



# Divided by the Desire for Peace: A Frame Analysis of the Twitter Mobilisation ahead of the Russian Peace March 21 September 2014

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on mobilisation via Twitter ahead of the ‘Peace March’ on 21 September 2014, a national mass demonstration against the Russian regime’s policy towards Ukraine. Through a qualitative review of the most salient tweets mentioning the official hashtag #MarshMira, the article identifies the most conspicuous frames and classifies their functions. Contrary to the stated goal of the Peace March—to unify the people (or at least mend the divide between liberal, urban activists and ‘the people’)—the most pronounced frames propagated on Twitter served to widen this divide. Rather than pitching ‘the people’ against the regime, these frames juxtaposed the liberals and their values and emotions with the ‘uneducated’ masses and *their* values and emotions. Instead of working towards their stated objective of unification, opposition activists communicating on Twitter reproduced their own, caricatured, largely prejudiced image of ‘the people’ and thereby put a spoke in their own wheels. However, the analysis also suggests that the interactive and multi-venue character of such demonstrations gives activists the opportunity—provided that the frames are adjusted—to narrow the divide and potentially increase mobilisation.

**Keywords:** Russia, social mobilisation, opposition, demonstrations, frame theory, social media, Twitter, hashtag

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On 21 September 2014<sup>1</sup> several tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Moscow to participate in an officially sanctioned ‘Peace March’ (*Marsh mira*) to protest against the war in Eastern Ukraine. In Saint Petersburg, an unsanctioned protest earlier that day drew

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approximately 1,000 people (Karimov 2014). Smaller demonstrations, some sanctioned, some unsanctioned, took place in several Russian cities, as well as in Europe, Israel, the US and even Beijing.<sup>2</sup>

Social media were an integral and important part of efforts to inform, recruit and motivate. A web page with an online resolution, [netvoine.info](http://netvoine.info), was launched, and official events and groups were set up and administered on the dominant social media platforms. The official Twitter account @marshmira was opened on 15 September and attracted 2372 followers, forming an important hub for tweets about the demonstration. The Cyrillic hashtag #MarshMira and variants such as #marshmira were mentioned in more than 28,000 tweets between 21 August and 21 September. Reaching approximately 25,000 tweets on the day of the demonstration, it was one of the trending hashtags on Cyrillic Twitter.<sup>3</sup>

Right from the planning stage, the Peace March resembled first and foremost an opposition show of force, and only much less a ‘peace demonstration’ as such. It had a strong pro-Kyiv, anti-Kremlin thrust. Ukrainian national symbols such as the blue and yellow colours of the flag were prominent, and many of the slogans were explicitly anti-Putin. The initiative was launched not by some peace movement, but by the Committee for Protest Action, a coordinating organ for the opposition.<sup>4</sup> During a meeting on 21 August, the Committee decided to arrange a mass demonstration for the first time since before the summer holiday. The main slogan was subject to discussion, but Boris Nemtsov, a prominent opposition leader who was brutally killed in February 2015, argued the demonstration should be designated a ‘Peace March’ because of the *unifying* force of the desire for peace (Ryklin 2014). That is, the initiators (i.e. the opposition leaders) first decided on contentious action, and only afterwards, with the particular goal of uniting and recruiting people in mind, decided on the frames.

Though not bad by Putin-era standards and considering the wave of propaganda-fuelled patriotism at the time, an attendance of 50,000 or even 100,000 hardly amounts to a ‘unification’ of the people in a city of 12 million. If this was the goal, the demonstration was a fiasco. Why was the outcome so poor?

<sup>2</sup> The official count carried out by the observer organisation Soiuz nabludatelei Rossii (SONAR) was 26,100. Moscow police estimated attendance at around 5,000, whereas the most optimistic of the organisers claimed that as many as 100,000 were present (BBC 2014). This was the second Peace March that year. The first one was held on 15 March, the day before Crimea’s referendum on joining the Russian Federation.

<sup>3</sup> This study relies on technological tools that are available for free (or at a low cost). These all have their limitations, as Twitter is restrictive about access to its so-called *Firehose* (its entire archive of tweets). For the collection of the material, this study relies on a 1 November 2014 search using the Russian search engine Yandex, which under an exclusive deal has licensed access to ‘the full feed of all public tweets’ posted in Russian (‘Yandex Announces Partnership’). This makes it possible to establish a relatively reliable chronology (Paulsen and Zvereva 2014: 92). However, the (delayed) Yandex search does not capture 100 percent of the tweets as compared to real-time harvesting directly from the Firehose. Therefore, this collection method is not suited to quantitative studies. However, it should be adequate for qualitative analyses, as demonstrated by Paulsen and Zvereva (2014). Further, the likelihood that Yandex will miss the most popular retweeted posts is low, since each retweet is shown as a unique post. Thus, a tweet that is retweeted 100 times should theoretically appear 101 times in the search results. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the retweet count will vary slightly when studying the tweets in retrospect, as accounts and tweets may be deleted, and new retweets may appear. Online services such as Twtrland, Hashtagify, Twitonomy, Followerwonk and Topsy are, at least in their free or basic versions, much less reliable for collecting the amount of material required, but useful for analysing more limited datasets (for instance, individual accounts during a short period).

<sup>4</sup> *Komitet protestnykh deistvii*.

There are, of course, many factors to explain the opposition's failure to attract support. Over a number of years, and especially since the demonstrations 'for fair elections' after the fraudulent parliamentary elections in December 2011, the state has employed an array of administrative measures, restriction and repression to limit support for the opposition. The opposition faces numerous administrative obstacles and has limited access to traditional media, especially federal television. As a result, the opposition's organisational resources are limited. All of this is well documented (Petrov et al. 2014, Gel'man 2013, Oates 2013, Lansky and Suthers 2013, among others). Nevertheless, these are factors that the opposition activists cannot control. What they *can* control is the *message* they send about who they are, what is wrong with the current state of affairs, who is to blame, what the opposition's goals are and in what way they will reach them—the *framing* process.

In order to explain the fact that the opposition did not reach their stated goal of unification, I will attempt to answer the following research questions: Which frames were the most salient? What were the functions of these frames? To what extent were these frames viable for a wider mobilisation for the Peace March?

### **The importance of framing for social mobilisation**

Framing theory recognises that the crucial factors for collective action to take place include the (potential) participants' *perception* of the injustice of which they are victims, and their *perception* of the opportunities to achieve change (Noakes and Johnston 2005: 2). 'Objective' opportunities lead to collective action only when the potential protesters recognise the existence of such opportunities (Goodwin et al. 2001: 7). And efficient framing may itself create opportunities (Kenney 2005).

As stated in an oft-quoted definition, a frame is an 'interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of action [...]' (Snow and Benford 1992: 137). The basic *functions* of a frame are to present an interpretation of issues or events (diagnostic framing), offer a solution (prognostic framing) and motivate people to join the movement (motivational framing) (Noakes and Johnston 2005: 5-6). From a different perspective, Gamsen (ibid.) has identified three *components*: identity (which defines the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'); agency (which recognises that the grievous conditions may be changed); and injustice (which allocates blame, inciting the people to respond). I will make use of both sets of concepts.

In order to serve their mobilising functions, frames must be *resonant*. Resonance depends on several factors: a frame must be consistent and empirically credible, it must correspond to the targets' everyday experience, appeal to their values and draw on cultural themes that are familiar to them (Snow and Benford 1992: 140-1). The social and attitudinal differences between the liberal opposition activists and the broader masses are well documented (Volkov 2012, Bikbov 2014). However, so-called *frame alignment* strategies may contribute to bridging or at least narrowing this gap. Such strategies may include bridging (linking two or more structurally similar but previously unconnected frames), amplification (highlighting certain

values or beliefs), extension (so as to embrace new areas that are believed to be important for potential recruits) (Snow and Benford 1986), and transformation (i.e. ‘changing old understandings and meanings and/or generating new ones’) (Benford and Snow 2000: 625). In sum, to be truly and broadly resonant, frames must be *balanced* (Hewitt and McCammon 2005: 38). If they are too conservative, there is no motivation to act to achieve change. If they are too radical, challenging virtually everything about the existing order, they will repel the masses.

It has to be added that it is also important to look not only at the cognitive aspect of the frames, but also their emotional side. Emotions and cognition work together. In fact, emotions such as anger and hostility may arise even before blame is allocated (Goodwin et al. 2001: 8). Social movements *rely* on emotions, as mobilisation ‘require[s] an emotional mobilization triggered by outrage against blatant injustice’ (Castells 2012: 220f). This is also valid for the online sphere. Experimental research has shown that emotional states can be transferred via social media (Kramer et al. 2014). Like the protesters shouting slogans in the streets during the physical demonstration, affiliated Twitter users were employing a spectrum of emotions to motivate protesters and attract new participants.

### **Twitter and mobilisation**

Social media have become an integrated part of social mobilisation in Russia. Toepfl (2012), Deibert and Rohozinski (2010), Fossato et al. (2008) and Yagodin (2012) are to some extent ‘cyber-pessimists’ in the sense that they regard the Runet, and social media most prominently, as first and foremost the regime’s tool of surveillance and consolidation of their power. On the opposing side, some (Greene 2013, Aron 2011, Litvinenko 2012, Rothrock 2013) argue that social media strengthen civil society. Machleder and Asmolov (2011) assert that networked institutions and individuals are increasingly contributing to setting the political agenda, providing alternative frames and empowering Russia’s civil society. Alexanyan et al. (2012: 3) found that use of digital platforms in social mobilisation and civic action has been growing.

Scholars generally agree that social media contributed to the eruption of the post-elections protests in 2011-12 (Lonkila 2012, Oates 2013: 3215, Meredith 2013, Nikiporets-Takigawa 2013). Reuter and Szakonyi (2015) have shown that Twitter and Facebook raised political awareness after the fraudulent parliamentary elections in 2011—largely thanks to the politicisation of these platforms by opposition elites. Paulsen and Zvereva’s case study (2014) demonstrates how Russian Twitter is used for mobilizing for, coordinating and shaping collective action, and how the online and offline elements of the protest are linked. Spaiser and her collaborators (2014) have found that the microblog played an important role in Russia during the mass protests in 2011 and 2012. Interestingly, their report shows how the regime was able to use Twitter to weaken the protest movement that initially thrived on this platform. Greene (2012) has analysed the functions and networks on Twitter during the 2012 presidential elections and the subsequent pro- and anti-regime protests. Nikiporets-

Takigawa (2013) has given a refined account of the interplay between the Twittersphere and Russian street protests.

Greene lists three functions Twitter serves at differing stages of mobilisation: as an aggregator of information, ideas and memes, as a broadcast medium to spread the aggregated information, ideas and memes to a broader audience; and as an echo chamber that may reinforce group solidarity and adherence to aggregated memes (Greene 2012: 2). Herein lies a problem: the frames that increase the group solidarity of hardcore activists might be substantially different from those that appeal to a broader audience. And as an essentially open platform—most tweets are available for all to see, even non-registered Twitter users—it is virtually impossible for the outsider to distinguish between the two sets of frames.

The wider audience is increasingly present online. A national survey conducted by Romir for NEPORUS in September 2014 showed that more than two thirds of Russian adults (67.7%) use the internet, and 50.1 percent of all respondents do so on a daily basis. In the 18-24 age bracket, virtually everyone (93.2%) accesses the internet daily. Social media are the most popular single service among Russian internet users. Some 71.3 percent of internet users reported that they had used social media in the past month, while only 65.7 percent had used e-mail.

It is difficult to determine the number of Twitter users in Russia, but according to the social media consulting agency Buzzfactory, in December 2013 there were 5 million monthly active Twitter users. Less than a year later, Brand Analytics (2015) estimated that there were 8.47 million monthly active accounts. Even if many of these are actually *bots* (automated accounts), it appears safe to conclude that Twitter use in Russia is increasing and spreading outside the urban elites of the two capitals. In fact, the highest average number of Twitter authors is to be found in the remote regions of Sakhalin and Chukotka (*ibid.*). And even if Twitter is still to some extent an elite phenomenon, the interlinked nature of different social networking platforms makes the frames propagated on Twitter matter to many more than the narrower population of (active) tweeters.

### **The #MarshMira public as a framing agent**

In this article, I analyse the roughly 4100 tweets<sup>5</sup> hashtagged ‘#MarshMira’<sup>6</sup> posted between 21 August and 21 September at 1610 hours local time, i.e. ten minutes after the official start of the gathering on Pushkin Square. I base my analysis of the framing of the Peace March on Twitter on Michael Warner’s (2002) understanding of a *public* as a text-based, temporary, self-organising entity of strangers. Thus, I will call the Twitter users following and mentioning this hashtag the *#MarshMira public*, regarding it as a particular kind of public, different from the more closed networks on Facebook or VKontakte.

This openness is exactly what makes Twitter so suitable for recruitment. Thanks to the hashtag, Twitter makes it easier for users to follow a specific topic or event (boyd et al. 2010:

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<sup>5</sup> As retrieved via Yandex on 1 November 2014.

<sup>6</sup> The Cyrillic #MarshMira was by far the most used hashtag for tweets related to the Peace March. From 21 August, when the plans to hold the demonstration were made public, until just before midnight on 21 September, about 28,000 tweets mentioned it.

1), not only the posts of one's followees. By including such an event-based hashtag, a tweeter reaches not only his/her followers, but also those who are showing an interest in the event. This facilitates the activation of so-called *hidden* networks, i.e. links between people who do not know each other, but who share interests and even values (Paulsen and Zvereva 2014: 99). For social movements, this may be important for mobilisation, as the hashtag helps to form an *ad hoc* public (Bruns and Burgess 2011). The 'weak ties' characteristic of such publics are important for information diffusion (Granovetter 1973).

Thus, Peace March activists and organizers approached the #MarshMira hashtag strategically, aiming to use retweets to increase visibility and thereby reach a wider audience. Boris Nemtsov, who masterminded the 'peace frame', appealed to his followers: 'Let's make the hashtag #MarshMira reach the top' (@borisnemtsov 19.09.2014, RT: 89).<sup>7</sup>

The retweet has become the most important mechanism for information diffusion on Twitter (Suh et al. 2010, Morchid et al. 2014: 33). The nature of retweets is subject to scholarly debate.<sup>8</sup> However, a recent and comprehensive study (Metaxas et al. 2014) has found that retweeting in most cases indicates trust in the message and its author, and agreement with the content. The presence of a hashtag, especially a political one, further increases the agreement factor (ibid.). Following this logic, a large number of retweets may in general be regarded as a sign that the frame propagated or evoked in a tweet is *resonant* in the public in question.

The visibility of the most retweeted posts mentioning the hashtag makes them contribute to shaping the outlook of the (upcoming) demonstration. Depending on their content, they will therefore stimulate or undermine mobilisation. In the analysis below, I envisage the #MarshMira public as a whole (and not the official @marshmira account or the individual organisers) as the principal framing agent on Twitter. In fact, many of the most popular tweets originated not from the leaders, but from relatively unknown users. Thus, my analysis deals with the frames that have been 'propelled to the top' by the communication within the #MarshMira public.

No discussion of Twitter as a data source would be complete without taking into account automated and paid-for content. Nobody knows the number of bots, though Twitter has consistently claimed that no more than 5 percent of its accounts are spambots (Brustein 2014). In

<sup>7</sup> Where necessary, I will render the number of retweets at the end of the reference, e.g.: RT: 126.

<sup>8</sup> Several analyses have examined why some tweets are retweeted and some are not or to a far lesser extent (Pezzoni et al. 2013, Suh et al. 2010, boyd et al. 2010, Macskassy and Michelson 2011). The majority of the studies of microblogs deal with high-level, global processes. For example, as Macskassy and Michelson (2011: 209) argue, these studies most often do not take into account the context, which is critically important when analysing local behaviour. In addition, the vast majority of these studies are quantitative. In general and on a global scale, the presence of a link or hashtag, the number of followers (Suh et al. 2010), the time of posting, the presence of certain words and the absence of other words, or, *ad absurdum*, the presence of a colon (as opposed to the semicolon, which is all but a retweet-killer) are all traits that seem to correlate with a high number of retweets (Zarella 2009).

However, I take the view that retweeting implies that users have viewed the post as important enough to be shared. From this perspective, the retweet pattern is reflective of the mood of the population of tweeters (Li et al. 2014: 80). For something to be widely spread online, it has to resonate: it has to be something relatable (Castells 2012: 122). Looking at the number of retweets is a way of measuring the popularity of the tweet's content (Kupavskii et al. 2012: 693). A retweet can be regarded as an endorsement of the content quoted and/or its author (Jürgens 2014: 51, boyd et al. 2010: 6).

their case study of one opposition demonstration in Moscow, Paulsen and Zvereva (2014) have shown how the relevant hashtag was flooded with automated spam. Lawrence Alexander (2015) has recently shown that there is an enormous network of bots tweeting pro-Kremlin and anti-opposition content. There is also a substantial market for people who want to boost their number of followers, even if they are only fake accounts (Perlroth 2013). As for paid-for human-generated content, the existence of hundreds of ‘trolls’ working 12-hour shifts at the service of the Russian regime is well documented (Soshnikov 2015, Khachatryan 2015, Volchek and Sindelar 2015, Walker 2015, Koreneva 2015).

Judging from the material analysed for the present article, there was an apparently modest campaign aimed at sabotaging the hashtag by littering it with automatically generated tweets containing pornographic photos and nonsensical text (e.g.: @mer01j12gorley 19.09.2014, RT: 23, see also @kafka\_chan 21.09.2014). As of mid-April 2015, at least some of these bots were still running, by this point making it difficult to follow the hashtag without pornographic photos appearing the screen. The exact range of this campaign is difficult to estimate in retrospect, as Twitter routinely deletes spam accounts.

In addition, it cannot be ruled out that some of the content analysed in this article is automatically generated. However, there are a few factors suggesting that the scale of such content is limited. In Alexander’s analysis (2015), the bots did not use any hashtags. In the material analysed for this article, I did not detect any simple hashtag retweet bot retweeting all posts containing the #MarshMira hashtag (with the possible goal of making it peak). Further, the retweet count in the material is moderate, the highest number for a single post being only 628, which suggests that there was no massive automated retweeting campaign except for the one mentioned above.

It is beyond the scope of this article to distinguish automated content from human-generated content, or paid-for (re)tweets from ‘genuine’ ones. Whether or not opposition leaders and activists wrote and disseminated the tweets themselves is actually less relevant: the frames were, intentionally or not, propagated by way of (human or automated) retweeting. The impression those following the hashtag get is shaped by what appears on the Twitter feed, whether the individual posts are ‘genuine’ or not.

I have identified six more or less distinct frames that crystallised in the #MarshMira public. The rest of the article will present and discuss these frames one by one. The ‘counter-frames’ propagated by opponents of the demonstration will be treated separately. The sub-headings are not slogans or even formulations employed by the tweeters, but my own attempts to summarise the meaning of each individual frame.

### **The peace frame: ‘the regime is illegitimate and aggressive’**

From the perspective of the initiators, the Peace March was an attempt to unify a large number of people under the banner of peace. In general, one could argue, ‘peace’ as a slogan is universal and should be able to cut across cultural and political differences. As for the emotional aspect, such a framing strategy seems well-founded. In 2011-12, the emotional trigger of the post-electoral protests was the outrage caused by image and video evidence of differ-

ent kinds of election fraud (Nikiporets-Takigawa 2013: 4). However, Russian voters are no strangers to such use of ‘administrative resources’ (Magun 2014: 162f), and in the end this might not be an emotive enough issue to prompt a wider mobilisation (Thomas 2012: 1). The violent deaths of innocent people, especially those who are geographically and culturally close to oneself, should theoretically have a stronger emotional potential and a wider appeal than run-of-the-mill ballot-stuffing and carousel voting.

Thus, tweets dealing directly with peace slogans and peace imagery were widely shared, for instance: ‘Make love not war! #MarshMira #Ekaterinburg [PIC]’ (@Svetulya2907 21.09.2014a, RT: 127). However, the strong anti-regime rhetoric is never far away. Even in this tweet containing a ‘classic’ peace slogan, the enclosed photo shows people holding home-made posters, one of which says ‘Enough with the lying and fighting’ (see below for more on this slogan).

**Image 1.** A screenshot of @Svetulya2907 on Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/Svetulya2907/status/513628482006700033> (accessed 1 November 2014).



The ‘official’ slogan launched by the organisers was well received in the #MarshMira public: ‘Putin, enough with the lying and fighting—today in Russia there will be a “Peace March” #NetVoine #MarshMira PIC’ (@pravda 21.09.2014, RT: 170, see also @marshmira 20.09.2014a, RT: 148). The organisers’ desire to create continuity with the 2011-12 protest cycle was evident from the choice of slogan. One of the popular slogans at that time was ‘enough with the lying and stealing’ (fighting and stealing being *voevat* and *vorovat* in Russian). More important than the phonetical similarity, however, is the narrative that is condensed in the slogan. In very few words, the official Russian version of the events in Eastern Ukraine is dismissed as a lie, and Putin is directly accused of waging war.

A very popular photo that circulated on Twitter before and during the demonstrations used peace imagery combined with harsh rhetoric against the regime. The photo showed two young barefoot women wearing dresses in the colours of the Ukrainian and the Russian flag, respectively. The ‘Russian’ girl holds the slightly smaller ‘Ukrainian’ in a protective embrace:

Image 2. A screenshot of @RosPrava on Twitter.



Source: <https://twitter.com/RosPrava/status/513373090277900288> (accessed 1 November 2014).

The photo was also used by others, among them the official account @marshmira (@ARMY\_SOS 20.09.2014, RT: 84; @marshmira 20.09.2014b, RT: 74). The ideal of Russia as a gentle, feminine protector as depicted in the image stands in stark contrast to the harsh arguments made in the text. The Russian authorities are, among other things, charged with invading Ukraine, starting a war that has led to the deaths of Russian soldiers, increasing fascist tendencies as well as repressions in Russia and waging a cynical propaganda campaign.

However, if one wants to unify the Russian people, not only the #MarshMira public, against the incumbent regime, even the *choice* of the Ukrainian theme is problematic. The ‘peace frame’ as described above had little chance of succeeding in mobilising broader strata among the Russian people. Part of the reason that it failed to resonate is likely that from the perspective of the majority of the population, it scored low on empirical credibility. In the #MarshMira public, the ‘peace frame’ has an important diagnostic function, describing what is wrong, and very clearly points towards who is to blame. But in late October 2014, 44 percent of the Russian population approved of Russia’s Ukraine policy (Levada Center 2014a). According to a survey conducted by the Levada Center in mid-November, a larger percentage of the Russian population (73%) thought that Russia bears no responsibility for the bloodshed in Eastern Ukraine than the percentage that was ready to vote for Putin (61%) (Garmonenko 2014). The 18 percent of the respondents who at this point thought Russia has a responsibility were, according to Aleksei Makarkin, ‘people of liberal views’ (Garmonenko 2014).

This is not to say that there is no potential in a ‘peace frame’ of another variety that might gain resonance both in the #MarshMira public and in the population at large. Consider: ‘The conscripts who were killed in Ukraine were not lost! They were sent there by our authorities! People of Ekaterinburg, come to the #MarshMira 21.09’ (@Svetulya2907 16.09.2014, RT: 469). This is arguably a particularly powerful frame, as it emphasises the view that the regime’s arbitrariness in the end leads to the deaths of innocent young Russian citizens. Instead of being preoccupied with abstract terms, such as ‘democracy’ or ‘fascism’, which for historical reasons have specific connotations in Russia, and instead of dealing with high-level political processes, this version of the frame focuses on concrete and tragic consequences of the war. At the same time, it challenges the official narrative that no Russian soldiers were deliberately sent to Ukraine. Thus, it is a prime example of frame alignment. The diagnostic function is largely the same: the Russian regime is to blame for people dying. But contrary to the hegemonic version of the frame, this one is arguably recognisable among broad strata in the population, as it plays on Russian parents’ fear of harsh conditions for their sons and relatives who are or will be serving in the Russian army.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Putin’s repeated denials that there were any Russian regular forces in Ukraine, and despite the state’s monopoly on regular federal television, in October 2014 the Levada Center reported that as many as 26 percent of Russians opined that there was an ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine (Sokolov 2014). Further, in an earlier survey in late September, just after the Peace March, 40 percent of the respondents said that it was ‘unacceptable and

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<sup>9</sup> According to a VTsIOM survey, 41 percent of Russians would not want a near relative to serve in the army (‘Vooruzhennyye sily Rossii’).

unjustifiable' that '[...] Russia's support of the militias in Donetsk and Luhansk leads to the deaths of Russian soldiers' (Levada Center 2014c). Hence, by making the message more down-to-earth, the activists would arguably have a greater chance of success. Perhaps most importantly, this variant of the 'peace frame' echoes the slogans of the Soldiers' Mothers organizations during the unpopular first Chechen war in the mid-1990s, such as: 'Do not send our sons to the slaughter!' or 'Soldiers and officers! Do not implement the orders of military [sic] criminals!' (Zdravomyslova 1999). Noting the remarkable popularity of this individual tweet and the resonance of this frame in earlier Russian peace movements (Zdravomyslova 1999), one could be surprised that it was not used more often by the Peace March activists.

### **The *vatnik* frame: 'the people are uncultured and stupid'**

A successful framing strategy must deal with *identity*. In order to mobilise, activists need to define the border between 'us' and 'them'. A central problem of the liberal opposition protesters of 2011-12 was the way they imagined their relationship with 'the people' (Magun 2014). The popular theory of 'two Russias', of a crude division between the cultured, educated, urban population and the uneducated, even stupid population at large is entrenched in the language and self-understanding of the liberal opposition (Matveev 2014). In 2011-12, their often sophisticated and witty posters (see Lur'e 2012) demonstrated, sometimes implicitly, sometimes consciously and explicitly, the extreme importance of education and *Bildung* in their self-understanding. They saw themselves as the cultured people, in contrast to the uncultured, brutal regime *and its supporters* (Bikbov 2012, 2014). The manifestations of such a self-understanding, of course, contribute to alienating 'the people' they are trying to mobilise, which only serves the regime and its strategy of minimising the demonstrations. Thus, during the post-election protests in 2011-12, official media were quick to portray the participants as 'angry urbanites' (Vladislav Surkov's term), hipsters, middle class or belonging to the 'creative class' (Treisman 2014: 373).

In the run-up to the Peace March, opposition activists used stigmatising epithets to include not only *gopniki*, i.e. street hooligans posing as rude counterdemonstrators (@gudkovd 20.09.2014, RT: 123), but *all* supporters of the regime, passive or active. A common nickname for the 'uncultured' supporter of the regime is *vatnik* (in the singular) or *vata* (collective), which refers to the padded winter jacket used mostly by the armed forces and workers, i.e. the social strata seen as uncultured and stupid. During the post-election demonstrations, posters were made depicting a cartoon-like figure, a 'man' made of a padded jacket, with a black eye and a stupid facial expression. This image was also widely circulated during the Peace March, and there were many widely shared tweets complaining about the *vata* or *vatniki* (for instance (@GraniTweet 21.09.2014a, RT: 65; @GraniTweet 21.09.2014b, RT: 38; @Dbnmjr 20.09.2014, RT: 164).

The 'two Russias' theory is actively used by the regime to rally support among the 'majority population' (Matveev 2014. See also, for instance, @swarog09 20.09.2014a). Thus, in July 2014, Oleg Matveichev, former deputy governor of Vologda oblast' and a widely read

blogger, creatively cast the *vatnik* as a symbol of patriotism and the victory in the Great Patriotic War, and an object of hate for the fashionably dressed, but freezing German invaders. Those using the word as a derogatory name for supporters of the Kremlin were explicitly called fascists (matveychev\_oleg 27.07.2014). Similarly, the professedly ‘patriotic’ online encyclopedia Ruxpert, founded in 2013 by prominent pro-government blogger Oleg Makarenko with the goal of exposing myths about Russia and the West (‘Spravochnik patriota’ 2014), stated that the *vatnik* became a symbol of pride and patriotism *immediately* after the liberal opposition started to use it negatively (‘Vatnik’ 2014).

The protesters even went so far as to describe the boundary between supporters and opponents of the demonstration as a question of common sense or even mental health. For instance, there were a few tweets suggesting that the majority not going to any Peace March demonstrations were not ‘normal’: ‘Today Russia will show how many normal people are left there #MarshMira’ (@REposttwit 21.09.2014, RT: 65, see also @kuw\_muw 21.09.2014, RT: 41). At its most extreme, this framing ends up denigrating the opponents as something resembling animals incapable of articulating simple words. This was evident in a widely shared characterisation of a counterdemonstrator: “‘Moouooo Moouooo ba-a-a-a ba-a-a-a moouoo uuaaa”—a supporter of independent Novorossia emphasised. #MarshMira [PIC]’ (@euromaidan 21.09.2014a, RT: 157)

While this denigration of one’s opponents probably enhances in-group cohesion and motivation, it is, to say the least, hardly the best way to recruit protesters from outside the urban, educated circles.

### **The minority frame: ‘we the protesters are a heroic minority’**

As in the 2011-12 demonstrations, the organisers of the Peace March were, of course, aware that they represented only a minority of the population. Tweets directly related to the biggest offline demonstrations, namely those in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, were numerous and popular. However, going through the chronology, one is struck by the number of retweets of posts about demonstrations that, in numerical, strictly *offline* terms, cannot be described as anything other than utterly marginal. For instance, a tweet featuring a photo of an old, bearded man with a poster saying the ‘The war must be stopped’ from the Siberian city of Tiumen’ was retweeted 112 times (@marshmira 21.09.2014b).

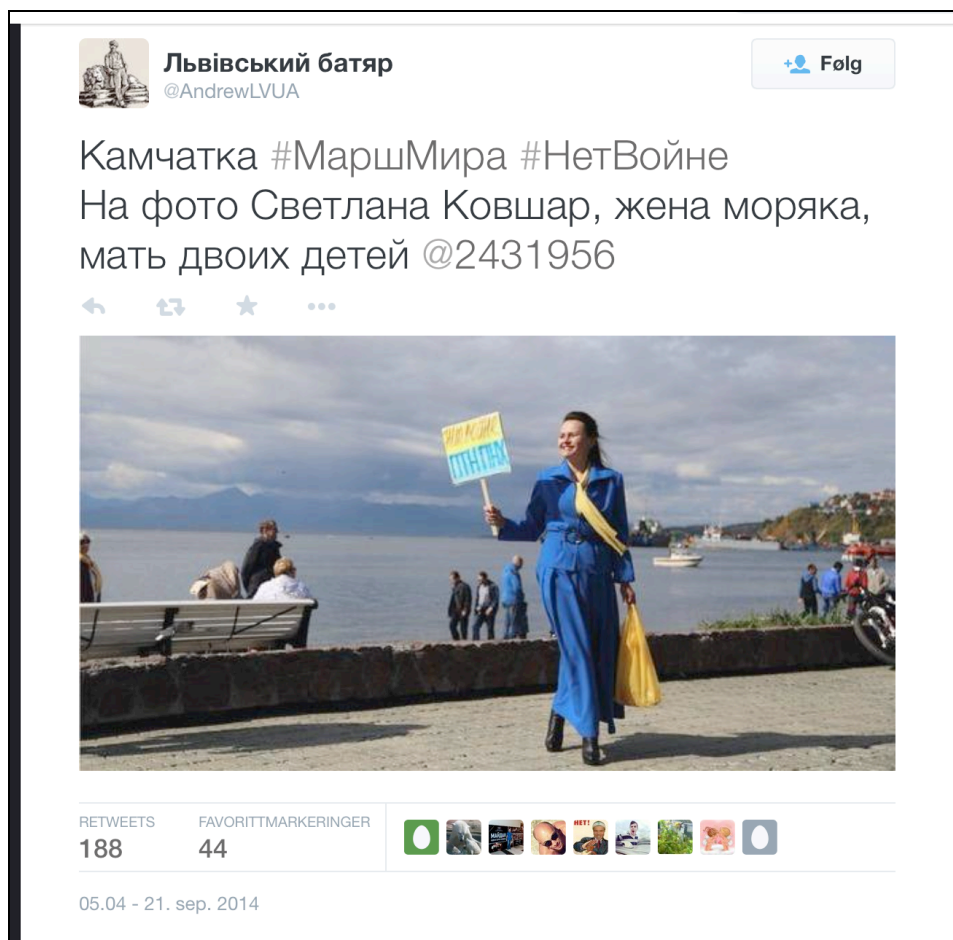
Image 3. A screenshot of @marshmira on Twitter.



Source: <https://twitter.com/marshmira/status/513597289718640640> (accessed 1 November 2014).

Similarly, a photo of a smiling woman in Kamchatka, smartly dressed in blue and yellow, holding a home-made Ukrainian flag with a profanity against Putin written on it, was also widely retweeted (@AndrewLVUA 21.09.2014). The text read: ‘The photo shows Svetlana Kovshar, wife of a sailor, mother of two children’.

**Image 4.** A screenshot of @AndrewLVUA on Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/AndrewLVUA/status/513660119998287872> (accessed 1 November 2014).

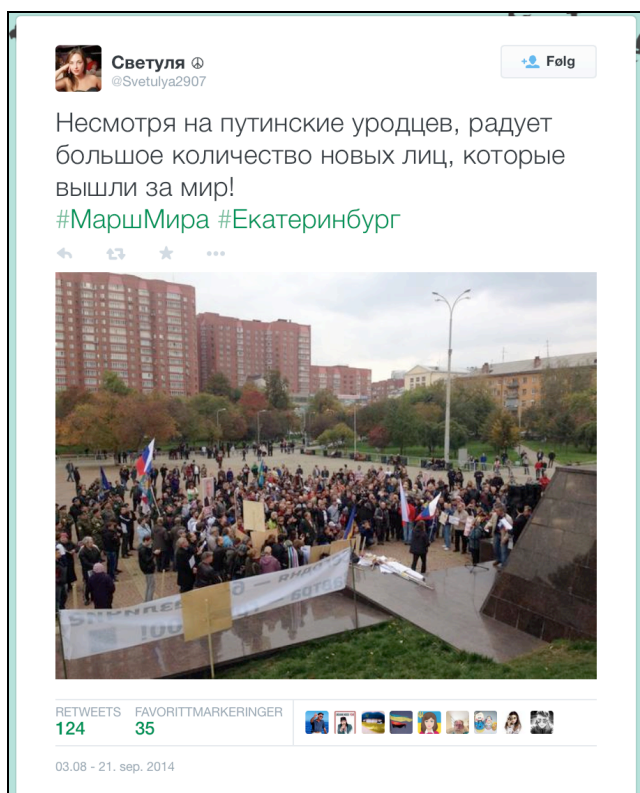
Both of these protesters were surpassed by experienced provincial activist and liberal opposition politician Artem Kosaretskii, who, during and after his one-man stunt in his home town of Barnaul in the Altai region, wrote several posts that were widely shared (@kosaretskii 21.09.2014b, RT: 157). The most retweeted one showed him standing alone with a home-made poster: ‘I’m standing with my poster after the gopniki attacked me #marshmira [PIC]’ (@kosaretskii 21.09.2014a, RT: 235).

These three protesters are different in appearance, they come from different places, and they belong to different age groups and probably different social strata. What unites them is their solitude and their courage in standing up in an environment of hostility (at least in the

case of Kosaretskii) and pro-government conformity, as seems to be the case for the woman in Kamchatka. That all three are from smaller (in the Russian context) provincial cities far away from the two capitals serves to spread the protest geographically, reinforcing the feeling that the protesters in central Russia also have strong supporters in the regions. These tweets also reproduce the protest movement's self-understanding that although they are (for the time being, as they say) a minority, they must speak up against injustice committed by the regime.<sup>10</sup> Thus, paradoxically, one of the most important messages of these tweets is: 'You are not alone'. This is one of the advantages of social media as a means of mobilisation. Very few people saw the one-person protests live, and they received little coverage in national traditional media. But with the help of Twitter, their visibility was amplified, and the protesters received a lot of attention, largely because they were on their own.

Similarly, a tweet by Ekaterinburg activist Svetlana Burdina proved very popular, perhaps because of the optimism it demonstrated, but the number of protesters shown on the photo is arguably not impressive for a city of 1.4 million: 'Despite Putin's freaks [we are] delighted by the large number of new faces taking to the streets for peace! #MarshMira #Ekaterinburg' (@Svetulya2907 21.09.2014b).

**Image 5.** A screenshot of @Svetulya2907 on Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/Svetulya2907/status/513630806687105024> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>10</sup> This point was made, for instance, in the text on @Rosprava's photo shown above.

The way the ‘minority frame’ deals with motivation and identity makes it a stumbling block for the opposition. The belief that many others will participate is an important mobilising factor (Klandermans 1984), which is likely to apply to the ‘majority population’. Hardcore liberal activists, on the other hand, are likely to be motivated by the personal courage of the lone protesters and identify with the sense of their solitude. The pride of being in a minority, as a part of the liberal activists’ self-understanding, is also in harmony with the elitism conveyed by the ‘*vatnik* frame’, and the problem is the same: the broader masses are excluded.

However, the ‘minority frame’ was challenged by tweeters from Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Some of the most shared tweets from the demonstrations in these two cities consisted of panoramic photos giving a somewhat exaggerated impression of how numerous the protesters were: ‘Piter, right now: #MarshMira’ (@nevex\_tv 21.09.2014a, see also @nevex\_tv 21.09.2014b, RT: 93, @daniilken 21.09.2014, RT:74).

Hence, the participants in the #MarshMira public were in a sense proud that they were many, and proud that they were few.

**Image 6.** A screenshot of @nevex\_tv on Twitter.



**Source:** <https://twitter.com/marshmira/status/513653328354766850> (accessed 1 November 2014).



### **The resistance frame: ‘the peace march is unsanctioned’**

The treatment of the sanctioned/unsanctioned dimension vividly illustrates how framing is often a delicate balancing act. In Moscow, the organisers went to great lengths to secure formal permission from the Moscow city authorities. The application was submitted on 8 September and signed by opposition politician Sergei Davidis, along with two relatively low-profile activists (Davidis 08.09.2014).<sup>11</sup> The goal was formulated in vague and generic terms, i.e. to ‘express and shape public opinion about the violations of human rights, laws and the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the violations of Russia’s international obligations and international law, and to demand that they be observed’ (ibid.). Two days later, the Moscow City Administration granted permission, but made it clear that the demonstrators would have to stick to the slogans they applied for (Vedomosti 11.09.2014).

Evidently, it was important for the organisers to present the protest as officially sanctioned. The official Twitter account of the demonstration published the entire document twice (@marshmira 20.09.2014c, 19.09.2014). This was likely an attempt to lower the threshold for prospective participants by presenting them with a lower risk and greater formal legitimacy (following the letter of the law). However, for the liberals, the ‘sanctioned frame’ could be less motivating, since the regime in their view has a very low level of legitimacy. The organisers handled this ‘split’ by steering a middle course. Having acquired permission, they stretched its provisions by propagating, as soon as the day before the event, anti-Putin, highly political slogans. This was not, of course, stated in the application (Davidis 2014).

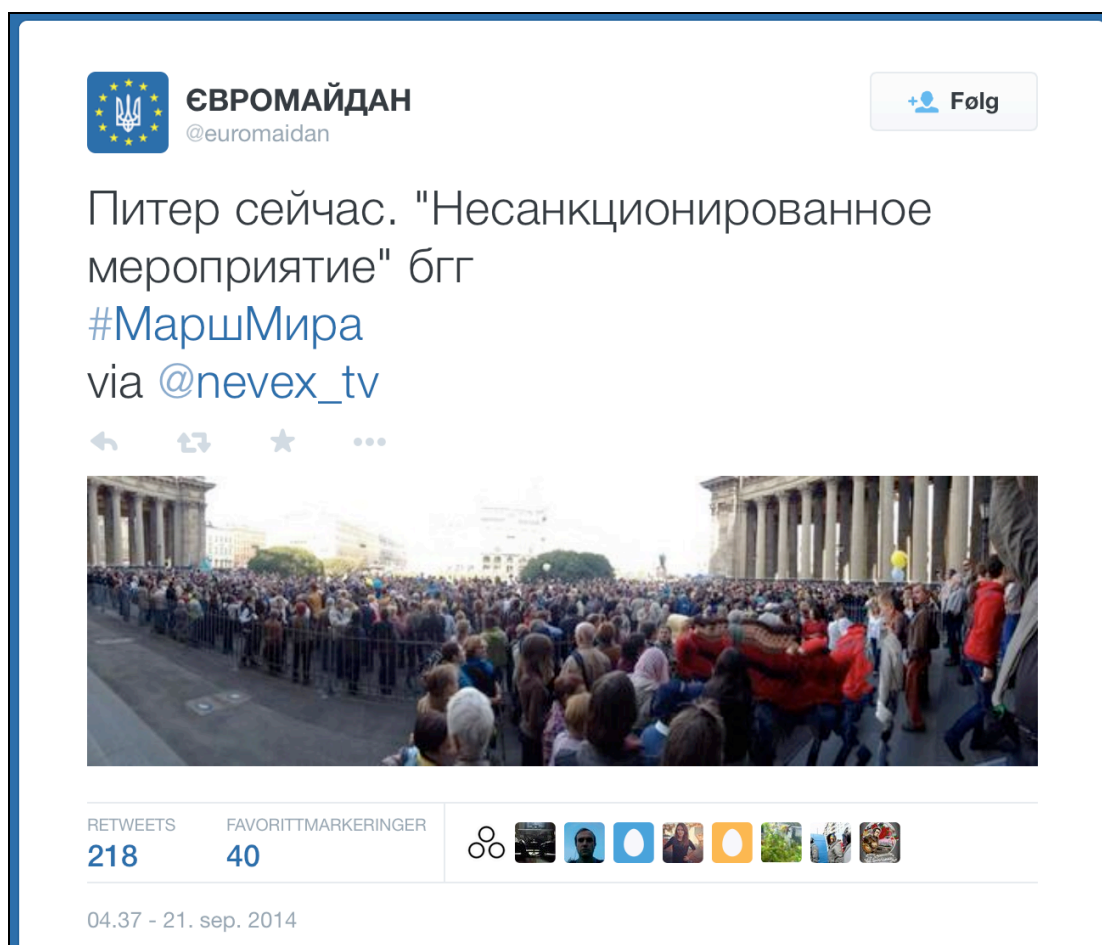
The emphasis on the sanctioned character of the event might have been reinforced by opponents spreading rumours (@opernn 19.09.2014; @swarog09 20.09.2014 and 20.09.2014b, @simonmerkader 21.09.2014) that the Peace March had not received the necessary permit. These rumours continued to be spread in the afternoon and evening before the event.

In Saint Petersburg, by contrast, the Peace March was explicitly advertised as unsanctioned. For such a demonstration to be peaceful, it requires discipline, as the barrier for a crackdown by the police is lower. The risk for the individual participant is, as mentioned above, higher. However, two mobilising factors countering this ‘fear factor’ could be the higher degree of legitimacy and the excitement gained from participating in an illegal event. This arguably appeals more to hardcore activists. In the aftermath of the demonstration in Saint Petersburg, tweets that emphasised the pride of the protesters and their feeling of strength (having been able to conduct an unsanctioned demonstration) gained many retweets. Consider: ‘Piter now. An “unsanctioned event” haha #MarshMira via @nevex\_tv [PIC]’ (@euromaidan 21.09.2014c).

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<sup>11</sup> Several central figures in the opposition are banned from filing such applications (Ryklin 2014).

**Image 7.** A screenshot of @euromaidan on Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/marshmira/status/513653328354766850> (accessed 1 November 2014).

Further, among the most widely reposted tweets there were also calls to arms, in the literal sense (@Dbnmjr 20.09.2014, RT: 162, @European\_choice 20.09.2014, RT: 141). The most graphic one featured a photo from Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in Kyiv, showing a protester wearing a gas mask and standing in the midst of smoke and flames. The text reads: 'A healthy person's #PeaceMarch' (@tombreadley 21.09.2014).

Such an association of the upcoming demonstration is highly unlikely to get a favourable reception in the population at large. The death toll in the Euromaidan uprising in Kyiv alone is likely to repel many potential recruits to any demonstration. Overall, in March 2014, 73 percent of Russians considered that Ukraine as a whole had ended up as the loser. One year later, that percentage had risen to 83 (WCIOM 2015).

**Image 8.** A screenshot of @tombreadley on Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/tombreadley/status/513614386578337793> (accessed 1 November 2014).

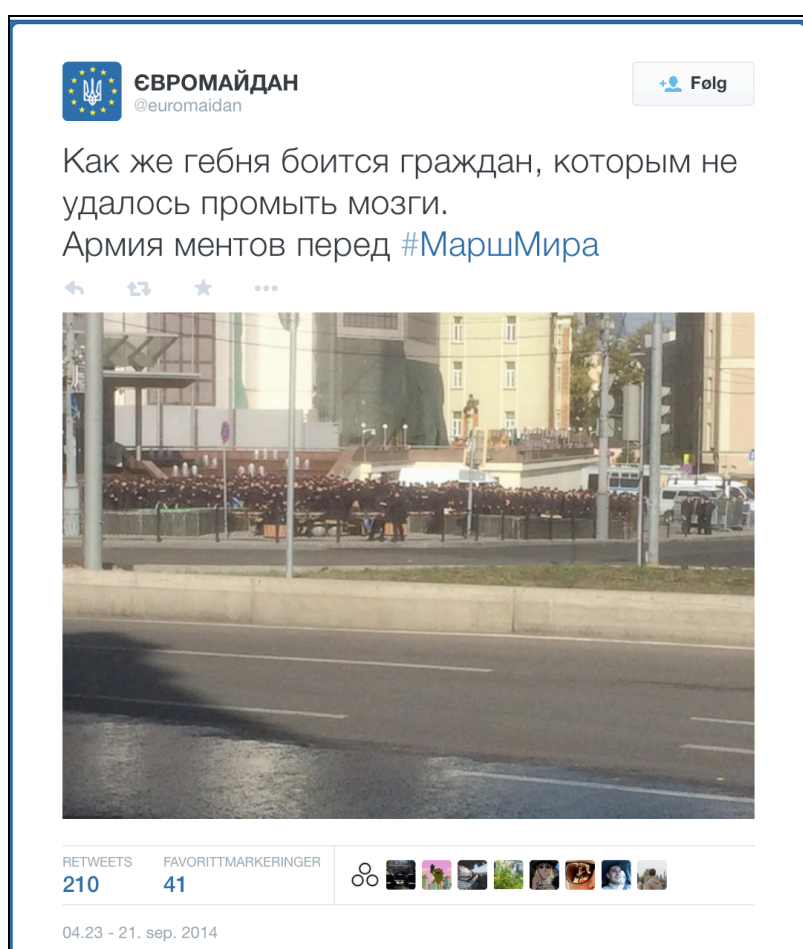
### **The fear frame: the regime fears the protesters**

Whether their demonstrations are sanctioned or not, Russian opposition activists always have to deal with the threat of the police intervening to their disadvantage, detaining participants or preventing the demonstration from going according to plan. As an important tool for spreading practical information, Twitter is, of course, used to tell other protesters where the police are, how they are armed and so on. But apart from having this practical function, information about or photos of the police also serve the purpose of framing.

Photos depicting police violence or merely unreasonable behaviour by the police could agitate the protesters and enhance recruitment, at least from the more radically minded (della Porta 1996: 90). However, tweets commenting on the police's whereabouts, behaviour and

even harassment failed to score a substantial retweet count (up to 47) (@pharaon01 21.09.2014, @IlyaYashin 21.09.2014; @Varfolomeev 21.09.2014; @Dbnmjr 21.09.2014a, 21.09.2014b, 21.09.2014c; @tikaipo 20.09.2014; @\_Asfodela\_ 21.09.2014). What really caught the eye, on the other hand, was a tweet containing the same photo as one of the posts just mentioned. Apart from having a different author and thereby different followers, this tweet arguably stood out because of the text: ‘Look how afraid the *gebnia* is of the citizens they haven’t succeeded in brainwashing. An army of cops before #MarshMira’ (@euromaidan 21.09.2014b).

**Image 9.** A screenshot of @euromaidan on Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/euromaidan/status/513649750827352064> (accessed 1 November 2014).

Apart from the security concerns, the authorities could be deploying a large number of police in the hope of exerting a demobilising effect. The dynamics of recent street demonstrations in Russia have sometimes been unpredictable, and an official permit to demonstrate is by no means a guarantee against a crackdown, for instance following provocations. Photos of a large, well-equipped police force should therefore, in theory, be intimidating. However, in

this tweet the fear is transferred to the authorities, derogatorily dubbed ‘*gebnia*’, which alludes to the KGB past of many of the members of the regime. The authorities’ supposed fear is thus a rhetorical means of instilling pride and increasing the protesters’ strength in their own eyes. The post was retweeted 210 times, which makes it one of the most popular tweets in the material.

The problem with the ‘fear frame’ is similar to what is the case with the related ‘resistance frame’. While there may be dissatisfaction with the police, the ‘fear transfer’ is arguably less likely to be successful with the ‘majority population’ if one only tries to persuade them that the regime is more afraid.

Another, likely more viable strategy of weakening the fear and respect of the regime, was aimed at one of the constituent parts of the legitimacy of Putin’s regime: its use of hegemonic masculinity (Riabov and Riabova 2010: 60). Consider: ‘Putin and his cronies are thinking that they are people with eggs [balls]. Alas, they are people with rotten eggs, and that’s something completely different #MarshMira [PIC]’ (@AndreyGrammar 21.09.2014, RT 136). In the untranslatable tweet, consisting of an excerpt from a longer blog post by writer Dmitrii Bykov, the author elegantly plays on the double meaning of ‘having eggs’ in Russian, which in addition to its literal meaning also has the metaphorical meaning of ‘having balls’ (being masculine and courageous). By implying that the only courage the regime possesses relies on the counterdemonstrators’ rotten eggs—the rotten masculinity of the elite, to stretch the point, the tweet thus emasculates the regime in a humorous way. It is they who are portrayed as weak, fearful and feminine and the opposition that is strong, masculine and courageous.

### **The shame frame: ‘the Russian regime’s Ukraine policy is a shame’**

All of the frames analysed above have, to a varying degree, an emotional side to them. However, what I will call the ‘shame frame’, which had a strong motivational function, deals with emotion in a particularly direct way. To put it simply, it takes more than one kind of emotion for successful mobilisation to take place. It is the *interaction* of different emotions that is most important. One category of such interaction can be called ‘moral batteries’. Similar to a physical battery, which works through the tension between its two poles, moral batteries consist of a positive and a negative emotion. It is the contrast between them that motivates action (Jasper 2011: 291).

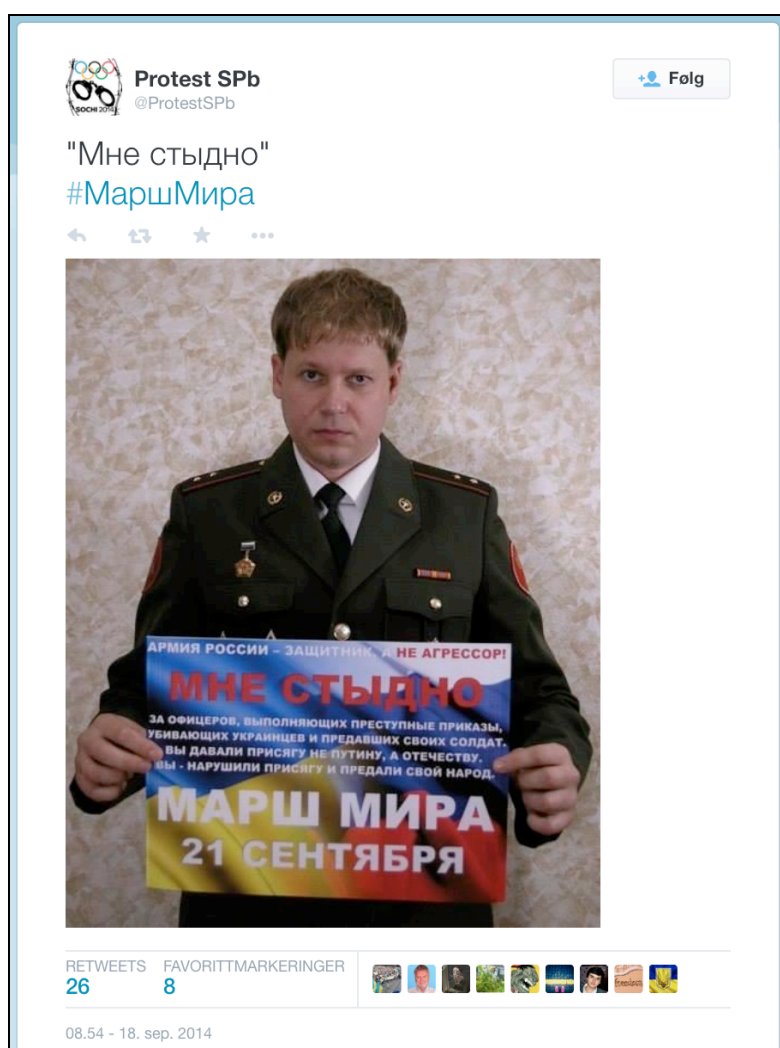
‘Pride/shame’ is one such moral battery. Many social movements are preoccupied with turning shame into pride (Jasper 2011: 290), and this is also relevant for the study of the Peace March. Russians’ attitudes to the Ukrainian crisis and to the Kremlin’s way of dealing with it are strongly emotional. For liberal-minded Russians, the Kremlin’s actions in general, and perhaps in particular in relation to the annexation of Crimea and the crisis and war in Ukraine, are connected to a feeling of shame (see, for example, Volchek 2014). Tellingly, in late March 2014, a YouTube video entitled ‘Ashamed to be a Russian’ went viral (hrendyabliki 26.03.2014).<sup>12</sup> Slamming the Russian regime for the annexation, it contrasted the ideal

<sup>12</sup> As of 27 January 2015, it had more than 4.26 million views, 60,364 ‘thumbs up’ and 45,919 ‘thumbs down’.

image of Russia as an honest and decent protector with its present role as a deceitful ‘aggressor’, the narrator repeating that ‘[I am] ashamed to be a Russian’.

In the #MarshMira public, shame as such was not a very salient emotion. A picture circulating featured one Eduard Kot, a corporal in the Russian army holding a poster saying he was ashamed of his colleagues who were ‘following criminal orders’ (@ProtestSPb 18.09.2014).

**Image 10.** A screenshot of @ProtestSPbon Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/ProtestSPb/status/512630729306828800> (accessed 1 November 2014).

This was one of very few tweets that dealt with this personal feeling of shame, and with 26 retweets it was not very popular. By comparison, among the significantly fewer tweeters *opposing* the Peace March on the other hand, the ‘shame frame’ was more salient. Thus,

@AVRyabtsev (21.09.2014, RT: 39) claimed that '[t]he #MarshMira slogan is "I am ashamed to be a Russian". A glance at the list of organizers reveals no Russians' [PIC].

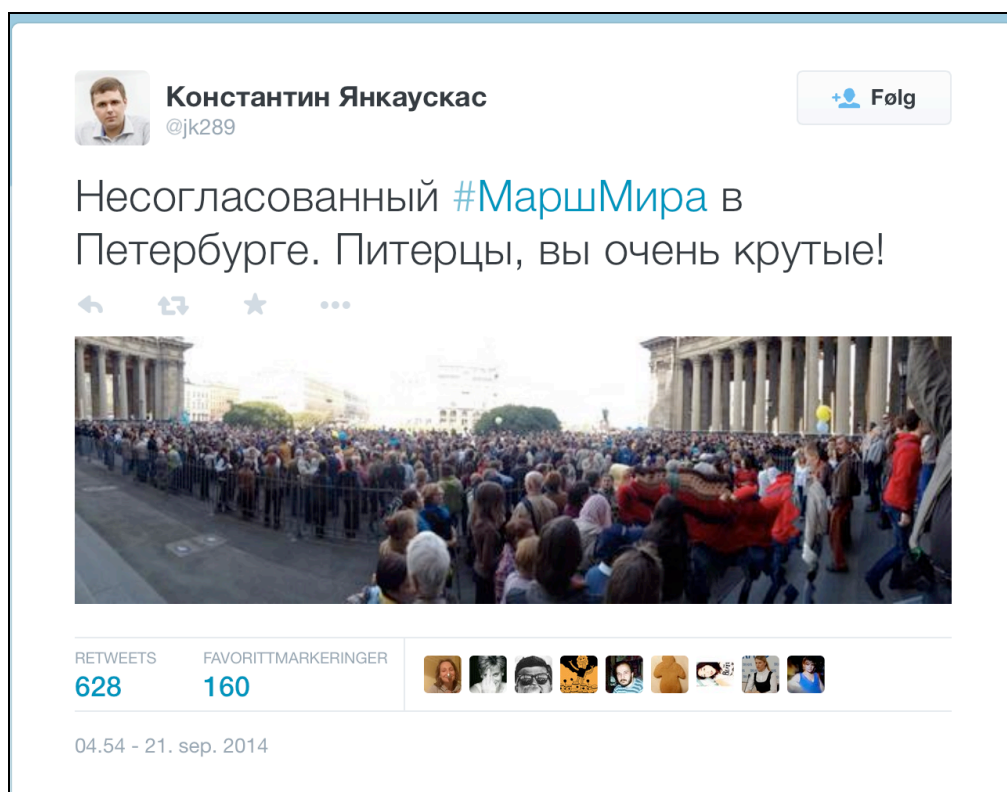
But shame *per se* is not a mobilising emotion. However, if activists are able to turn shame into pride, that may be a mobilising frame, as it activates the 'moral battery' (Jasper 2011: 291). This change can happen fast: a sudden emotional shift in a crowd may help people discover they have a potential for collective action they did not know they had (Goodwin et al. 2001: 19). Signs of such a pivotal moment arguably came in Saint Petersburg, when Vitalii Milonov unexpectedly showed up at the demonstration. A member of the Saint Petersburg legislative assembly representing United Russia and a radical and active defender of 'traditional values', Milonov is an obvious object of hatred for the liberal opposition.<sup>13</sup> Arriving when the unsanctioned demonstration had reached the Kazan' cathedral, he created much commotion. Milonov confronted the protesters head on, claiming that 'it is a shame that [...] such a sad bunch of national traitors are trying to present themselves as Petersburgers in front of the cameras of Western media' ('Na marshe mira'). His arrival was tweeted with a sense of fear of provocations: 'In #Piter the #vata already came to the #MarshMira, soon the provocations will start, here and there eggs are already flying. Deputy #Milonov, the brawler and hysteric, has turned up' (@Dbnmjr 21.09.2014d).

Some supporters applauded him. However, soon somebody started to shout 'shame!' (*pozor*), and others joined in. Milonov left the crowd, accompanied by the police. Judging from the video reports available on the internet, this apparently happened peacefully and without drama (tvrainru 2014). On Twitter, by contrast, Milonov's departure was presented as a great victory for the people: '[...] and here is Milonov, people are shouting shame! and are chasing him from the Kazan' cathedral #MarshMira [PIC]' (@marshmira 21.09.2014a). Independent TV channel Dozhd's Saint Petersburg correspondent triumphantly tweeted: 'The people are staying. Milonov left. The police are asking not to participate in this illegal public event #MarshMira #tvrain [PIC]' (@odinden 21.09.2014, RT: 158). Thus, the protesters' personal feeling of shame (*styd*) had in a way been channelled into an outward-looking sense of *pozor* directed towards Milonov, perhaps the only prominent representative of the regime present at the demonstration. Towards the end of the event in Saint Petersburg, tweets playing directly on pride were widely shared. Consider: 'I'm proud of our city! We are against [the] war! [LINK]' (@Gulyaev\_S 21.09.2014, RT: 262). Of all the tweets in the material, the most retweeted one was authored by @jk289, which belongs to liberal politician and activist Konstantin Jankauskas:<sup>14</sup> 'The unsanctioned #MarshMira in St Petersburg. Petersburgers, you are really tough!' (@jk289 21.09.2014).

<sup>13</sup> For instance, he was the initiator of the local law 'against homosexual propaganda' and the law prohibiting waterpipes ('Deputy Peterburga odobrili' 2011; Chernov 2014).

<sup>14</sup> At the time of the demonstration, he was under house arrest and not allowed to access the internet.

**Image 11.** A screenshot of @jk289 on Twitter.



*Source:* <https://twitter.com/jk289/status/513657566501797888> (accessed 1 November 2014).

However, for the ‘majority population’, the dynamics of pride and shame in the ‘Ukrainian question’ work in a very different way. Lev Gudkov (2014) emphasises that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the economic hardship that followed led to the loss of identity and a sense of humiliation. These are elements of an inferiority complex that were aggravated by the everyday hardship of life in post-Soviet Russia. Russian popular support for the return of Crimea to Russia had persistently been 80-84 percent over the last two decades, and the annexation of the peninsula became a matter of pride for a majority of the Russian population. For them, it basically meant a partial restoration of Russia as a great power and compensated for the still ongoing humiliation to which they were subjected (*ibid.*: 8).

The Euromaidan and subsequent developments changed Russians’ perception of their own country, its position in the world and its leadership. In the course of the months following the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, Russians became more proud of their country (Levada Center 2014b). According to a survey conducted by the Levada Center in late October 2014, 69 percent of Russian citizens were proud of their country in its present state. This was a significant increase since March 2006 (48 percent). In the summer of 2003, 80 percent of the Russian population agreed with the contention that ‘in Russia at present, things are happening that are making me feel ashamed’. In the autumn of 2012, 52 percent, and in October 2014, only 20 percent agreed (Levada Center 2014b). These numbers vividly illustrate



not only the ‘cognitive’ differences between liberals and the majority population, but also the emotional ones that have to be taken into account when arranging protests.

### The counter-frames

Various opponents of the Peace March repeatedly made incursions into the #MarshMira public, attacking the organisers and denigrating the activists and their sympathisers, portraying them, explicitly or implicitly, as fascists, non-Russian or anti-Russian, gays, elitists or simply scum. The most salient tweet instilled pride in the ‘victory’ of counterdemonstrators managing to disperse the activists of the Peace March: ‘That’s how the #MarshMira went in #novosibirsk. People with tricolours, DNR [People’s Republic of Donetsk] flags gathered and chased away all the fascist cripples [PIC]’ (@kottbegemott, 21.09.2014a, RT: 141). Similarly, two of the most influential and active pro-Kremlin tweeters, Pavel Ryzhevskii (@RPGrpgS) and Konstantin Rykov, associated the Peace March with the passing of German prisoners-of-war in Moscow in 1945: ‘Peace March. “@rykov: Did you know that the tradition of arranging ‘Peace Marches’ in Moscow is already 70 years old?” #MarshMira’ (@RPGrpgS 21.09.2014).

**Image 12.** A screenshot of @RPGrpgS on Twitter.



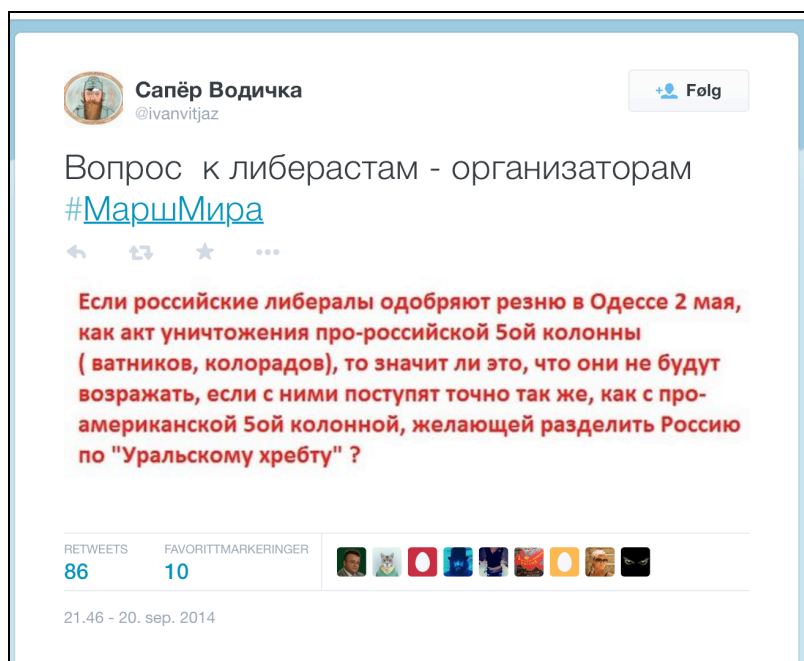
**Source:** <https://twitter.com/rpgrpgS/status/513652772408131584> (accessed 1 November 2014).

A thematically related cluster of tweets revolved around the water carts commonly used to clean the streets in Russian cities after major gatherings. Thus, a pronounced pro-Kremlin tweeter stated: ‘I drive a water cart, and I’m going to #MarshMira’ (@dostoverkin 21.09.2014, RT: 118). On the most basic level, the tweet is a direct allusion to the concept of the protesters as ‘scum’ or ‘trash’ which should be washed away. It may also have alluded to the popular image of the German prisoners-of-war mentioned above (when, allegedly, there were also water carts cleaning the streets after them), thus simultaneously drawing the parallel with the fascist enemy during the Great Patriotic War.

Prominent pro-regime tweeters and others repeatedly (@swarog09 20.09.2014d, RT: 27, @LevSharansky<sup>15</sup> 19.09.2014, @wmk2u 20.09.2014) tried to connect the protesters directly to the strongly anti-Russian, Ukrainian nationalist movement and political party Right Sector: ‘The “Peace March” is approved by the Right Sector. Russian liberals and Ukr fascists are blood brothers, because they want the RF to be destroyed #MarshMira (@ivanvitjaz 18.09.2014, RT: 18, see also @ivanvitjaz 19.09.2014, RT: 21).

A widely retweeted post condemned the opposition’s alleged (see Vzgliad.ru 2014) lauding of events in Odessa on 2 May 2014, where 42 people died, most of them as a consequence of a fire in a trade union headquarters (OHCHR 15.06.2014): ‘A question for the liberasty<sup>16</sup>—the organisers of the #MarshMira [PIC]’ (@ivanvitjaz 21.09.2014).

**Image 13.** A screenshot of @ivanvitjaz on Twitter.



**Source:** <https://twitter.com/ivanvitjaz/status/513549912584503296> (accessed 1 November 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Lev Sharansky is a virtual persona often parodying the liberal opposition. ‘His’ tweets concerning the Peace March were sarcastic and highly negative of the event.

<sup>16</sup> A combination of the words *liberal* and *pederast*, the latter being a highly derogatory term for a homosexual.

The text on the picture says:

If Russian liberals are applauding the slaughter in Odessa on 2 May as an act of annihilation of the pro-Russian fifth column (*vatniki, kolorady*)<sup>17</sup>, does that mean that they will not protest if they are treated the same way, since they are a pro-American fifth column who wants to split Russia along “the Ural mountain range”?

This is a good example of how the images and frames from state propaganda are condensed, sharpened and amplified in a short Twitter message. In a few words, the organisers of the Peace March are portrayed as homosexuals, liberals lauding genocide, anti-Russian traitors, separatists and elitists.

## Conclusion

One should be careful not to over-interpret the findings of a micro-level analysis like this. But, however limited, the #MarshMira Twitter public functioned as, among other things, a test audience, where frames were launched and triggered an immediate response in the form of being discarded, modified or recommunicated (retweeted). Thus, the Twittersphere in a way serves as a laboratory of evolution, where only the ‘fittest’ frames survive. The findings are therefore important in order to provide pieces to the puzzle of what the Russian opposition movement *is*—its agenda, values, emotions and failings. At the same time, the framing process was not a rehearsal—it was open for all to follow and influenced the outlook of the offline demonstrations.

Based on the analysis above, it is safe to conclude that in the mobilisational phase, the Peace March appeared as a demonstration of the opposition first and foremost. Peace imagery and peace slogans came next, since the ‘blame component’, even in what I have called the ‘peace frame’, was so assertive. With one or two notable exceptions, the powerful strategic potential latent in the tragic deaths of Russian soldiers went unused, as it was mostly in the background.

Another interesting finding is the near total absence of prognostic frames. Among the most popular tweets, there were none that offered a solution for the situation, except the implied message that Putin and his regime should be replaced. Who should replace them was not even hinted at. Accusations were rife, and they received a certain resonance in the #MarshMira public. But while it might have been liberating to shout and tweet ‘Putin, enough with the lying and stealing’ in 2011-12, it was perhaps not the best choice to go for an equally negative ‘Putin, enough with the lying and fighting’ in 2014. In plain language, it is not very constructive. In general, the creative element that was so striking in the slogans of the early post-election demonstrations was less prevalent in this public.

The ‘identity component’ of the frames is to a large extent a continuation of what was the case with the 2011-12 protesters, in the sense that the members of the #MarshMira public

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<sup>17</sup> ‘*Kolorady*’ is a pejorative nickname for the regime-friendly wearers of the orange and black Saint George’s Ribbon. It alludes to the ribbon’s similarity to the Colorado potato beetle, a feared parasite (see Sindelar 2014).

define themselves against what they perceive as a mean, unsophisticated mass. This seems to some extent to have been guided by offline developments, such as the presence of counter-demonstrators and provocateurs. The overwhelming response gained by tweets telling about solitary protesters far from the capitals speaks volumes about the opposition's self-understanding of being in a minority. But it is also important to emphasise that the flip side of this is the pride they often take in the manifestation of numerical strength. Since the Peace March was a national demonstration with many offline venues, the participants in these venues came together in the #MarshMira public, paradoxically letting the demonstrators be many and few at the same time.

The unique feature of such a multiple-venue demonstration is thus that, in a sense, it can possess mutually exclusive properties simultaneously. Whether it was a conscious choice of the regime to confuse the opposition by allowing some demonstrations while rejecting others for no apparent logical reason or this incoherence was the result of coincidences, it might actually have given the opposition a tool, the potential power of which they did not exploit fully. Sanctioned demonstrations attract a broader spectrum of people, while unsanctioned ones appeal to the hardcore activists, giving the event a different outlook. The popularity of the tweets portraying the Saint Petersburg demonstration as unsanctioned (and successful) makes it reasonable to assume that they motivated participants of the sanctioned Moscow event, too.

This is crucial: however important the online mobilization, the largest number of tweets is sent *during* the offline demonstrations, with people posting photos and on-the-spot reports. The increased visibility gained and the hope conveyed by the tweets from Saint Petersburg, where a demonstration was held earlier that day, was a strategic resource for the mobilisation for the offline event in Moscow. The same can be said of other, seemingly marginal demonstrations in the regions. But the other side of the coin is that, since the small, unsanctioned demonstrations (because of the time difference) were held before the event in Moscow, the tweets about them contributed to the impression that the mobilising opposition was small and participating in their demonstrations was risky.

The analysis indicates that there was little *conscious* framing work on the pride/shame dimension—or on emotions in general. There were many widely shared tweets conveying a sense of pride, but they seem to have been guided by offline developments (Milonov's departure from the demonstration in Saint Petersburg) rather than a conscious strategy by the activists. The shame that many members of the opposition undoubtedly feel in connection with Russia's complicity in the Ukraine crisis could be a destructive force, but, if strategically reworked into pride, it could be a resource for mobilisation. To attract a wider social spectrum of recruits, however, the 'emotional divide' must be taken into account.

Pro-regime tweeters—in this largely oppositional public one might as well call them saboteurs—rode the wave of state propaganda and used the concocted formula fascist/liberal/homosexual/elitist/traitor over and over again. Consistency between the frames propagated did not bother the pro-regime tweeters, as the state's propaganda had done the job for them: in this propaganda, liberals are often, for instance, presented as supporting fascists or

Nazis (cf.: Panchenko 2014) or, somehow, even being crypto-fascists themselves.<sup>18</sup> While this is a contradiction for outside observers, it is different in the ‘reality’ offered by state television, as all of these epithets are pejorative. The one-sided, massive focus on the negative connotation pushes the denotation into the background and allows for these terms to be used together or even interchangeably. However, for all this crudity, as shown, a few of the tweets were rather refined and creative.

Opposition leaders and activists were certainly trying to propagate their frames strategically in the #MarshMira public. But they used a relatively narrow range of frames. Some resources remained largely untapped, such as the alternative version of the ‘peace frame’. In addition, many of the most popular tweets came from little-known activists, and/or were the result not of a conscious framing strategy, but of developments on the ground. This could suggest that the leading activists, with their network and reach, were not sufficiently in contact with the public and/or did not take the framing work on #MarshMira seriously enough. Even worse, as the analysis clearly indicates: the values and emotions characteristic of the #MarshMira public were too distant from those of the population at large. The possibilities of strategic frame alignment were to a large extent unused. As a framing agent, the #MarshMira failed to promote frames with a potentially broader resonance. The liberal opposition mostly reproduced their own images, values and emotions, often defined in opposition to those of the ‘majority population’. Hence, instead of being a recruitment tool, Twitter served as an echo chamber.

While this analysis has offered a glimpse into online mobilisation by the opposition, every demonstration has some unique features. There is a need for more micro-level studies like this, as well as broader, more comparative analyses of the Russian opposition’s framing strategies. Future research should also include quantitative analysis of larger numbers of tweets and social media data from other platforms. Further work should also, to a greater extent, take into account the dynamics between the framing efforts by the opposition and the regime.

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, the state’s main TV news anchor/commentator Dmitrii Kiselev has compared Aleksei Naval’nyi to Hitler (Solomonova 2013).

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