

# **“You’re not standing alone”: Single-person Protest in Russia (2006-2017)**

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Marie Dewaegenaere

Student number: 01106111

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Sami Zemni

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Ragulin Vitaliy | [dervishv.livejournal.com](http://dervishv.livejournal.com)

A woman stages a single-person picket on the Red Square in Moscow. She holds a placard saying: "This power must go away!" (Эта власть должна уйти!).

THOSE WHO TAKE A STAND ARE NEVER ALONE (Verstraete, 2013)

## **Abstract**

Following the restrictive legislation on assembly and the heavy-handed police interventions during mass protests in the mid-2000s, the maneuvering space for protesters was significantly limited. A loophole in current Russian legislation, however, still allowed for one kind of protest that was exempted from prior notification to authorities: the single-person pickets (“оди́ночные пикеты”). A vocal minority of Russians increasingly engaged in small-scale, symbolic solitary protests across the country, communicating their grievances and raising awareness on both social and political topics. This article is a first attempt to reveal the unique peculiarities of these single-person protests in Russia. Building on the concept of political opportunities structures and Charles Tilly’s theory of contentious repertoires, the single-person protests are discussed against the background of the political developments during the Putin-Medvedev-Putin era. In an attempt to address the specific characteristics, a single-person protest event catalog was assembled and analyzed. Alongside social, spatial and temporal features, several other variables are discussed. This way, the article aims to contribute to the previous studies on protest dynamics in Russia, transcending the traditional focus on *mass* mobilizations by concentrating on the particular solo protest tactic.

## **Samenvatting**

Door de restrictieve wetgeving uit 2004 en het gewelddadige politieoptreden tegen elke vorm van onaangekondigd protest, werd de bewegingsvrijheid van Russische opposanten fors ingeperkt. Toch glipt er één protestactie door de mazen van het net, waarin men vrijgesteld is van de toelatingsaanvraag aan Russische autoriteiten: het één-persoonsprotest. Een luidruchtige minderheid in Rusland is steeds meer gaan inzetten op kleine, symbolische soloacties om hun eisen kracht bij te zetten, en om aandacht te vestigen op politieke en sociale thema’s. Dit artikel is een eerste aanzet om specifieke kenmerken van het solo protest in Rusland bloot te leggen. Voortbouwend op het concept van veranderende *opportunity structures* en *contentious repertoires*, ontleend aan Charles Tilly, worden de soloprotectacties besproken tegen de achtergrond van politieke ontwikkelingen tijdens het tijdperk van Putin-Medvedev-Putin. In een poging om de specifieke karakteristieken te achterhalen, werd een corpus van soloprotectacties aangemaakt en geanalyseerd. Naast de sociale, ruimtelijke en chronologische trends, werden ook andere variabelen besproken. Op die manier probeert dit artikel bij te dragen aan de reeds bestaande literatuur over protest in Rusland, door te focussen op de specifieke soloprotectactiek, die de traditionele focus op massamobilisaties overstijgt.

## Introduction

Ahead of the Russian presidential elections in March 2018, the controversial candidate Ksenia Sobchak staged several “одиночные пикеты”, translated as “single-person pickets”.<sup>1</sup> During a campaign trip in Grozny, as well as back in Moscow outside the Duma, she ostentatiously stood alone and held placards that respectively read: “Free Oyub Tetiev” (Свободу Оюбу Титиеву) and “Deputies! We don’t want you!” (Депутаты! Мы вас не хотим!). Publicly staging these *one-woman* pickets, Sobchak shrewdly appropriated imagery from the Russian protest repertoire.

When the Duma in 2004 amended protest legislation and adopted the controversial law requiring prior notification to authorities, the maneuvering space for protesters was significantly limited. Single-person pickets, however, were exempted from prior notification. And since the mid-2000s, a vocal minority of Russians engaged in spontaneous single-person pickets everywhere across the country, cleverly bypassing new restrictions. Anonymous citizens, grassroots activists, opposition politicians, students, veterans, stay-at-home mothers and pensioners have taken to the streets on their own (or dispersed in groups) and have expressed their grievances, deploying an arsenal of symbolic attributes and well-aimed slogans. Dozens of these single-person protests occur every month, often taking authorities by surprise. Although there have been several high profile examples of dramatic one-person actions, they are by their nature uneventful and often go unreported. Unlike some blips of mass mobilization, single-person pickets have been an important part of the daily Russian political life.

Small-scale protests in Russia have been systematically overshadowed by the headline-grabbing mass mobilizations. It was not until after the mass uprisings during the “Snow Revolution” in 2011-2013 that a body of literature on the Russian protest landscape exploded.<sup>2</sup> The previous underexposed engagement of Russians that preceded these uprisings, misled observers to believe that Russians finally awoke from their winter sleep in 2011-2013 (Robertson, 2012). However, the reality was far from this. Scholars have demonstrated how the Russian contentious politics assumed new contours since the mid-2000s: Protests moved from the Russian provinces into the capitals (Robertson, 2013), demands changed from socio-

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology is in order. I didn’t solely focus on the English translation of the Russian word пикет (picket), which Russians generally use to refer to single-person protest. The literal translation would exclude many solitary protests from a different format. Throughout the article, I use the terms picket, protest, act, performance, event and action synonymously.

<sup>2</sup> The term Snow Revolution refers to the first large uprisings since 1990s that started in 2011 and continued until 2013. The flawed Russian legislative election results in December 2011 initially sparked the protests. Thereafter, the demonstrators continued to protest

economic to civic and political issues (Semenov & Lobanova, 2013; Semenov, 2017; Robertson, 2013), and repertoires shifted from Soviet-inspired gatherings into more performative protest acts (Robertson, 2013).

As the above mentioned findings indicate, scholarly interest in Russian protests has mainly focused on (new) social movements and mass gatherings (mobilizing at least 100 people). Much of the broader research on protest events is based on Charles Tilly's understanding of protest events as "contentious gatherings", collective actions determined by the co-presence of other people (2006: 49). But as Michael Biggs points out in his study on self-immolation, co-presence is not a necessary feature of protest tactics such as strikes, boycotts, hunger strikes or self-immolations (2013: 408). He argues that those are acts of collective action as well because someone makes a sacrifice in the name of a collective cause (Biggs, 2013: 407, 408). In line with Biggs, I consider single-person protests in Russia as "solitary" forms of collective action, because they, as Tilly has argued in the light of collective actions, also "affect the interests of at least one person outside their number" (2006: 49). There has been some isolated reporting on one-person events, but most studies focused purely on legislation condemning the act (Vdovichenko, 2015; Nazarov & Tokarev, 2015; Nazarov & Gusev, 2016; Simons & Voorhoof, 2016). I contend that the lack of research on single-person protest may obscure crucial trends in the Russian protest landscape.

This article is a first attempt to reveal some unique peculiarities of the single-person picket in Russia. It examines how and why Russians, between March 2006 (when single-person protests made their way into media reporting) and December 2017, took to the streets on their own. In order to analyze solitary protest, I compiled a protest-event dataset of 369 single-person picket events across Russia, assembled from opposition websites using search terms. Thereafter, I utilized protest event analysis to identify some key characteristics of single-person protests. In the first section, I provide a detailed description of the corpus, assessing the common pitfalls when cataloging protest events. In the second section, I examine single-man protests through the lens of Charles Tilly's notion of "the repertoire of collective action", against the background of changing political opportunity structures. The exploration of single-person protest questions whether traditional social movement theory has defined protest in a too narrowly quantitative way, only focusing on *mass* events. Nevertheless, it offers a useful framework to comprehend how Russian citizens mobilize and how their grievances are handled by the Russian state. In the third and final section of this paper, I will turn to the analysis of the data. In the first part, I shed a light on the people behind the solitary protests, and the claims they make. The second part consists of a detailed description of the single-person script,

focusing on the preferred locations and dates of the solo protesters. The repression by regime, police and pro-government groups is highlighted in the third and last part.

## **Data and Methodology**

Similar to pioneering scholars Charles Tilly (1978) and Ted Robert Gurr (1979), I compiled a database of single-person events. Before I delve deeper into the data, the definition of the single-protest type that this article will analyze should be sharpened to differentiate the various forms of solo demonstrations.

A solitary picket can be reported as a one-person event, but it might also be part of a broader campaign, involving a larger number of activists (Lankina & Savrasov, 2009: 8). We can distinguish three kinds of solo demonstrations in Russia. The first type, as in the name itself, is performed by *one* participant. Except for some spectators and unexpected visitors, the protester conducts the picket or action on her/his own. The second type cleverly anticipates current legislation, in which several single people are allowed to protest collectively, if the individuals are standing 50 meters apart from each other.<sup>3</sup> In the third type, people agree to take turns, replacing each other to hold the placards or shout out slogans.<sup>4</sup> Here, I will focus on single-person protests with one participant conducting the picket. Data on the so-called mass solitary protests are often incomplete and much trickier to track down for each participant, let alone details on causes or detention.

Current realities in Russia complicated the collection of protest events, particularly of single-person protests. The Kremlin's tightening screws on official media, often resulting in self-censorship, limits the information of protests in official news coverage. This is especially true for events publicly opposing the regime, when state owned media both try to discredit the antiregime protests and negatively influence the public's attitude towards civic activism (Lankina, 2016: 1). Furthermore, reporters are generally more diligent in covering mass protests or dramatic protest performances, at the expense of reporting on smaller, "less newsworthy" events. Precisely because of their far-flung nature and focus around bread-and-butter issues, many single-person events easily go unnoticed by the mainstream media.

To overcome these limitations, the corpus outlined here is a compilation of single-person protests selected from online activist coverage and self-reporting websites. As a result of Russia's state-saturated media landscape and the low-profile protest tactic, the gathering of

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<sup>3</sup> Russians call this a "mass solitary picket" («массовый одиночный пикет»).

<sup>4</sup> Russians often refer to this as a "series of solitary pickets" («серия одиночных пикетов»).



protest events from opposition websites has become an accepted practice to analyze protest (Gorokhovskaya, 2016: 116). In their research on regional dimensions in the Russian protest landscape, Graeme Robertson (2011, 2013) and Tomila Lankina and Alexey Savrasov (Lankina & Savrasov, 2009) lay the groundwork for this search strategy. Throughout his work, Robertson has developed a protest catalogue on the basis of reports from the Ministry for Interior Affairs (MVD) and the left-wing Institute for Collective Action (IKD). Lankina and Savrasov assembled protest databases using reports from the website “March of Dissenters” (*namarsh.ru*).<sup>5</sup> In line with their work, I employed data from the IKD dataset and from the regional opposition websites *namarsh.ru* and *kasparov.ru*, set up by former chess grandmaster, now liberal oppositionist Garry Kasparov. The IKD dataset is run by a group of oppositionist sociologists and activists and its timespan ranges from 2006 to mid-2017. Kasparov’s personal website *kasparov.ru* and the “March of Dissenters” website are operated by activists and volunteers from The Other Russia coalition.<sup>6</sup> Except for some cases, most of the single-person events are referenced on both of Kasparov’s websites. They cover the period from 2006 to 2017.

The *namarsh.ru* and *kasparov.ru* datasets monitor protest events in the same way as the IKD website. Both opposition networks are run by activists and cover protests within Russian borders (Lankina & Savrasov, 2009). They rely on dispatches from local respondents and from (online) press articles. Activists publish reports on both localized, small-scale protest and large-scale demonstrations and marches, involving participants from a wide range of political preferences. Most articles are accompanied by a web link referring to press reports, making the data verifiable. I went further and also looked for social media reports and blogs, and photographs where possible. In the corpus, I also listed slogans and protest signs, to detail the topic of the protest. There is some overlap between the IKD dataset and the regional opposition websites, but a fair amount of solitary incidents are only mentioned across one of the two databases.

Searching the databases, it was important to first limit the number of excerpts analyzed, fitting my definition of the single-person protest. As already mentioned above, this article is restricted to the individual single-person picket. The Russian vocabulary for single-person protests is usually limited to adjectives: «одиначный» (single, solitary), «одинокий» (single, solitary) and «индивидуальный» (individual); nouns: «пикет» (picket), «пикетчик»

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<sup>5</sup> The Dissenters’ March was a series of opposition rallies across Russia from 2006 to 2007, organized by The Other Russia coalition.

<sup>6</sup> The Other Russia coalition, not to be confused with the political party of The Other Russia, was an alliance, formed in 2006, between opposition (political) movements, opposition leaders and individual citizens of all stripes.

(picketer), «пикетирование» (picket), «протест» (protest), «демонстрация» (demonstration) and «акция» (action, performance); and adverbs: «в одиночку» (by oneself) and «в одиночестве» (alone, on his/her own). Collocations of these keywords were used, taking into account changes in morphology, as search terms to identify single-person events in the online databases. Therefore, the selection of single-person protests became more coherent. I counted all events on Russian soil, with one protester conducting the picket on her/his own. Transcripts of these events were organized by date and then analyzed. In total, I counted 369 protest acts carried out by 287 different protesters. Cataloging the events, I considered the diversity of protesters. One protester with great stamina would create a distorted view of what is ‘really out there’ and complicate the interpretation. For each single-person event, I set basic variables: protesters, protest scripts, date, location and demands. The data also captures efforts by the police, authorities, pro-government groups and individuals to hinder solitary protesters. I subdivided the causes of protest into four different categories; political issues (anti-regime protests at regional and national level, protest against electoral falsifications and corruption at the national level, against new policies or bad implementation), civil rights issues (protest against violations of civil rights), civic activism (protest dealing with corruption at regional level, environmental and development issues and fair justice issues), and socio-economic issues (protest in the names of wages and labor rights, against the lack of social benefits). This categorization should be handled with caution, because solo demonstrators made multiple demands at the same time.

The data is obviously biased inasmuch that I build on politically motivated correspondents. Given the liberal leaning of the networks behind the websites, they mostly concentrate on protest events critical of the authorities.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the vast Russian territory makes the database prone to underexposure of isolated regions and over-representation of populated metropolitan cities (Semenov, 2017: 8). Also, the single-protest transcripts in the corpus are treated as equally significant events. However, due to the different media attention or shock effect, some single-person actions are more influential than others.

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<sup>7</sup> The opposition websites were not spared from government censorship either. In the summer of 2007, entry to the sites hosted by The Other Russia coalition was blocked. ‘Без фильтрации: «Корбина Телеком»: Проблема находится не в нашей зоне ответственности’ (2007, June 6). *Namarsh*. Retrieved from: [www.namarsh.ru/materials/4666C9132B48A.html](http://www.namarsh.ru/materials/4666C9132B48A.html). Last accessed 9 May 2018. In March 2014, *kasparov.ru* was censored at the request of the Russian Prosecutor General’s Bureau, because the website “spreads calls for unauthorized mass events”. ‘Ограничен доступ к ряду интернет-ресурсов, распространявших призывы к несанкционированным массовым мероприятиям’ (2014, March 13). *Roskomnadzor*. Retrieved from: <http://rkn.gov.ru/news/rsoc/news24447.htm>. Last accessed 9 May 2018.

The exposition above shows that my corpus does not cover all of solitary activism. Accordingly, data on the number of events should be handled with caution. The overall number of 369 solo protest events is modest in light of the 12-year long time span the data cover. On the one hand it is arbitrary, since the use of search terms is artificial and there are numerous surveys on single-person protest without the used terms. On the other hand, it is representative in the sense that the recorded single-person events were made explicitly identifiable by the websites itself by the key words. Therefore, this corpus enables me to draw some general conclusions on single-person protest activism.

Finally, throughout the analysis, I will illustrate the characteristics with a few examples from the corpus. I use pseudonyms instead of names in order to protect the identity of the participants. Only public figures who are not at risk of being exposed are mentioned by name.

### **Theorizing single-person protest in Russian context**

Charles Tilly defined contentious politics as “interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interest, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties” (2008: 5). The solitary pickets engage in contentious politics and are remarkable for their accessibility to a wide range of people. Recent history of popular contention is replete with examples of individual protest acts. Some famous single protesters are Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in a defiant action against separatism in 1955, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who set himself on fire in protest against the persecution of Buddhists in 1963; the anonymous ‘Tank Man’, who solely tried to stop a column of Chinese tanks from driving into the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989; the cellist Vedran Smailovich, who in 1992 played his cello in a war-torn Sarajevo for 22 days, one for each person killed in a mortar attack, and the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation on the eve of the Arabic Revolutions in 2010 became a symbolic act in the wider Arab Spring. These events exemplify established forms of solitary action in the global repertoire of protest. Russian solitary protest fits into this repertoire, but obviously differs from the previous examples in terms of context, cost, cause and target.

Tilly’s “repertoires of contention” offers a potential tool for analyzing characteristics in the methods and meanings of solitary activism in Russia. He employs the concept of ‘repertoire’ to describe the myriad tactics and performances used by protesters to make claims (Tilly, 1977). Inspired by Tilly’s insights, scholars further broadened the concept of the repertoire to a toolkit (as cited in Taylor & van Dyke, 2004) of protest strategies used by protesters everywhere (della

Porta & Diani, 1999; McAdam & Snow, 1997). Likewise, in this article I approach the single-person protest as one of the various peaceful tactics that Russians select from existing repertoires. Of course, none of the protest repertoires is self-explanatory. Strategies of claim-making develop through time and are inseparably connected to their political contexts (Taylor & van Dyke, 2004). Here the concept of political opportunity structures comes into play. According to Tilly, each regime “creates a specific environment of political opportunities and threats” to which protesters react (2006: 43). Accordingly, to address the solitary protests, we must take into account changing legislation against the backdrop of Putin’s style of government. I will not discuss Russia’s broad post-Soviet political legacy, but I will instead focus on characteristics of the Putin regime and on the recent amendments to the laws on assembly that have affected the one-person protests.

In the mid-1990s, economic hardship and the monopolistic post-Soviet regime knocked the legs out from under organizational capacity of protesters (Semenov, 2017). Resistance was isolated in the provinces, centered around local grievances, and limited to direct actions, such as road blocking, strikes and occupying buildings (Robertson, 2012). When Yeltsin resigned in 1999, the Russia he bequeathed to Putin was weak and decentralized, and the masses had largely pulled back from politics (Semenov, 2017). Putin centralized power, boosted the economy and reassigned the state to an active role in Russian politics (Robertson, 2012). In the mid-2000s, a spill-over from the color revolutions<sup>8</sup> provoked the regime’s ‘color-phobia’ and influenced its defensive response on protests (Smyth et al., 2013; Sakwa, 2014). By the summer of 2004, the Duma adopted a legal regulation of assembly: Federal Law No.54-FZ on “Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets” (hereinafter: Law on Assembly).<sup>9</sup> Similar to other countries, the law set out a procedure of notification of public events to authorities. But the European Commission for Democracy through Law, known as the Venice Commission, considered the notification procedure set out in the Russian Law on Assembly more of a request for permission than a notification.<sup>10</sup> Single-person pickets, however were exempted from prior notification.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Color Revolutions’ is a collective term for the uprisings in several countries of the former Soviet Union and in the Balkans during the 2000s, among which the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and the Tulip Revolution (also called the Pink Revolution) in Kyrgyzstan (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Federal Law No.54-FZ of 19 June 2004 on “Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets” (as amended and supplemented).

<sup>10</sup> See opinion on the Federal Law No. 54-FZ of 19 June 2004 on “Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets” of the Russian Federation, paragraph 30. Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 90th Plenary Session (2012, March 16-17). Retrieved from: [www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2012\)007-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2012)007-e). Last accessed 5 May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Federal Law No.54-FZ of 19 June 2004 on “Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets”, Chapter 2, Article 4, paragraph 1 (as amended and supplemented).

President Dmitry Medvedev showed some dedication to allow more leeway for opposition when he vetoed further amendments to the Law on Assembly in 2010.<sup>12</sup> In this newfound space, Russians mobilized against the flawed election results in December 2011, resulting in the largest uprisings since the breakup of the Soviet Union (Lankina, 2014: 2). But since his all-but-inevitable third reign in 2012, President Putin brought back the scepter of wiping out opposition. In the years after the “Snow Revolution”, the Law on Assembly was significantly amended by Federal Law No.65-FZ. The newly adopted laws further tightened assembly regulations and drastically cropped the space to mobilize and protest. Solitary picketers were now required to keep a distance of fifty meters from each other and sound-amplifying attributes were banned.<sup>13</sup> The new restrictions also allowed judges to qualify solitary pickets as an assembly if they saw a common cause and target.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the amendments included the establishment of authorized places for public events,<sup>15</sup> the so called “hyde parks”.<sup>16</sup> These laws significantly limited the maneuvering space for dissent. Protest organizers critical of the regime were denied permission or pushed into desolated locations. In contrast, pro-government organizations like the pro-kremlin youth group Nashi have been given a free pass to organize mass protests (Amnesty, 2014a: 4). Therefore, the solo protest emerged as an exemplary tactic of mainly anti-regime protesters, who increasingly see their voices muffled.

In the first part of my analysis, I shed a light on the people staging the solitary actions. Afterwards, I turn to the script of the single-person tactic and explain how the participants by means of symbolic protest paraphernalia stage their one-person act. In the last part of the analysis, I zoom in on the regime’s response to solo protesters. As will become clear in the next paragraphs, Russians stage solitary actions not only on the basis of strategic decision-making. The analysis demonstrates how solo pickets stem from the combination of shared experiences of state repression and outcomes of Putin’s policies. It also explains how repression of single-pickets is provoked by restrictive legislation, as well as by a growing intolerant atmosphere against public venting of dissonant political views.

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<sup>12</sup> In an open letter, published on the presidential website, addressed to the Chairman of the Federation Council Sergey Mironov and to the Speaker of the State Duma Boris Gryzlov, Medvedev rejected the new amendments. Retrieved from: [www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/9435](http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/9435). Last accessed 7 May 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Federal Law No.65-FZ of 8 June 2012 on “Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets”, Chapter 2, Article 7, paragraph 1.1 (as amended and supplemented).

<sup>14</sup> Federal Law No.65-FZ of 8 June 2012 on “Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets”, Chapter 2, Article 7, paragraph 1.1 (as amended and supplemented).

<sup>15</sup> Federal Law No.65-FZ of 8 June 2012 on “Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets”, Chapter 2, Article 8, paragraphs 1.1 and 1.2 (as amended and supplemented).

<sup>16</sup> The term “hyde park” (in Russian: Гайд-парк) refers to the Hyde Park in London, where anyone can speak freely in the Speakers’ Corner (Amnesty, 2014a).

## **Solo protesters through political exclusion**

Between 2006 and 2017, hardly a month passed without at least one solitary protest. In total, I counted 369 protest events that complied with my definition, carried out by 287 different protesters across Russia. The dozens of dispersed solitary protests clearly illustrate the variety of the people holding the placards.

As already hinted above, repression of dissenting voices has been a constant feature of President Putin's regime. Throughout his presidency, Putin slowly but surely subordinated the parliament and independent mass media (Gabowitsch, 2016: 50). His containment policy of the party system forced the political opposition, composed of liberals, leftists or ultranationalists, from the parliament into the streets (Gabowitsch, 2016: 119). As a result, these democratic institutions could no longer serve as outlets for political discontent and for Russians everywhere the opportunity for public participation in politics greatly diminished. On top of that, the legal restrictions on protest further silenced critical voices. The clampdown on both the parliamentary and non-systemic opposition, however, did not curtail all their mobilization capacity (Gabowitsch, 2016: 215). Instead, it opened up new opportunities and created coalitions across ideological divisions (Gabowitsch, 2016: 215).

As the author Mischa Gabowitsch also showed, a broad range of people, regardless of the content of their demands, found themselves in the same position, cut off from the official political debate (2016: 121). In the corpus, there were to be found opposition politicians of all ideological stripes (such as Ksenia Sobchak, Boris Nemtsov, Leonid Volkov, Lev Ponomarev, Ilya Yashin and Leonid Gozman), human rights defenders (Vladimir Ionov, Ildar Dadin, Irina Kalmykova, Suren Yedigaryov and Mark Galperin), LGBTQ activists (Nikolay Alekseev, Dmitriy Isakov and Kirill Kalugin), grassroots activists and, last but not least, ordinary citizens, who all deployed the same protest tactic. They spontaneously resorted to one of the few remaining outlets that doesn't involve the authorities: the single-person protest. The common struggle for freedom of expression resulted in a collective use of the solo protest tactic. Of course, solo demonstrations could result in detentions and prosecutions, but this was even more true for participating in large protests. More than prior solidarities or similar demands, solo demonstrators here are connected by shared experiences of the legal framework of Russian state repression.

### ***Protesting provinces***

The solitary protests took place in at least 60 of Russia’s 85 federal subjects and in over 80 cities.<sup>17</sup> Table 1 shows that cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg are the leaders in solitary activism. The majority of the rank-and-file protesters are based in Moscow, and to a lesser extent in Saint Petersburg. They make claims of a more political nature, pushing for legal reforms and fighting for human rights. But as we can see from table 2, the total number of solo protests outside the two cities has been notably larger. Overall, 62% of the solo protest events occurred in the regional provinces, 28% in Moscow and 10% in Saint Petersburg. As mentioned above, due to the volatile reporting of protest in Russia, data on numbers should be handled with caution. But data coverage does not explain all the temporal and spatial trends. Mapping the solo protest events shows that some regions are clearly more active than others. Krasnodar Krai, Sverdlovsk Oblast, Penza Oblast and Samara Oblast have the most recorded single pickets between 2006-2017. This dovetails with Tomila Lankina’s findings in her research on regional protest trends in Russia (2015). She linked the greater density of protests in those regions with their open and competitive political process and higher democracy ratings (Lankina, 2015: 27, 32).

Place	Number of solo protests
Moscow	82
Saint Petersburg	28
Krasnodar Krai	12
Sverdlovsk Oblast	12
Penza Oblast	11
Samara Oblast	11
Rostov Oblast	7
Tyumen Oblast	7

Table 1. Top 5 regions of solo protest, March 2006-December 2017

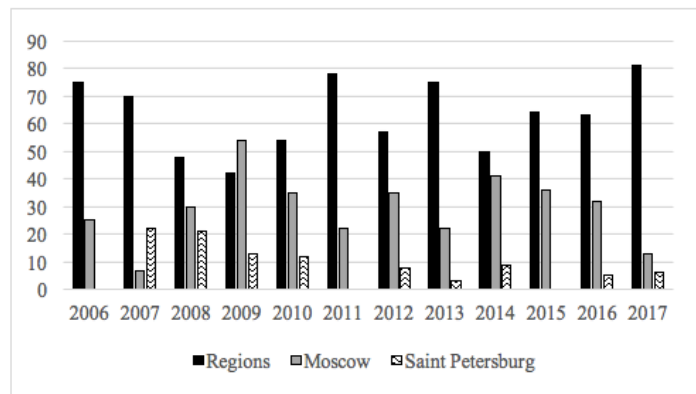


Table 2. Number of solo protests in the regions, Moscow and Saint Petersburg (% of total), March 2006-December 2017

The regional overweight resulted from the broad popularity that the solitary picket enjoyed among grassroots activists in Russia’s provinces. The local grassroots protesters undertake small solo initiatives addressing issues rooted in their everyday life. Firstly, they stage solitary pickets because those correspond with their attitude towards protest. The more low-profile

<sup>17</sup> The Russian Federation is divided in 85 federal subjects, including the recently added Sevastopol and the Republic of Crimea, which are still recognized by the international community as part of Ukraine. Every subject is an autonomous entity and has its own governor and parliament.

participants, both in the capital cities and in the provinces, are reluctant to telescope their everyday problems into politicized issues (Koveneva, 2006). Due to the increasing degree of protest restrictions, along with the bad aftertaste of repression during Soviet times, they avoid unwanted attention to one's deviating political views (Clément, 2015: 4). Instead, as we can see from table 4, local solo protesters seek to alleviate specific concerns, such as health care issues, pension benefits, labor rights, housing issues, rising tariffs, specific cases where individuals' rights have been violated, environmental issues and unpopular regional policies. The solo picket, as an accessible and easy to copy method, offered them an appropriate medium to draw the authorities' attention to the problems of the "little man". Secondly, grassroots activist can't rely on a strong politically motivated opposition core in like Muscovites can (Dmitriev, 2015: 240). Provincial activists have a more modest support base at their exposal and hence, the initiatives are small-scale, more diffuse and disconnected (Clément, 2015: 4).

Approximately 141 of the 287 participants are in one way or another (as supporters, members or personnel) connected to national and local branches of political and social movements, such as the Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko, the Russian Communist Party, the non-registered Other Russia Party and the opposition movements Left Front, Solidarnost and All-Russia Civil Forum. The data also show that the solo protesters seek to build alliances with other actions and running campaigns, such as the Dissenter's Marches, the "Putin Must Go" campaign<sup>18</sup> and the anti-corruption campaign launched by opposition politician Aleksey Navalny. And since political dissident Eduard Limonov initiated the "Strategy-31" action in July 2009, the 31<sup>st</sup> of every 31-day month became a busy day in the solo protesters' agendas.<sup>19</sup>

For some of the participants, the solitary protest was a crash course in protest activism. It allowed them to gain their first experiences of challenging the authorities. These previous protest experiences may ultimately play an important part in building coalitions for larger antiregime protests (Lankina, 2015: 26).

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<sup>18</sup> The public campaign was launched on 10 March 2010 by anonymous activists on the Russian website *putinavotstavku.ru*. On the website, visitors could sign a petition "Putin must go". The goal was to collect as much signatures as possible. Maloveryan, Y. (2010, March 26). 'Сайт «Путин должен уйти» и барьер для оппозиции'. *BBC News*. Retrieved from: [www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2010/03/100326\\_putin\\_against\\_for.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2010/03/100326_putin_against_for.shtml). Last accessed 12 May 2018.

<sup>19</sup> The "Strategy-31" campaign was a chain of protests all over Russia in support of the right to Freedom of Assembly. Several human rights organizations, such as The Other Russia, Solidarnost, The Moscow Helsinki Group and Memorial society supported the action. The number 31 refers to Article 31 of the Russian Constitution, that guarantees the freedom of assembly.



### *Small deeds for a greater cause*

When we disaggregate data by cause, we read from table 3 that the number of socio-economic protests in the name of wages, labor rights, housing, rising tariffs and social benefits slowly declined over the years. Instead, demands for civil rights and civic issues, mostly instigated by irresponsible development projects and a lack of environmental measures, have become much more popular. Table 4 shows how the category of civil rights issues outweighs any other type of claim; 115 solo protests were fueled by a sense of injustice against journalists, political oppositionists, political prisoners, grassroots activists and ordinary citizens. Table 5 (further below), which examines the locations of the protests, illustrates how solo demonstrators, both in the capitals and provinces, frequently protested in front of local police offices and detention centers in support of innocent detainees. In 2008, opposition activist Suren Yedigarov fiercely waited four days in a row in front of the Moscow police station at Petrovka 38, for the human rights activist Oleg Kozlovsky to be released. And in 2010, the leader of the Yabloko party and opposition politician Boris Nemtsov held a solitary picket in support of Andrey Pivovarov. Nemtsov was standing in front of the detention center where Pivovarov was held. The latter was detained for taking part in the Strategy-31. Others protested in front of court buildings to plead for specific cases in which criminal justice seemed to have gone astray. In 2013, a pensioner from Rostov picketed against the court building with a poster saying: “Don’t choke innocent pensioners with fines” (Не подавиться штрафами невинных пенсионеров). She could not afford to pay her outstanding fines for participating in unauthorized protests. And particularly poignant were the cases where family members in their solo actions demanded authorities to take responsibility in the unlawful prosecutions of their loved ones. In 2009, a mother stood in a solitary picket at the entrance of the Ingodinsky District Court and begged to bring her son home, who was allegedly jailed on false charges. In 2010, the wife of a prisoner camped in a tent outside the Krasnodar Administration. She went on a hunger strike to protest what she said was an unlawful detention of her husband. In 2013, the father of a young supposed drug delinquent went to the court and stated that the case against his son was falsified. In a desperate attempt in 2016, a young mother whose child had been missing for five years, went to the Red Square three days in a row to protest the way the case of her son’s disappearance was handled. In a heart-wrenching scene in the middle of the square, the mother held a poster directed to the ‘people in power’ and shouted: “This power must go away!” (Эта власть должна уйти!). The high number of civil rights-concerned protests indicates a widespread sense of impunity of the regime among Russian citizens. The great number of solo acts in

support of unjustly convicted people, widens the scope from specific cases to a general cry for supporting human rights.

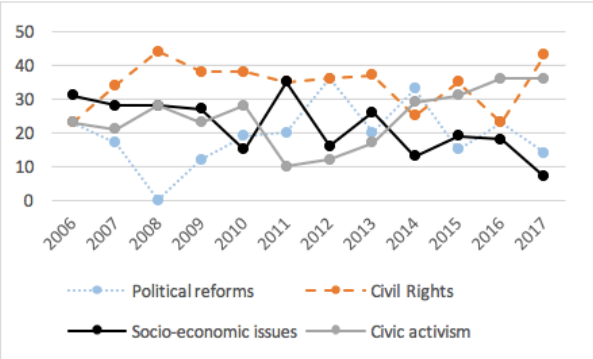


Table 3. Number of solo protests by category (% of total), March 2006-December 2017

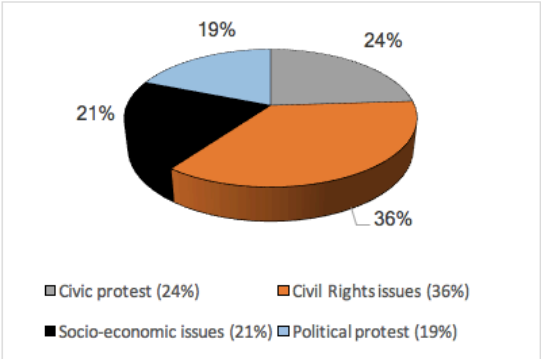


Table 4. Total number of solo protests by category (% of total), March 2006-December 2017

Furthermore, the data reveal temporal trends in the types of causes that people protest around (table 3). Between 2008 and 2012, we see a dramatic decrease of civic activism, compensated by a steep rise in political protest. It was no coincidence that political protest was on the rise during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. Firstly, upon coming into office in 2008, Medvedev initially had liberal-sounding plans for Russia. In the newfound political space under his regime, activists overcame their hesitation to engage in politicized protest (Lankina, 2014: 2). Solo protesters were mainly fueled by antiregime sentiments and the frustrations with local governors. Secondly, Vladimir Gelman noted a growing politicization of the Russian society (Gelman, 2015). People were disappointed with Medvedev’s unfulfilled modernization-promises and his failed economic reforms (Gelman, 2015: 114). The widespread dissatisfaction culminated in the Snow Revolution in 2011; followed with a peak of political solo protests in 2012. Afterwards, we see a decline in political solo activism, accompanied by a steady rise in civic demands. Since the 2011-2013 protest cycle did not overthrow the regime, Russians turned back to life in their own ‘backyards’ (Zheltnina, 2012a: 13). Table 3 shows how the trajectories of civic and political demands form a reverse triangle. This seems to suggest that when political opportunity structures are unfavorable (when political suppression increases), protesters tend to couch their grievances in particular local-parochial terms and vice versa. The trend of rearticulating political claims into civic demands when repression increases also emerged from Tomila Lankina’s study of the regional trends in Russian protests in 2007-2013 (2014: 3).

Between 2014 and 2015, solo protesters took to the streets against the annexation of Crimea and protested against the war in Ukraine. In 2016, the anti-war solo pickets continued, along with several commemorative acts to honor Boris Nemtsov, who was shot in February 2015. In 2017, we can see a rise of solo protest in the regions from table 2, expressing mostly civil rights demands (table 3). The majority of the solo protesters expressed their support for the opposition politician Alexey Navalny, who was detained several times in 2017 and ultimately excluded from the presidential elections of March 2018.

The analysis of the participants' demands gives an idea of the range of issues for which solo demonstrators in Russia protest. Not surprisingly, given the regional overweight, the overall number of solo demonstrations was related to socio-economic, civic and specific civil rights issues that were connected to certain people and places. In the next part, I focus on the different aspects of the solitary protest performance.

### **Script of the single-person protest**

Robertson showed how the Russian protest repertoire shifted since the late 1990s from 'direct actions like industrial strikes, hunger strikes, and road and rail blockades' to protests that are 'purely symbolic in nature, involving demonstrations and marches' (Robertson, 2013: 16). After the Duma introduced protest legislation, unconventional and symbolic protest tactics such as 'nano-demonstrations',<sup>20</sup> flash mobs, 'strolls' and artistic performances gained popularity (Nim, 2012, 2015; Akunina, 2014; Stolyarov, 2014). The solo protests fluctuate between the symbolic and direct actions. Initially, solo protests qualify as direct actions, because they cause direct disturbance of normal public life. But due to the increasing condemning of the act by authorities, where many protesters were arrested or trailed, the single-person protests gained a greater symbolic significance throughout the years.

Data illustrate how some solitary events were more idiosyncratic than others. Particularly outlandish was the example of performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky. Between 2012 and 2015, Pavlensky performed several provocative one-man actions, in which he sewed his lips together, wrapped himself in barbed wire, cut off his earlobe and nailed his scrotum to the cobblestones of the Red Square. His stunts were partly inspired by the radical art performances during the 1990's (do Vale, 2016) and by gulag practices, where prisoners nailed their testicles to trees to

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<sup>20</sup> Nano-demonstrations were staged in various cities across Russia between 2011 and 2012. They are flashmob protests, but instead of human beings, Lego dolls, Kinder Surprise toys and stuffed animals are the ones holding the placards. This type of unconventional protest ridiculed current legislation on assembly, because police were forced to take statements from the miniature non-humans participants (Nim, 2012, 2015).

protest the inhumane living conditions (Mervio, 2017: 39). Each of his individual actions were carefully choreographed, and widely covered by international media.

Pavlensky's performances, however, proved to be an exception to the rule. The gross of the less media-savvy protesters followed a more 'plain-spoken' script. The most frequent activity at solo protest events was picketing with posters: at 300 out of the 369 single events, protesters were holding placards and flags or collecting signatures and distributing leaflets. Almost all participants suited their actions to words in creative, well-aimed slogans. The solo protesters exclusively aimed at a Russian-speaking audience, since all of the slogans were in Russian. Unlike the disproportionate international reactions that Pavlensky unleashed, the solo protesters generally shied away from addressing audiences abroad.

In the remaining 70 one-person pickets, protesters deployed less conventional paraphernalia than pickets and posters. In 2009, at the Department of Environmental Management in Moscow, an activist surrounded herself with trees that were earmarked for destruction to make way for new developmental projects. Instead of ornaments, she grotesquely dressed the trees in tags, with date of birth and date of death. Standing in this macabre scene, she opposed the environmental policies. In 2011, a student brought an actual toilet and sat on it in front of the Smolensk administration, protesting the lack of public restrooms. That same year, the activist Suren Ghazaryan took to the streets, wearing a Santa Claus wig and beard, and handed out toilet rolls, with the word 'Constitution' written on it. Ahead of the presidential elections in 2012, an activist from the Komi Republic put together a large wooden construction, and erected a canvas that read: "Putin, go away!" (Путин, уходи!). In 2013, at the entrance of the Federal Assembly in Moscow, a farmer squeezed himself in a refrigerator, fighting the genetically modified food import. In 2015, the Russo-American activist Ariella Katz laid down on the Red Square under a purple quilt with pictures of political assassinations, which she made out of her graduation robe. She sewed photographs of murdered journalist Anna Politkovskaya, deceased lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, the murdered human rights activist Natalya Estemirova, the poisoned ex-KGB colonel Aleksandr Litvinenko, and of human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova, who were both allegedly killed by nationalists. Some protesters latched on to more direct ways of drawing attention to their cause. In 2012, a Moscow-based journalist threw eggs at the Duma in protest against the "Dima Yakovlev law", that prohibits Americans to adopt Russian children. Duma deputy Grigory Semenov publicly smashed a printer against new legislation for single member constituencies in 2013.<sup>21</sup> In

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<sup>21</sup> President Putin issued a law in 2013 that established new rules for the election of Duma members. The Duma members will be chosen on the basis of the winner-take-all system, where members with the highest polls are

Yekaterinburg, a deceived shareholder floated on a pond in the water next to the Governor's office. His stunt was meant to draw attention to the corrupt estate agencies, that dupe people into investing in building projects that never get finished. In 2015, a man climbed on the roof of the Omsk Legislative Assembly and demanded the resignation of Omsk functionaries. Also in Omsk, a resident conducted his protest for better infrastructure on Laptev street, wading knee-high in a puddle of dirty water. Several pensioners publicly staged, what looked more like *one-person shows*, fake funeral processions. As they lay down in their pillowed coffins, they 'mourned' the lack of pension benefits. On the eve of Putin's inauguration in 2012, the "Other Russia" activist Dmitry Karuyev framed a mourning picture of Putin at the walls of the Cheboksary Presidential Reception. In 2013, a Greenpeace activist in a polar bear costume paddled down the Moskva River, not far from the Kremlin. The "polar bear" was protesting against the oil-drillings in Russia's Arctic to tap oil in the Barents Seas.

In addition, protesters also brought life size dolls to accompany them, so they would not exceed the allowed number of participants (but still use the presence of other figures). A Lieutenant colonel in Stavropol was accompanied by a life-size doll of Putin. He asked the president for help, because he was struggling to provide for his disabled daughter. In 2015, a small business owner, dressed in a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) robe, came to the Kirov central square and carried a placard: "The **K**iller of the **K**aluga **K**iosks" (Киллер Калужских Киосков). He then displayed a stuffed dummy hanging from a noose around the neck with a black bag on his head and a poster that read: "Small business" (Малый бизнес). During the Christmas periods, several activists dressed up as Father Frost (the Russian equivalent of Santa Claus) and went out protesting, braving winter temperatures of minus 20 to 30 degrees Celsius. Others disguised their faces in masks: Yuri Voblikov was nicknamed the "Gas Mask Man" after his unorthodox protest techniques with gas masks against the environmental policies.<sup>22</sup> In Yekaterinburg, a pensioner was detained on administrative charges because he was wearing a medical mask during his solitary picket. The Moscow-based activist Roman Roslovtsev became famous for his solitary walks in the mask of Putin in support of the freedom of assembly. Solo demonstrators bring an element of showmanship to their protest for two reasons. Firstly,

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elected. Observers predicted that this would only further consolidate the position of Putin's party United Russia, because it was by far the biggest party. The new system outplayed independent and opposition candidates in the race for votes. Herszenhorn, D. (2013, January 2). 'Putin Orders Change in Election Rules'. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: [www.nytimes.com/2013/01/03/world/europe/putin-orders-new-system-for-russian-parliamentary-elections.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/03/world/europe/putin-orders-new-system-for-russian-parliamentary-elections.html). Last accessed 13 May 2018.

<sup>22</sup> 'Human rights activist Yuri Voblikov elected deputy' (2017, September 11). *Penza News*. Retrieved from: <https://penzanews.ru/en/politics/64511-2017>. Last accessed 15 May 2018.

because they want to raise awareness about certain issues to authorities and fellow citizens. And secondly, they want to show their willingness to take risks.

More extreme acts – including inflicting physical pain – are also a salient one-person tactic. A dozen activists sealed their mouth, most of them with tape, others sewed their lips together with needle and thread. An “Other Russia” activist in 2011 sewed his mouth in protest against the expanding powers of the Federal Security Services (FSB).<sup>23</sup> In 2013, an immigrant worker in Sochi sewed his lips shut and went on a hunger strike because his employer at the Olympic site refused to pay his salary. And in 2016, in imitation of Pyotr Pavlensky, a teenager sewed his mouth, to the horror of his mother and bystanders. A couple of solo demonstrators chained themselves to monuments or buildings. In 2009, the mother of the murdered Bolshevik Yuri Chervochkin chained herself to the building of the Investigative Committee in Moscow, demanding an investigation into the assassination of her son.<sup>24</sup> In 2014, a chauffeur nicknamed “Parkman”, spent 22 hours handcuffed in his car protesting against the new parking regulations in Moscow. Several other activists taped their mouths, as a metaphor for the crackdown on freedom of expression in Russia. And another ten protesters used (the threat of) public hunger strikes to challenge the authorities.

The examples above indicate a considerable variation in the solitary tactic, alternating between low profile acts and provocative performances. Most of the solo pickets were filmed or photographed by journalists and bystanders. Pictures of pensioners, mothers, students, politicians, activists, teachers, journalists, disabled people, artists, lawyers, priests and army veterans holding placards appeared on Vkontakte (Russian equivalent of Facebook), LiveJournal (popular Russian blogging website), Facebook and Twitter. The photographs were powerful pictures of unknown lone protesters taking a stand against bigger forces. The act of one person holding her/his stance against governmental repression and police violence, became an iconic image of peaceful resistance. In contrast to what Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (1999: 174) call “the logic of numbers”, where groups try to convey numerical strength, solo protesters challenge authorities not by number, but by their reverberating solo performances.

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<sup>23</sup> In July 2010, President Medvedev agreed on expanding the FSB’s jurisdictions. FSB officials now have the power to warn citizens against actions that could result in crimes. And anyone who hinders a FSB official or ignores a legal order, faces a fine or up to 15 days of arrest. ‘New powers for Russia’s FSB alarm rights activists’ (2012, March 6). *BBC News*. Retrieved from: [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-10801029](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-10801029). Last accessed 9 May 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Two days before the first March of Dissent in December 2007, the political oppositionist and Bolshevik Yuri Chervochkin was murdered at the age of 22.

Performances can quickly resonate beyond the act itself if they make it into media coverage. The concern of the solo performance is, aside from the fulfilment of demands, whether it will be able to reach its audiences. Therefore, it is crucial that solo protesters carefully prepare their solo actions so that their presence catches the eye of by-stander and reporters.

### ***‘Scenes of Jubilation’***

The data show how solo protests often coincided with highly symbolic dates. On Russia’s national Flag Day in 2017, a young teacher, wearing nightgown smeared with bloodstains, taped her mouth and chained herself to a Lenin monument in Novosibirsk. Holding the Russian tricolor, she portrayed a dying Russia. Protesters commemorating the school siege of Beslan of 2004 by Chechen separatists, went to protests on the first of September, the start of the school year. In 2013, the LGBTQ activist Kirill Kalugin held a solo action on the National Airborne Forces Day on the Palace Square in Saint Petersburg against Russia’s anti-gay laws. He argued that the purpose of the Russian army is to protect Russian citizens and the Constitution and not to discriminate against people. In remembrance of Anna Politovskaya, a Tyumen-based journalist taped his mouth and bound his hands on his back. He conducted his action on the anniversary of her death on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October. Ironically, Vladimir Putin celebrates his birthday that same date. And when the President turned 65 in 2017, Aleksei Navalny (who was under arrest) called for nationwide protests as a very unwelcome birthday surprise for Putin. Several solo protesters in Krasnodar, Tyumen, Tabmov and Penza responded and stood with placards “Free Aleksei Navalny” (Свободу Алексею Навальному). Protesters who scheduled their one-person actions on emotionally charged dates made an appeal to the collective memory. Through their act, they revisit the commemorated historical events and connect them with the recent political events.

Locations in the regions	Number of solo protests	Locations in Moscow	Number of solo protests	Locations in Saint Petersburg	Number of solo protests
Regional Administration building	35	Manezhnaya Square	18	Smolny Institute	7
Main Square	20	Red Square	10	Nevsky Porspekt	4
Regional Government building	14	Ministry of Internal Affairs	7	Military Registration Office	3
City Hall	13	Police Station on Petrovka	6	Sadovaya Street	2
Regional Court	11	Prosecutor General’s Office	5	Alexander Column on Palace Square	1

*Table 5. Top 5 of solo protest locations in the regions, Moscow and Saint Petersburg, March 2006-December 2017*

Another pattern that emerges from the data is the specific locations that solo protesters prefer (table 5). In Moscow, the Manezhnaya Square is the most favored protest venue. Over the years, Moscow-based activists, including Vladimir Ionov, Mark Galperin, Ildar Dadin all took stands in front of the State Duma or near the Monument of Marshal Georgy Zhukov. Right at the door of the Kremlin and the presidential official residence, the activists fearlessly expressed their dissatisfaction with Putin's policy in slogans that respectively read: "Putin is a disgrace to Russia" (Путин – позор России), "Shame on you, Putin" (Стыдно быть Путиным), "We are against corruption" (Мы против коррупции). The Red Square, only a stone's throw from Manezhnaya Square, is an equally busy protest venue. The activist Roman Roslovtsev, famous for wearing a Putin mask during his protests, frequently staged his solitary marches on the Red Square. In Saint Petersburg, protesters most often stand in front of the Smolny Institute, where the residence of the Petersburg governor is vested. In provincial cities, over 100 locals conducted solo protests in front of city halls and local government buildings. Because of the Stalin-era urban architecture, the regional and local executive bodies are often centered around the main squares (Gabowitsch, 2016: 214). The data also show numerous solo protests on places with a strong symbolic value. In 2015, for example, a solo picketer stood near the Penza "Repentance" Monument for Victims of Political Repression to protest the current political repression in Russia. That same year, a woman went to protest on the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge near the Kremlin, on the spot where politician Boris Nemtsov was assassinated that year. A volunteer at Navalny's headquarters went to the Tula Monument for Victims of Political Repression on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, the day of remembrance of the victims of politically motivated repressions during Soviet times.

These examples illustrate that the majority of solitary pickets, much like other larger protests and demonstrations, occupy the so called 'spaces of jubilation' (Ryklin, 2002): central squares, large prospects, close to monuments and governmental buildings where, during Soviet times, parades of jubilation and celebration were staged (Gabowitsch, 2016: 214). Today, these places are symbolically charged because they are linked to state power (Gabowitsch, 2016: 214). By holding single-person protest at these monumental places, solo demonstrators revive the collective memories that are connected to them. This enhances the meaning of the single-person picket and offers an opportunity to draw attention to certain events.

The effect of protest at these symbolically charged places did not go unnoticed by authorities. In 2012, public spaces were significantly structured and limited by the new adopted legislation (Zhel'nina, 2012b: 2). Authorities appointed remote and desolated areas, commonly known as hyde parks, to protesters. Regional administrations drafted additional restrictions and



imposed bans on meetings in the proximity of administrations, public roads, airports, malls and markets, schools and universities, churches and mosques, hospitals, isolated territories and construction sites, sport facilities, and bus and metro stops and banned protest from the city centers, moving them to the outskirts (Amnesty, 2013: 10). The restrictions would particularly hurt the small-scale, solo protesters, whose efforts in slogans, props and equipage to boost visibility would be undone standing in desolated parks.

As we can see from table 6, these locational restrictions are only partly reflected in the corpus, in the sense that after 2012, more protesters were detained for protesting at unauthorized, public places. But protesters were reluctant to accept restraints on access to public space. They rather risked being arrested than to lose the visibility they gained in crowded, public areas. The importance of visibility is three-fold. Firstly, chances are higher that journalists report on a solo picket if the protesters stand in an open, crowded place. Media coverage is crucial for any given protest because, as Ruud Koopmans argues: “it is no longer the co-present public that counts most, but the mass audience that sits at home and watches or reads the media coverage” (2004: 368). This is particularly true for solitary protesters, who can’t rely on a supporting base like mass protests. They have tried to enlarge their presence by standing in the spotlight of public eye. Secondly, the visibility is directly related to the main goals of the solo action: to create awareness around specific issues and to prove their willingness to take risks to fellow citizens. Finally, being visible to the regional and local executive bodies is equally important, because they are perceived as the ones to have erred. Protesters address regional leaders, because they expect change is coming from them. And although causes of solo protests in Russia’s regions are mainly rooted in province-based, personal issues, their messages also repeatedly target President Putin. This direct appeal to the president and regional leaders goes back to the Soviet tradition of “manual management”, where province-based issues were solved only when it caught the eye of central authorities, who then could relocate recourses (Gabowitsch, 2016: 49-50). When Putin became president in 2000, he further intensified the “manual management” practice by personally appointing regional governors instead of organizing elections.<sup>25</sup> The flip side of Putin’s personalization of Russia politics is that the president will be held accountable for even the smallest, personal issues (Gabowitsch, 2016: 49-50). The fact that names of high-ranking politicians appeared on the posters about bread-

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<sup>25</sup> In April 2013, President Putin signed a law that allowed Governors to be appointed by the President, instead of holding direct elections. Observers condemned the new law, because it would enable the ruling United Russia Party to dominate, without having proper elections. Roth, A. (2013, April 2). ‘Russia: New Law Allows Governors to Be Appointed, Undoing Reform’. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: [www.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/world/europe/russia-new-law-allows-governors-to-be-appointed-undoing-reform.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/world/europe/russia-new-law-allows-governors-to-be-appointed-undoing-reform.html). Last accessed 15 May 2018.

and-butter topics indicates that solo protesters made connections between parochial issues and federal-level policies. Putin's name, for example, appears on posters, condemning bread prices, bad education, shady real estate agents, lack of housing, poor social benefits and insufficient HIV treatment.

The solo demonstration proved to be successful in enabling citizens to unmask national and regional effects of inadequate policies. This way, Russian citizens are reminded that anyone can go outside and reclaim their rights.

### **From interruption to repression**

The examples mentioned above give an idea about how authorities respond to the claimants. Tomila Lankina and Alisa Voznaya (as cited in Gorokhovskaya, 2016: 123) already demonstrated that unconventional protest tactics are amateurish at conveying their demands, and protesters are more prone to violence, arrest and imprisonment (Lankina & Voznaya, 2015: 338). The same largely applied to the solo demonstrators.

The numerous variations of the solitary pickets across Russia by an amorphous crowd did not go unnoticed by the authorities. The innocent, seemingly harmless solitary acts in fact undermined the regime's legal definitions of what constituted an illegal assembly. Moreover, they exposed cracks in Putin's so laboriously polished image of a stable and united Russia. For him, domestic protests were a loss of face in the eyes of the world (Gabowitsch, 2016: 71). Consequently, law enforcement increasingly started to interrupt the solitary acts and after the newly adopted amendments of 2012, solo protesters were harshly punished. Overall, I counted 236 solo protest events that dealt with repression. In other words, six out of ten single participants between March 2006 and December 2017 have faced some kind of repression.

The Law on Assembly as adopted in 2004 did not, apart from the remission of notification, specify procedures for holding single-person pickets. This loophole in legislation was open to arbitrary interpretation not only by protesters, but also by the police. Between 2006 and June 2012, police acted at own discretion without solid legal groundwork and 47% of the solitary protesters faced repression. This went from small pestering, such as demanding passports, taking pictures, or guarding the solo pickets, to severe intimidation, including threatening with violence and detaining the participants with excessive force. In the case of an activist who sympathized with the left-wing politician Vladislav Ryazantsev, police even falsified testimonies and the activist was imprisoned. In the weeks after her picket in support of the right to freedom of assembly, a pensioner from Samara was stalked by two

plainclothesmen in her courtyard. About 30 protesters were administratively charged under Article 20.1 for petty hooliganism. They were fined between 500-1000 rubles (approximately 13-26 euros at the then exchange rate) and faced up to 15 days of administrative arrest.<sup>26</sup>

The data reveal temporal variations in the frequency of repression. As can be seen in table 6, between 2008 and 2011 the number of repression decreased. These years coincide with the term of then-president Dmitry Medvedev, who stood for a seemingly more liberal course. In this newfound space, Russians mobilized en masse, accumulating in the 2011-2013 protest cycle.

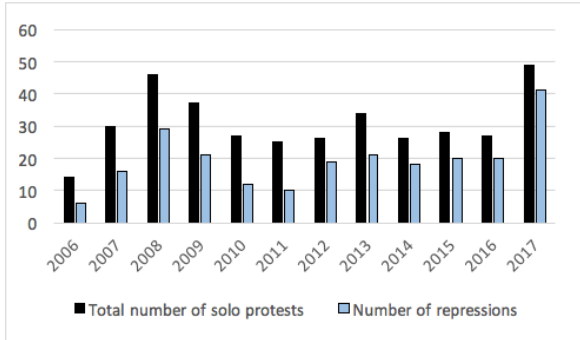


Table 6. Number of solo protests and Repression (% of total), March 2006-December 2017

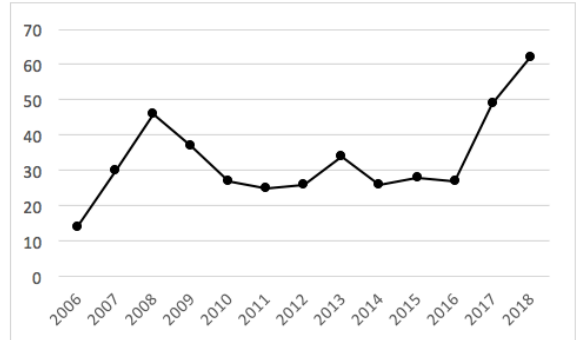


Table 7. Number of solo protests, March 2006-March 2018

When the “Snow Revolution” withered away with the inauguration of the not-so-new president Vladimir Putin, repression again increased. For 175 solo protest events taking place from June 2012 until December 2017, I counted 136 acts of repression. Whereas before June 2012, around half of the solo protesters faced repression, after the amendments of the law on assembly in 2012, this number increased to 76% of the picketers facing repression. In a report, Amnesty International condemned the increasing sanctions against and arbitrary arrests of solo demonstrators (2014a: 11). Almost 60 protesters were administratively detained under Article 20.2.<sup>27</sup> They were fined up to 20 000 rubles (270 euros) and imprisoned up to 40 days. Several solo demonstrators disputed their convictions in the European Court of Human Rights (EHCR) and were rewarded with compensations between 450 and 26 000 euros for suffered damages

<sup>26</sup> Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation No.195-FZ of 30 December 2001, Section 2, Article 20.1 Disorderly Conduct (as amended and supplemented): violation of public order in the form of open disrespect of the public accompanied by foul language in public places, abusive pestering of the people or destruction or damage caused to another’s property.

<sup>27</sup> Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation No.195-FZ of 30 December 2001, Section 2, Article 20.2. Violating the established procedure for arranging or conducting a meeting, rally, demonstration, procession or picket (as amended and supplemented).

and unlawful sanctions.<sup>28</sup> Russian authorities also brought the Soviet practice of punitive psychiatry out of mothballs in an attempt to silence dissent (Colborne, 2017). Several solo protesters were forced into incarceration and psychiatric treatment. In 2012, Pyotr Pavlensky was declared “mentally ill” and admitted to a psychiatric hospital.<sup>29</sup> Both Arielle Katz and Elena Ukolova were threatened with psychiatric incarceration. And in 2016, the teenager who sewed his mouth, was sent to a closed psychiatric ward.

Over the years, authorities invented different strategies to discourage protest activism. Regional authorities denied permission to protest or suggested desolate locations. Pro-government groups, however, have been given a free pass to organize counter-protests (Amnesty, 2014a: 4). In some instances, they even intimidated and physically attacked solo protesters.

### ***Provocateurs***

Government security forces were not the only ones interrupting the solitary pickets. The demonizing of protestors as unlawful and unpatriotic by mainstream media resulted in an increase in interferences by aggrieved pro-government groups and by-standers (Amnesty, 2014b). A recurring trend were the uninvited visitors, Russians call them provocateurs, that tried to infiltrate and sabotage the legitimate protests. Their added presence transforms an authorized solo picket into an illegitimate gathering. In some cases, police worked together with provocateurs or turned a blind eye to them during arrest, and they managed to escape. The scheme with provocateurs resulted in the arrest of the Moscow-based activist Mark Galperin. During his picket, he was approached by unknown men holding placards similar to Galperin’s posters. The activist was arrested and later prosecuted on the grounds of organizing an illegal mass gathering. The provocateurs, however, were never mentioned during his trial. Some provocateurs even went so far as to physically attack the solo protesters. During his one-man picket against Putin in 2015, the stalwart activist Vladimir Ionov was assaulted by members of the pro-Kremlin group Liberation Movement SERB. They poured a green antiseptic on the pensioner, commonly known as *zelyonka*, which caused severe second-degree burns in the

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<sup>28</sup> For example, solo protesters Marina Novikova, Yuri Matsnev, Viktor Savchenko, Aleksandr Kirpichev and Aleksandr Lashmankin appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). See: *Novikova and Others v. Russia*, ECHR, Judgement of 26 April 2016; *Navalnyy v. Russia*, ECHR, Judgement of 2 February 2017; *Lashmankin and Others v. Russia*, ECHR, Judgement of 7 February 2017.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Russia: End Artist’s Forced Psychiatric Confinement’ (2016, February 12). *Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved from: [www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/12/russia-end-artists-forced-psychiatric-confinement](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/12/russia-end-artists-forced-psychiatric-confinement). Last accessed 29 April 2018.

pensioner's face.<sup>30</sup> Another pensioner in Vorzonezh suffered significant injuries after he was mercilessly beaten with a baseball bat by provocateurs. In 2015, a young transwoman from Moscow was holding the poster: "We have Putin, so we can stop thinking" (Путин есть – ума не надо) when she was attacked by three provocateurs. Police on the scene did not detain the attackers, and instead escorted the protester to the police department.

By Putin's re-election, would-be protesters were entering in an arena of increasing arbitrary violence by both police and fellow citizens. In 2014, Amnesty noted how authorities started banning protests on discriminatory bases, after the Duma introduced the Russian federal law that prohibits the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships" (hereinafter: gay propaganda law) in 2013 (2014a: 11). The worsened atmosphere of anti-LGBTQ sentiments is also mirrored in this corpus. Every single LGBTQ solo protester faced attacks by either policemen or provocateurs. In 2012, LGBTQ activist and founder of the Moscow gay pride movement Nikolay Alekseev was fined 5000 rubles (67 euros) under the gay propaganda law for his solitary protest in front of the Smolny Institute. He carried a banner with the words of the famous Soviet actress Fayna Ranevskaya: "Homosexuality is not a perversion; field hockey and ballet are" (Гомосексуализм – это не извращение. Извращение это хоккей на траве и балет на льду) and was accused of "promoting homosexuality".<sup>31</sup> In Kazan, a young activist was forcefully detained during his protest action in support of LGBTQ rights and he injured his arm. In 2013, a video on YouTube and social media was spread of the activist Kirill Kalugin, after his peaceful one-man action against the gay propaganda law was brutally interrupted.<sup>32</sup> He was attacked by an enraged group of Petersburg paratrooper-lookalikes, who were celebrating National Airborne Forces Day. Policemen had to intervene and Kalugin was arrested.

The example show that authorities were on the defensive when treating the solitary protesters. Police did not discriminate when it came to detaining or sanctioning solo protesters. Political activists, pensioners, students and activists all faced the same kinds of repression during their solo protests. According to Ralph Turner, these forms of harmless, peaceful protest

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<sup>30</sup> Since 2015, the green antiseptic, became the weapon of choice to attack Russian opposition leaders, including Aleksey Navalny and Sergey Mitrokhin. But the opposition turned to *zelyonka* attacks in their favor and quickly, green-faced protesters appeared everywhere. 'Why are Russian opposition leaders' faces turning green?' (2017, May 10). *The Economist*. Retrieved from: [www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2017/05/economist-explains-7](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2017/05/economist-explains-7). Last accessed 9 May 2018.

<sup>31</sup> 'LGBT Activist Fined for Breaking 'Gay Propaganda' Law (2013, December 5). *The Moscow Times*. Retrieved from: <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/lgbt-activist-fined-for-breaking-gay-propaganda-law-30181>. Last accessed 16 May 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Ruptly (2013, August 2). *Russia: Gay activist is attacked by paratroopers on national holiday* [Video file]. Retrieved from: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdBxEm4cu0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdBxEm4cu0). Last accessed 13 May 2018.

expose authorities because they “are embarrassed by having to arrest otherwise law-abiding persons and by giving them the dangerous publicity of public trials” (1970: 148). This way, the vulnerability of the solo protesters shifts from frailty to a means of exposing the oppressive measures the Russians regime uses against its citizens.

In May 2014, the Duma adopted Article 212.1 of the Russian Criminal Code (Amnesty, 2017). Unauthorized protest was no longer treated as an administrative violation, but as a criminal offense with a maximum penalty of five years of imprisonment (Amnesty, 2017). The law targets ‘recidivists’: protesters who got arrested multiple times for staging an unauthorized protest. Vladimir Ionov, Mark Galperin, Irina Kalmykova and Ildar Dadin were the firsts to be charged with violations of Article 212.1 for staging unauthorized solitary pickets.<sup>33</sup> And in December 2015, the case of Ildar Dadin became a cautionary tale of the regime’s crack down on solo protesters. He became the first Russian citizen to be imprisoned under Article 212.1 for “repeated violations of the law on public assemblies” (Amnesty, 2017). He was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in the prison colony in Segezha in Russia’s Karelia region. Dadin’s conviction fueled several solitary protests. The activist Ariella Katz went to the Manezhnaya Square and held a poster in Latin: “Although Ildar Dadin is imprisoned, he is free” (Ildar Dadin quamuis captivus liber est). In 2017, another activist travelled to the penal colony in Segezha where Dadin was held and held her solitary picket in front of the prison fences, shouting: “Russia will be free!” (Россия будет свободной!). The girl was arrested and received a fine of 10 000 rubles (135 euros).

To conclude, table 7 shows how the number of solo demonstrations is rising at the same time that repression is increasing. Although absolute numbers should be handled with caution, solo protests according my definition are on the rise. The number of single-person protests sharply peaks in 2017 and this trend will probably continue during 2018.<sup>34</sup> In this increasing arena of repression, the resoluteness of the solo demonstrators is even more striking.

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<sup>33</sup> Both Vladimir Ionov and Irina Kalmykova fled the country and applied for asylum abroad. Mark Galperin ultimately served 38 days in administrative arrest. Miller, C. (2016, August 24). ‘Interview: Putin-Mask Protester ‘Safe’ In Ukraine After Midnight Run from Russia’. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from: [www.rferl.org/a/man-behind-putin-mask-wants-to-serve-in-ukraine-army/27940566.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/man-behind-putin-mask-wants-to-serve-in-ukraine-army/27940566.html). Last accessed 14 May 2018.

<sup>34</sup> In the first 3 months of 2018, the number of single-person events (15 solo protest events) is double the average number in the first three months in the period 2006-2017 (7 solo protest events).

## Conclusion

Tilly's concept of the repertoire as a toolkit of contention was valuable for revealing peculiarities of the one-person tactic in Russia, which has been overlooked in previous studies. My analysis showed that one-person protest is a ubiquitous part of the Russian political life. The one-person protest is an example of how people alter their protest tactics in response to changing opportunity structures. The variety of the solitary acts illustrates how the tactic fluctuates between direct actions stretching from Soviet times and the more recent flashmob protests with performative allures. In extreme cases, protesters even inflicted pain upon themselves, undertaking hunger strikes and other extreme actions.

Hundreds of Russians from very different backgrounds have been standing *apart* together, united in their condemnation of governance gone astray. Many of them saw the single-person picket as a last resort when all efforts to organize a large gathering were denied by authorities. The varied social composition of the solo picketers was an effect of the regime's subordination of democratic forms of political participation, such as the parliament and independent media. Along with some public figures and stalwart protesters, most of the participants were grassroots activists and citizens based in the regional provinces. The solitary protest tactic enjoyed broad popularity in Russia's provinces, since populations there can't rely on a supportive citizenry like Muscovites. The data show a high density of solo protest in the cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but the overall number of solo protests outside the two capitals has been markedly larger.

The solitary protests are unique episodes, but they are hardly isolated phenomena. They correlated to broader socioeconomic and legislative issues, and policy changes in Russia. The solo protests also acted in concert with other protest waves, such as the Dissenters' Marches, the Strategy-31 campaign and during the Snow Revolution. The analysis of the solo protesters' demands showed that civil rights and civic province-based issues were the number one motive behind the solitary pickets. Putin's status both as an instigator of people's grievances and as the target of their claims is emblematic of the personalization of Russian politics. The high number of people that demanded accountability from authorities indicate that the Russian opposition is more and more unwilling to put up with the widespread impunity. These numerous dispersed solo protests clearly showed potential to mount into building blocks for larger, antiregime actions.

Although the solo protest actions were overwhelmingly peaceful, a lot of solo protesters were immediately arrested, often very violently. They were also attacked by aggrieved

bystanders and in some cases, the illegitimate intervention of provocateurs resulted in arrest and detention. Despite the restrictive laws, solo protesters did not abandon the symbolically charged squares and buildings. They carefully coordinated place and date of their actions to heighten their visibility. This way, they exploited solo picketing as a way to reclaim public places as platforms to express one's support, grief and anger. But the strategy of visibility is a double-edged sword that cut both ways. On the one hand, it provided audiences and coverage by media. But on the other hand, it exposed its participants to arrest and detention. And indeed, the solo demonstrators could only make short-lived claims on public spaces before they were removed by authorities. By taking a stand on a figuratively execution spot, solo protesters successfully exploited their vulnerability to challenge those in power as well as to expose the regime's arbitrariness toward dissent. Through Facebook, blogs, and news sites, these images of their one-against-all performances are etched in the public's imagination.

It is important to keep in mind that the conclusions drawn at this point of the study are based on a relatively small sample of single-person pickets and require additional explorations to validate the observations as outlined here. The intent of this article is to introduce the concept of the single-person protest, and to set the groundwork for more in-depth analysis. More research must be utilized, for example, to demonstrate how solitary pickets could instigate larger mobilizations. It will be clear that the corpus and thus the investigation are far from closed.

Putting this all into perspective, we see an experimenting Russian opposition that goes beyond the headline-grabbing protests. The solo protesters are the proverbial canaries in the coal mines for the growing atmosphere of intolerance against protest in Russia. But instead of suffocating, the protesters' voices are mounting and their numbers are swelling. This proves that the Kremlin's suppressive agenda for managing dissent won't stop the resilient Russian citizens from taking to the streets, shattering the illusion of a *passive* Russian nation.



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