



## Public resistance in Russia: Mobilizational opportunities and the effect of protest on public attitudes

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### RECOMMENDATIONS:

The 2018–2020 “garbage” protests in Russia’s northerly Arkhangelsk Oblast’ have shown how an “apolitical” population can mobilize despite an increasingly repressive environment. Additionally, the Shiyes case may indicate the fate now facing Russian civic activism: mobilizational resources and experience have been weakened because many of the most experienced activists have had to leave Russia, while those who risked staying behind find themselves increasingly cut off from their colleagues in exile. Based on our analysis of the Shiyes case, as well as Russian civic activism more broadly, we argue that:

- Russian civic activists have shown that it is possible to utilize mobilizational opportunities spurred by regime efforts to politicize “apolitical” issues. Protest participation in the “apolitical” Shiyes movement had an impact on political behavior, as evidenced by an increase in opposition votes.
- Activists now in exile as well as those who have stayed behind are valuable carriers of mobilizational experiences. However, without continued Western support, mobilizational experiences and critical attitudes towards the Putin regime will remain an untapped resource.
- Exchange of information and skills is needed in Russia; and in the West, reliable information from within Russia is sorely needed. Western donors and governments should therefore help to reduce the barriers that hamper the flow of information, e.g., by funding VPN (Virtual Private Network) services.

## Introduction

Ever since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 the level of resistance against the Putin regime and the general protest potential in Russian society have been in the limelight. The decade preceding the invasion had witnessed the highest number of mass protests in modern Russian history. This Policy Brief explores one of the most successful of these regional protest movements, the Shiyes movement. How was the movement able to grow, sustain itself, and diffuse under Putin's authoritarian regime? And what can this tell us about the protest potential in today's Russia?

## The Shiyes protests

[In 2018, mass protests erupted in Arkhangelsk on a scale never seen before in this northern region.](#) At the peak, an estimated 25,000–30,000 people protested the planned construction of a massive landfill deep in the forests of Arkhangelsk Oblast' near the abandoned settlement of Shiyes. While the issue of landfills and where to locate them was not new to the region, the Shiyes landfill was a special case, as it was intended to accommodate excess waste from overfilled garbage dumps in Moscow. After more than two years of sustained protests across the region and beyond, in spring 2020 the Governor of Arkhangelsk, Igor Orlov, was forced to [resign](#), and construction of the landfill was effectively stopped.

2 The Arkhangelsk protests took many observers by surprise, not least because of the unexpected mobilizational success, outcome, and its geographical occurrence in the Russian “periphery.” The movement drew on a unique action repertoire: the protesters set up a permanent protest camp at the construction site; they organized “uninterrupted, peaceful protests” ([bessrochka](#)) in the central squares of some 30 cities and villages, where activists gathered daily to exchange information and to collect goods and money for the campsite protesters; they formed a united coalition of protest groups; and they utilized the opportunities offered by the social media (VKontakte, Telegram) to mobilize support. In addition, unlike the case of many other environmental protests in Russia, the Shiyes protesters managed to garner attention and support from Russians all over the country, including famous artists and other public figures.

## Social structures and movement emergence in Russia

Studies of the emergence of social movements emphasize the role of organizational resources (finances, skilled human resources, and social networks) and political opportunities (legal framework, media pluralism, elite divisions, and channels of political influence). Given the scarcity of mobilizational resources and political opportunities in today's Russia, the environment might seem not conducive to mass protests. [Yet, mass protests have indeed been occurring.](#) By being sensitive to and utilizing the specific social context that shape individuals' and collectives' knowledge of how to express emotions

(including grievances) in public, protest movements have been at least partially successful.

[One central feature of societal stability in authoritarian regimes is a depoliticized, disengaged population. This “norm” of public non-interference in the political domain is further strengthened by the authorities' punishment of those who violate this “norm,” as well as the narrative about the undesirability of getting involved in “dirty politics.” Interestingly, a growing number of protests and movements in Russia over the last decade have proclaimed themselves “apolitical.”](#) Such framing creates a mobilizational opportunity which is further solidified by contention with the authorities as to when the “apolitical” becomes “political.” The emergence of the Shiyes movement and its sustainability over two years can be largely attributed to its claim to being apolitical.

Study of the authorities' responses to this growing movement reveals that, despite some instances of direct repression of the activists, most efforts were directed at disengaging the public. To achieve this, the authorities engineered new forms of “non-disruptive” ways of expressing discontent with the Shiyes construction. First, they signaled new expectations as to how discontent should be expressed in the public; second, violation of these expectations would result in the movement being labelled “political” and thus a challenge to the regime—which in turn would run contrary to the movement's self-identification.

The regime response to the Shiyes protests was thus dominated by a combination of “muting” (ignoring the criticism of the authorities' policies) and “facilitation” (giving the impression of dialog between the authorities and the activists). “Muting” measures entailed efforts to shift the Shiyes issue from the public domain by enmeshing it in technocratic language. The construction was first framed as a business opportunity that would bring in revenues to the regional budget, then as a modernization effort, and finally, as a legal-administrative matter to be dealt with by competent bodies. Alternative narratives about the project were perceived as being “political.”

Facilitation measures, on the other hand, made it possible for activists to appeal directly to those in power, sharing their personal experiences. When using the channels offered by the authorities, the activists' concerns and grievances were framed as [“apolitical.” “self-evident facts”—in contrast to how political issues are discussed and framed in public hearings, political TV debates, etc.](#) For example, the production team behind Putin's televised “Direct Line” program promised that their questions would be included in the program. However, in the end, “time constraints” led the production team not to air the activists' question. At the regional level, Governor Orlov organized his own direct line with the region's population, as well as eco-forums where members of the

general public could participate.

Responding to the efforts at disengagement, the movement galvanized people onto the streets by framing these efforts as a way for the authorities to absolve themselves of responsibility and to depoliticize the issue of the Shiyes landfill. Any disengagement measures were perceived as yet another way for the authorities to label the movement as “political.” In sharp contrast to the usual targets of regime repression, such as international NGOs, NGOs receiving funds from abroad, and “non-patriotic” organizations, the movement framed the attempt to draw it into “dirty politics” as a problem, the antithesis to its self-perceived identity. Ultimately, the authorities’ management of the public domain backfired, creating new mobilizational opportunities for the Shiyes protesters.

### Impact of Shiyes protests on political attitudes

The measures aimed at disengagement eventually led to the politicization of the Shiyes movement. The issue of the planned landfill revealed to the local population the importance of having publicly elected politicians who truly represent the interests of the electorate—on the municipal, regional, and federal levels. As a result, some local residents decided to run as candidates themselves in the upcoming elections, while others started taking voting more seriously.

In 2020, the “Stop Shiyes” coalition, consisting of some 30 groups and movements, initiated the “[People’s Governor](#)” campaign, which aimed at promoting a single protest candidate for the Arkhangelsk Oblast’ gubernatorial elections. However, the high barriers for registration of opposition candidates prevented their selected candidate, Oleg Mandrykin, a local businessman, from running. Instead, Alexander Tsybulsky, acting governor since Orlov’s resignation, who had repeatedly opposed the landfill, was elected. Ironically, Tsybulsky is a member of United Russia—the party whose officials initiated the Shiyes project in the first place.

In September 2021, Shiyes activists ran as candidates in the State Duma elections and in ten municipal elections. At the municipal level, two councils of deputies in Arkhangelsk’s Lensky District ended up comprised largely of members who opposed the Shiyes landfill. Moreover, two Shiyes activists were elected as council heads. The “[Stop Shiyes](#)” coalition also nominated candidates for the two single-mandate constituencies in Arkhangelsk Oblast’ as well as the one in the Komi Republic. In Arkhangelsk, Oleg Mandrykin and Alexander Kozenkov were supported by Yabloko, an opposition party that has not been represented in the State Duma since 2003; in Komi, Oleg Mikhaylov ran on the ticket of the Communist Party (CPRF), the main “systemic” opposition party in Russia today. In addition to the coalition-nominated candidates, several other activists ran in Arkhangelsk Oblast’ constituencies, presenting themselves as Shiyes

defenders.

The Shiyes protests significantly impacted the results of first-time candidates Mandrykin and Kozenkov as well as the more seasoned candidate Mikhaylov. We found a strong connection between the number of protests and the electoral results of United Russia as contrasted with opposition candidates. In districts with many protests, United Russia candidates generally fared worse and opposition candidates better (see Figure 1). The effect of the number of protests on voter turnout was not significant. However, in Arkhangelsk, despite the ongoing pandemic, turnout increased slightly compared to the 2016 State Duma elections, whereas it declined slightly in Komi.

Figure 1. Relation between number of protests and results of United Russia in the 2021 State Duma elections in electoral districts of Arkhangelsk Oblast’ and the Komi Republic (Source: data gathered by Elena Gorbacheva; graph produced by Margarita Zavadskaya).

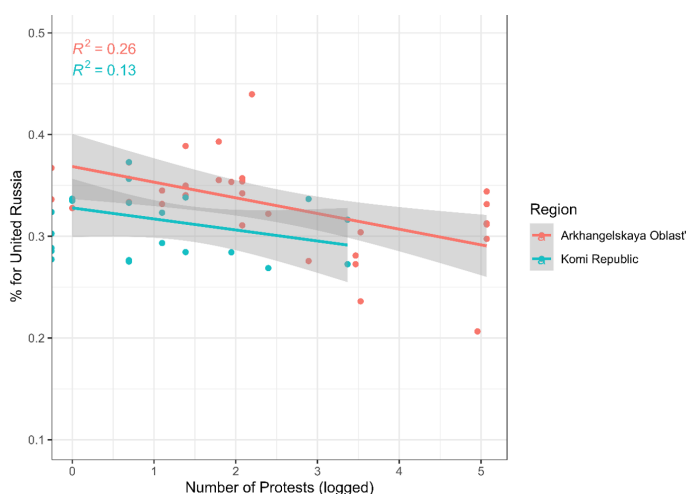
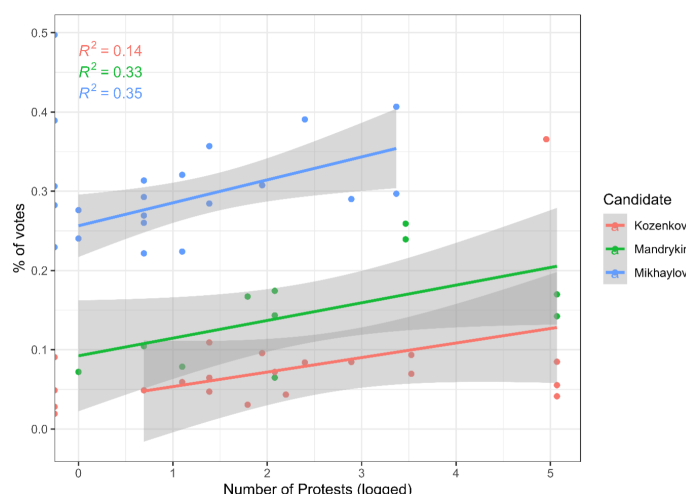


Figure 2. The relation between number of protests and the results of “Stop Shiyes” candidates in the 2021 State Duma elections in electoral districts of Arkhangelsk Oblast’ and the Komi Republic (Source: data gathered by Elena Gorbacheva; graph produced by Margarita Zavadskaya)



The Shiyes protests brought new politicians to the fore. This resulted in sharper competition between opposition

candidates, in Arkhangelsk leading to a splitting of the vote and a victory for the United Russia candidates. In Komi, however, there was only one Shiyes candidate. In 2016, before the protests, Mikhaylov had received 13% of the vote in State Duma elections. Now he received 32% and won the seat—and, given the correlation between the number of protests and the election results (see Figure 2), the linkage with the Shiyes protests seems clear. The party list results show that United Russia lost more than 10% in both regions compared to the previous elections.

The 2021 State Duma election represents a unique case of regional elections being meaningful and indeed competitive in today's Russia. This shows that environmental protests have the potential to affect political behavior significantly. Indeed, considering the authoritarian context, the impact on the politicization of the public is quite impressive. The success of the Shiyes defenders helped to alleviate some of the “learned helplessness” otherwise prevalent in Russian society. In authoritarian regimes, the authorities generally want the public to believe that they are powerless, that their opinion does not matter, and that protests are futile. However, the Shiyes success inspired the residents of not only Arkhangelsk Oblast' and the Komi Republic, but also of other regions, to stand up for their rights and voice their demands.

Moreover, the legacy of the Shiyes protests lives on in Arkhangelsk Oblast' and the Komi Republic. For instance, in 2021, after new protests in Arkhangelsk, 14 planned incinerators were [removed](#) from the new territorial waste-management plan. More recently, the planned construction of three large new landfills has triggered public unrest. As public gatherings are no longer al-

lowed, contestation is expressed through petitions and attendance of public hearings. Komi residents protested against a landfill in Ezhva—and, [in December 2022, Governor Vladimir Uyba announced that construction would not proceed](#). The authorities in these two regions have learned that members of the local population are prepared to fight for their environmental rights.

### Conclusions

The Shiyes protests stand out as an unexpected instance of successful mass protests in Russia, demonstrating the possibility of achieving goals through collective action even in a highly restrictive political environment. Those who took part in the Shiyes movement gained mobilizational experience, underwent a political transformation and became active citizens. Not only did they defend—and have continued to defend—their lands against unwanted waste-related construction, they have also demonstrated political mobilization by participating in elections more actively, as voters and as candidates. This heightened political engagement has become evident in local opposition to the war in Ukraine, [as reflected in the statistics on fines issued for “discrediting the Russian Army”—Arkhangelsk Oblast' and the Komi Republic are among the 10 regions with the most cases opened under this charge, with approximately half of these cases being instigated against Shiyes activists residing in Arkhangelsk Oblast'](#). Despite the oppressive actions of the Russian state—including the ongoing war against Ukraine, corruption, and the suppression of the media and freedom of speech—there are still individuals with the courage to speak out against the regime. The defenders of Shiyes are among them.

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