CHALLENGES TO PROTEST PARTICIPATION IN NON-DEMOCRATIC CONTEXTS: A PRIVILEGE OF THE PRIVILEGED

EBA

Challenges to Protest Participation in Non-Democratic Contexts:
A Privilege of the Privileged

Elizaveta Kopacheva

Elizaveta Kopacheva is a postdoctoral researcher at the Linnaeus University. Her fascination lies with protest participation research and unconventional methods for collecting and analysing social and political data, as well as data-driven decision-making. Elizaveta is particularly drawn to understanding human behaviour, with a keen focus on unravelling how socio-economic status at birth influences behaviour patterns. With a mission to raise awareness about the pervasive impact of low socio-economic status, Elizaveta delves into the intricate ways in which individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are not only deprived of access to opportunities but, perhaps more significantly, are often unaware of the existence of these opportunities. By shedding light on this hidden facet of inequality, Elizaveta seeks to empower marginalised communities and challenge systemic inequalities.

Table of Contents

Sammanfattning

Denna avhandling tar upp kritiska utmaningar för politisk deltagande och mobilisering i icke-demokratiska kontexter, med Ryssland som huvudsaklig fallstudie. Med utgångspunkt i resultat av statistiska analyser undersöks de mångfacetterade hinder som försvårar medborgares deltagande i politiska processer, samt belyser vikten av finansiella resurser och effektiva mobiliseringsstrategier. Briefen ger policyrekommendationer för det svenska utvecklingsbiståndet. Här betonas behovet av att stödja kapacitetsuppbyggnad inom civilsamhället samt främjandet av inkluderande strategier för mobiliseringsstrategier. Dessutom belyser avhandlingen de socioekonomiska mekanismerna bakom protestdeltagande i semi-auktoritära stater. Här varnas också för de oavsiktliga demokratiska effekterna av politik som förstärker eller upprätthåller socioekonomiska ojämlikheter. Genom att ta itu med dessa utmaningar, och främja inkluderande och effektiva strategier för politisk mobilisering, kan beslutsfattare bidra till att främja ett mer livskraftigt, motståndskraftigt och demokratiskt civilsamhälle i icke-demokratiska kontexter.

Abstract

This dissertation addresses the critical challenges of political participation and mobilisation in non-democratic contexts, with a focus on the case of Russia. Drawing on the results of statistical analyses, it examines the multifaceted barriers that hinder citizen engagement in political processes. It also highlights the importance of financial resources and effective mobilisation strategies. The dissertation brief offers policy recommendations for Swedish development aid, emphasising the need to support civil society capacity building and to promote inclusive mobilisation strategies. The dissertation also raises awareness of the socioeconomic mechanism behind protest participation in semi-authoritarian states, as well as it warns of the unintended democratic effects of policies that reinforce or maintain socio-economic inequalities. By addressing these challenges, and promoting inclusive and effective strategies for political mobilisation, policymakers can contribute to fostering a more vibrant, resilient, and democratic civil society in non-democratic contexts.

Introduction

Active citizen participation plays a crucial role in the process of democratisation (Maravall, 1982; Collier, 1999; O'Donnell et al., 1986). Research has shown that when citizens are engaged in political activities (go to protest, write petitions, contact politicians with questions), it helps to combat corruption and strengthen democratic institutions (Tocqueville, 1835). This is true not only for countries transitioning towards democracy but also for those with well-established democratic systems (Johnston, 2013).

In many transitioning countries, those with weak institutions and growing opportunities, a small group of elites often monopolises power and resources. In such environments, the active involvement of citizens becomes paramount in ensuring accountability (Johnston, 2013). However, civic society in these countries is often underdeveloped, intimidated, or manipulated (ibid.) and thus, requires substantial reform and reinforcement.

Reforming and strengthening civic activism in transitioning regimes requires both internal and external efforts. External actors, such as international organisations or foreign governments, can play a significant role in supporting these reforms. But before they can effectively intervene, they must first understand the conditions of activism within these states.

Traditionally, research on political participation has been focused on Western societies and explained the lack of participation by low individual motivations, such as interest in politics, insufficient political education/knowledge, or poor socio-economic conditions (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). However, this perspective is outdated and fails to capture the complexities of political engagement in the 21st century.

Recent developments challenge the conventional explanations for political participation. Firstly, industrialisation and urbanisation have led to increased education levels among populations (Barro and Lee, 2013), enabling more individuals to engage in political processes. Secondly, globalisation and the information revolution, along with Western cultural influences, have sparked greater interest in democratic values and activism across the globe (Hart and Bogdanoff, 2020). Lastly, the emergence of new forms of political engagement, such as online activism and online petition-signing, has lowered barriers to participation, allowing individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to participate.

These developments prompt us to question whether traditional theories of political participation are still relevant in the 21st century. Do they adequately account for the complexities of modern political engagement, or are there other factors at play? This is particularly pertinent when considering transitioning regimes like Russia, where active political participation is crucial for combating corruption and promoting democracy. Deeper understanding of the barriers to participation in these contexts is essential.

To address these questions, this dissertation seeks to explore the underlying factors behind limited protest participation in non-democratic contexts.

Research aim and questions

This study aims to investigate whether the factors identified by researchers in the 1990s as influential in explaining political participation remain relevant for understanding contemporary engagement in protests.

The urgency of this topic is underscored by the democratic backsliding observed in many countries in the 21st century (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, editorial board, 2021). In such cases,

participation in protests often emerges as the primary – and sometimes sole – means of influencing political decisions.

The significance of this issue is exemplified by the political landscape in the Russian Federation, which witnessed a notable authoritarian shift in February 2022. Despite numerous instances of successful protest movements in Russia, such as ecological protests (Davydova, 2021), employment protests during COVID-19 (Vazhnyye Istorii, editorial board, 2022), and protests in support of illegally arrested opposition representatives (Roth, 2021), the scale of participation in protests often falls short compared to the level of engagement seen in online activism. This discrepancy underscores the complex nature of political engagement in non-democratic environments.

To address the overarching research question of the factors explaining contemporary protest participation, I conducted four studies exploring various factors that influence political participation and compared different forms of political activities.

Firstly, I examined such factors as individuals' access to resources (e.g., financial means, education); their political motivations (including political knowledge, interest, efficacy, partisanship) and access to mobilisation via memberships.[1] I compared the significance of these factors across a spectrum of activities, ranging from low-cost actions such as sharing political information online to higher-cost endeavours like protesting. This comparison was conducted across several European countries, including both democratic states (e.g., Sweden) and non-democratic ones such as Russia. By doing so, I aimed to identify which

---

[1] While these factors are typically referred to as individual factors in the literature, I refrain from using this term for a specific reason. Traditionally these factors are studied by comparing different demographic groups (e.g., gender, socio-economic status). However, one can find more fine-grained factors in the literature. For example, social movement research highlights personal motivation/interest as an important explanation of participation. This involves understanding why individuals choose to participate in specific protests, offering a more nuanced perspective on participation.

factors truly explain the disparity between high levels of online political engagement and comparatively low levels of participation in protests.

Next, I focused on the dynamics of mobilisation and how the interplay between online mobilisation and political participation is shaped by one of the most crucial resources in the 21st century: an individual's social network (i.e., the connections that a person has). Specifically, I investigated the impact of three mobilisation steps – information-sharing (disseminating details about the planned activity), persuasion (providing reasons for participation), and provision of social support (building a critical mass to make participation feel safer and worthwhile) – on political engagement.

Given the prevalence of online coordination and mobilisation, particularly through social networking websites, I concentrated on online activities for this study, specifically examining the mobilisation effect in the context of online petition-signing. My research questions centred on determining whether any or all of the mobilisation steps (information-sharing, persuasion, and social support) contribute to increased political participation. Additionally, I sought to identify which mobilisation channels (what kind of social networks) are most effective in positively influencing participation.

Previous studies have suggested that social support from close friends and family tends to have a significant impact on the decision to participate (Centola and Macy, 2007), while the involvement of random individuals may not make a substantial difference. To test mobilisation, along with several other hypotheses, I compared the effect of mobilisation via two structurally different social networking websites on online petition-signing. These platforms were Twitter, built upon one-sided followship connections, and VKontakte (VK), based on two-sided friendships, which are stronger connections. By comparing the mobilisation effects on these platforms, I investigated how an individual's social network influences their decision to participate in political activities.

Lastly, I conducted a detailed examination of how the structures of individual social networks influence participation in more costly activities, specifically protests. Previous studies suggest that large networks populated by weak ties – social networks where the connections between individuals are sparse or infrequent (i.e., where many people know each over via other friends rather than are friends themselves) – stimulate participation by enabling better coordination and information dissemination (Granovetter, 1973). To test this hypothesis, I utilised data on users and their friendship connections in VK. By reconstructing the network based on friendships, I studied which specific network properties positively affect participation and to what extent these features exert influence.

The described steps enabled me to draw conclusions regarding the three groups of explanatory factors outlined in the classic study by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995): political motivations, resources, and mobilisation. The results and findings are discussed in the next section.

Results, findings, and discussion

The following sections will provide brief summaries of the main findings of the four articles in my dissertation. For further information and more detailed discussions on the repercussions of my findings, please consult the dissertation in full.

Political motivations and political participation

Analysing European Social Survey Data (ESS, 2018) and comparing various forms of political participation (such as petition-signing, boycotting, protesting, and online activism) along with the impact of such factors as political trust, social trust, political knowledge, and efficacy, I have found that out of all the factors outlined in the classical study by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), only political efficacy (i.e., the citizens' belief in their ability to influence political

decision-making) emerges as a significant predictor of participation. Moreover, the studied factors demonstrated limited predictive power, explaining only 44% of the variation in participation.

This suggests that other, now unidentified, factors hold greater explanatory power in understanding political participation than those studied here, and that the factors previously supposed to enhance political motivations remain normative or desired – rather than real or practical – explanations.

In other words, while it remains ideal that individuals with political knowledge and the understanding that things can be changed participate politically, this is not always the case in practice. In reality, even individuals who are active and willing to participate often encounter obstacles, with access to mobilisation being a primary challenge.

Online mobilisation in Russia

The case study of online petition-signing in Russia further highlights the role of individual factors in political participation. In this study, I focused specifically on mobilisation: what forms of mobilisation are carried out online and what is their effectiveness?

My findings reveal that among the three forms of mobilisation – information sharing, persuasion, and providing social support – only information sharing directly influences participation in petition signing. Meanwhile, persuasion and social support show no additional effects and merely correlate with information sharing. Moreover, I discovered that information sharing through social media networks with sparse connections between individuals (as seen on platforms like Twitter, where connections are one-sided) is more effective than sharing through networks with denser connections (such as VKontakte, where connections are two-sided friendships). From these results, several conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, it becomes evident that the channels utilised for mobilisation and coordination play a crucial role in determining the outcome of these efforts, particularly participation. Certain networks, notably those with sparse connections between individuals, prove to be more effective and should be prioritised when organising and supporting a movement.

Secondly, the lack of additional effect of persuasion on participation suggests one of two possibilities. Either recruiters are not so good at persuading individuals to participate, or those who already have access to information about planned political activities are not the demographic requiring persuasion. The latter explanation aligns with previous research by Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (1999), who found that recruiters often target groups with prior political engagement. However, this strategy of continuously drawing from a pool of activists – which is quite limited especially when studying non-democratic contexts – inevitably leads to restricted participation outcomes.

Based on these findings, it becomes evident that inadequate mobilisation and/or coordination presents the primary challenges to achieving mass participation. This inadequacy can manifest in various ways: a) inappropriate targeting of groups, b) ineffective persuasion efforts, or c) the selection of incorrect recruitment channels.

The role of social networks in Russian mobilisation

In the fourth study of the dissertation, my colleagues and I further tested these assumptions.

Using data on protest activity in Russia, I once again observed that communication networks and their structures significantly influence individuals' decisions to participate politically. By solely utilising information about an individual's network structure and group memberships, we achieved

a remarkable 96% accuracy in predicting participation in protests. Notably, protesters exhibited unique social network structures. Often, protesters occupied brokerage positions within social networks, serving as intermediaries connecting other users and groups of users. Furthermore, protesters tended to have large networks with sparse connections, indicating that many users in their network were not directly connected to each other but were indirectly linked through a protester. Additionally, the majority of protesters belonged to activist groups, having previously participated politically. It is also worth mentioning that the majority of all users who received information about the protests did so via activist groups.

These findings underscore several important points:

1. They provide evidence that recruiters primarily utilise activist groups to disseminate information about planned activities, targeting prior activists rather than other user groups who have not participated before.

2. Access to political information on social media is heavily influenced by the structures of personal networks. Users with larger networks and sparse connections tend to receive sufficient information and support to participate actively, whereas users with smaller, denser networks have limited access to information about planned activities and inadequate support for political engagement.

Moreover, previous research by Menon, Thompson, and E. Smith (2020) suggests that having large, sparse social networks and occupying brokerage positions in these networks correlates with high socioeconomic status. This highlights disparities in access to political information, indicating that protesters often come from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. In the context of a non-democratic regime like Russia, these insights translate into several implications.

Firstly, influential individuals have the necessary resources to mitigate the risks associated with participation, such as potential arrest or job loss. Having connections, financial resources to hire legal assistance, and substantial savings to withstand unemployment are assets when deciding to participate in protests.

However, there is another more significant conclusion that arises from this result. Influential individuals have privileged access to information about planned activities. As emphasised by Brady, Schlozman, and Verba (1999), disadvantaged groups face restricted access to information due to their limited civic memberships (thus, adverse social networks). While Brady, Schlozman, and Verba primarily focused on minority groups in the USA, in non-democratic contexts where a substantial middle class is often absent, this translates into the participation of only a select few. The majority lack sufficient networks to access information about planned political activities. Furthermore, the quality of their social networks is compromised by social media personalisation algorithms, further limiting access to this critical information (Himelboim, McCreery, and M. Smith, 2013; Cinelli et al., 2020).

In practice, advantaged groups utilise their social networks to engage in political participation, such as participating in protests. By participating in these activities, they establish new connections and affiliations with other like-minded individuals. These new connections contribute to the expansion and improvement of their social networks. In this way, as they engage in protests and other forms of political participation, advantaged individuals forge new memberships and strengthen their network ties. This continual cycle of engagement and network improvement further amplifies their influence in political decision-making processes.

Conversely, disadvantaged groups, hampered by poor social networks, are marginalised from the political process due to limited access to information and thus have reduced opportunities for political participation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that political participation is conditioned by an individual's access to both financial and social resources, and that this barrier to political engagement creates a vicious cycle of political disenfranchisement for the most disadvantaged groups.

Conclusion

To conclude, political participation research often portrays individuals as disinterested or uneducated, lacking concern for the future of their country. This is exemplified by news reports from European outlets over the past decades, which criticise the Russian public for the lack of protest participation (Smirnov, 2022). However, this dissertation challenges such simplistic understanding of participation – or the lack thereof – in non-democratic contexts.

The findings of my analysis reveal that political knowledge or social trust do not determine individuals' propensity to participate politically. Instead, the dissertation underscores the critical importance of resources, particularly in the context of costly activities such as protesting within non-democratic regimes.

Protest participants face significant risks, including the possibility of arrest or imprisonment (Amnesty International, editorial board, 2021), and instances of job loss following political activism are not uncommon (France24, editorial board, 2021). Therefore, financial resources play a crucial role in enabling individuals to navigate these risks and consequences, and poor socioeconomic conditions negatively affects the ability of individuals to participate politically.

Policy recommendations

Based on the findings of my dissertation, the following policy recommendations can be made:

1. Raise awareness of the socioeconomic mechanism behind protest participation in semi-authoritarian states and consider the unintended democratic effects of policies that reinforce or sustain socioeconomic inequalities.

2. Support initiatives aimed at promoting economic development, job creation, and poverty reduction in non-democratic countries. By addressing underlying socio-economic inequalities and structural barriers to economic opportunity, these initiatives can help alleviate financial pressures on individuals and communities, enabling them to engage more actively in political participation and advocacy.

3. Invest in economic empowerment programs that provide vocational training, job placement assistance, and entrepreneurship training for communities affected by political repression. By equipping individuals with the skills and resources to secure sustainable livelihoods, these programs can enhance their ability to withstand economic pressures and continue their political activism.

Secondly, this dissertation delves into the issue of mobilisation and access to it as another significant barrier to political participation. It highlights the inadequacies of existing mobilisation efforts, which are often misdirected, ineffective in terms of persuasion, and reliant on inappropriate recruitment channels. A key challenge faced by civil society in Russia today is the shortage of active civic organisations. In light of these findings and conclusions, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Allocate resources to support the development and strengthening of civil society organisations in non-democratic contexts. This could include funding for capacity-building programs, advocacy campaigns, and initiatives aimed at promoting civic engagement and activism at the grassroots level. By investing in civil society, the Swedish development assistance can empower communities to mobilise effectively and advocate for their rights and interests.

2. Provide training and support for activists and recruiters to enhance their persuasion techniques and communication skills. This could include workshops, seminars, and mentorship programs focused on effective messaging, storytelling, and community organising strategies. By equipping activists with the tools and resources to effectively persuade and mobilise others, the Swedish development assistance can enhance the impact of grassroots movements and advocacy effort.

3. Encourage the adoption of inclusive mobilisation strategies that target diverse segments of the population. This could involve tailored messaging, outreach campaigns, and community-based initiatives designed to resonate with specific audiences and address their unique concerns and interests.

4. Provide training and support for civil society organisations and activists to navigate the constraints of social media channels for movement coordination and effectively share information. This could involve offering workshops or seminars on best practices for digital mobilisation, including targeted advertising strategies and content optimisation techniques. By equipping recruiters with the knowledge and skills to leverage social media platforms more effectively, they can overcome barriers to information dissemination and reach a wider audience for political participation purposes.

References

Amnesty International, editorial board. (2021). Russia: No place for protest, [Online]. Available: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/4328/2021/en/ [12 Aug 2021].

Barro, R. J. and Lee, J. W. (2013). A new data set of educational attainment in the world, 1950–2010. *Journal of Development Economics*, 104, pp. 184–198.

Brady, H. E., Schlozman, K. L. and Verba, S. (1999). Prospecting for participants: Rational expectations and the recruitment of political activists. *American Political Science Review*, 93(1), pp. 153–168.

Centola, D. and Macy, M. (2007). Complex contagions and the weakness of long ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 113(3), pp. 702–734.

Collier, R. B. (1999). *Paths toward democracy: The working class and elites in Western Europe and South America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davydova, A. (2021). Environmental activism in Russia: Strategies and prospects, [Online]. Available: https://www.csis.org/analysis/environmental-activism-russia-strategies-and-prospects [3 Mar 2021].

ESS. (2018). ESS round 9: European social survey round 9 data. Data file edition 1.2. NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC.

France24, editorial board. (2021). Russians risk their jobs for supporting Navalny, [Online]. Available: https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210220-russians-risk-their-jobs-for-supporting-navalny [20 Feb 2021].

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), pp. 1360–1380.

Hart, J., & Bogdanoff, C. (2020). Protesting – was it just a trend, or is it a movement? [Online]. Available: https://www.tcnjsignalnews.com/article/2020/11/protesting-is-it-just-a-trend-or-is-it-a-movement [24 Nov 2021].

Himelboim, I., McCreery, S., and Smith, M. (2013). Birds of a feather tweet together: Integrating network and content analyses to examine cross-ideology exposure on Twitter. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(2), pp. 154–174.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, editorial board. (2021). The global state of democracy 2021: Building resilience in a pandemic era, [Online]. Available: https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-democracy-2021-building-resilience-pandemic-era [22 Nov 2021].

Johnston, M. (2013). *Corruption, contention, and reform: The power of deep democratization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maravall, J. M. (1982). *The transition to democracy in Spain*. UK: Croom Helm.

Menon, T., Thompson, L., and Smith, E. (2020). Research: How Socioeconomic Status Impacts the Way We Network, [Online]. Available: https://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/H05N5L-PDF-ENG [10 Jun 2020].

O'Donnell, G., and Schmitter, P. C. (1986). *Transitions from authoritarian rule: Latin America*. Political science. Maryland, US: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Roth, A. (2021). Alexei Navalny: 1,000 arrested after protests over jailing of Russian opposition leader, [Online]. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/02/russian-opposition-leader-alexei-navalny-jailed [3 Feb 2021].

Smirnov, S. (2022). Why Russians are not protesting against the war, [Online]. Available: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-why-no-protests-ukraine-putin-soviet-union/ [5 Oct 2022].

Tocqueville, A. de. (1835). *Democracy in America*. New Jersey, US: Princeton University Press.

Vazhnyye Istorii, editorial board. (2022). When you don't get paid, you don't pay attention to anything else, [Online]. Available: https://istories.media/interviews/2021/12/20/kogda-vam-ne-platyat-dengi-vi-ne-obrashchaete-vnimaniya-ni-na-chto-drugoe/ [20 Dec 2021].

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

What are the underlying factors behind limited protest participation in semi-authoritarian regimes? This thesis tests the applicability of political participation theories and the role of individual factors in explaining on- and offline mobilisation in the context of contemporary Russia.

Vilka är de underliggande faktorerna bakom det begränsade protestdeltagandet i semi-auktoritära regimer? Denna avhandling testar tillämpbarheten av teorier om politiskt deltagande och vilken roll individuella faktorer spelar för att förklara on- och offline-mobilisering i dagens Ryssland.

⚡EBA