



TIKTOK and TELEGRAM

as platforms for political mobilization in Belarus and Russia

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abstract

Over the past decade, social networking platforms have become an important communication channel for protesters in autocratic countries. In August 2020 and January 2021, the messaging application Telegram and social media platform TikTok became platforms for protest mobilization and coordination in Belarus and Russia respectively. This article applies previous research within social movements and democratization studies about the use of Facebook and Twitter to instigate and galvanize protests in autocratic countries in order to explore how protest mobilization on newly politicized platforms such as Telegram and TikTok is manifested. For this purpose, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 1,128 protest-related publications (posts) on Telegram's channel NextaLive and 100 videos on TikTok. The conclusion provides an extended framework for analyzing political mobilization online and argues that social networking platforms can themselves be considered spaces that are commensurate with those of offline protest and not merely tools to stimulate democratic participation.

KEYWORDS: protests, mobilization, Belarus, Russia, Telegram, TikTok.

Protest mobilization through the use of social networking platforms has been extensively studied in several examples of revolutions and civil uprisings, such as in Tunisia, Egypt, Ukraine, Turkey and Russia.¹ Facebook and Twitter emerged as coordination platforms during the Arab Spring and since then have been the most-used platforms for the dissemination of information, coordination, to search for required help or volunteers, the delegation of tasks and instructions for self-defense in authoritarian countries.²

In 2020 and 2021, Telegram and TikTok emerged as new online mobilizing platforms in several authoritarian countries. In August 2020, Belarus became the first country where Telegram changed from being a regular messenger application to a mobilization platform for the protests,³ the largest in the country's history, that followed a presidential election with a debated result and violence against peaceful protesters.⁴ In Russia, the protest wave that emerged after the arrest of Alexej Navalny in the second half of January 2021 expanded with TikTok in addition to previously popular platforms, Facebook and Twitter.⁵ TikTok is a platform known for attracting a younger audience for the purpose of entertainment,⁶ but now it was hosting a large amount of political content related to the protests. Both the scale



Protesters against the Putin-regime and pro-Navalny use the #FreeNavalny-banderoll.

of the protests and the choice to use these new digital platforms highlight the need for increased knowledge about the specific characteristics of political mobilization on these platforms. For example, are the ways in which these platforms are activated for mobilization different from the methods found in earlier research studying Facebook and Twitter? That is to say, what role does a particular social networking platform play in how political mobilization is articulated online?

IN THIS ARTICLE, our aim is to understand and explore how mobilization is manifested through the messenger application Telegram and the entertainment platform TikTok, in order to analyze how different social networking platforms impact upon political mobilization. The manifestation of protest mobilization in this study is seen broadly as the dissemination of messages on the social networking platforms with the intention of directly or indirectly mobilizing participants, coordinating or popularizing a protest.⁷ As previous research on political mobilization on digital platforms has mainly focused on Facebook and Twitter and research on the incorporation of Telegram and TikTok is still limited, we also aim to contrast the results of our empirical analysis of political mobilization on Telegram and TikTok with this earlier research in order to further explore the specific meanings of using different platforms. The following research questions have guided us:

1. What are the specific characteristics of protest mobilization on Telegram and TikTok?
2. Is it possible to discern variations in the characteristics of political mobilization related to these two social networking platforms, and if so, how do they manifest?

OUR INTEREST IN the relationship between political mobilization and digital platforms is based on an understanding of technology as a co-producer of political agency,⁸ not solely as a tool.⁹ Hence, we regard social networking platforms as possessing agency which, through interaction with participants in social movements and autocratic regimes, creates opportunities for new effects, such as passive offline participation, making movements popular, reaching out to different groups, or changing the essence of social movements in general.¹⁰ The emergence

of such effects in a network of multiple human and non-human actors would be impossible without the digitalization of political mobilization, or as Bodrunova puts it, “[...] platforms – become actors, and on-platform activities and communities gain agency, even if limited”.¹¹ For example, the use of TikTok in Russia as a political mobilization platform in January 2021 highlights how the offline and online domains of social or political movements are inseparable from technology; that is, technology is becoming a part of these movements. Hence, instead of viewing social media as a tool for political mobilization for a protest, we believe that the

digital platforms should be addressed as intermediaries and mediators that host political protests, and represent an interesting case for research in themselves.

THE ARTICLE HAS the following outline. The next section discusses previous research addressing political mobilization through social networking platforms. The scope of this literature review is not restricted by a specific field of research but represents a wide range of literature in order to include different approaches to and perspectives on the phenomena under study. The literature review is also organized in such a way that it provides an analytical framework for our analysis of Telegram and TikTok. In the third section, we describe the methodology and material. The fourth part presents the results of the analysis and reflects upon differences in protest mobilization between Telegram and TikTok, including a discussion of new aspects of political mobilization that were identified in the analysis. Finally, we conclude the article with a discussion in which we contrast our empirical results with earlier research on political mobilization on other digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Protest organization via social networking platforms

Reflecting upon previous research within social movements and political mobilization studies, we have identified four central themes that describe political mobilization online: *encouragement to join a protest*, *coordination of protests*, *dissemination of information*, and *leadership*. These themes also later serve as a point of departure for categorizing and interpreting our empirical material. In the following, we flesh out these themes by presenting central aspects of earlier research. In our overview, we focus on research that addresses how political mobilization is manifested through social media.

Considering our first theme, *encouragement to join a protest*, social movement scholars have looked at what makes an uprising or protest successful and the factors that influence a significant protest turnout. In a round of 16 interviews and 437 web-surveys, Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar tracked the development of a protest cycle through social media in Tunisia. They concluded that the collective identity created via social media enabled organizers to break “the national media blackout

in Tunisia”.¹² Because social media is the “last resort” for many alternative thinkers who do not use state-controlled media for information consumption, expressing oneself online is about risks and costs. Therefore, in authoritarian countries, activists prefer to organize large-scale protests quickly to avoid the risk of being just a small group that will be quickly dispersed by the ruling elites.¹³ For example, Kuran suggests the concept of a “revolutionary threshold”, which is the value/number of people perceived by hesitant observers as sufficient for them to join a collective action.¹⁴ In line with this, Tufekci emphasizes the very first day of protest as a key moment, when a risk assessment performed by each individual results in the collective decision to join a movement. The greater the number of protesters during the first day, the bigger the chances of a successful uprising.¹⁵

Furthermore, previous research has shown that, in autocracies, social media represents an opportunity for alternative, oppositional opinions to be heard.¹⁶ Social media enables people to identify others with similar political opinions via hashtags, friends’ suggestions, searches, and location tags. Connectivity online helps to develop a collective protest identity. Jost et al. label it this a group ideology based on common values and clearly articulated demands.¹⁷ Breuer and Groshek also connect citizens’ perceptions of their own power to affect political protest with the likelihood of taking part in collective action.¹⁸ These authors conclude that the feeling of ownership that emerges through minor political and social engagement online leads to increased incentives to join a protest offline. At the same time, social media has become a platform for mobilization in autocratic states, but only when society trusts the network, and participants in protests consider that the risk of being punished for their online activities is low.¹⁹

ADDRESSING OUR SECOND theme, *the coordination of protest*, previous research suggests that Facebook and Twitter appear to be the most popular platforms for organizing and maintaining social movements.²⁰ They were incorporated into the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Ukrainian revolutions to motivate people to join in, for coordination, and to provide live updates from the protest locations.²¹ Addressing an ongoing debate within social movements and democratization studies about whether social media is either a “liberation technology” for democrats in autocratic states²² or a “net delusion” threatening activists’ safety and assisting autocrats,²³ Tufekci and Wilson’s four-day field survey involving 1,050 participants at the protests on Tahrir Square demonstrated that Facebook functioned as a platform for coordination and information exchange for those who would have previously avoided speaking up in an authoritarian environment.²⁴ A free space for expressing oneself and sharing live updates, pictures, and videos allowed people to make new connec-

tions, thus making the decision to join the offline protest easier.²⁵

In relation to *dissemination of information*, which we formulated as a third theme, previous research has emphasized that the dissemination of photos, videos, and texts enables more frequent live updates from street protests, coordinates logistics, and identifies victims (whom to help and where to find medical assistance, or instructions on counteracting tear gas, etc.).²⁶ Protestors in autocratic countries often find their safe place online, where they can discuss protest locations, share information about security measures and police movements, and develop slogans.²⁷ The dissemination of information also implies the delegation of centralized requests to share live updates on online networks in order to increase the proportion of the population that receives information about a collective action.²⁸ Importantly, due to the platforms’ affordances that allow for sharing, the popularizing of posts through hashtags, group invites, and algorithms favoring popular posts, protest-related messages are able to reach a broad audience. Scholars have argued that the structures and affordances of these social networking platforms define activists’ choices about which to use, based on a range of criteria such as the popularity of the platform in a country, or the platform’s security.²⁹

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WHEN SHAPING a group identity, formulating protest messages implies the emergence of one or several leaders. Considering this, our last theme regards *leadership*. Clarke and Kocak reflect upon the role of leaders in mobilizing protests in Egypt and highlight that “their role was to set the protest in motion, not to guide it towards a particular end or outcome”.³⁰ Often with encouragement from the leaders, a protest later develops organically, rather than following the leaders’ original plan.

While these aspects of protest mobilization impact upon the conceptualization of social networking platforms during collective action, one of the central debates relates to the effects of social media usage during protests. Some scholars believe that “slacktivism”, as in clicking and discussing online without actually participating in protest events, is unlikely to lead to regime change. Sceptics like Morozov argue that the power of social networking platforms to trigger protest in autocratic countries is debatable³¹ and that they are mostly used for “apolitical purposes”.³² To give an example, Belarusian and Ukrainian activists have highlighted the informational overload and slacktivism that in their view reduce physical turnout at events.³³ However, Bennett and Segerberg argue that social movements “living” online may create a basis for collective action and should not necessarily be stigmatized as a failure.³⁴ Thus, “connective action” instead of “collective action” can be viewed as a new form of communication and discussion within new, online, public spaces.³⁵ Bennett and Segerberg argue that, when compared to conventional forms of collective action, social movements mediated digitally

share some common features. First of all, there is a tendency to rapidly disperse across a broad digital territory due to rapid and short political messages distributed on social networking platforms. Secondly, digitally mediated networks enable a high degree of personalization of political messages, which improves the effective spreading of the network's ideas. The authors give an example of such personalization, the slogan "we are 99 per cent", and write: "These personal action frames are inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed".³⁶ Another form of personalization occurs via the affordances of the digital platforms through which action is mediated, such as sharing personal stories, photos, and reflections on personal pages. Thus, connective action networks represent a form of action that is largely mediated by technology and more personalized than traditional forms, making fewer demands on its members to adhere to a common collective identity, and having the ability to respond to opportunities and threats. Connective action enables a dispersed and leaderless functioning, without set collective action frames.³⁷

Barbera emphasizes that, despite the slacktivism effects of social networking platforms, such activism enables "larger numbers of online citizens to be exposed to news and information about the protest, even (or especially) in the absence of mass media coverage".³⁸ Bennett and Segerberg also point out the inapplicability of traditional collective action models for modern movements organized with the help of digital technology.³⁹

RESEARCHERS OF social movements in autocracies have looked into methods of protest mobilization,⁴⁰ the incentives of participants to join social movements,⁴¹ how social media serve the goals of popularizing movements and disseminating important information,⁴² and the conversion of online political communication into offline protest.⁴³

While Facebook and Twitter have been studied quite extensively in relation to the examples of the Arab Spring or the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, few studies have touched upon protest mobilization via TikTok or Telegram. However, in the summer of 2020 in Belarus, and in January 2021 in Russia, these two social networking platforms had a significant impact on antigovernmental protests.⁴⁴

Telegram opened up new opportunities for protest organizers and protest participants during the post electoral protests in Belarus in summer 2020. First, the messenger's popularity expanded geographical coverage and outreach of protest demands and information on demonstrations.⁴⁵ Secondly, perceived as the most secure platform at the time, Telegram provided user anonymity, the feature of the platform that has been appreciated by protesters in many autocracies.⁴⁶ Thirdly, during the most active days of the protests when the authorities shut down the Internet across the country for the three days, Telegram was one of the platforms

that was accessible for Internet users.⁴⁷ Finally, the platform's interface, that allows for both an aggregation of news and communication through private chats and groups on one feed, is often seen as a distinct feature of Telegram as a platform for convenient and secure communication in autocracies.⁴⁸

TIKTOK IS ONE OF THE fastest growing platforms in the world, including in authoritarian countries. Scholars have argued that, due to its visually appealing platform affordances, which enable the promotion of videos regardless of an account's popularity, TikTok sparked bottom-up political discussion during the BLM movement.⁴⁹ Particular affordances of TikTok were pointed out as factors that changed protest practices.⁵⁰ Exploring

TikTok's role in the Russian protests during the winter of 2021, researchers have argued that the platform was not only politicized as a result of the protest but the perception of the platform as being only a service for youth and entertainment was also challenged.⁵¹ In recent years, TikTok has become an "integral part" of many social movements and protests across the globe, and the scholarly contributions to understanding this platform as an ally of collective action appear more extensive than in the case of Telegram.⁵² While in 2020 in Belarus TikTok was just gaining its popularity, by the beginning of 2021 in neighboring Russia, the TikTok user base grew up to 25 million users, outrunning Facebook and Twitter.⁵³ Brodovskaya et al. (2021) refer to TikTok in the Russian context as a "powerful tool for organizing and coordinating protests".⁵⁴

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, our ambition while examining the literature was to find analytical categories that could support the categorization of protest mobilization. At the end of the next section, we explain how we have used these categorizations in our analysis of the empirical material.

Telegram and TikTok as mobilization platforms for protests

This article examines cases of political mobilization using Telegram and TikTok during protest episodes where these apps emerged as central mobilization platforms – in Belarus during August 2020 and in Russia during January 2021. As the previous research already addressed, precisely Telegram became a central platform for protest coordination in Belarus while the Russian protest movement was primarily maintained by TikTok. Although we do not aim for the comparison of protest episodes between two countries, rather at exploring how recently apolitical platforms turn into the arenas for protest mobilization in autocratic settings. The article makes use of background information about the two countries that is relevant to the analysis. Both Belarus and Russia are autocratic neighboring states with longstanding rulers, a record of violations of human rights and freedom of speech, and manipulation of elections. In 2020 and

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An example of a post August 2020 on Nexta Live, showing protesters in the city of Homel reading aloud their demands to the authorities. This post was viewed over half a million times the week after it was posted. Screenshot from Nexta Live/Telegram.

2021, both countries have quite high Internet penetration rates: 80.3% of the population in Russia⁵⁵ and 82.8% in Belarus⁵⁶ have access to the Internet. In addition, both Belarusians (41.3%) and Russians (48%) use the Internet regularly for communication on social media platforms: VKontakte, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, and TikTok.⁵⁷

BY WAY OF BACKGROUND, large-scale electoral protest occurred in Belarus in 2006 and 2010 when opposition leaders employed offline mobilization through their organizations and parties. However, in 2017, when Belarusians protested against the tax on unemployment that obliges people working fewer than 183 days per year to pay \$250,⁵⁸ and when they took to the streets in 2019 to protest against the integration agreement between Russia and Belarus,⁵⁹ social media played a more important role. Negotiations on integration with Russia in 2019, the failing policy of the authorities with regard to Covid-19, and police violence during the first three post-election days in August 2020 triggered hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to demand new elections and Lukashenko's resignation.⁶⁰ The MOBILIZE project, based on a sample of 12,092 respondents from Belarus, shows that 90% of protestors learned about the protests through social networking platforms.⁶¹ Telegram, that served as a central mobilization platform for the protestors, offered anti-censorship filters for Belarus during the protests and was the only social networking platform that functioned decently for information sharing and news while the country was subjected to a total Internet black-out. This resulted in the number of Telegram users growing rapidly over just a few days and opened up access to the reporting of independent journalists, as state-controlled Telegram channels emerged only after the biggest manifestations in August 2020.

In Russia, protests took place following the arrest of opposition politician Alexej Navalny upon his return to Russia on

January 18, 2021. These were primarily mobilized online. Protest events demanding Navalny's release broke out across the entire country.⁶² While previous research has identified Facebook and Twitter as mobilization platforms for the Russian opposition in earlier protests during 2011–2012,⁶³ in 2021 TikTok hosted a significant share of political content in support of the Russian opposition.⁶⁴ In July 2020, 20.2 million Russian citizens were regularly using TikTok, and by March 2021 this number had increased to 33.1 million, with 44% of the audience aged 25–44, according to an analysis by Mediascope.⁶⁵ Navalny's return to Russia from his post-poisoning rehabilitation in Berlin sparked a wave of political expressions on TikTok. Hashtags #23january, #31january, and #freenavalny had received 200 million views by the morning of January 21,⁶⁶ one day after protests were announced by Navalny's office.⁶⁷ Hundreds of thousands of short videos (15–60 seconds) reacting to Navalny's detention and calling for people to join the protest appeared during the period January 18–31. Unlike the Belarusian authorities, who chose to shut down the Internet in the country to avoid mass mobilization, the Russian government attempted to filter out political content on social networking platforms. Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, issued warnings to the owners of TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, demanding that they take down anti-government content. Roskomnadzor later claimed to have made TikTok delete 38% of its videos targeting teenagers and encouraging them to join the protest.⁶⁸

Methods and materials

In order to collect materials on Telegram, we studied the flow of messages on the platform to identify which channel to select and whether that channel was rich with relevant material: messages related to protest coordination, information about protests, and posts encouraging people to take part in a protest during our selected period. For the analysis of protest mobilization on Telegram in Belarus, we selected four days in August, based on the scale of protests on those days: August 8 because it was the last pre-election day with a large number of posts on Telegram related to the upcoming election day and protests; August 9 because it was election day and the date when the first large-scale demonstrations occurred all over the country; and August 16 and 23 as the dates of the largest anti-government protests in Belarus since its independence, involving about 200,000 marching simultaneously on the streets of Minsk.⁶⁹ For the study of protest mobilization in Belarus in August 2020, the Telegram channel NextaLive was selected. NextaLive became the most popular channel on Telegram, with its audience growing from 300,000 before the presidential election in Belarus to 1.5 million on the eve of the election on August 9.⁷⁰ The channel served both as a mobilization platform and as a news aggregator, publishing content from individual users who submitted their election- and protest-related updates through the Telegram-bot of NextaLive channel. This also created an opportunity for protestors in the regions and smaller cities to stay in touch with events.⁷¹

The content analysis of the publications that we conducted

within the four days resulted in a total of 1128 posts on NextaLive related to protests in Belarus in August 2020. It is worth mentioning that these 1128 posts represent almost all of the posts on that channel during this period. In other words, the channel mainly published posts about the protests.

FOR THE ANALYSIS of TikTok videos, 100 videos from TikTok's "Top" category were collected (50 of these 100 videos used the hashtag #23january and 50 used the hashtag #31january and they were all published during the period January 18–31). In contrast to Telegram, where we were able to work with all the posts related to protest mobilization, the TikTok sample is restricted to 50 for each hashtag in order to be able to manage the volume of data, given the restricted scope of this article. In the case of TikTok, we approached the material for primary exploration by employing five criteria specified by Kozinets, which guided us in analyzing online materials produced by multiple users and published on open social networking platforms: "relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness".⁷² We therefore assessed: a) whether the material contained videos that could become informative for this study, i.e. ones that included manifestations of political mobilization, and b) what hashtags dominated in the protest-related flow of messages. Videos in the sample represent the most popular under the two hashtags, classified as "Top" videos by TikTok based on the number of views and likes.

When analyzing TikTok videos, one is studying the content of private users. It is therefore quite challenging to identify a single mobilization strategy. However, individual users' content allows us to see how peer-to-peer mobilization develops in a digital community. Secondly, it is not possible to know for certain whether content classified as a "live update" was actually published as it was happening, given that the time of publication on TikTok is unavailable. This is in contrast to Telegram, which provides the exact time of a post's publication. Therefore, while sampling the videos, we had to restrict our collection of material to the selected time-period of January 18–31 (the starting day corresponding to the first calls to join the protests and the last day corresponding to the last large-scale protest), and to exclude videos that contain the hashtags but were published later. Thirdly, TikTok is a trend-producing platform on which individuals involved in the same activity, such as dance, using the same music or audio, create a culture of networking. This created the opportunity to identify a whole set of political trends that arose on Russian TikTok during the second half of January 2021.

Although the analyzed content belongs to the platforms where it was published, no personal data – such as names, voices, or images of the individuals who published content – was collected. Additionally, the study was granted ethical permission

for the analysis of political opinions that are subject to the GDPR. As one of the authors is a fluent speaker of Belarusian and Russian, we have translated the material ourselves.

In order to analyze protest-related content on Telegram and TikTok, we have applied a qualitative content analysis that is based on previous research on political mobilization via social media, but is also open to new phenomena. Because previous research on Telegram and TikTok as mobilization platforms is limited, and thus assumptions and conclusions in previous research come from studies on Facebook or Twitter, we have made use of an abductive approach for interpreting the data.

This allows us to both generate new knowledge based on categories derived from previous research, and to highlight additional categories that emerge.⁷³ By reading the previous research, we identified aspects that have been described as important for understanding Facebook and Twitter as mobilization platforms. We then organized these aspects into four major categories and a number of sub-categories (see Table 1). Since the previous research often employs specific terminology when describing political mobilization, this is reflected in the way in which we have formulated the categories and sub-categories. We are aware that, in a sense, this analytical strategy "pushes" the analysis of Telegram and TikTok into a framework based on research on other

digital platforms, but through our abductive approach we believe that we are also open to results that do not fit the categories derived from earlier research. Hence, this analytical framework gives us tools to contrast the results of our empirical analysis of Telegram and TikTok in relation to Facebook and Twitter. Hence, it provides the opportunity to discern both similarities and differences between "old" and "new" digital platforms as well as between Telegram and TikTok. (See Table 1.)

WE ANALYZED THE text-based posts on Telegram and videos on TikTok using NVivo12, marking posts and videos that addressed the categories and subcategories defined in the literature. Looking more deeply into the material, we made notes on the repeated tendencies, salient expressions, and otherwise qualitatively important articulations of protest mobilization that manifested in different ways than those described in previous research. In accordance with the methodology, repeated tendencies were grouped into new subcategories or categories. Two sub-categories and one category were added during the analysis and are presented in our discussion as additional aspects of protest mobilization activated by Telegram and TikTok. Based on this analysis, the article enables the broadening of the perspective of research on mobilization through new social media, and the mapping of the spectrum of possible tactics of protest mobilization emerging on Telegram and TikTok.

"TIKTOK IS A TREND-PRODUCING PLATFORM ON WHICH INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN THE SAME ACTIVITY [...] CREATE A CULTURE OF NETWORKING."

Table 1. **Aspects of political mobilization identified in the previous research**

Category	Encouragement to join a protest	Coordination of protests	Dissemination of information	Leadership
Sub-category	Direct call to join a protest	Information about location of protest	Live updates about ongoing protest	Comparing incumbent leader with an oppositional leader
	Motivational and emotional appeals	Information about time of protest	Live updates about police violence	Criticizing ruling leader
	Appeals to common identity/ ideology	Information about movements of police	Requests to help disseminate information	Praising oppositional leader
	Appeals to feeling of ownership	Information about Internet shutdown and ways to avoid it		Highlighting leaderless protest
	Referring to clear protest demands	Instructions on self-defence		

Under the category *encouragement to join a protest*, we have added another subcategory, *reporting on smaller victories*, which has not been addressed in previous research but which appeared frequently in the material. Thus, a specific type of call to join protests was observed on August 9, 16, and 23, when NextaLive added analyses of smaller victories as a motivation to continue protesting. When OMON, the Special Purpose Mobile Unit (a system of police units located within Belarusian National Guard), removed their helmets in the town of Kobryn, allegedly refusing to follow orders to disperse the protest, the channel highlighted this case and encouraged the protestors/followers/audience to believe in the movement’s success. It should be noted, however, that *reporting on smaller victories* was sometimes based on false information. For example, on August 9, the channel reported that Lukashenko had fled the country in his Bombardier

Results

The results of the empirical analysis are presented below. They are grouped thematically, reflecting the key aspects of political mobilization as presented in Table 1. This enables us to show both how these categories are articulated in the material and to describe the additional categories and subcategories we constructed from the empirical data.

Encouragement to join a protest

When analyzing *encouragement to join a protest* as an aspect of political mobilization, we assessed the material according to the following sub-categories: (1) calls to join a protest; (2) calls utilizing motivational and emotional appeals; (3) calls appealing to a common identity/ideology; (4) calls appealing to feelings of ownership (for example, ownership and responsibility for the future of the country); and (5) calls referring to clear protest demands. Hence, within this category, several types of post were observed. Firstly, the Telegram channel NextaLive published motivational appeals explaining why joining the protest is worthy and profitable for society and how it brings the protestors closer to achieving their demands. Secondly, when encouraging its audience to protest, NextaLive reminded them of the common identity shared by the protestors (for instance, through listing the groups that were supporting the protests, highlighting no difference in income, gender, age, or occupation; communicating that everyone is “different but united by the protest”). Frequently, posts included descriptions of Belarusians as united and as a nation focused on sovereignty and national attributes. Closely related to common identity, an appeal to a feeling of ownership were also present in these posts. Posts of this kind provided a set of arguments such as “the country is ours, not Lukashenko’s”, “it is now in our hands to change the situation”, or “enough, let’s protect our home!”

Challenger 850, implying that both the former president and law enforcement were afraid of the movement and that protestors should therefore not give up now.

In contrast to Telegram, few users on TikTok directly encouraged others to join the protest. Instead, they provided political analyses of the situation, contrasting Putin with Navalny, and criticizing the corruption that was said to be “flourishing” under Putin’s rule. For example, one TikTok user explains the law in relation to a student’s right to protest: “*Can a university expel you for participating in protests? No: article 34 of the Federal law ‘On education’ says it guarantees the freedom to express opinions and values.*” Many other users publishing under the hashtag #31january also filmed themselves reflecting upon the political situation in the country or informing viewers about their civic right to participate in peaceful protests, but concluded their commentary with no direct call to action. TikTok users often appealed to a sense of common identity and a feeling of ownership. Videos referring to common identity were twice as popular on TikTok as on Telegram. The popular slogan “*Myzdes’ vlast’*”, translated as “*We are the power here*”, introduced by Navalny in 2008, was repeatedly used on TikTok (either spoken by users or installed as an audio clip or as text).

Protest coordination

When analyzing *protest coordination* as an aspect of political mobilization, the following subcategories have guided our analysis of the material: (1) information about locations and times of protests; (2) the movements of police; (3) information on Internet shutdowns; and (4) instructions on self-defense. The use of both TikTok and Telegram grew during this period in relation to protest mobilization. The height of the Belarusian protests saw the greatest number of participants in the history of independent Belarus and were clearly supported by the Telegram channel



Police arrest Russian peace protester within seconds of starting interview. Footage shared on social media shows the moment a Russian peace protester was arrested just moments after starting an interview. The video was captured on Manezhnaya Square in Moscow by the Russian. Uploaded March 14, 2022. 315 tn shows; 4,22 tn likes.

NextaLive. The fact that Telegram continued to function whilst the Internet in the country was shut down (via locally installed Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)) helped to shape the channel as a mobilization platform. In coordinating protests, Telegram mostly published initial protest announcements giving the location, time, and/or planned route. Any change in location or timing was also reported directly without any reference to protest leaders (as re-posts or links to other sources on important coordination changes). For example, a publication on NextaLive from August 8, 2020 at 11:01 am states:

There is very little time left until 9 August, and the time has come to talk about what we have to do. Spread this information as widely as possible, share it with all of your friends and relatives. 1. We arrive at the polling stations towards the end of the day on 9 August. We stay near the polling stations until the end of voting. We communicate. 2. At 8 pm we demand from the voting clerks an open counting of votes, as well as a public demonstration of the protocol. 3. By 10 pm: Minsk is peacefully heading towards the Stela “Minsk-gorod geroj” area. If there is no way to get there, we go to Nezavisimosti Avenue [...].

On August 8, the day before the Internet was shut down in the country, the channel had provided information on how to install a VPN, so that Telegram could continue to upload videos and pictures and people could continue to access it. Besides announcing the rallies and providing protestors with instructions on how to access the Internet during the shutdown, NextaLive also distributed information about the location and routes of the law enforcement services. This type of content was mostly visible on August 9, when the brutal detentions occurred. In relation to that risk of brutality, the channel published guides for self-defense during the protests, such as recommendations to wear warm clothing and no jewelry in case of detention, or applying milk to the eyes if hit by tear gas, and other advice in relation to protecting oneself in the event of detention and/or

police violence. For example, a publication on NextaLive on August 8 at 21:46 pm reads: “From medical workers. “Those currently heading to the squares of cities, protect yourself and those nearby from the likely use of tear gas against you: “Maalox”, “Phosphalugel”, “Almagel A.” On August 16 and 23, NextaLive’s protest coordination revealed yet another trend – a repeated set of protestors’ demands, which were: 1) the immediate release of all political prisoners; 2) that Lukashenko should resign immediately and a new election should be held; and 3) that torture and violence perpetrated by law enforcement services should be investigated.

WE ALSO APPLIED the aspects framing the analysis of protest co-ordination on Telegram in our

analysis of TikTok. In the sample, users published video clips related to protest co-ordination, containing information about the strategy, location, and/or timing of upcoming protest action. However, in comparison with Telegram, information about police movements was almost absent from TikTok. Nor were videos published to inform people about strategies to overcome Internet shutdown. However, videos containing self-defense instructions were published, and we categorized these as protest coordination-related content. For example, one young woman states the following in a self-defense tutorial posted on TikTok on January 23:

If you are going to walk on 23 January, here is some advice: 1. Minimum make-up or no make-up. 2. No jewelry. 3. Comfortable shoes without laces. 4. Have with you: napkins, disinfectant, medicines, pads, water and food, chewing gum, notepad and pen.

Compared to the instructions from NextaLive posted on Telegram, TikTok’s advice on self-defense is more specific, with tutorials and video demonstrations on what (not) to wear, and how to protect one’s eyes from tear gas. These videos are usually accompanied by titles such as “Preparing to protest: don’t forget about self-defense”.

Dissemination of information

When analyzing the *dissemination of information* as an aspect of political mobilization, we observed whether the following categories were present: (1) live updates about ongoing protests; (2) live updates about police violence; and (3) requests to help disseminate information. In the collected materials, the category *dissemination of information* was the most visible of all the categories. NextaLive assumed the role of providing live updates about the protests, detentions, and movements of the law enforcement service. Additionally, the channel published live updates from individual users, collected via a Telegram chatbot that allowed it to simultaneously gather news from protestors throughout the country. NextaLive therefore became not only

the favored protest mobilization channel but also the preferred platform for collective live updates about the protest. In addition to requests to *share* information, which have been discussed in previous research as a category of political mobilization,⁷ the example of NextaLive in this study reveals an additional sub-category, namely that of *requests for information by the channel*. Editors of the channel *requested* readers to share information about the development of the movement in their cities and towns: “*Send your photos and videos to @nextamail_bot*”. Such requests were included at the end of many posts on NextaLive. As the Internet was shut down during the first day of protest, the channel also requested users to employ offline methods, providing recommendations on sharing information via phone calls or face-to-face communication. Live updates, however, became the most dominant type of content on the channel on August 9, 16, and 23.

ON TIKTOK, MORE THAN half of the analyzed videos related to live updates. Videos of crowds usually indicated a location, city, or time; for example, in the video published on January 31: “*Petersburg, we nailed it! According to the media, there are more than 30,000 of us here. We were divided but not conquered. People were following the march on parallel streets.*” Individual TikTok users filmed street rallies and conversations with the police, as well as documenting and publishing detentions and violence directed against protest participants. Police violence was mostly visible in videos with the hashtag #23january. In terms of *requests to help disseminate information*, TikTok users were encouraged to share videos with others: “*Share! The protest will happen on 31 January. This time there will be many more of us!*” reads the text on a video posted by a TikTok user on January 30. Due to TikTok’s structure, which does not enable the anonymized sharing of large data files, as is the case on Telegram, requests to send information were not present.

Leadership

When analyzing leadership as an aspect of political mobilization, the following subcategories were identified: (1) contrasting the ruling leader with the opposition leader; (2) criticizing the ruling leader; and (3) praising the opposition leader. On Telegram, these leaders became visible in posts related to protestors’ demands, with the channel editors referring to leaders’ statements addressing those demands. Some posts concerning leaders criticized the ruling leader, contrasting him with the acting opposition leader. A much stronger focus on leaders was visible on TikTok, with teenagers on the platform often comparing the political actions of Putin during his presidential mandate with the actions and values of the opposition leader, Alexej Navalny. To illustrate, one of the videos from January 23 presents a visual comparison of Putin and Navalny in different situations: public

speaking, at home, and talking to journalists, with text citing the lyrics of a song by the artist Max Korzh.

Praising the opposition leader in Russia became a trend on TikTok, with filters and masks of Navalny used by content producers. Whether this type of content can be categorized as direct mobilization is unclear; however, these videos certainly contributed to shaping Navalny as a positive persona on TikTok.

Political protest as trendsetting

In the process of analyzing the entertainment platform TikTok, which is a platform that follows the logic of promoting trending and popular videos, hashtags, and accounts, a new category was added to enable a broader understanding of political mobilization on this type of platform: that of *political protests as trend-*

setting. This additional category was created to address

videos that reflected trends emerging on TikTok but did not fit into either of the categories derived from previous research.

The category of *trendsetting* reflects how the usage of a new social networking platform intended for entertainment can influence the form and content of manifestations of political mobilization. From the materials gathered, five main sub-categories under this category were observed, which are described below.

Protest in schools. This type of video usually depicts school pupils standing on a chair or a table and taking down the portrait of Putin hanging above the whiteboard in the center of the classroom, and later putting Navalny’s

portrait in its place. Some videos also depict pupils taking down the portrait of Navalny.

Getting ready to protest. In this type of video, teenagers record a tutorial on how to prepare to protest. These videos often depict a person putting on extra warm clothing, taking off their jewelry, covering their face with a warm scarf, donning gloves, and placing a small bottle of milk in their pocket. Such videos are described via text on the screen, firstly introducing it as a self-defense tutorial and later explaining the logic behind each move.

Romanticizing a politician. At first glance, the private relationships of an opposition leader and his partner play only a small role in mobilizing protest activity. However, a trend focusing on the personal relationship of Navalny and his wife, Yulia, was repeatedly present on TikTok under the hashtags #23january and #31january, and we therefore perceived it as worth mentioning. This kind of video is usually presented as a collage of clips depicting Alexej and Yulia Navalny hugging each other, or gazing at each other on different occasions, but mostly at the protests or in the courtroom where Navalny appears in a glass cage. Sometimes these videos are subtitled with text describing the “real love and support” of his wife as a key to explaining why Navalny is “so brave” and why he “returned to Russia”.

Destroying a passport. Another type of video depicts a person walking along while holding a Russian passport and, at a specific

“NEXTALIVE
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MATION ABOUT THE
LOCATION AND
ROUTES OF THE LAW
ENFORCEMENT
SERVICES.”

Table 2. **Political mobilization aspects on Telegram and TikTok** (New subcategories are marked in color)

Categories		Encouragement to join a protest	Coordination of protests	Dissemination of information	Leadership	Trendsetting of political protest
Sub-categories	Telegram	Direct call to join a protest	Information about location of protest	Live updates about ongoing protest	Comparing incumbent leader with an opposition	
		Motivational and emotional appeals	Information about time of protest	Live updates about police violence	Praising oppositional leader	
		Appeals to common identity/ideology	Information about movements of police	Requests to help disseminate information	Highlighting leaderless protest	
		Appeals to feeling of ownership	Information about Internet shutdown and ways to avoid it	Requests to send information		
		Referring to clear protest demands	Instructions on self-defence			
		Reporting on smaller victories of the protest				
	TikTok	Appeals to common identity/ideology	Instructions on self-defence	Live updates about ongoing protest	Comparing incumbent leader with an oppositional	Manifesting protest at school
		Appeals to feeling of ownership	Information about location of protest	Live updates about police violence	Criticizing ruling leader	Getting-ready to protest
			Information about time of protest	Requests to help disseminate information	Praising oppositional leader	Romanticizing a politician
						Destroying a passport
					Protest playlist	

moment in the accompanying music, tossing it over their shoulder or ripping it apart.

Protest playlist. More than a third of the analyzed videos used the same five music tracks.⁷⁴ Four of these contain political opinions opposing the Russian authorities, and one, featuring the lyrics “Not gonna get us”, is usually used in videos of the police chasing protest participants. Another track used over videos of police chasing participants contains the lyrics “standing against the authorities does not mean standing against the Motherland”. Practices of manifesting political protest on social media in Russia have been studied previously,⁷⁵ and TikTok trend-setting routines add an additional dimension to understanding the role of music in mobilization. This is an interesting aspect for future research.

AS DESCRIBED IN the methods section, some categories and subcategories from the literature were added based on what we found in the materials. Table 2 summarizes the results of our content analysis of Telegram and TikTok in relation to previous

research, including the new category, *political protest as trendsetting* (named for TikTok’s “trendsetting” hashtag), and the subcategories *reporting on smaller victories of the protest* and *requests to send information*. (See Table 2.)

Concluding words

The purpose of this article was to explore how political mobilization on Telegram and TikTok is manifested and to offer a theoretical discussion concerning variations in protest mobilization on the different social networking platforms. We have identified the main aspects of protest mobilization described by previous research that mainly studied Facebook and Twitter as mobilization platforms, and used them to address materials from political protests in Belarus in 2020 and Russia in 2021 published on Telegram and TikTok, respectively. This allowed us to understand political mobilization in relation to existing conceptualizations of mobilization strategies and tactics, as well as to observe additional aspects of political mobilization on Telegram and TikTok.

Posts from Telegram and TikTok illustrated additional forms

of protest mobilization that have not been addressed previously by scholars studying political mobilization. Specifically, *reporting on smaller victories of the protest* and *requests to send information* were tendencies visible on Telegram, and *political protest as trendsetting* appeared on TikTok. The sub-category *reporting on smaller victories* relates back to the concept of the revolutionary threshold⁷⁶ and can be described as a tactic that presumably targets observers who sympathize with the cause of a protest but are hesitant about joining in.

THIS STUDY HAS SHOWN that Telegram's requests to its users to upload protest-related content was important in encouraging mobilization during the Belarusian protests. This allowed Telegram's NextaLive to gather live updates from across the whole country and serve as a central distributor of information, despite the fact that the editors themselves were located abroad. The structure and functioning of Telegram, which enabled the accumulation of individual users' information through anonymous chat-bots, therefore made it possible to broaden the geography of mobilization. On Telegram, the whole set of tactics identified in previous research in relation to Facebook and Twitter was visible. From encouraging people to take part in protest, to protest coordination and the dissemination of information – all these aspects of political mobilization described by previous research were present on Telegram.

On TikTok, political mobilization was manifested differently than that described in previous research. Articulating protest-related messages was rather discreet and indirect, with only a few videos explicitly calling people to take to the streets. Instead, content included inspirational videos praising Navalny or critical videos targeting Putin, filters of Navalny, self-defense tutorials for offline protesters, celebrities' videos featuring messages supporting the protests, or dancing to trending TikTok songs popular at protests. On TikTok, political mobilization was manifested primarily through political protest as trendsetting, which emerged as a result of individual users' actions combined with the culture and structure of this social networking platform. The trends that were described in the section above represent how the message of mobilization can be adapted for the platform. Trendsetting also implies that a trend is followed because it is popular and not necessarily because everyone genuinely shares its ideas. Therefore, during the protests of January 2021, TikTok was filled with non-political content masquerading under the popular politicized hashtags because it seems to be important within the platform to support the trend. This was reflected in usage of the hashtags #23january and #31january on beauty/dance/pet videos; or in resharing (technically, reuploading) the videos of other users.

Another observation of materials from TikTok is that those

videos categorized as "live updates" (i.e. published at the time a protest was taking place) are not as reliable as is the case with other platforms. Firstly, TikTok does not allow users to identify the exact time of publication of their video, only the day. Secondly, some videos were repeatedly posted by different accounts without any indication of the source, which makes it clear that not all of them could have been live updates. Finally, publication of others' videos and misuse of protest-related hashtags should not necessarily be discounted as a form of political mobilization. Uploading other people's protest-related videos on TikTok can have an impact on the popularization of the protest.⁷⁷ Indirect support of political protests illustrates a logic of *connectivity* as a new form of discussion on social networking platforms.⁷⁸ At the same time, following TikTok trends and producing videos without joining the offline protests seems to extend beyond *slacktivism*, despite being a form of passive online participation.⁷⁹ Creating a video on TikTok so that it becomes "TikTok-famous" requires more time and knowledge of the trend's components (an understanding of the message, hashtags, specific music, and filters) than merely sharing or liking others' posts on social networking platforms.

In this way, connective action through continuous exchange and engagement with an online community has an impact on the popularization of protests, especially in contexts with a censored media environment.⁸⁰

"UPLOADING OTHER PEOPLE'S PROTEST-RELATED VIDEOS ON TIKTOK CAN HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE POPULARIZATION OF THE PROTEST."

THIS STUDY HAS aimed to explore political mobilization on Telegram and TikTok, as well as to understand how it relates to the aspects of political mobilization described in previous research covering such social networking platforms as Facebook or Twitter. Namely, most of the forms of political mobilization previously identified by social movements scholars were present on Telegram and on TikTok, while additional strategies and tactics of mobilization through digital platforms that we identified through our analysis may inform studies of new mobilization aspects on other digital platforms and in other political settings. The structure of TikTok enabled the popularization of the protests through the particular trendsetting practices described earlier. The structure of Telegram enabled the collective gathering of live updates of protests on one channel, NextaLive. This highlights the need to study the affordances of new social networking platforms when addressing political mobilization on these platforms. This is important because, as shown in this study, specific platform affordances can affect political mobilization in different ways. The interconnection of these particular social media platforms, of those particular content producers, and those particular editors of the Telegram channels, created a specific type of political mobilization in the context of autocratic regimes utilizing repressive tactics such as Internet shutdowns and violence to counteract opposition. Hence, social networking platforms as a technological product

with their specific forms of agency influence the dynamics and forms in which political mobilization manifests.

We observed manifestations of protest-related content on TikTok without any particular indication of that user's participation in the protests (for example, posting someone else's live update from a protest). Whether such video activism influenced other individuals' decisions to join the movement offline is difficult to assess. However, an extraordinary number of videos with protest hashtags in Russia and multiple options for signifying protest support online (from masks and filters to specific songs) demonstrate that contemporary political movements are difficult to separate into "online" and "offline" domains.⁸¹ In the cases examined in this study, offline protest would be impossible without online support, information, and co-ordination. NextaLive is an example of how an online domain of civil uprising organically synchronizes with offline protest. In line with this finding, we suggest that, when addressing civil uprisings in academic contexts, online domains should be seen as an integral part of political protest and inseparable from offline protest. This has already been pointed out by authors studying Telegram in relation to protests, who addressed the "need to approach digital platforms as actors in contentious politics, rather than seeing them as mere tools for political participation".⁸²

TO CONCLUDE, the article's findings contribute to the two dimensions of studies of political mobilization mediated by social networking platforms. First, the analysis impacts the studies of Telegram and TikTok as mobilization arenas, pointing to connection between a platform's affordances and structure with specific types of mobilization strategies and tactics. Secondly, our findings inform on practices of digital political mobilization in authoritarian countries, where choices of the platforms often derive from high security concerns and demand for broad outreach of protest-related content on digital platforms as the only available arenas, while the traditional media are controlled and censored by authoritarian states. ✘

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Appendix. Codesheet for content analysis (based on previous research and empirical materials)

Categories	Sub-categories
Encouragement to join a protest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct call to join protest (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) • Motivational and emotional appeals (Breuer & Groshek, 2014; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) • Appeals to common identity/ideology (Breuer et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2018; Bennet & Segerberg, 2012) • Appeals to feeling of ownership (Breuer et al., 2015) • Referring to clear protest demands (Jost et al., 2018) • Reporting on smaller victories of the protest (data-driven)
Coordination of protests (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Breuer & Groshek, 2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about location of protest • Information about time of protest • Information about movements of police • Information about Internet shutdown and ways to avoid it • Information about the change of protest strategy • Instructions on self-defence
Dissemination of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live updates about ongoing protest (Clarke & Kocak, 2020; Tucker, 2016) • Live updates about police violence (Clarke & Kocak, 2020; Tucker, 2016) • Requests to help disseminate information (Clarke & Kocak, 2020; Tucker, 2016) • Requests to send information (data-driven) • Political analysis of situation (data-driven)
Leadership (Clarke & Kocak, 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contrasting incumbent leader with opposition leader • Criticising ruling leader • Praising opposition leader • Highlighting leaderless protest
Political protest trendsetting (data-driven)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manifesting protest at school • Getting ready to protest • Romanticising a politician • Destroying a passport • Protest playlist

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1. ICЗPEAK – Смерти Больше Нет
 2. т.А.Т.и. – Нас не догонят
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