, Medvedev and his ducks, are not going anywhere.⁷*

⁶ “Smart Vote” (Умное Голосование) was a tactical voting website organised by the opposition party FBK for the September 2018 elections, where voters entered their region and were told the optimal vote with which to unseat the United Russia candidate.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43202127>

— There are two different tasks: you can want things to change, but even the actions we're taking are changing people. Right now, the important thing is not simply that we have some kind of response to the state, but that we are also changing the very structure of society, forms of solidarity are growing: we have OVD-Info, we have a huge quantity of lawyers, mutual assistance funds, a mass of people going not just to rallies but to courts, collecting money, signing petitions, standing in line at pickets, writing posts on social media. Right now is the critical formation of a russian variant on civil society, which very distinctly contrasts itself formally with the existing power structures. This is no less important than the response of the state, and whether someone is released or not. Many, including you, judging by your question, seem to think that we are playing some kind of ping-pong, we hit a ball at them, they hit it back at us. In reality, we are skipping rope, building our leg muscles, changing ourselves.