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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS

Special Editor: Anastassia Obydenkova, Institute for Economic Analysis of the Spanish National Research Council IAE-CSIC and Barcelona School of Economics

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INTRODUCTION BY THE SPECIAL EDITOR

Environmental Protests: An Overview

Anastassia Obydenkova (Institute for Economic Analysis of the Spanish National Research Council IAE-CSIC and Barcelona School of Economics)

Abstract

This essay outlines the key arguments of this special issue and situates its contributions within the broader scholarly discourse on Russian regions and subnational political regimes. It argues that analysis of the heterogeneity of environmental protests across regions benefits from engaging with the insights from literature on political regimes, historical legacies, and external influences. This essay illuminates how various factors, previously discovered in the studies on Russian regions, collectively shape environmental protests across diverse regional contexts within Russia.

This unique collection of essays examines the regional dimension of environmental protests in Russia from the 2010s to the 2020s, tracing shifts in protest activity over time. The opening two essays (the first authored by Arina Loginova and Anastassia Obydenkova, and the second by Andrei Semenov, Yaroslav Snarski, and Tatiana Tkacheva) analyze general trends in environmental protests at national and subnational levels. The third and fourth essays present detailed case studies of environmental protests in two distinct regions: Arkhangelsk Oblast in northwestern Russia (by Elena Holmgren) and the Republic of Bashkortostan in the Volga-Ural region (by Iliuza Mukhamedianova and Irina Meyer-Olimpieva).

Environmental Protests: National Level

The opening two essays establish a framework for understanding protest dynamics across the Russian Federation, including changes during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2020) and following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Critically, they conclude that environmental protests are highly heterogeneous across Russian regions: some regions exhibit frequent and intense protests, while other regions remain passive. Protest outcomes often correlate with geographic proximity to Moscow, level of urbanization, and the strength of civil society. This aligns with prior scholarship on socio-political and economic disparities across the Russian regions. For example, studies from the 1990s–2010s identified subnational variation in political regimes, corruption, freedom of speech, and freedom of mass media with some regions demonstrating greater democratic openness than others (Dininio and Orttung 2005; Obydenkova 2008). These differences were attributed to such factors as geographic location, EU influence, and socio-economic and historical legacies, among others (see, for example, Hale 2003; Lankina et al. 2016; Libman and Obydenkova 2023; Obydenkova 2022). By mapping trends in environmental protests, this collection advances scholarly understanding of Russia's regional diversity in terms of environmental protests.

While the two opening essays agree on regional heterogeneity, their findings diverge in key respects. Loginova and Obydenkova argue that environmental protests increased in 2023, with approximately 250 protests recorded that year compared to around 70 in 2022. Semenov et al., meanwhile, note a decline in protests in the early 2020s. This discrepancy might arise from methodological and theoretical differences: Loginova and Obydenkova use one dataset (Activatica) and they define "environmental protests" as any public action—not only as traditional physical gatherings, but also as video appeals, and social media campaigns (that is, including all aspects of digital activity representing protests)—aimed at resolving environmental conflicts or disasters through engagement with political actors. Their study highlights a post-pandemic shift toward virtual activism due to restrictions on in-person gatherings and heightened state control. Although fragmented, these digital protests remain critical for assessing civil society resilience and occasionally achieve tangible outcomes. In contrast, Semenov et al. use three datasets (the LAruPED dataset for 2007–2011, "Contentious Politics in Russia" for 2012–2016, and the dataset on Environmental Protests in Russian Regions for 2017–2021). They add to these three sources the data from Activatica 2022–2023, comparing the empirical evidence from different sources and for different periods of study. Moreover, the functioning of Activatica was interrupted in Russia in 2022 due to further restrictions on the freedom of speech and access to digital sources.

Environmental Protests: Regional Level

The third and fourth essays offer a comparative analysis of environmental protests in two contrasting Russian regions. Elena Holmgren's essay examines Arkhangelsk Oblast, a strategically significant region that includes the Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the Solovetsky Islands. With its extensive coastline along the Barents, White, and Kara Seas, Arkhangelsk plays a vital role in transnational environmental protection, particularly in Northern Europe

and the Arctic. However, the region has faced severe environmental degradation due to resource extraction (oil, timber, manganese). Holmgren focuses on the Shies protest campaign, analyzing shifts in environmental activism with the main focus on the 2020s time period. Her study reveals how preexisting activist networks facilitated anti-military mobilization and underscores state repression as a key challenge, advocating for innovative protest strategies under escalating authoritarian constraints.

The final essay, by Iliuza Mukhamedianova and Irina Meyer-Olimpieva, investigates protests in Bashkortostan, a resource-rich republic in the Ural Mountains. Unlike coastal Arkhangelsk, Bashkortostan is landlocked, limiting cross-border environmental alliances. The essay centers on the 2023 protests in Baymak triggered by the imprisonment of Indigenous rights activist Fayil Alsynov, which mobilized thousands against gold mining. Drawing on participant interviews, the authors argue that successful protests fused environmental, ethnic, and rural identity politics. This case study highlights how localized cultural narratives amplify environmental resistance in regions with limited geopolitical leverage.

Conclusion

This collection traces evolving trends in Russian environmental protests, combining national-level analysis with regional case studies. By isolating patterns in protest dynamics, it identifies environmental activism as one of the few viable forms of opposition to federal and regional elites, as previously noted in the *Russian Analytical Digest* (No. 324, 28 February 2025). A key finding is that regional politicians, administrations, and civil society at the subnational level have adapted to the COVID-19 restrictions and the increasing repression of freedom of speech by making innovative use of social media and other digital mobilization tools, such as video appeals. These strategies, while fragmented, demonstrate resilience and are themselves occasionally effective at mitigating environmental conflicts. Yet international isolation represents a challenge when dealing with major environmental challenges, including in the Russian Arctic (see, for example, Obydenkova 2024; Vladimirova 2023).

This collection of essays underscores the interplay of geography and digital innovation in shaping environmental protests across Russia's diverse regions in the turbulent period of the 2020s. The essays reveal both the fragility and the adaptability of Russian civil society amid escalating state control.

About the Special Editor

Anastassia Obydenkova, the Guest Editor of this special issue of the *Russian Analytical Digest*, is a Research Scientist at the Institute for Economic Analysis of the Spanish National Research Council (IAE-CSIC) and an affiliated Professor at the Barcelona School of Economics. She holds a PhD in Political and Social Science from the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Dr. Obydenkova has been awarded research fellowships at Yale, Princeton, and Harvard Universities, among others. Her expertise encompasses comparative politics and international relations, environmental politics and sustainability, regionalism, political regimes, and historical legacies.

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ANALYSIS

Environmental Protests in Russia, 2013–2025

Arina Loginova (University of Bologna, Italy) and Anastassia Obydenkova (Institute for Economic Analysis of the Spanish National Research Council IAE-CSIC and Barcelona School of Economics)

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Abstract

The article analyzes the nature, size, dynamics, and intensity of environmental protests in Russia from 2013 to early 2025. It argues that the nature of protests has partially changed from traditional public demonstrations to online digital protesting activities. Protests have become smaller and more fragmented, while the frequency of protests has increased. This study offers valuable insights into the dynamic of environmental protests over the last decade, especially during the 2020s.

Environmental protests in Russia remain an understudied topic, with limited data available in the academic literature. Existing studies often rely on restricted-access databases, cover only short time periods, or focus on specific cases such as the Shies landfill protests. The primary aim of this essay is to present a comprehensive analysis of protest activity in the environmental sector over the last decade. To this end, we collected protest data from Activatica, a Russian-language online platform dedicated to civic activism, where activists themselves report on mass mobilization events. We analyzed more than 1,000 Activatica posts made by activists on environmental topics in the 12-year period from 2013 to early 2025. This analysis was conducted using seeded Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling, supported by an initial qualitative review of 300 protests for dictionary and topic identification.

Before proceeding to the analysis, it is crucial to make one conceptual remark. In this study, we employed a broad understanding of the term "protests," defining them as *any* public expression of collective will (whether in person or online) intended to highlight a specific issue or to voice opposition to the actions of the authorities, businesses, or other stakeholders. In Russia today, mass gatherings can trigger persecution by the Russian state and police, making such activity more difficult and riskier to organize. As such, citizens have turned to other, "more peaceful" means to express dissent, such as signing a petition, recording a video about the problem, etc. Drawing on an activist-driven dataset that includes information not only on protests as classically understood—that is, as in-person gatherings of people—but also on online/digital environmental actions, events, round tables, etc., enabled us to conduct valuable analysis of these new trends.

Our analysis focuses on three key aspects: the intensity of protests over time, the main topics of these protests, and how these topics have evolved year by year. In the following sections, we will explore each of these aspects in greater detail.

Intensity of Protests

Over the 12-year study period, the intensity of protests followed a wave-like pattern. From 2013 to 2016, protest activity gradually increased, followed by a sharp decline in 2017. This decrease in environmental protests continued in 2018, but this was followed by a significant surge between 2019 and 2021. Another decline occurred in 2022, after which protest activity rose again in 2023 before decreasing once more in 2024 (see Figure 1 on p. 8).

These fluctuations in protest intensity can be attributed to several factors. One key factor is the popularity of the Activatika website, which represents the primary data source for this study. Originally created for environmental activists, the data collected are naturally influenced by the website's reach and user engagement. At the same time, it is essential to consider the broader political context when analyzing the dynamics of environmental protests.

For instance, the period from 2017 to 2018 was characterized by six major anti-corruption and opposition protests organized by prominent Russian opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Viacheslav Maltsev. These protests were large in scale, involving between 36 and 118 cities across Russia, with peak participation reaching approximately 98,000 people (see Fomin et. al. 2022). During these two years, the opposition protests dominated the public and media agenda, particularly among young people and independent media outlets. This political backdrop may explain the decline in environmental protests recorded on the Activatika website during 2017–2018, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Other contextual factors include the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which, as suggested by Figure 1, may not have significantly reduced the number of protests but likely influenced their format, shifting many activities online. Additionally, the Activatica website was blocked in Russia in March 2022, and it likely had a profound impact on protest dynamics, user engagement, and the availability of protest data.

Another important factor, as noted in previous research, is the issue-based nature of protests in Russia, particularly environmental ones. Large-scale protest movements often originate from a central location—typically a major city—before spreading to other regions.

Several notable federal-level protests illustrate this pattern. For instance, the #ecoprotest1905 and #ecoprotest2209 actions in 2019 mobilized support across 45 cities in Russia against the construction of a landfill in Shiyes, Arkhangelsk region. Other prominent national protests include the "Freedom for the Defenders of the Arctic" campaign in 2013, which supported Greenpeace volunteers detained in the Arctic, and #FREEVITISHKO in 2014, advocating for the release of environmental activist Yevgeny Vitishko. Of all regions of Russia, the Arctic has historically received the most international attention when it comes to environmental issues (Obydenkova 2024). International organizations such as the Arctic Council and Greenpeace play a major role in regional environmental efforts, while the EBRD supported environmental cleaning operations, reporting its activity on social media (see Ambrosio et. al. 2022). In addition, the federal-level #RussiaIsNotAGarbage (#RossyaNePomoyka) campaign in 2019 protested against waste incineration and called for reforms in waste management.

By comparison, protests in 2022 and 2023 were more localized. For example, in 2022, ten protests were recorded against tree felling in Moscow's Troitsky Forest. Instead of large-scale demonstrations, activists organized continuous monitoring efforts to prevent deforestation. From 2023 to early 2025, approximately 30 protests were held against the construction of a landfill in Sysert, Sverdlovsk Oblast. Activists employed a range of protest tactics—including single-person pickets outside the governor's residence, a hunger strike, video-based awareness campaigns, and even the use of traditional Russian ditties (short folk poems)—to draw attention to the issue.

Main Protest Topics

The analysis identified 12 main protest topics, eight of which were directly related to environmental issues. As illustrated in Figure 3, the most frequently occurring words in the analyzed texts include "polygon" (landfill), "forest," "park," "cuttings," "dumps," and "residents against." The most prominent protest theme, labeled Topic 1 in Figure 2, revolves around efforts to preserve parks, squares, and groves, particularly in large Russian cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. A more detailed visualization of Topic 1 can be found in Figure 3 (see Figure 2 and 3 on p. 9).

The keywords associated with this topic indicate that these protests primarily involve urban residents, especially in Moscow, who oppose excessive urban development, inadequate landscaping, and the felling of trees in city forests and parks. The prominence of this theme is likely linked to overall higher level of civil society and, related to it, protest activity in bigger cities a trend previously noted in other studies on the regions of Russia and a capital as an outlier (e.g., Libman and Obydenkova 2014) (see Figure 3 on p. 9).

Closely related to the theme of park preservation is Topic 2, which focuses on the protection of water resources. As shown in Figure 4, these protests are largely driven by public opposition to the construction of residential buildings, industrial zones, factories, and waste-

water treatment facilities along the banks of rivers and lakes. Unlike protests for urban green spaces, demonstrations related to water protection tend to be smaller in scale and more localized (see Figure 4 on p. 10).

The remaining six protest topics address various environmental concerns, including waste management, the preservation of specially protected natural areas and forests, solidarity with activists, waste recycling, animal protection, and air pollution. It is also worth noting that, despite the detailed classification of topics, three of them can be grouped under the broader category of waste management, highlighting its significance as a recurring environmental issue (see Figure 5 on p. 10).

Distribution of Topics over the Years

The distribution of protest topics over the years reflects a broader trend toward the localization of environmental activism in Russia. Before 2017, protest themes were relatively evenly distributed, with no significant spikes—except for 2013, when large-scale demonstrations were held in defense of the Arctic, where international attempts to influence environmental protection (e.g., by Greenpeace and European states) was significant during this period of time and were reported on different digital platforms and social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and the like (Ambrosio et. al. 2022; Hall et. al. 2021). In 2017–2018, however, a wave of mass anti-corruption and opposition protests (associated with the activities of Alexei Navalny and his popularity in social media) swept across Russia, seemingly shifting public attention away from environmental issues toward broader political concerns (see Fomin et. al. 2022). The frequency of the environmental protests for 2017–2018 might also have been affected by a switch in public attention to the electoral campaigns run for the elections of the national president in 2018 and further restrictions on the freedom of speech.

Since 2019, environmental protests have become more issue-specific, with a particular focus on waste management, urban green spaces, and water resource protection. In 2020, for instance, 14 protests were held to protect a public square on Ivan Franko Street in Moscow. These actions included single-person and mass pickets, video appeals to authorities, and activist watch groups at the proposed deforestation site. This surge in activism was largely driven by Moscow's urban renovation program, which involves demolishing Soviet-era five-story apartment blocks to construct new residential buildings, as well as projects to expand the city's transport infrastructure by adding new roads and highways near residential areas.

Another notable example from 2020 is the series of nine "Human Chain" ("Zhivaia tsepochka") protests in Nizhny Novgorod, where residents opposed construction projects in Switzerland Park ("Park Shveitsariia"). These demonstrations were a response to local authorities' plans to redevelop the park as part of Nizhny Novgorod's 800th-anniversary celebrations (see Figure 6 on p. 11).

By 2021, protests related to urban parks and green spaces became more dispersed. In Moscow, five protests were held to protect the Botanical Garden ("Botanicheskiy sad") from development; these included public gatherings and meetings between activists and members of the Moscow City Duma. In St. Petersburg, two protests aimed to preserve Academician Sakharov Park ("Park Akademika Sakharova"), which was slated for development into a judo school named after Anatoly Rakhlin, President Vladimir Putin's first coach. Additionally, six protests in St. Petersburg and Primorsk focused on water resource protection. Three of these six opposed the construction of a port complex in Primorsk (Leningrad Oblast), citing environmental risks to local flora and fauna. The remaining three involved public monitoring of landfills and illegal waste dumping along the Gulf of Finland. During the 1990s and the first two decades of the 2000s, it was the coastal regions and cities that experienced the most intense influence from the EU and European states, which sponsored programs to support civil society, environmental movements, freedom of mass media and human rights during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s (e.g., Obydenkova 2012). It might, therefore, be no coincidence that cities and regions located along Russia's borders and coasts are more active when it comes to protests in general and environmental activism specifically.

The year 2022 witnessed the next wave of restrictions placed on the freedom of speech, and a number of social media and digital platforms were shut down in Russia, and the Activatika website was prohibited and blocked in Russia in March 2022. Therefore, it is not surprising that overall protest activity, as reported on the Activatika, seems to have declined. Yet, despite these changes, the most active demonstrations were still registered, including mainly the protests against deforestation in Moscow's Troitsky and Bitsevsky forests, where, according to Eco-Crisis Group (2023), the activists participating in these protests faced particularly harsh detentions. Despite these challenges, protests in support of preserving these forests continued into 2023.

Beyond the increasing localization and fragmentation of protests, 2023 also saw a shift in protest strategies. While video appeals to authorities—especially to President Vladimir Putin—had been relatively rare in earlier years, they became a safer and more widely used method of protest after 2022. In 2023, over 25 video appeals were recorded, primarily from regional activists highlighting local environmental problems. This trend continued in 2024, with more than 20 video appeals, and

in January 2025 alone, at least five appeals were directed to Putin and the federal authorities.

Conclusion

Analysis of environmental protests in Russia from 2013 to early 2025 reveals several key trends. First, and contrary to expectations, environmental protest activity did not decline after February 2022; in fact, it increased, at least as reported on the Activatika. However, its format shifted from traditional rallies and public gatherings to more indirect forms of activism, particularly video appeals to the president and other high-ranking officials.

The strategy of appealing to the president can be at least partially explained through the lenses of studies on environmental conflicts and environmental governance. Recent comparative study of public behavior in environmental conflicts in Russia and China points to local populations' lack of trust in subnational regional governors in Russia due to the latter's alignment with entrepreneurs when environmental conflicts arise (Demchuk et al. 2021). In contrast, in China, subnational regional and local administrations tend to support local populations, allying with them to lobby the national government to prevent or solve environmental conflict (Ibid).

Another possible strategic reason for appeals to the president can be found in studies on polycentric governance in general and deforestation in the Russian regions in particular. In the latter, Libman and Obydenkova (2014) argue that the balanced involvement of federal and subnational interest groups is optimal for the efficiency of forest management in the Russian regions, while the domination of either central national government or of subnational *nongovernmental* actors might be associated with negative outcomes for deforestation. Therefore, appeals to the federal government can be considered a more effective form of environmental protest than appeals to regional and local politicians.

Second, the nature and the size of protests changed over the period under study. They became both more fragmented and smaller in scale. This shift was likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which restricted in-person public gatherings, and by increased political repression, which has made organizing large-scale demonstrations increasingly difficult and risky. In the aftermath of the Pandemic 2020, the protests became partially digitalized and the use of social media for reporting environmental problems has also increased since 2020.

Third, following the mass waste management protests of 2019, environmental activism has primarily focused on urban issues, particularly opposing excessive development and protecting parks and forests from deforestation in city environments. This is in line with findings on the emergence of so-called "apolitical activism" (see *Russian Analytical Digest* 324, 28 February 2025).

Overall, the study of environmental protests in the Russian regions offers valuable insights into how non-political activism evolves under restrictive conditions. This makes it an important area for further, more in-depth research.

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Arina Loginova is a PhD Candidate in Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna (Italy), specializing in environmental governance and civil society organizations in post-Soviet Eurasia. She has three years of experience coordinating an international youth NGO focused on sustainable development in Russia. In 2023, she represented youth in the UNECE region and delivered a speech at the closing plenary session, emphasizing the importance of youth involvement in sustainability efforts. Arina is dedicated to bridging academic research with practical initiatives to support civil society and environmental governance.

Anastassia Obydenkova (PhD, European University Institute, Florence) is a Research Scientist at the Institute for Economic Analysis of the Spanish National Research Council (IAE-CSIC) and affiliated Professor at Barcelona School of Economics. She has held multiple teaching and research appointments, including at Uppsala University (Sweden), Carleton University (Canada), Zurich University (Switzerland), Yale, Princeton, and Harvard Universities (USA). Obydenkova's expertise is in political science and international relations, focusing on post-Communist states and societies, Eurasia, and China.

Please see overleaf for Further Reading.

Further Reading

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Appendix

Figure 1: Number of Environmental Protests per Year

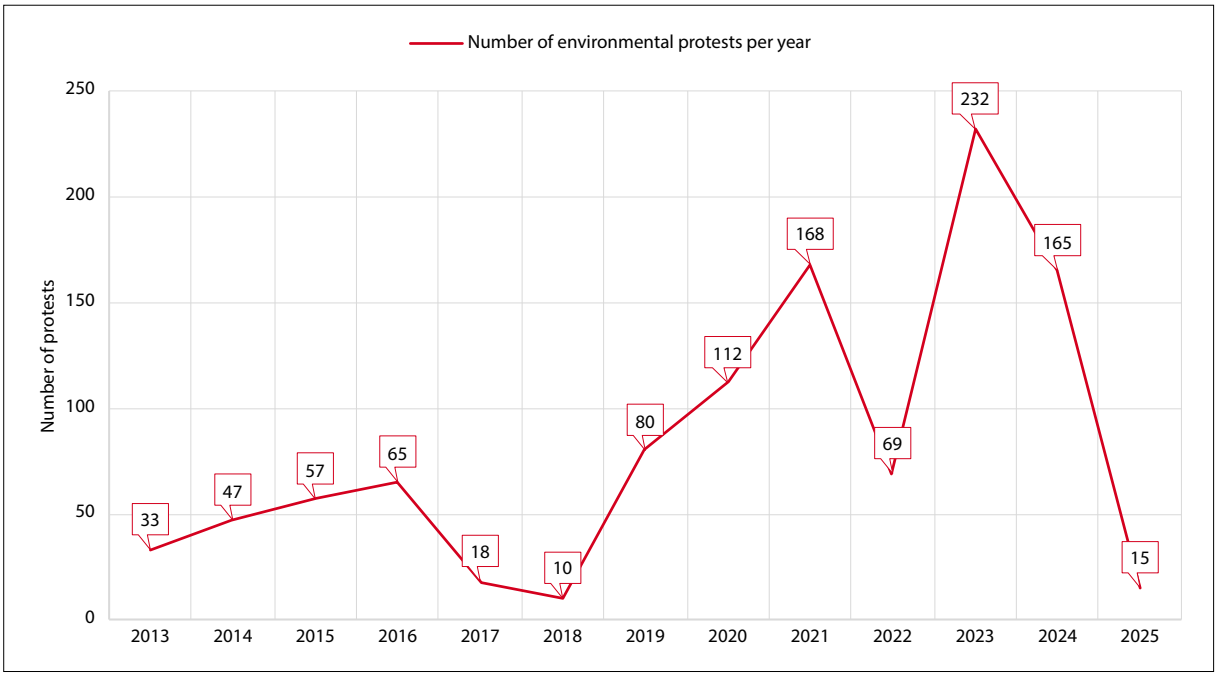

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Figure 2: Visualization of Seeded LDA Topic Model with LDAvis Package for R

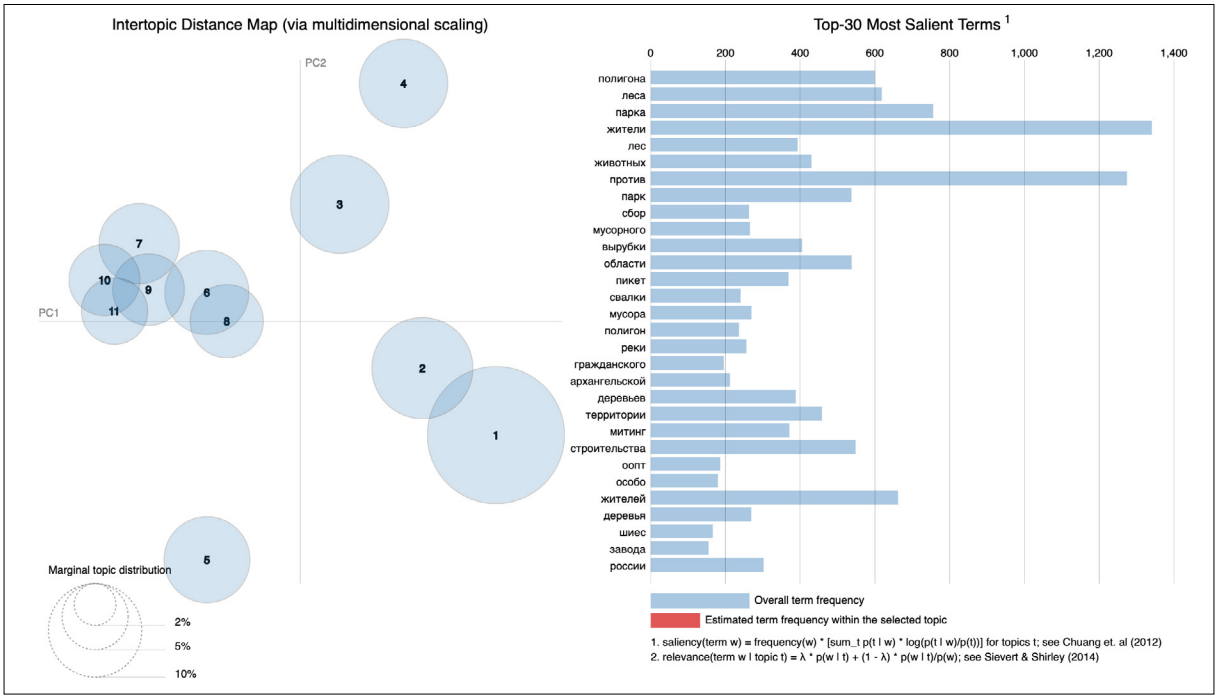

Figure 3: Visualization of Seeded LDA Topic 1 with LDAvis Package for R

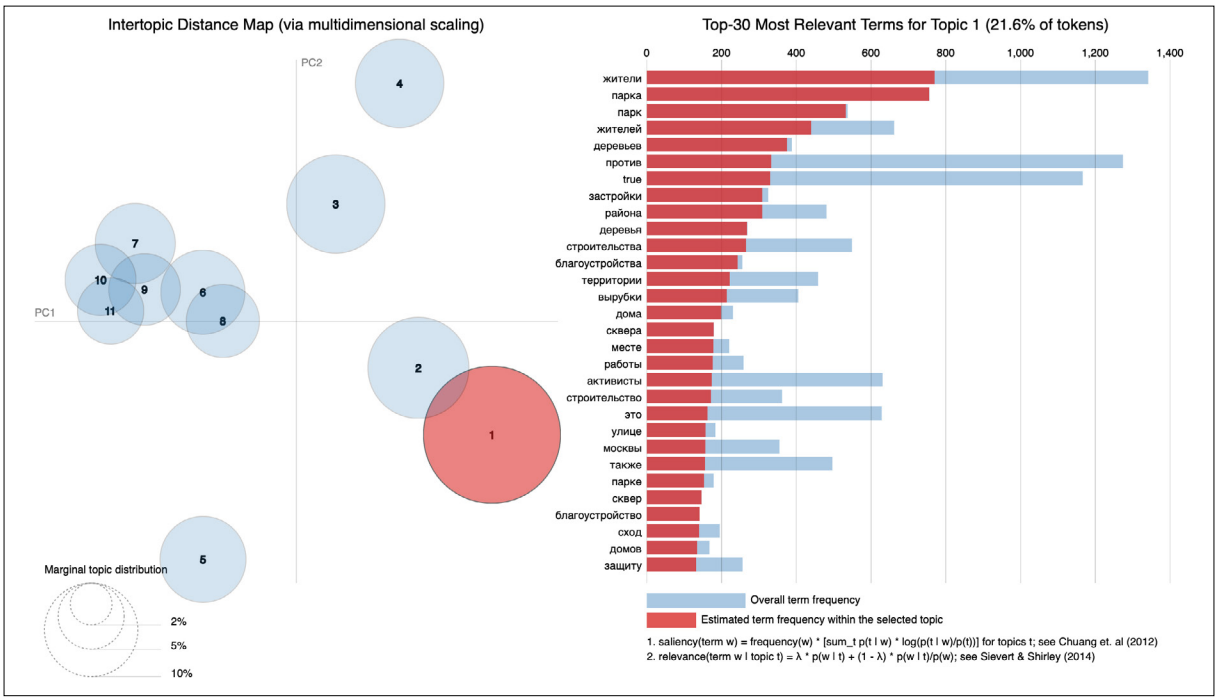

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Figure 4: Visualization of Seeded LDA Topic 2 with LDAvis Package for R

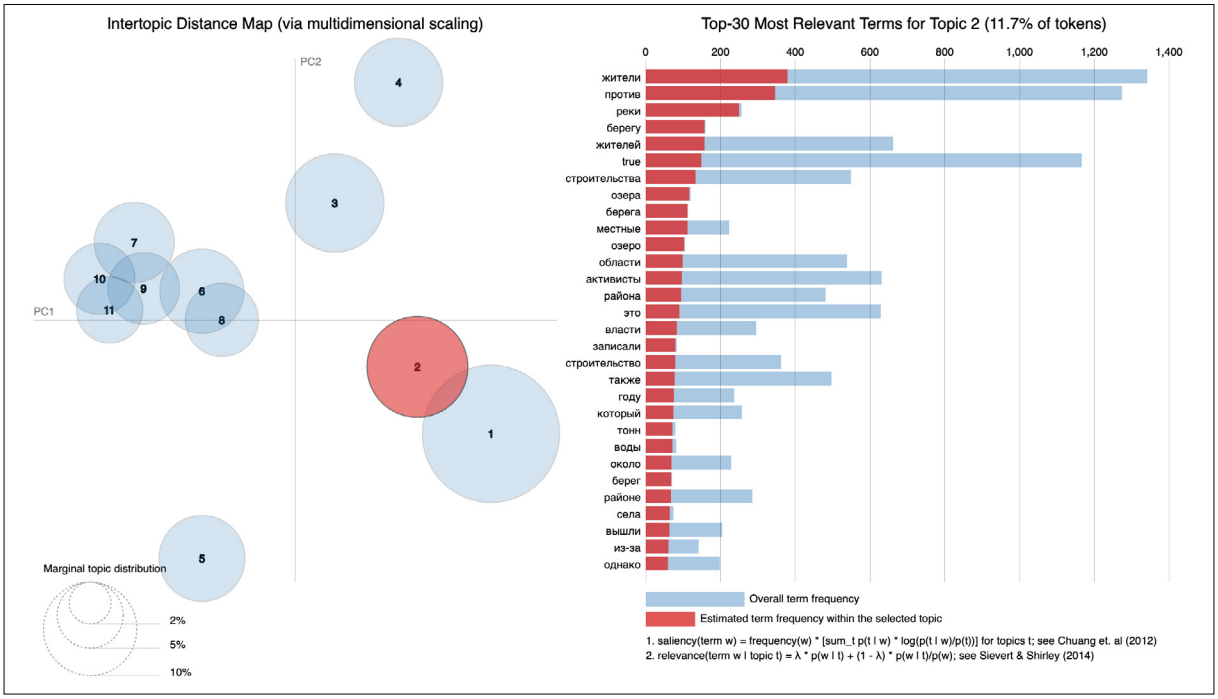
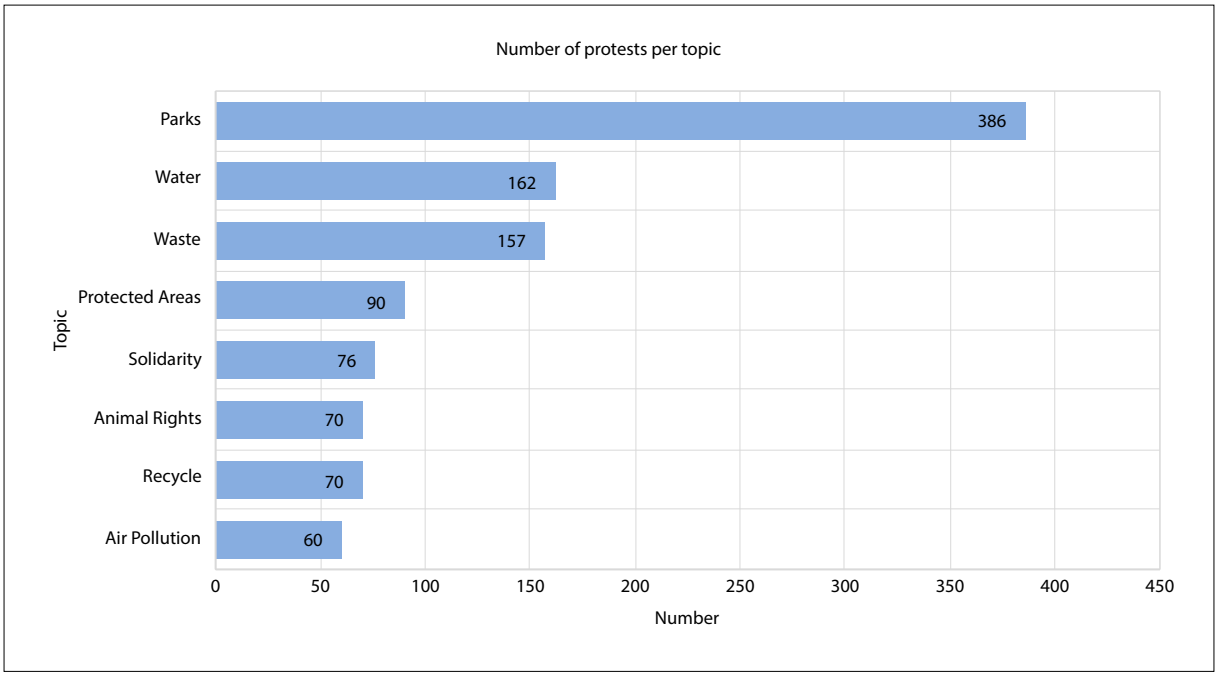
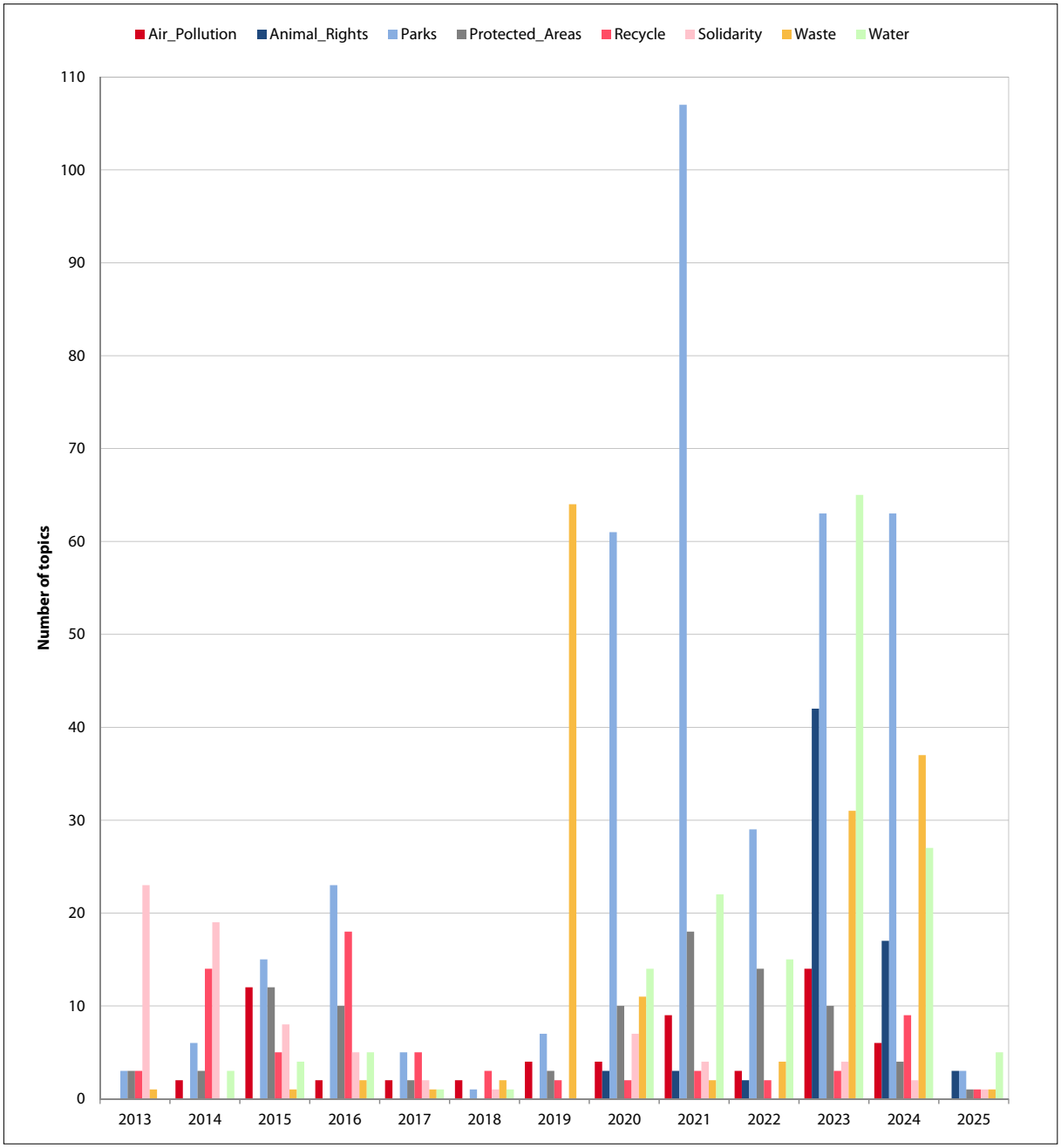


Figure 5: Topic Frequency



Appendix continued overleaf.

Figure 6: Distribution of Topics by Year



Topic	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
Air Pollution	0	2	12	2	2	2	4	4	9	3	14	6	0	**60**
Animal Rights	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	2	42	17	3	**67**
Parks	3	6	15	23	5	1	7	61	107	29	63	63	3	**396**
Protected Areas	3	3	12	10	2	0	3	10	18	14	10	4	1	**100**
Recycle	3	14	5	18	5	3	2	2	3	2	3	9	1	**70**
Solidarity	23	19	8	5	2	1	0	7	4	0	4	2	1	**76**
Waste	1	0	1	2	1	2	64	11	2	4	31	37	1	**221**
Water	0	3	4	5	1	1	0	14	22	15	65	27	5	**162**
Grand Total	**33**	**47**	**57**	**65**	**18**	**10**	**80**	**112**	**168**	**69**	**232**	**165**	**15**	1,071

ANALYSIS

Mapping Environmental Protests in Russia

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Abstract

While environmental protests in Russia represent a prominent form of civic activism, they exhibit considerable regional variation. Based on a panel analysis of over 1,000 protest events from 2007 to 2021, this study maps environmental mobilization across Russian regions and identifies factors influencing environmental protest intensity. We develop a typology of regional eco-mobilization and analyze its relationship with socio-economic and political variables.

Against a backdrop of mounting state repression and legal constraints on political activism, ecological mobilization remains a notable form of everyday contention in contemporary Russia. Protests break out in various regions in response to industrial pollution, waste management policies, large-scale infrastructure projects, and other issues. Having germinated from the Soviet-era conservation movement, post-Soviet environmental activism has survived drastic changes in politics and economy, in the process establishing and maintaining connections with international environmental non-profit organizations, as well as developing new organizational forms and initiatives.

Using several data sources that cover 1,107 events in 59 regions, we trace the general and subnational trends in environmental protests in Russia. We show that some regions exhibit persistently high levels of eco-mobilization, while others feature surges in eco-protests followed by protracted periods of demobilization or do not experience any collective action at all. Two distinct sources of eco-protests are a) large-scale infrastructural or industrial projects with high negative environmental externalities; and b) unwanted urban development in metropolitan areas. We document these patterns and argue that even against the backdrop of a repressive autocratic regime, eco-activism is unlikely to disappear.

Data on Environmental Protest Events

We rely on three data sources to systematically trace the evolution of Russian environmental activism. First, the LAruPED dataset covers the period from 2007 to 2011, identifying 414 protest events in 45 Russian regions. Second, "Contentious Politics in Russia" (CPR) includes 384 eco-protests in 58 regions from 2012 to 2016. Finally, the dataset on Environmental Protests in Russian Regions (EPRR) covers the period from 2017 to 2021, recording 1,107 actions in 59 regions. We complement these data with more recent estimates for 2022–2023 from the Activatica website maintained by activists. All three datasets track only the most visible part of environmental activism and lack information on other crucial aspects, such as organizational support or the number of participants. Yet they enable systematic cross-regional comparison, as well as illuminating the underlying factors behind environmental mobilization.

Patterns of Eco-Protests in 2007–2021

Similar to other collective actions, eco-protests in Russia follow a wave-like pattern, with distinct periods of intensified activism followed by decline. Figure 1 on p. 14 plots the number of environmental protest events annually for 2007–2021. The first cycle of environmental protests corresponds to the period between 2007 and 2011, in which 45 regions experienced at least one collective action directed against government-backed industrial projects that were having or would have had severe ecological consequences.

Moscow and Moscow Oblast, as well as Krasnodar Krai, were hotbeds of activism in 2007–2011. In the former, the Khimki Forest Defense Movement opposed the construction of a toll highway that would cut through a protected forest. While the construction plans were adjusted in response, the highway was ultimately finished. In the latter, preparation for the 2014 Olympic Games provoked mobilization aimed at protecting coastal areas and the territories of the Caucasus Nature Reserve. Elsewhere, a public campaign against a nuclear power plant in Kaliningrad region rocked the political landscape, while activists in Irkutsk Oblast demanded the shutdown of the Baikal Pulp and Paper Mill, the largest polluter of the fragile Baikal ecosystem (see Figure 1 on p. 14).

In the next cycle (2012–2016), environmental protests expanded beyond the capital and industrial centers. The most notable cases were the "Save the Khoper!" Movement in Voronezh, which opposed the Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company's plans to develop a nickel mining project in the Khoper Nature Reserve, and the "Stop GOK" campaign in Chelyabinsk, which emerged in response to the Russian Copper Company's plans to

build a mining and processing plant. Moscow and St. Petersburg remained highly contentious: rapid urban development threatened green and recreational areas, and residents mobilized to protect the urban commons.

The 2017–2021 period saw a significant increase in both the scale and intensity of environmental protests, largely driven by waste management reforms. In the Moscow region, 187 ecoprotests took place, the majority of which were mass rallies against municipal waste landfills and plans to build waste incineration plants (WIPs). The most high-profile protests in the period related to the Shiyes landfill project (2018–2020): residents of Arkhangelsk Oblast opposed the construction of a waste disposal site intended to handle Moscow's garbage. The movement employed long-term occupation tactics, including the establishment of an activist camp at the construction site. The protests eventually forced the government to cancel the project, marking a rare victory for environmental activists in Russia. In Tatarstan, plans to build a WIP also faced resistance: residents of the village of Osinovo opposed the decision to build a waste incineration plant for several years, but construction finally began in June 2020. Similar protests were observed in the Kirov and Leningrad regions, as well as in Udmurtia.

Another prominent case of sustained environmental activism unfolded in Bashkortostan. In 2020, a campaign to protect the Kushtau shihan, a mountain made of limestone that the Bashkir Soda Company (BSC) wanted to mine for soda production, mobilized thousands to protect the site from workers; clashes with riot police and security services followed attempts to establish a camp on site. President Putin's intervention ended the conflict: the BSC's license was revoked and the shihan received protected status. However, the regional government continued to harass the activists.

From the combined data on ecomobilization, we can develop a typology that combines a) the overall level of contention and b) its persistence over time. A region is classified as having high persistence if it records environmental protest activity in two consecutive periods, e.g. 2012–2016 and 2017–2021. In 11 regions, there was not a single instance of environmental protest (see Table 1 on p. 15). Some of these regions have industrial pollution levels similar to those with a high level of mobilization (for example, the gas-rich Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District) or they have protected areas that could be an object of claims from powerful groups (e.g., Kalmyk Republic). Another group of 15 regions experienced intermittent low-level (below the median level of ecoprotests) mobilization. Nineteen regions provided fertile ground for the eruption of collective actions, which declined quickly (e.g. Shiyes in Arkhangelsk). In 22 regions, despite the overall low level of mobilization, it persisted for at least two observation periods. Lastly, 16 regions are "champions" of ecological activism with persistently high levels of mobilization (see Table 1 on p. 15).

Environmental Protests in 2022–23

Since 2022, the number of eco-protests plummeted, with only 65 ecoprotests recorded—numbers comparable to 2007 (60 actions), 2011 (59 actions), and 2015 (61 actions). Nevertheless, environmental protests did not disappear completely. Instead, regions that had experienced a surge in protest activity before 2022 took center stage. In Moscow, rallies to protect the Bitsevsky Forest and the Troitsky Forest attracted hundreds of participants despite the widespread use of coercion against the activists. Anti-landfill meetings took place in the Leningrad region, including protests against the development of the Ostrovsky and Dubrovka quarries. In Yekaterinburg, protests were held against the construction of a landfill in the Sysertsky district. In Bashkortostan, locals opposed the development of a copper-zinc deposit near the village of Podolsk, and the extraction of sand and gravel near the village of Okhlebinino. They also advocated for preserving the Irandyk Ridge as a national park.

Isolated protests occurred in the Krasnodar region (against a landfill in the village of Borisovka), Yekaterinburg (pickets opposing the deforestation of Krugly Forest), and Kirov (a rally against the Maradykovsky plant), among others. In Lipetsk region, activists staged pickets against a landfill project, as the planned EcoTechnoPark complex was set to be built near residential areas. In Chelyabinsk, several public meetings were held against deforestation for construction and the development of a stone quarry.

In 2023, waste disposal again sparked collective resistance. In May 2023, the village of Poltavskaya in Krasnodar krai hosted a demonstration against the operation of a landfill. In the Leningrad region, anti-landfill rallies targeted sites such as the Dubrovka quarry. Urban protests against urban deforestation and uncontrolled development appeared in Novosibirsk, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. Thus, two distinct stands of environmental contention continued into 2022–2023: in resource-rich regions with strong grassroots organization, eco-mobilization was primarily driven by concerns over resource extraction and land use, while urbanized regions faced more mobilization against unwanted development as well as activism aimed at improving the overall quality of the environment.

Conclusion

Environmental protests vary drastically across Russian regions. Some—particularly Moscow, St. Petersburg, and industrial centers like Irkutsk and Sverdlovsk oblasts—exhibit persistent and high levels of environ-

mental mobilization. In contrast, ethnic republics such as Kalmykia and Ingushetia show minimal to no eco-mobilization. The key difference between these groups is political rather than structural: those regions with high levels of environmental activism are urbanized and resourceful and have a higher level of activism overall. Environmental protests are embedded in a broader socio-political context rather than reflecting the scale of ecological grievances. As with other strands of contention, eco-mobilization comes in cycles: in some regions, the accumulation of grassroots discontent over time leads to the formation of broader ecological networks and campaigns. In regions where the government managed to successfully disrupt such networks, protests remained isolated and short-lived.

Lastly, we detect two large subsets of environmental mobilization. The first stems from large-scale industrial and infrastructural projects with high negative environmental externalities, such as the construction of roads, WIPs, or extracting factories. Pollution and the destruction of natural habitats drive indignation that facilitates broad coalition formation. The second occurs in capital cities and other metropolitan areas in the face of threats to the urban commons, such as forests and recreational areas. These realities will not disappear and might even be exacerbated as the current regime continues to prioritize loyalty over accountability and responsiveness to popular discontent. Therefore, environmental activism will remain one of the most visible strands of contention in the near future.

About the Authors

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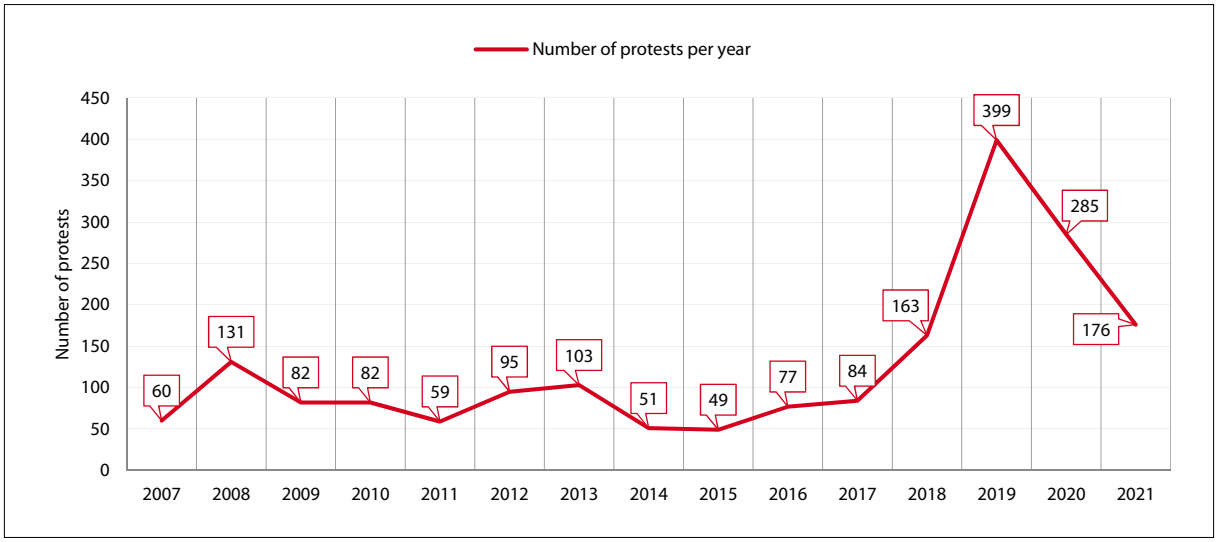
Appendix

Figure 1: The Overall Number of Eco-Protests in the Regions of Russia, 2007–2021

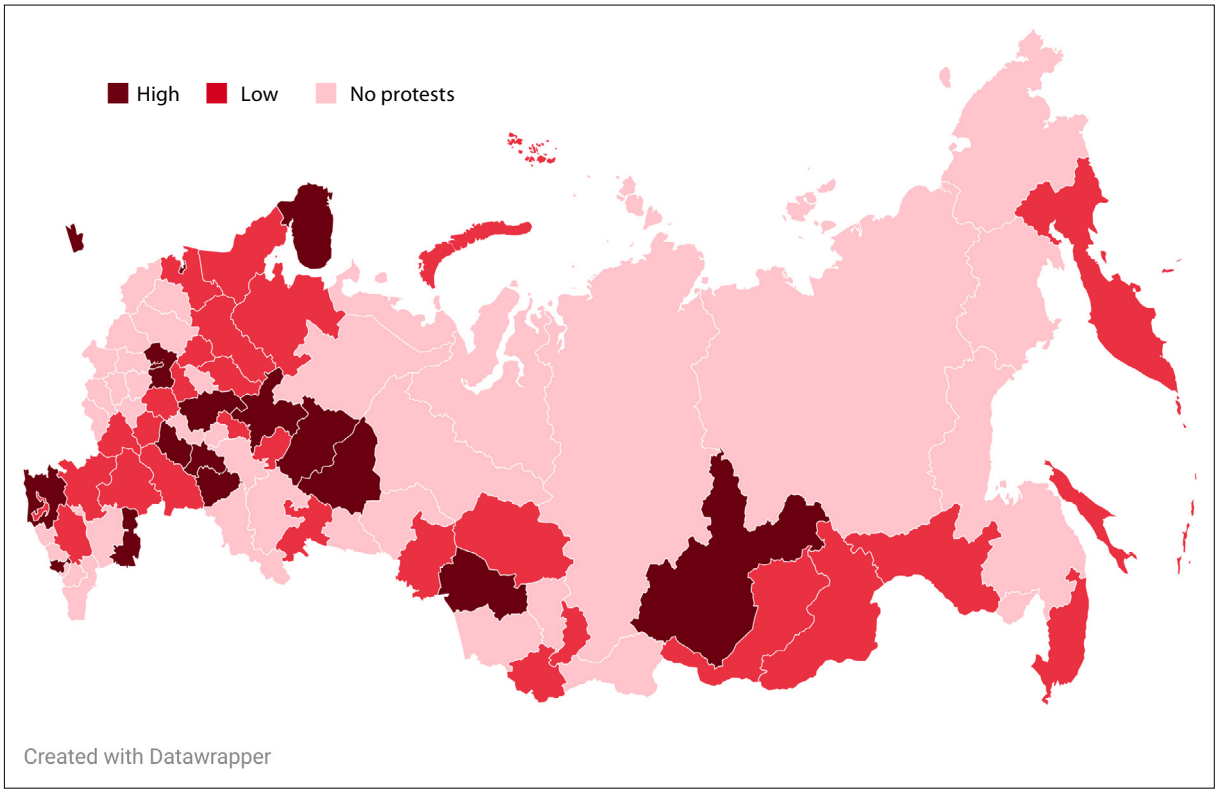


Appendix continued overleaf.

Table 1: Typology of Russian Regions Based on Intensity and Persistence of Environmental Mobilization

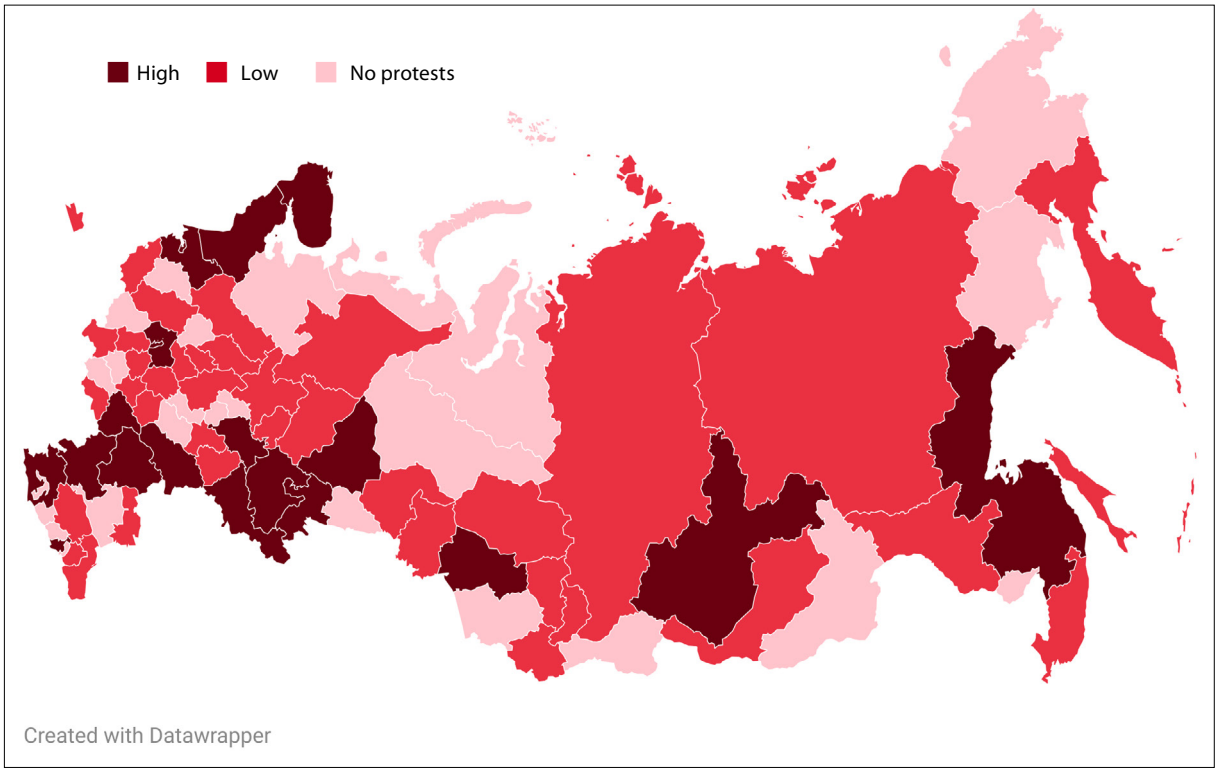
	Low intensity of environmental mobilization	High intensity of environmental mobilization
Low persistence of environmental mobilization	Regions with Unstable and Low Levels of Protests (Belgorod Region, Lipetsk Region, Altai Republic, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Kurgan Region, etc.) N = 15	Regions with Unstable and High Levels of Protests (Arkhangelsk Region, Komi Republic, Primorsky Krai, Udmurt Republic, Voronezh Region, etc.) N = 19
High persistence of environmental mobilization	Regions with a Stably Low Level of Protests (Amur Region, Kaluga Region, Sakha Republic, Tver Region, Republic of Buryatia, Khakassia, etc.) N = 22	Regions with a Stably High Level of Protests (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Irkutsk Region, Moscow Region, Novosibirsk Region, etc.) N = 16
Regions without environmental mobilization	Republic of Ingushetia, Republic of Kalmykia, Magadan Region, Smolensk Region, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, etc., N = 11	

Figure 2: Environmental Protest Levels in Russian Regions (2007–2011)



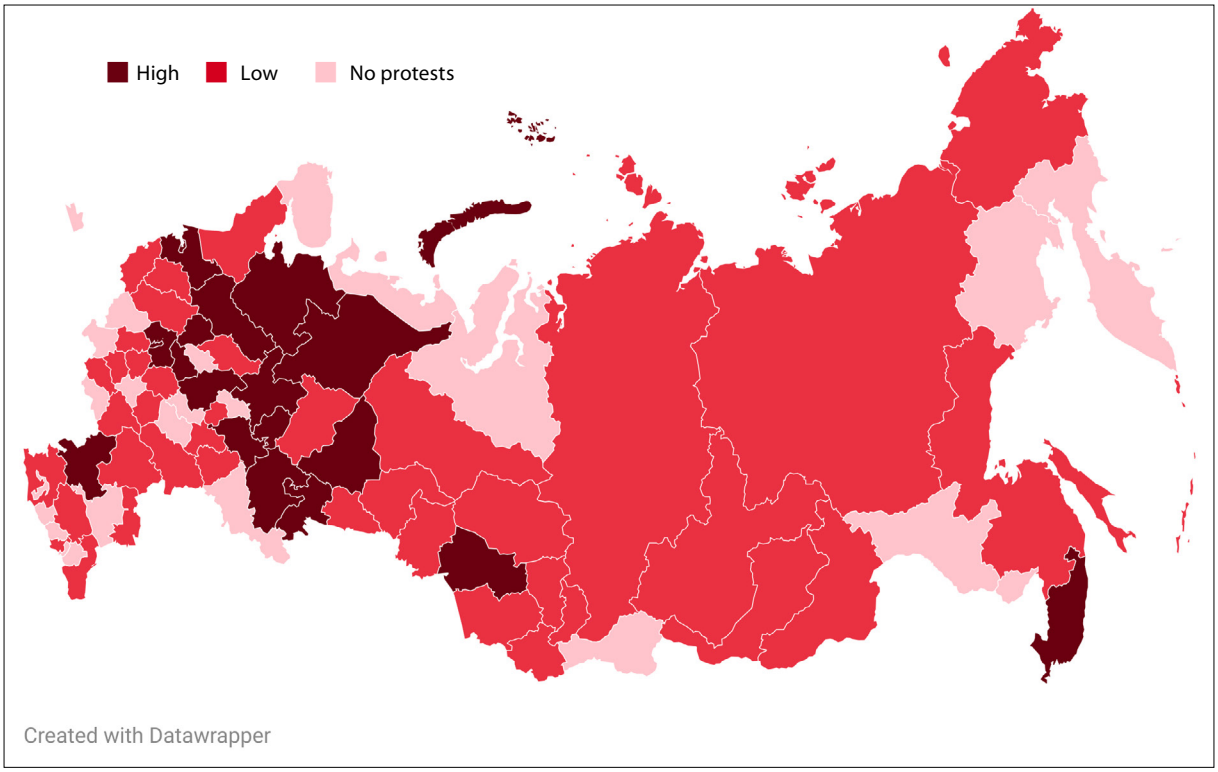
Source: authors' calculations

Figure 3: Environmental Protest Levels in Russian Regions (2012–2016)



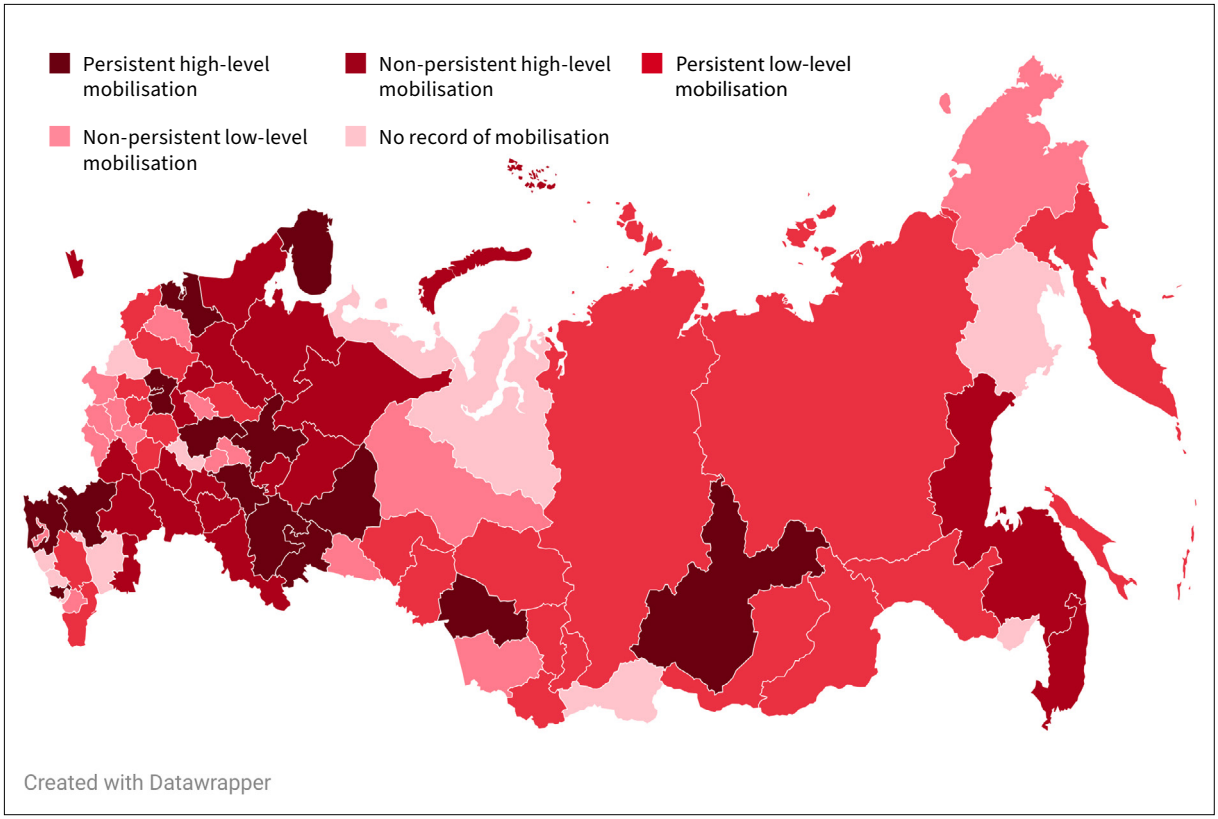
Source: authors' calculations

Figure 4: Environmental Protest Levels in Russian Regions (2017–2021)



Source: authors' calculations

Figure 5: Typology of Environmental Mobilisation in Russian Regions



Source: authors' calculations

ANALYSIS

From the Shies Campaign to Wartime Activism: The Legacy of Environmental Protests in the Arkhangelsk Region

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the Shies protest (2018–2021) in Arkhangelsk Oblast, which began as a fight against environmental exploitation by Moscow but came to influence local activism during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Using Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), it demonstrates how the organizational networks and strategies formed during the Shies movement enabled activists to continue protesting during wartime. However, this wave of anti-war resistance was eventually stifled by intense state repression, reflecting broader issues of civil society and dissent in Russia.

The late 2010s saw a wave of large-scale protests in Russia, with the 2018–2021 Shies protests marking the most significant environmental mobilization of the period. Thousands of people across Arkhangelsk Oblast and the neighboring Komi Republic engaged in pickets, rallies, termless protests (*bessrochki*), and even a protest camp to oppose the construction of a massive landfill for Moscow's waste (Gorbacheva 2023). After

two and a half years, the project was cancelled, marking a notable victory for the activists.

The Stop-Shies coalition, comprising 30+ (the number fluctuated over the various stages of the protest) groups from Arkhangelsk and Vologda oblasts and the Komi Republic, transitioned into electoral politics, supporting candidates in the 2021 State Duma elections (Gorbacheva and Slabinski 2023). One such candidate, Oleg Mikhailov from the Komi Republic, got elected despite widespread electoral malpractice. The coalition also planned to participate in regional elections, including the Regional Assembly in Arkhangelsk Oblast in 2023 (Interview with anonymous campaign worker, April 25, 2023). However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 disrupted these plans, curbing hopes of a more democratic Russia and hindering activism.

Nevertheless, some forms of activism continued, since environmental grievances remained, just like the networks and connections formed and experience gained during the Shies protests, which became vital resources for future efforts. In discussing the legacy of the Shies campaign, I follow Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) and use Edwards & Kane's (2014) conceptualization of resource types at social movement organizations' (SMOs) disposal: material, human, social-organizational, cultural, and moral. These resources not only support movement growth, but can also emerge as outcomes of activism. This paper explores how SMOs within the Stop-Shies coalition utilized the legacy of that earlier protest campaign to sustain environmental and broader activism efforts. I use various media sources, Telegram, and VKontakte—channels used by the SMOs to publicize their activities—to monitor the activity of protest groups.

Resources as Legacy

In this section, I discuss the resources at the disposal of the "Stop-Shies" coalition and show how they have been utilized during various collective action efforts by the residents of Arkhangelsk Oblast. The first group of resources that Edwards and Kane (2014) identify is material: financial and physical assets. During the Shies campaign, the protest was organized at the grassroots level, occupying forest grounds, central squares of cities, and activists' houses. The campaign activists did not and could not apply for any grants or funding, especially from foreign sources, because of the risk of being pronounced foreign agents. Instead, they supported their efforts through crowdfunding. For example, this practice is still used to pay the fines of anti-war protesters (Pomor'e—ne pomoika! 2023).

Human resources include labor, skills, expertise, and leadership. Skills and expertise did not disappear with the end of the Shies campaign and are shared online and offline. Yet several prominent leaders were either forced to leave Russia due to prosecution or received prison terms and fines as punishment variously for their involvement with the Shies protest, their affiliation with the regional Navalny headquarters, or their expression of anti-war positions (Chentemirov and Krivtsova 2023). Even in exile, these activists continue to defend environmental rights and protest against the Russian invasion, for example by creating and maintaining the Environmental Crisis Group, which monitors rights violations and pressure placed on environmental activists in Russia (Ekologo-Krizisnaia Gruppa n.d.).

The category of socio-organizational resources encompasses organizations, infrastructure, and social networks. While social ties are more challenging to quantify, the presence of organizations can be verified online. As of November 2024, three years after the Shies protests ended, 21 of the 38 SMOs that had been part of the "Stop-Shies" coalition remained active. Today, these organizations focus primarily on local and regional environmental concerns in the Arkhangelsk and Vologda regions and the Komi Republic. Many of them did, however, publicly denounce the full-scale invasion, although they were soon impelled to remove their statements from public view due to the risk of being charged with the "discreditation of the Russian army" (Zhilin 2022). Table 1 indicates the status of those SMOs that formed part of the "Stops-Shies" coalition at the time of writing (see Table 1 on p. 21).

The cultural resources generated by the Shies campaign are abundant; its symbols, identities, and ideas remain influential. Visual symbols and slogans from the protests continue to be used in campaigns opposing new waste facilities (Bogatyreva 2024). The phrase "XX ne pomoika" is still used in protest campaigns against various waste facilities, and Shies itself has become a frame: activists often describe a waste enterprise unwanted by locals as "a new Shies" (Gorbacheva 2023). The campaign's legacy is preserved in websites, films, books, albums, and a museum dedicated to Shies in Urdoma, the settlement where the protests began (Zhuravkov 2021).

Moral resources include solidarity, celebrity endorsements, and the legitimacy of the protest. Through the Shies campaign, local residents became aware of their rights, including environmental ones, and the opportunity to defend them. Solidarity persists today, with activists from various cities supporting local protests in Koriazhma and Niandoma (Savonchik 2023). The Shies campaign garnered support from notable celebrities and opinion leaders while also creating new politicians and influencers. These prominent figures now lend credibility and amplify attention to emerging issues, further reinforcing the campaign's enduring impact.

Ongoing Activism

In the previous section, I briefly mentioned examples of environmental and anti-war activism since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Now I provide more details on these protests and show how the Shies campaign continues to shape activism three years on.

Anti-War Activists

When Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a large number of environmental activists in Arkhangelsk Oblast opposed it. Of course, some supported the actions of the Russian state, as well as those who were afraid to publicly condemn the war. Still, Shies activists led the anti-war efforts in Arkhangelsk Oblast: as of early October 2022, 19 of the 41 individuals who had been fined for "discrediting the actions of the Russian armed forces" were Shies protest activists (Zhilin 2022). Nationwide, the largest numbers of environmental activists were prosecuted for opposing the war in Arkhangelsk Oblast (13 activists) and the Komi Republic (8 activists), surpassing even Moscow (7 activists) (Ekologo-Krizisnaia Gruppa 2022). Some of the politicians who stood against the Shies landfill were also not afraid to condemn the war publicly. When the full-scale invasion started, five deputies of Arkhangelsk Oblast signed the nationwide KPRF petition against the war. All five were kicked out of their party, and as one of them noticed, all of them had actively opposed the construction of the Shies landfill (*7x7* 2022).

The experience of confronting environmental injustices broadened activists' awareness of other forms of injustice (Zhilin 2022). Shies activists are not alone here: during the first five days following the full-scale invasion, more than 1,600 environmentalists signed an open letter condemning the war (Activatica 2022a). In Arkhangelsk Oblast, Shies defenders received the majority of the fines for anti-war activism: not only did they possess more resources to protest and thus were prosecuted to a larger degree, but they were also probably already on the radar of law-enforcement agents due to their involvement in the Shies protests.

Soon after the beginning of the war, repressive laws and regulations were severely increased, and it became unsafe to publicly challenge the Russian state. Shies activists' anti-war efforts continue in exile, but more protests are organized against environmental issues within the country.

Waste Protests 2022–Present

The campaigns against three proposed waste-processing complexes with landfills—in the Koriazhma, Niandoma, and the Kholmogorskii districts of Arkhangelsk Oblast—started immediately after the plans were announced in 2021 (Savonchik 2023). In Koriazhma, people hold daily pickets, including mass ones. In December 2023, around 500 people were protesting against the facility (Zhalalis 2024). In Niandoma, people started protesting in March 2022, and by May more than 4,000 people had signed a petition against the waste-processing complex—17% of all Niandoma residents (Activatica 2022b). Many of the tactics employed in this wave of new protests replicate those deployed in the Shies contention: residents gather in rallies and pickets, sign petitions, go to court with the help of Shies lawyers, create social media groups and use visual symbols of Shies protests, order independent assessments of the land by environmental experts, and attend public hearings. All of these actions are organized in a quick and smooth manner; the Shies contention has taught activists how to fight against their environmental grievances. While the result of these protests is as yet uncertain, they are clearly having some effect: the projected completion of the waste-processing complexes in Koriazhma, Niandoma, and Kholmogorskii districthas been delayed from 2024 to 2025–2027 (Dvina Segodnia 2024).

Conclusion

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought so much horror with it, and also radically diminished the scope of opportunity for protest in Russia. Nevertheless, activism continues, as grievances, including environmental ones, remain. I see part of the explanation for this in the legacies of pre-war activism and the resources it created, including material, human, socio-organizational, cultural, and moral ones. In 2023, 52% of all protest victories were environmental (Activatica 2023). Waste issues remain a relatively safe area for protest, gathering hundreds of demonstrators against landfills even in 2024 (Bogatyreva 2024). Other issues, like anti-war protests, are more likely to result in fines and prison terms. Of course, the activists cannot stop the war; there are too few of them and their opportunities are limited. However, by preserving the legacies of past activism and maintaining the resources accrued, protesters help keep future campaigns possible.

About the Author
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Appendix

Table 1: Status of "Stop-Shies" Coalition Members, November 2024

Name	Coalition member 2024	Status	Link
Aktivist Kotlasa	+	Active	https://vk.com/club163444185
ArkhFRONT	+	-	-
Bessrochka Arkhangel'sk	-	Active	https://vk.com/bp_arh
Bessrochka Vel'sk	+	Active	https://vk.com/public183524312
Bessrochka Vologda	+	Active	https://vk.com/bp_vol
Bessrochka Irta	+	Inactive since May 8, 2021	https://vk.com/public184608798
Bessrochka Koriazhma	+	Inactive since November 28, 2023	https://vk.com/club183204958
Bessrochka Kotlas	+	Active	https://vk.com/bp_ktl
Bessrochka Lena	+	Inactive since July 2, 2022	https://vk.com/ekolena
Bessrochka Severodvinsk	+	Inactive since April 27, 2024	https://vk.com/bp_sev
Bessrochka Syktyvkar	+	Active	https://vk.com/public183170481
Bessrochka Usinsk	+	-	https://vk.com/ecobessrochka_usinsk
Bessrochka Ezhva	-	Active	https://vk.com/bp_ezhva
Bessrochka Iarensk	-	-	-
Borovikov Andrei, activist, representative of Navalny regional office[1]	-	Inactive since April 29, 2021	https://vk.com/a_borovikov
Vytegra-Ekologiia	+	Active	https://vk.com/vytegra_sad
Grazhdanskoe Obshchestvo Respubliki Komi	+	Active	https://vk.com/gokomi
Grazhdanskoe ob''edinenie Vologdanepomoika	-	-	https://vk.com/club184921071
Initsiativnaia gruppa Viled'	+	Inactive since April 22, 2024	https://vk.com/pnp_vld
Initsiativnaia gruppa Koriazhma (Zhiteli Koriazhmy Za Chistyi Sever)	+	Active	https://vk.com/stopsvalkakor
Initsiativnaia gruppa Krasnoborsk	+	-	-
Initsiativnaia gruppa Sol'vychegodsk	-	-	https://vk.com/club182739382
Initsiativnaia gruppa Ukhta-Sosnogorsk	+	Active	https://vk.com/bp_uhta_sosn
Komitet zashchity Vychegdy	+	Active	https://vk.com/vychegdaoutpost
Komitet zashchity Severnoi Dviny	+	Active	https://vk.com/spacemdvinu
Komitet spaseniia Pechory	+	Active	https://vk.com/savepechora
Kommuna Shies	-	Inactive since February 2021	-
Madmas za chistuiu ekologiiu	+	Active	https://vk.com/club176083864
Moi Severodvinsk	+	Active	https://vk.com/myseverodvinsk
Pomor'e ne pomoika	+	Inactive since April 22, 2024	https://vk.com/pnp_29
Pomor'e ne pomoika "Kargopol'"	+	Inactive since April 22, 2024	https://vk.com/pnp_kgp
Pomor'e ne pomoika "Niandoma"	+	Active	https://vk.com/pnpnnd
Regional'noe ekologicheskoe dvizhenie "42"[2]	-	Inactive since January 10.2023	https://vk.com/antresoul29
Chistaia Urdoma	+	Active	https://vk.com/chistur29
Chistoe Privodino	+	Inactive since April 20, 2024	https://vk.com/chistoeprivodino

[1] *In prison April 29, 2021–May 23, 2023 for sharing Rammstein music video.*

[2] *Foreign agents since December 9, 2022.*

ANALYSIS

For Fayil Alsynov: Understanding Protest Dynamics in Rural Bashkortostan

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Abstract

A year after a series of protests in the Bashkir town of Baymak in defense of eco-activist Fayil Alsynov, this article examines the drivers of protest mobilization and identifies the key characteristics of the Baymak protests. Drawing on a set of interviews with participants, the study highlights the interplay of environmental, social, and cultural factors that shaped these events. Ultimately, the findings underscore how regional identity, rural context, and an authoritarian environment influence the dynamics of ethnic protests in contemporary Russia.

What Happened in Baymak?

In January 2024, three major protests occurred in Bashkortostan in support of the popular eco-activist Fayil Alsynov, who was convicted of "inciting interethnic hatred" during a public speech.

On January 15, in the town of Baymak (population: 17,000), up to 5,000 people gathered outside the courthouse where Alsynov's sentencing was expected. However, the hearing was postponed to January 17. The next day, authorities arrested Bashkir activists, identified as the protest organizers, and added Alsynov to the federal list of "extremists and terrorists." Concurrently, reports emerged of internet disruptions across the region, and the main activist Telegram channel, "Kushtau-Bairam," was blocked.

Despite these measures, on January 17, even larger crowds gathered, with estimates reaching up to 10,000 people (Meduza 2024). After Alsynov was sentenced to four years in prison, a verdict deemed excessively harsh by protesters, some demonstrators expressed their anger by throwing snow and firewood at security forces. In response, authorities deployed tear gas and stun grenades, ultimately dispersing the crowd.

That same day, Altynai Valitov, a popular Bashkir rapper, released an emotional video calling for a peaceful demonstration at the Salavat Yulaev monument in Ufa to protest governmental abuses. This spontaneous protest drew between 500 and 2,000 participants, depending on reports, but it was also violently suppressed.

The Baymak protests have been described as possibly the "largest protest" in Russia since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Verstka 2024). Why, amid intensified crackdowns on dissent, did so many people come out in support of Alsynov? What meanings did participants attribute to their actions? Did the ethnic context of Bashkortostan play a role? Were these protests political, as some experts suggest?

This paper seeks to answer these questions based on empirical data collected in Bashkortostan from April to September 2024.

Methodology and Data

The dataset includes 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants of the protests, each lasting between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours. The respondents were residents of villages and towns from various districts of Bashkortostan. Interviews were conducted offline in either Bashkir or Russian, depending on the respondent's language preference.

The sample represents different age groups ranging from 20 to 64: eight younger participants under 28, and eight older participants 42–64 years old. Notably, nine respondents do not identify themselves as activists, and 8 had no prior experience participating in protest actions.

Two Protests in One

The analysis suggests that the participants of the Baymak protests can be understood as belonging to two primary categories. The first group consists of ecological and national activists, including some of Alsynov's allies from the organization "Bashkort," which was declared extremist in 2020. These individuals are dedicated to defending the environment and preserving Bashkir national culture. The second group comprises rural residents who were not activists but were drawn to the protests out of respect for Alsynov, whom they viewed as a defender of Bashkir lands and culture, or even a national hero. The participation of these villagers, many of whom had no prior protest experience, may help explain the unusually large scale of the protests.

All three protest actions were triggered by the same event—the unjust conviction of ecological activist Fayil Alsynov—and occurred within the space of a few days, with the result that experts and journalists often describe

them as a single protest. However, it may be helpful to view them as distinct in nature. The protest action in Ufa, the smallest in scale of the three, is perhaps the only one that can unequivocally be described as a political protest. It emerged in response to the violent dispersal of the gathering in Baymak on January 17 and was driven primarily by activists. Although it arose spontaneously—because the most active organizers had already been arrested—activists nevertheless gathered in the town square, responding to calls to "take to the streets and fight for your rights" and "record the actions of the police." They arrived at the monument holding signs that read "кара халык" (*kara khalyk*), a phrase translated variously as "dark-skinned" or "rabble," and interpreted by the court as a slur against people from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Alsynov was convicted specifically for using this phrase in a public speech. Over time, "кара халык" became a symbol of protest against the violation of civil rights and freedoms ("We are the 'black people' being humiliated"). At this stage, support for Alsynov took on a broader political character, aimed at defending citizens' rights against government abuse.

The Baymak protests on January 15 and 17, although intended to show solidarity with a man accused of extremism, were hardly anti-government or political in nature. Judging by the accounts of rural residents who came to the courthouse to support Alsynov—particularly those taking to the streets for the first time—the gathering at the court was perceived a communal assembly similar to village meetings where community members convene with their leader to discuss pressing matters, voice complaints, and propose solutions.

This explains why many Baymak protest participants had high hopes that the head of the republic, Radiy Khabirov, would show up in person, and why they were so shocked when, instead of meeting with them, he sent in troops to break up the crowd: "Why didn't the authorities come to listen to the people? There was an expectation—and rumors—that the head of the republic would show up" (#2, Female, 22 years old, first-time participant).

It is noteworthy that the protests in Baymak did not feature any signs or slogans, apart from a few Bashkir flags on January 17. The activists' chants focused entirely on supporting Alsynov—calling out "Fayil," "Freedom for Alsynov," and "Shame" when the verdict was announced. Attempts by a few individuals to chant "Down with Khabirov" received no support from the crowd.

"A Common Cause but Different Reasons": Drivers of Protest Mobilization

While all participants in the Baymak protests came out to show solidarity with and support for Fayil Alsynov, they were motivated by a range of personal reasons. As one respondent put it: "We had a common cause, but everyone had different reasons. I even think if you picked a random participant from these events and made us talk, I'm not sure we'd find common ground" (#4, female, 24, activist).

Despite this variety of motivations, one overarching theme emerged from all interviews: environmental concerns, including anxiety over environmental destruction and threats to the land. Every respondent voiced alarm about the irresponsible behavior of gold miners, ongoing deforestation, increasing illness rates in the Trans-Ural region, and the importance of preserving the land for future generations. These environmental issues are especially urgent for rural dwellers, whose livelihoods depend directly on the land and local ecosystems. As a result, damage to the land and nature is felt keenly and personally. Alsynov's popularity among ordinary village residents stemmed from his role as a defender of this land, which is why even those who had never participated in protests before came out to support him.

Beyond environmental concerns, a profound sense of injustice—which had accumulated over years of rural hardships such as low wages, job scarcity, and poor working conditions—also drove people into the streets. In fact, the issue of injustice arose in interviews just as frequently as environmental anxieties. For many interviewees, Alsynov's conviction was the final straw in a series of accumulating grievances and broader social inequities.

Ethnicity also ran through these narratives. Nearly all respondents framed their motivations around Bashkir history, traditions, and cultural identity. Some drew parallels between their participation in the protests and the Bashkir uprisings of the seventeenth century, while others compared Fayil Alsynov to the Bashkir national hero Salavat Yulaev. This does not imply that the protest was anti-Russian or aimed at seeking independence from Russia; on the contrary, it was far from ethnically exclusive, as Russians and Tatars participated alongside Bashkirs: "There were others too… Tatars also came and said, 'We brought 70–100 pastries and fed everyone'" (#5, male, 24, activist).

"Didn't It Work with Kushtau? Why Wouldn't It Work Now?"

Another major factor behind the unusually large turnout at the protests in support of Alsynov was that they occurred in the wake of the powerful and successful 2020 campaign to protect the sacred Kushtau Mountain in Bashkortostan. That earlier campaign led President Putin to personally halt an industrial development project that had threatened the mountain's destruction.

The triumph of the Kushtau protests played a key role in galvanizing people around Alsynov. References

to Kushtau appear in nearly every interview we conducted—not just among activists, but also among ordinary participants. Most of them said they joined the protests hoping that the federal government would once again respond to a public outcry, just as it had in 2020: "And after Kushtau, people really expected Putin to get involved in this issue. Yes, Putin would step in, take action, and resolve everything" (#13, male, 46 years old, activist).

Hope in the supreme ruler reflects a traditional peasant practice of reverence known as "naive monarchism" (Mamonova 2016). Such a practice contrasts sharply with the democratic model of public–government interaction, where mass protests serve as institutional mechanisms for channeling dissatisfaction. Within the framework of "naive monarchism," the primary goal of the gathering was to alert the ruler to a problem and request help, rather than to make demands, especially not of a political nature.

The experience of protesting to save Kushtau had sparked a sense that dialogue with the authorities was possible. However, that notion was ultimately shattered by the authorities' harsh response.

"We Gathered Not Against Khabirov, but for Alsynov"

One observation stood out when analyzing the protest narratives: respondents answered the question "Why did you join the protests?" in terms of support rather than opposition. As one participant explained: "We didn't gather against Khabirov, we gathered for Alsynov. People weren't saying, 'Let's hold a rally against the head of the republic, call for his resignation'—that's not why they gathered" (#7, female, 27, first protest).

This framing applied not only to the authorities, but also to the broader reasons participants gave for their involvement. It appeared in the narratives of first-time protesters and self-identified activists alike. Repeatedly, they described their presence as "for Alsynov," "for solidarity," "for the land," or "for justice," with the exact meaning of "justice" varying from person to person.

In essence, the protests were:

- Not against the authorities (regional or federal), but for Alsynov and his ideas.
- Not against the extractive industry per se, but for protecting the land and Bashkortostan's environment.
- Not against Russia, but for respect toward Bashkir national values.

This collective action, driven by shared values rather than direct opposition to an "enemy," seems to reflect a distinctive feature of Bashkir protests, at least in these initial events in Baymak. We believe that such interpretations, which participants invest in their protest actions, arise not only from fear of being labeled "political" (and the harsh repressions that label can entail), but also from the ways in which protest itself is perceived in an authoritarian context. Equally important is the influence of local rural culture, which shapes how people relate to public action as a form of engagement with the authorities.

A desire to signal "we are not against the government but rather want the government to pay attention to our problems" was articulated clearly by one activist, who was arrested for his participation in the January protests:

> Ordinary people are saying: "We're for ecology, we want the right to live on our land, breathe clean air, drink clean water." That's why they come out with these demands. But they're told: "You came out to disrupt the foundations of our state. To put it simply, you don't wish happiness or prosperity for our state or our republic." And then physical persecution, criminal charges, and so on begin. (#11, male, 43, activist).

Interestingly, when respondents spoke about "the authorities," they overwhelmingly meant the regional leadership. The federal government was rarely mentioned unless the interviewer asked directly. For instance, one interviewee said he supported the protests to "show the very top, the supreme leadership, that things in Bashkortostan are not as rosy as some political figures claim" (#1, male, 21).

Conclusion

Although our study of the January protests in Bashkortostan is based on a small sample, it reveals important insights into the drivers and peculiarities of protest mobilization in ethnic regions with a predominantly rural population under an authoritarian regime. First, these protests were framed primarily as an act of solidarity—"for Alsynov," "for the land," "for justice"—rather than as a direct challenge to the authorities. The participants' motivations were strongly rooted in local cultural and environmental concerns, shaped by their reliance on the land and by recent successful mobilizations (such as the defense of Kushtau Mountain).

Second, the protests were influenced by a "naive monarchism," wherein participants expected higher authorities would intervene once they were made aware of grassroots grievances. The federal government largely remained outside their immediate focus, reflecting the limited channels for genuine political engagement in an authoritarian context.

Finally, issues of ethnic identity permeated the protest narratives, yet without translating into anti-Russian sentiment or demands for secession.

These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that accounts for the interplay of authoritarian governance, ethnic identity, and rural culture in understanding protest dynamics in similar regions.

About the Authors

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The liberation from the dictatorships in 1989 and the related opening of the archives, in particular the partial opening of the secret service archives, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has made invisibilities visible within research in a variety of avenues. But what exactly makes the perspectives of the viewers change, how are facts reframed and visions reshaped and what are the preconditions for these changes? Who so far were the producers of invisibilities? What made those invisibilities perceptible for some and invisible for others? What are the active practices of making something or someone invisible? When are invisibilities products of violence, and when are they strategies of power(lessness) or resistance? What role do the arts and humanities play in the undoing and analysis of invisibility?

We welcome submissions from scholars of humanities and social sciences to present their ideas on invisibilities in Eastern Europe by submitting an abstract of up to 600 words and two-page CV to isos@slav.uzh.ch by July 31, 2025.

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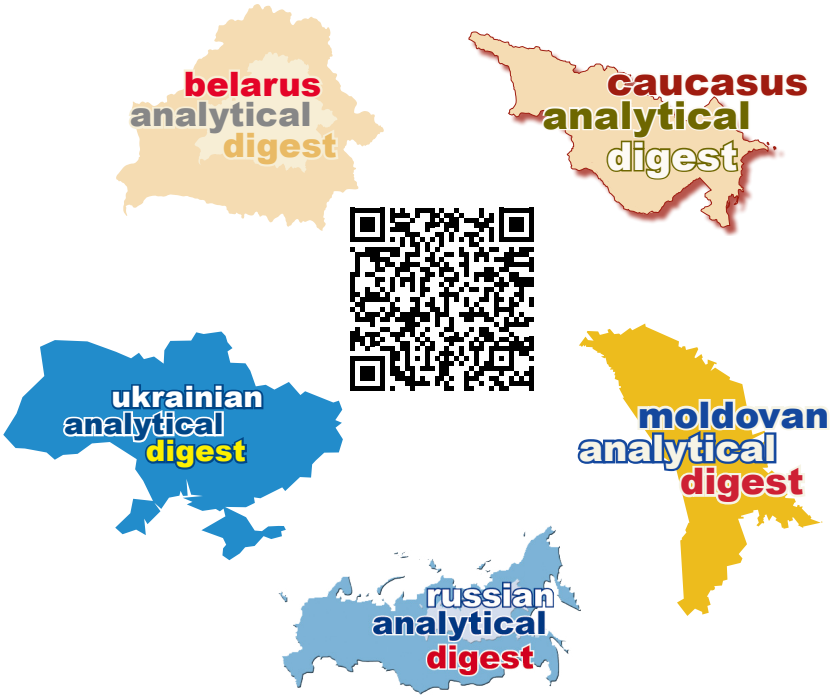

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