

WORKING PAPER

# Fine-Tuning Protest Event Analysis: Collecting Participant-Generated Event Data and Protest Slogans in an Internet Age. The PEPS database

This working paper<sup>1</sup> is a description and discussion of the PEPS database of data relating to protest events in (or relating to) Russia. PEPS stands for “protest events, photos, and slogans,” expressing the fact that it is not just a data set, but also a repository of first- and second-hand sources. It began as an effort to collect data (much of it in real time) about the protest cycle that started in response to electoral fraud in the elections to the Russian Duma in December 2011 and ultimately died down in January 2013. The database has been used in a number of publications in several languages.<sup>2</sup>

PEPS focuses on Russia *outside* Moscow and Saint Petersburg, the two cities that are vastly overrepresented in both quantitative and qualitative studies of protest in Russia. We also include events organized by Russian activists abroad. The database<sup>3</sup> currently includes 967 individual events in 237 places and 5,380 slogans for the period between November 2011 and January 2013 (as well as nine later events).<sup>4</sup> Another round of data from 93 places in Russia, collected

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented on Nov 23, 2013, at the 45th annual convention of the American Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in Boston.

<sup>2</sup> Oleg Zhuravlev, *Microsociology of big events: the dynamics of eventful solidarities in “For fair elections” and Euromaidan protest movements*. PhD diss. European University Institute, Florence, 2018; Jan Matti Dollbaum, “Curbing protest through elite co-optation? Regional protest mobilization by the Russian systemic opposition during the ‘for fair elections’ protests 2011–2012,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8, no. 2 (July 2017), 109–122; Mischa Gabowitsch, *Protest in Putin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Margarita Zavadskaia and Natal’ia Savel’eva, “‘A možno ia kak-nibud’ sam vyberu?’: vybory kak ‘lichnoe delo’, protsedurnaia legitimnost’ i mobilizatsiia 2011-2012 godov” [“How about I choose for myself?” Elections as a “personal matter,” procedural legitimacy, and the mobilization of 2011-12], in: M.L. Aliukov, K. Kleman [Karine Clément], A.V. Magun, I.A. Matveev, A.V. Nevskii, N.V. Savel’eva, M.V. Turovets, S.V. Erpyleva, M.A. Zavadskaia, A.A. Zhelnina, O.M. Zhuravlev, *Politika apolitichnykh: grazhdanskii dvizheniia v Rossii 2011-2013 godov* [The politics of the apolitical: civic movements in Russia, 2011-13] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015), 219–68; Artemy Magun, “The Russian protest movement of 2011-2012: a new middle-class populism,” *Stasis* 2, no. 1 (2014), 160–91; Mischa Gabowitsch, *Putin kaputt!? Russlands neue Protestkultur* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013); idem, “Social media, mobilisation and protest slogans in Moscow and beyond,” *Digital Icons. Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, no.7 (2012): 213–25.

<sup>3</sup> In terms of format, PEPS went through several stages: It started out as a blog (at [slogans10dec.blogspot.com](http://slogans10dec.blogspot.com)) that collected photos and provided links to sources as well as an alphabetical list of slogans. This was started by Mischa Gabowitsch in December 2011 and was effectively discontinued in February 2012. Collection continued offline in the form of an Excel spreadsheet and photos saved in folders sorted by date and place. In the summer of 2012, Olga Sveshnikova and Manarsha Isaeva joined the data collection team, and the data were moved, by Goor Zankl, to a Filemaker database hosted at the Einstein Forum. Finally they were transferred to a server at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen and are now available through an online platform maintained by Felix Herrmann.

<sup>4</sup> Another team, led by Alexandra Arkhipova, has also established a database of slogans, which they code by “frame.” Unlike our data, which is largely harvested from online sources, theirs was assembled directly by the

to cover the anti-corruption protests of March-April 2017, is currently being added to the database and will be made available by September 2019.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, we present PEPS in the context of existing protest event analysis (PEA) projects for the Russian case and beyond. We will then discuss some of the difficulties we faced in our data collection efforts, and argue that this may be relevant to assessing the accuracy and validity of other existing data sets and databases.

Let us start by highlighting the innovative features of PEPS:

1. PEPS is not just a dataset that harvests a limited number of variables (date, place, type of event, official organizer) from its sources, but also functions as a repository of sources, both textual and visual, and can thus serve as a multi-purpose archive of the largest protest movement(s) in post-Soviet Russia so far. Beyond protest content and frequency, our data can be used for the study of protest repertoires, language, and a number of other topics.
2. PEPS was created to document protest in the Internet age, where protest coordination has shifted from centralized organizations to unaffiliated individuals or horizontal networks<sup>6</sup>, and protest participants have become amateur reporters, publishing vast amounts of eyewitness accounts, photos, and videos that not only document protest events in much greater detail and with more accuracy than traditional news media can, but also allow researchers to account for diversity among protest participants. PEPS also acknowledges the fact that many, if not most of the protest events it includes cannot accurately be described as having a single, unified meaning or theme for all participants, or as being mostly about voicing a specific set of grievances. It thus takes into account the literature on “new new” social movements, which are not about making social or identity claims, but simply about the temporary common occupation of space.<sup>7</sup> In particular, it takes seriously a series of studies of protest in Russia that have shown that rallies and other protest events are not only, and often not primarily, arenas of claims articulation, and that protest participants do not usually feel represented by those claiming to speak for them, either on stage at the rallies or in the news media<sup>8</sup>. Thus PEPS does not subsume any one protest event under a single thematic heading; instead, it includes every single documented protest sign and slogan, allowing us to account for the variety of forms of expression at one and the same protest event.
3. Rather than drawing exclusively on editorially curated news media sources, as most such databases do, we pay particular attention to participant-generated content such as blog entries and photographs. To ascertain comprehensiveness, we had our data checked

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researchers, who took photographs at a series of rallies in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Tomsk in the spring of 2012. See Aleksandra Arkhipova, Mikhail Alekseevskii (eds.). *My ne nemy. Antropologiya protesta v Rossii 2011–2012 godov* [We are Not Mute. An Anthropology of Protest in Russia in 2011–12] (Tartu: ELM, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Data collection: Veronika Lukyanenko, Bremen University; data entry: Carina Spreitzer, Free University Berlin.

<sup>6</sup> *Anstifter, Strippenzieher, Urgesteine. Schlüsselfiguren in sozialen Bewegungen*. Thematic issue of the *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen*, no. 4 (2013).

Mischa Gabowitsch, “Are Copycats Subversive? Strategy-31, the Russian Runs, the Immortal Regiment, and the Transformative Potential of Non-Hierarchical Movements,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 5 (2018), 297–314.

<sup>7</sup> Carles Feixa, Inês Pereira, and Jeffrey S. Juris, “Global Citizenship and the ‘New, New’ Social Movements> Iberian Connections,” *Young* 17, no. 4 (Jan 2009), 421–42.

<sup>8</sup> Aleksandr Bikbov, “Metodologiya issledovaniia ‘vnezapnogo’ ulichnogo aktivizma (rossiiskie mitingi i ulichnye lageria, dekabr’ 2011 – iun’ 2012). *Laboratorium* 4, no. 2 (2012), 130–63; Gabowitsch, *Protest in Putin’s Russia*, 107–159.

by local correspondents in a number of Russian regions, and also cross-checked it against local protest event datasets such as that compiled by Olesia Lobanova and Andrei Semenov for Tyumen'.<sup>9</sup>

## PEA in Russia<sup>10</sup> and beyond

Quantitative protest event analysis typically draws on three kinds of sources: news reports, police statistics, and the accounts of activists and/or organizers. All of these can be unreliable even in relatively transparent societies; in the Russian case, this is especially so. Another difficulty not limited to Russia is the dwindling role of traditional institutions such as parties, other political groups, or trade unions in organizing (certain kinds of) protests, a phenomenon that has been attested worldwide and is documented for the West European context in systematic quantitative studies such as Bert Klandermans's CCC<sup>11</sup>. In Russia as elsewhere, protests organized by non-affiliated individuals have now become the norm: thus, in its 2012 data set and report, OVD-Info lists 137 out of 228 protest events in Moscow as having been organized by individuals or unaffiliated groups of activists (i.e. 60%; for the first quarter of 2013, the figure was 65%).

The world's largest manually compiled protest events data set—the German Prodat, built by Dieter Rucht and his colleagues at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin—spans the period from 1950 to 2002, draws on two nationwide newspapers<sup>12</sup>, and uses two smaller newspapers and some non-news-media sources<sup>13</sup> for shorter periods to cross-check some of the data and identify systematic bias. Their sampling method was later adopted for the U.S. context by a team that included Doug McAdam and Susan Olzak. Here is not the place to discuss the various selectivity studies that the Prodat team carried out; suffice it to say that their cross-checks demonstrated that national newspapers report, on average, less than 5% of local protest events, a finding that was corroborated by similar studies in other countries.<sup>14</sup>

The best-known and most comprehensive protest event data set for the Soviet and post-Soviet region is Mark Beissinger's "Mass Demonstrations and Mass Violent Events in the Former USSR," which includes 6,663 protest events and 2,177 incidents of mass violence from 1987 to 1992.<sup>15</sup> He compiled the data set himself, drawing on reports in 150 Soviet and post-Soviet news sources. While we haven't tried to double-check any of the events in Beissinger's database against independent evidence, our own efforts to draw on news media sources for PEPS highlight some of the difficulties in using such sources, which probably affect his data set as well.

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<sup>9</sup> See Olesia Lobanova, Andrei Semenov, "Ot neuchastii k deistviu. Grazhdansko-politicheskaia aktivnost' v Tiumeni v dekabre 2011 – sentiabre 2012 gg.," *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia* 17, no. 3-4 (113) (July-December 2012), 134–40.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://protestrussia.net/data/> for brief descriptions of available data sets related to protest in Russia. An overview is also provided in: Andrei Semenov, "Sobytiinyi analiz protestov kak instrument izucheniia politicheskoi mobilizatsii," *Sotsiologicheskoe obozrenie* 17, no. 2 (2018), 317–41.

<sup>11</sup> See some of the results at [www.protestsurvey.eu](http://www.protestsurvey.eu).

<sup>12</sup> PRODAT uses a sampling method based on Monday issues as well as the newspapers' entire weekly run in every fourth week.

<sup>13</sup> As well as local police data from the town of Freiburg for 1983–7.

<sup>14</sup> Ruud Koopmans and Dieter Rucht, "Protest Event Analysis," in *Methods of Social Movement Research*. ed. Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 246–48.

<sup>15</sup> Used in: Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002). Data sets available at <https://scholar.princeton.edu/mbeissinger/publications/mass-demonstrations-and-mass-violent-events-former-ussr-1987-1992-these> (last consulted on March 15, 2019).

Other well-known data collection efforts are also based mostly on news media sources, for example the SOVA Center's statistics on xenophobic violence in Russia.

Before turning to the problems with using news media sources about protest in the Russian case, let us briefly consider the alternatives.

The two main alternative sources of data are, on the one hand, government (especially police) statistics and, on the other hand, information gathered from protest organizers and participants. The first of these we will not dwell on in great detail here, because they are used less frequently in the Russian case, especially in the Putin period. Comprehensive police statistics are very hard to obtain (Graeme Robertson does use them for a limited time span in the late 1990s, but acknowledges the limitations<sup>16</sup>), and both ethnographic research and findings from police sociology about police accounting methods make it very doubtful whether such police data as are available are either comprehensive, representative, or accurate in their representation and attribution of different types of protest events.<sup>17</sup> Other types of government data, such as Goskomstat's strike statistics, are demonstrably useless—thus, Rosstat counts strikes as having occurred with single-digit frequency in every year of the 2010s<sup>18</sup> even though many more strikes have been amply documented e.g. by the Center for Social and Labor Rights (at [trudprava.ru](http://trudprava.ru)): one reason for this is that Goskomstat focuses on strikes in state-affiliated institutions such as educational bodies or state-owned companies, which have dwindled in recent years compared to the 90s, rather than strikes in privately-owned companies, which have become more frequent.<sup>19</sup>

The second source of data has been information obtained directly from protest organizers or participants. Examples of this include the individual event reports and aggregate statistics published intermittently from 2005 to 2011 on the web site of the Institute for Collective Action (IKD)<sup>20</sup>, the latter compiled from reports submitted by local correspondents and activists; the event reports collected on Garri Kasparov's web site [namarsh.ru](http://namarsh.ru) and used by Tomila Lankina and her co-authors as a basis for quantitative analysis<sup>21</sup>; and the statistics about illegal detainment and arrests in Moscow compiled by the web site OVD-Info based on participant reports (and some news media sources).<sup>22</sup>

The problem with such collection methods, which largely rely on the initiative of individual organizers or protesters, is that they almost inevitably introduce an ideological selection bias. The IKD's network of contacts was mostly with left-wing groups and small-scale local initiatives. Kasparov made efforts to forge broad ideological coalitions, but always included only some of the groups in each segment of the ideological spectrum; his network was also based largely on political activists and has less involvement from non-political civic groups.

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<sup>16</sup> Graeme Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Tat'iana Lokshina, Sergei Lukasheskii, Asmik Novikova, Ol'ga Shepeleva (eds.). *Militsiia mezhdru Rossiei i Chechnei. Veterany konflikta v rossiiskom obshchestve* (Moscow: Demos, 2007); Viktor Voronkov, Boris Gladarev, Liliia Sagitova (eds.). *Militsiia i étnicheskie migranty: praktiki vzaimodeistviia* (Saint Petersburg: Aleteia, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki, *Rossia v tsifrakh. Ofitsial'noe izdanie 2017* (Moscow: Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki, 2017), 109.

<sup>19</sup> See Robertson, *The Politics of Protest*, for strike statistics on the late 1990s.

<sup>20</sup> [www.ikd.ru](http://www.ikd.ru) is now defunct, but snapshots of the site can be consulted through the Internet Archive at [archive.org](http://archive.org).

<sup>21</sup> Tomila Lankina and Alexey Savrasov, "Growing Social Protest in Russia," *Russian Analytical Digest* no. 60 (2009), 1–9; Tomila Lankina and Alisa Voznaya, "New Data on Protest Trends in Russia's Regions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 2 (Feb 2015), 327–42.

<sup>22</sup> For the source data and reports, see <http://reports.ovdinfo.org>.

The OVD-Info network also seems to be slanted somewhat toward the liberal side of the political spectrum, not to mention the fact that the site primarily lists protests in Moscow.<sup>23</sup>

The main problem with these collections, however, is that their sources are not always listed. Namarsh.ru does provide links to press reports about the individual events it lists, and IKD published individual event reports, often written by local activists. In the case of the IKD's aggregate statistics, however, data is only available in aggregate form, without even minimal descriptions of individual events. This makes cross-checks impossible and severely limits their use, either as multi-purpose data sets or even for the purposes for which they were published, i.e. to track changes over time (since there is no way to test the data for bias).<sup>24</sup> To the extent that individual event descriptions are provided, these suffer from some of the same problems as news media reports.

## Problems presented by news media sources

News media reports have been by far the most prominent source of data in most protest events databases so far. Moreover, new projects that use automated data collection mechanisms to gather unprecedented amounts of protest event data, such as GDELT (the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone), usually draw exclusively or almost exclusively on news media sources. We will thus dwell on such sources in greatest detail.

Beyond issues of selectivity that hinge on scale (national vs. local) and name recognition of organizers, there are grounds for assuming that drawing on news media reports in the Russian case presents additional problems, which have to do with political bias, lack of media independence, and journalistic incompetence.

Let us illustrate these by demonstrating how difficult it can be to identify the **organizer** and **type** of an event.

### Identifying the Organizer

We have encountered three major types of problems in this regard: imprecise, incomplete, contradictory, or patently false data in our (media and blog) sources; the prominent role of individuals, as opposed to institutionalized groups, in organizing protest events; and the fluidity of the status of "organizer."

**First**, news media and blogs often ignore an event, or offer contradictory accounts.

For illustration, consider the example of a big protest rally in Kazan on February 4, 2012.

*Interfax* wrote: "The rally was organized by a civic action group (*initsiativnaia gruppа grazhdan*), who invited residents of the city via a group in an Internet social network."<sup>25</sup>

The news portal *ProKazan.ru* stated: [The rally's] organizers are the groups "Civic Activists [obshchestvennye aktivisty]" and "Kazan Civic Union [*Kazanskii grazhdanskii soiuz*]"<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> According to the main author of the project, Grigorii Okhotin (personal communication in October 2013), this is because there are too few illegal arrests outside of Moscow to warrant statistical generalizations, and OVD-Info has too few correspondents elsewhere.

<sup>24</sup> Graeme Robertson compiled his own quantitative dataset based on IKD's reports in order to compare them with events listed by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. See Ora John Reuter and Graeme Robertson, "Legislatures, Cooptation, and Social Protest in Contemporary Authoritarian Regimes," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 1 (January 2015), 235–48.

<sup>25</sup> "Okolo 500 chelovek priniali uchastie v mitinge oppozitsii v Kazani," *Interfax*, Feb 4, 2012, [www.interfax-russia.ru/Povoljie/news.asp?id=291158&sec=1671](http://www.interfax-russia.ru/Povoljie/news.asp?id=291158&sec=1671), saved Nov 13, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> "Miting oppozitsii 4 fevralia: kak èto bylo," *ProKazan.ru*, Feb 4, 2012, <http://prokazan.ru/newsv2/53868.html>, captured Feb 26, 2013.

A *Yabloko*-affiliated organizer, however, mentioned in his blog before the rally that those trying to register it with the authorities included *Yabloko*, the CPRF, *Pravoe delo*, the Civic Union, and the Prokhorov campaign, and reported on the difficulties they were facing in doing so.<sup>27</sup> In this case the formal organizers seem to have acted as a front for parties denied registration, but news reports did not mention this even though party symbols were clearly visible in some of the photos they displayed.

In general, the web sites of political organizations will often claim sole or main credit for an event even if it was co-organized with others. Thus, in Barnaul, an association calling itself “Decembrists” claimed a protest rally on March 5, 2012, as their own, omitting to mention the other organizers.<sup>28</sup> News media sources, on the other hand, list a “Committee For Fair Elections” as co-organizer.<sup>29</sup>

The **second** problem is presented by the organizers’ (or applicants’) lack of (stated) institutional affiliation. In many cases, events were organized by individual “civic activists.” Even with access to a copy of the application, we only know the organizers’ names, not their affiliation.

**Thirdly**, the very term “organizer” is fluid. Many events had large organizing committees involving representatives of different groups, and the sources say nothing about the extent of each individual group’s involvement, or indeed on whether they exist other than on paper.

In Murmansk on December 24, 2011, a protest rally was organized by representatives of the Russian Popular Democratic Union (RNDS), the United Civic Front, the *Solidarnost’* Movement, the Party of Popular Freedom, *Yabloko*, and unaffiliated civic activists.<sup>30</sup>

In Esentuki on February 4, 2012, one source states the organizers as: “Dmitri Chernov (from the organization “Russian March”), the Solar Patrol of Pyatigorsk, the Popular Veche of Mineralnye vody, the Slavic Union of Stavropol’e, the Popular Public Chamber of the Caucasian Spas, [and] the Public Council of the Southern and North Caucasian Federal Districts.”<sup>31</sup>

Even when news media do their best to mention the organizers, this is not always easy, as the following example of a protest in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on February 23, 2012, illustrates:

After this information was published, we were contacted by the deputy coordinator of the regional branch of the LDPR, Sergei Nechunaev, who was offended and asked why we had stated that the February 23 rally by the *Komsomolets* [Cinema] was organized by the local CPRF branch, even though the rally was organized by the LDPR, and the Communists only asked to be allowed to participate? It was the LDPR that received permission from the mayor’s office to organize the rally, which is why it was him, Nechunaev, who opened the event.

Why did we? Probably because it was the CPRF’s city committee that used the media to invite “all citizens with an active civic position to participate” in the rally, and on the square

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<sup>27</sup> Zufar Garipov, “V Kazani gotovitsia provokatsiia k 4 fevralia,” Jan 20, 2012, [territoriayabloka.pf/blog/35.html](http://territoriayabloka.pf/blog/35.html), captured Feb 26, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> mr\_alvis, “Obsuzhdenie itogov vyborov,” *Grazhdanskoe dvizhenie “Dekabristy,”* Mar 5, 2012, <https://dekabristi22.livejournal.com/730.html>, last consulted Mar 19, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. “5 marta v Barnaule proidut dva mitinga: odin pod lozungom ‘Za chestnye vybory’, vtoroi — ‘Za stabil’nost’ i v podderzhku kursa deistvuiushchei vlasti,” *Altapress.ru*, Mar 2, 2012, <https://altapress.ru/politika/story/marta-v-barnaule-proydu-dva-mitinga-odin-pod-lozungom-za-chestnie-vibori-vtoroy-za-stabilnost-i-v-podderzhku-kursa-deystvuyushchey-vlasti-81415>, last consulted Mar 19, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> “Nesmotria na shtorm,” Dec 26, 2011, <http://www.kasparov.ru/material.php?id=4EF823A228F51>, captured Jan 24, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Mikhail Parshin, “Miting 4 fevralia za chestnye vybory v Essentukakh,” Feb 5, 2012, <https://m-parshin.livejournal.com/41903.html>, captured Feb 23, 2013.

itself the red banners and slogans of the CPRF were in a majority, while the LDPR people looked like guests...<sup>32</sup>

Other sources on this event, such as *Interfax*, also mention the CPRF as organizers.<sup>33</sup>

## Identifying Event Type

There are two main kinds of difficulties in identifying event type. The first concerns the events themselves; the second have to do with the ways in which they are presented in news media and blogs.

Here are some common cases related to the first difficulty.

- Events whose format differs from that stated in the formal application. This was especially common in early December 2011, when organizers had little time to have their rallies approved (*soglasovat*). Protest rallies often officially took the form of “meetings with members of parliaments” (Vologda, December 10; Moscow, December 29) and pickets that turned into rallies (Kaliningrad, December 7; Kemerovo and Novosibirsk, December 10). In Magnitogorsk, a rally was camouflaged as the founding assembly of a new political organization (December 10).
- Events that are difficult to classify.  
For example, in Cheboksary, in December 10, 2011, approximately 50 people (according to the organizers) participated in laying a “funeral wreath” by the building of the Central Electoral Commission for Chuvashia as part of a string of protest events in Cheboksary that Saturday, a correspondent for Interfax-Povolzhie reported. One of the organizers told the news agency that the activists were carrying out a “ritual of burying fair elections.”<sup>34</sup> The organizers of the “burial” lit candles, laid their wreaths, and observed a minute of silence.<sup>35</sup>  
In Seoul, “five people, including one female student from Irkutsk, assembled by the Press Center of the City of Seoul at 2 pm on December 10.” Carrying posters with slogans such as ‘For Fair Elections in Russia’ and ‘We are against the falsification of elections in Russia,’ the activists walked down the main streets” of central Seoul.<sup>36</sup>

These atypical demonstrations create problems not only for researchers, but also for journalists. One problem is *misrepresentation*. In their descriptions of protest events, reporters often seem to use the first term that comes to their mind, failing to distinguish between different types of public events. Thus, the funeral procession in Cheboksary was called a picket, whereas the protest walk in Seoul was described as a “miting,” or rally, in news media sources. In some cases, a single source may contain contradictory information, for example when an event is presented as a rally, but its participants are referred to as picketers (Kyiv, December 10, 2011:

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<sup>32</sup> Vadim Gorbunov, “V Iuzhno-Sakhalinske proshel nebol'shoi miting ‘Za chestnye vybory’,” *Sakhalin.info*, Feb 24, 2012, <http://www.sakhalin.info/news/73954>, captured Oct 28, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> “Kommunisty Sakhalina proveli ocherednuiu aktsiiu s trebovaniem chestnykh vyborov,” *Interfax Rossiia*, Feb 13, 2012, <http://www.interfax-russia.ru/FarEast/main.asp?id=295356&sec=1664>, captured Oct 28, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> “V stolitse Chuvashii mitinguiushchie namereny vozlozhit ‘pogrebal’nye’ tsvety k zdaniiu TsIK respubliky,” *Interfaks-Rossiia*, Dec 10, 2011, <http://www.interfax-russia.ru/Povoljie/news.asp?id=279823&sec=1671>, last consulted Mar 15, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> “Piket v Cheboksarakh,” Dec 10, 2011, <https://mmullina.livejournal.com/52395.html>, captured Jan 18, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> “V Seule proshel miting za povtornye vybory v Rossii,” *Argumenty i fakty v Vostochnoi Sibiri*, Dec 12, 2011, <http://www.irk.aif.ru/society/edu/414573>.

judging by the photos and videos published online<sup>37</sup>, this seems to have been a picket). Frequently photos and videos turn out to be more reliable guides to an event's format and content than textual descriptions by the news media.

Another frequent problem is *simplification* of the event type. For example, news media will mention a *miting* when blog entries and photos clearly show that the event included e.g. a protest march, a concert, a picket, and a theatrical performance. Thus, for example, the event in Saratov on February 26, 2012, was a “rally” in the eyes of the news media<sup>38</sup>, but in fact it included a protest march, a human chain, an exhibition and contest of protest posters, a concert, and an attempt to burn the effigy of a bureaucrat. The distinction is far from trivial, as organizers, participants, demands, motivations, degree of organizational involvement, and regimes of engagement often differ between different parts of what appears to the news media as a unified event.

## Using Photos as Sources about Protest

The main problem with collecting photos concerns attribution. It is not always possible to determine with certainty on what date, in which city, and at which event a photo was taken, and often it is even more difficult to establish the identity of the photographer.

Once again, where news media sources are concerned, this is partly a problem of journalistic quality. The news media will often use photos from one event to accompany a report about another event. This is especially true of protest car rallies: thus, photos of the Moscow rally on January 29, 2012, were used, widely and usually without attribution, as illustrations for articles in the regional press about similar local events.

Even in high-quality reports about an event, the photos published will only reflect part of what was happening there. Much more detailed information can be found in photo albums published by protest participants as part of their reports in blogs posts and on social networks. These present even more serious attribution problems. Ideally photo albums will be grouped by event, which usually still leaves open the identity of the photographer. In many cases, however, no separate album is created, and authors will publish pictures used for mobilization purposes before an event alongside snapshots of the events themselves. Furthermore, photos taken in the same city on the same day are hardly ever published separately. Thus, Novosibirsk on 5 March, 2012, saw a protest rally followed by a “Parade of Doubts” organized by the artist Artem Loskutov, then a release of sky lanterns, and finally an impromptu picket that disrupted a pro-Putin concert. In their blog posts, authors will usually list such event series in chronological order and identify individual events, but not in social media posts and photo albums—which tend to be much richer in terms of recording signs and posters.

Identifying the author is the trickiest task. Almost as a rule, photos are published without an indication of their author and source. In rare cases, professional photographers will indicate their authorship. Frequently photos will be published in the name of a group, and thus the photographer can only be identified e.g. as “Nizhnii Novgorod for fair elections.”

The other problem with using photos as sources concerns their content. There are two extreme cases that make it difficult to collect slogans from photos. The most common case is when a

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<sup>37</sup> “V Kieve u posol'stva Rossii proshel miting za chestnye vybory,” *Novyi region 2*, Dec 11, 2011, [www.nr2.ru/kiiev/362739.html](http://www.nr2.ru/kiiev/362739.html), captured Jan 15, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> “Uchastnikam aktsii ‘Za chestnye vybory’ ne dali szhech’ chuchelo biurokrata,” *NewsPortal*, Feb 27, 2012, [http://triadsky.ucoz.ru/news/uchastnikam\\_aktcii\\_za\\_chestnye\\_vybory\\_ne\\_dali\\_szhech\\_chuchelo\\_bjurokrata/2012-02-27-22933](http://triadsky.ucoz.ru/news/uchastnikam_aktcii_za_chestnye_vybory_ne_dali_szhech_chuchelo_bjurokrata/2012-02-27-22933), last consulted Mar 17, 2019.

slogan is only visible in part, as when the photographer intended to take a picture of people, without regard for the texts they were displaying:<sup>39</sup>



Another common case is when the photo features a slogan, but it's impossible to determine where it was displayed.<sup>40</sup>

## Outlook and Unresolved Problems

Despite the problems outlined above, we argue that our method yields higher-quality data than traditional collection methods, and that it is especially attuned to recent protest waves, which for many participants have provided meeting places rather than occasions to voice specific, pre-formulated grievances.

<sup>39</sup> Source: <http://politomsk.ru/ph/22/137854132.jpg>, Feb 4, 2012, captured the same day.

<sup>40</sup> Thus we have so far been unable to place this picture,



which takes up a motif that was already used before the 2011-13 protest cycle (e.g. <http://newsland.com/user/4203879172/content/tvoi-golos-vazhen-kak-nikогда/572504>, Oct 9, 2010, last consulted Mar 15, 2019).

However, we are still facing a number of unresolved problems beyond the usual difficulties concerning funding and stamina.

- 1) So far we have resisted the temptation to include data about participant numbers, which tend to be extremely unreliable.<sup>41</sup> However, we might have to give up our resistance, if only to assemble systematic evidence to corroborate our observations that participation peaked almost everywhere outside Moscow on December 10, 2011, and dwindled thereafter.
- 2) So far we have not collected data systematically for Moscow and Saint Petersburg or integrated existing collections into our own database, but we plan to do this in the future.
- 3) One major problem is that only a small minority of participants in any protest event will come with protest signs. Thus, slogans cannot be construed as accurately reflecting the whole range of different views and themes represented at a protest event. For the relatively small events that constitute the majority of events in our database, the number of slogans is usually too small to say anything systematic about the discrepancies between individual participants.
- 4) We are fairly confident that reports about most protest events, at least in urban settings, are now published online, but so far we have not tried to ascertain this by cross-checking our data against reports in offline newspapers.

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<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the different ways in which attendance has been counted at the largest rallies in Russia, see Gabowitsch, *Protest in Putin's Russia*, 201–206.