

Fostering Proximity Through Telegram's Logistics: Russian Anti-War Activism Between Streets and Streams

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Abstract

Space is “a set of relations *between* entities and is not a substance” (Urry, 1985, p. 25). Starting from this proposition, this article examines the constitution of protest spaces enacted through a set of physical and technological entities. The case study is of Russian anti-war actors who aimed to organise anti-war protests following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, after which repression in the country significantly intensified and many were forced into exile. By conducting qualitative interviews with anti-war actors, underpinned by offline and online ethnography, the study examines hidden street anti-war agitation in Russia and reveals logistical orchestration in exile. Drawing on previous research that studies activism through a framework of “algorithmic tactics,” this article reveals that while anti-war actors cope with algorithms, their broader approach extends beyond the algorithmic logic of social media. Instead, anti-war actors incorporate infrastructural adaptation. The study argues that in order to foster proximity between dispersed geographical localities, actors utilise the affordances of both digital and physical environments. Specifically, it zooms in on logistical media, particularly Telegram, that enables polycentric coordination among multiple sites and allows anti-war actors to navigate in different contexts—inside the country as well as abroad.

Keywords

affordances; anti-war activism; logistics; protest spaces; proximity; Russia

1. Introduction

Space has always been of concern for studies on social movements, since social movements are ultimately about the production of spaces (Kaun, 2015), and through both symbolic interaction and the physical experience of being in spaces, social movement actors reveal social and political struggle. The role of media

technologies in space production has been intensely debated over the last few decades, with scholars pointing out how the arrival of digital technologies has accelerated space–time relationships (Castells, 2007), stimulating the affective participation of publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Many studies have focused on how protest spaces have been constituted and advanced alongside technologies, especially during mass rallies and political events where large numbers of people have taken to the streets (Gerbaudo, 2012; Herasimenka, 2022; Lim, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015).

Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been paid to understanding how protest spaces are organised from scattered localities when large street gatherings are restricted by police control and online surveillance, such as in contemporary Russia where after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many left the country to avoid being drafted or due to their disagreement with the war and the intensified repression directed against such critical publics. This study aims to fill this research gap and contribute both empirically and theoretically to the recognition of organised proximity between dispersed geographic localities in hostile and authoritarian contexts. In doing so, it asks two interconnected research questions:

RQ1: How has proximity between protest spaces played out inside Russia, where street rallies have been criminalised and social media monitored, and outside of Russia by actors in exile?

RQ2: How do anti-war Russians leverage media affordances to organise covert street actions in the country and link them with coordinated rallies abroad in order to sustain collective agency across dispersed and high-risk settings?

2. Anti-War Protests Inside and Outside of Russia in the Wake of the War

On June 12th, 2022, I joined an anti-war protest march in Stockholm. This was four months after “Black February,” when the Russian army attacked Ukraine, leading to what has now become the deadliest conflict in Europe since the Second World War. Just weeks after the invasion, Russian authorities introduced and implemented several articles in the Criminal Code, imposing criminal penalties and fines for “discrediting the army” and “spreading disinformation” about the Russian armed forces. This intensification came on the back of an already strict repression over the previous several years, and in the first few months following the war, the police and the Rosgvardiya cracked down brutally on all anti-war protests held in Russia. More than 20,000 people have been detained for public anti-war stances, according to the human rights organisation OVD-Info. These statistics include 856 detentions for posts on social media (OVD-Info, 2025).

For participating in such protests, but also for disseminating anti-war posts on social media and distributing street leaflets, people were harshly sentenced to anything from hefty fines to years of detention. Stockholm looked peaceful in contrast, and life continued as usual. At the time, it was mainly Russians who had left the country prior to the war who took to the streets to demonstrate against the invasion of Ukraine, shouting in English and Swedish: “Russians against the war! Stop buying Russian gas!” The march in Stockholm was part of a number of joint actions of solidarity, with corresponding demonstrations organised and held simultaneously by newly formed anti-war groups all around the world. People who joined these local groups abroad synchronised their actions by choosing the same day, June 12th, for their manifestations. The date was not accidental. June 12th is a national holiday celebrated as Russia Day and officially commemorates the formation of the Russian Federation following the end of the Soviet Union. Thus, the idea of organising a

global anti-war rally on the same date demonstrated a struggle for the space of symbolic representativity: opposing the onslaught of propaganda narratives about Russia Day, and through the public display of active anti-war dissent.

These global protests, organised by anti-war Russians, also signified a shift from spontaneous pickets and meetings towards more strategic and networked resilience among Russians abroad and in exile. I specifically focus here on groups that were mobilised against the war, while there is also a sizable “illiberal diaspora” (Golova & Sablina, 2024), that is, Russians who support the war and the narratives that back it up.

3. Previous Studies

3.1. *From Networked Connectivity to Proximity*

At the time of the development of Web 2.0 communication technologies, Castells (2010) highlighted the organisational functionality of communication networks, the ability of digital technologies to link separated physical localities into what he defined as a “space of flows,” which represents the material arrangements that enable simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity. This is the central point of his analysis, underpinned by a number of examples: global movements such as Occupy Wall Street, environmental movements, as well as more locally contextualised cases such as the Arab Spring and the Spanish Indignados movement.

In contrast, and with an outlook from “the techno-commercial perspective” of platform functionality, other scholars have made the point that social media “steer users towards personalised communication...while introducing the viral mechanism of togetherness” (Poell & Van Dijck, 2015, p. 533, author’s emphasis). Problematising further the universalism of the “technological approach,” Gerbaudo (2012), in his book *Tweets and Streets*, looks at how a symbolic construction of public space online facilitates and guides highly dispersed street gatherings. He argues further that media not only provide “networked connectivity” but also contribute to the development of collective identity and advance proximity between spaces. In another study exploring the phenomenon of the Occupy movements in Latvia and Sweden, Kaun’s (2015) qualitative research shows that such movements are constituted around “travelling narratives” rather than a networked logic, and such narratives are largely linked to people’s localised experiences and contexts.

Inspired by such a critical perspective, this research aims to contribute to the growing scholarly interest beyond “networked connectivity” by advancing a place perspective where localities themselves matter since they situate people’s experiences in specific contexts. As human geographer Doreen Massey (2005) argues, proximity is central to the production of spaces, encompassing mobility and distance as embedded in space-making practices. Building on this, this study delves into an understanding of how space is constituted across digital loci and dispersed physical localities. The Russian case study of intensified repression and the resulting large-scale emigration after the country’s war against Ukraine (Kamalov et al., 2025) provides rich material for examining the constitution of protest spaces under radically different conditions, where some are in exile, situated far apart, and others are confined by state restrictions.

3.2. Civic Engagement Under Rising Authoritarian Pressure

In the last decade, Putin's return to the presidency and the annexation of Crimea led to an intensification of the political struggle in the country, although scholars point out the persistence of structural weaknesses, limited resources, and fragmentation among counterforces (Gel'man, 2017). Russian "online activism" was not merely digital (Lonkila et al., 2021) but rather spanned across political and apolitical participation (Zhel'nina, 2023). In making this distinction, Zhelnina recognises the political participation inspired by opposition leaders, such as Alexei Navalny, whose electoral and anti-corruption campaigns mobilised the grassroots (Dollbaum et al., 2018). Additionally, as Zhelnina points out, apolitical participation sparked numerous citizen initiatives that united people over more local issues, such as ecological and urban activism (Bederson et al., 2025). Lonkila et al. (2021) have identified three main patterns of online protest mobilisation in Russia before the war: communicative online activism, where ordinary users became involved with the semi-professional campaigns of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation; technoactivism, sparked by the massive use of Telegram in a backlash against the increasing governmental control over the internet; and non-contentious forms, which did not directly challenge state power but elaborated alternative discourses (Lonkila et al., 2021).

In light of the above, this study views anti-war activism as a continuation of earlier political struggles in the country. Many of my interviewees had been involved with Navalny's headquarters prior to leaving Russia, either as activists or volunteers. Others participated in civic engagement through locally organised initiative groups, or, as Morozov (2009) notes, engaged in forms of "slacktivism" by commenting on, and disseminating, political content—activities that have since been criminalised following the outbreak of war. Additionally, sabotage-oriented anti-war groups have emerged (Aizman, 2024), along with those who joined the Ukrainian armed forces. This study, however, focuses on civic activism and civic anti-war engagement among politically diverse actors.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Beyond Algorithmic Tactics

Theoretically, I follow an ecological approach (Treré & Mattoni, 2016), addressing both users' practices and the technological specificity of platforms. In depicting the platform ecosystem as a "multipolar algorithmic battlefield," Treré and Bonini (2024) study how users—from gig workers to activists—develop inventive tactics to negotiate, exploit, and resist the algorithmic governance of platforms. They identify tactics such as amplification, evasion, and hijacking. By operationalising Treré and Bonini's framework, this study attempts to understand how Russian anti-war actors have adopted and tailored these tactics in accordance with specific affordances of platforms, adapting to algorithmic logics, but also acting beyond them. In particular, it examines how proximity as "the production of interrelations" (Massey, 2005, p. 9) has played out through practices and been constituted within media infrastructures.

Unlike Occupy and Indignados, which were characterised as explicitly event-based movements (Della Porta & Pavan, 2018), Russian anti-war activism has rather been embedded into everyday routine actions. Even compared to Hong Kong's 2019–2020 protest cycles, which were understood as prolonged, recurrent, and crystallised through live streams (Fang, 2023), Russian anti-war activism has remained dispersed and

organisationally diffused. By spreading anti-war agitation on Russian streets with leaflets, graffiti, and even symbolic flowers, people have adapted *in-visibility*—which is similar to Hong Kong’s “Be Water” strategy (Fang, 2023)—remaining below the thresholds of both physical policing and platform moderation inside the country. By contrast, Russian protests abroad have aimed to amplify the visibility of dissent through coordinated mass rallies and the use of mainstream platforms.

To capture how proximity has been organised in order to overcome geographic dispersion and state restrictions, the study takes a further conceptual step, looking at how actors enact platform affordances (Costa, 2018) and tailor their tactics to meet the specific challenges they have been facing.

4.2. Enacting Affordances

The concept of affordances has been employed to overcome the deterministic view of technological advancement and to point out the socially related status of technologies (Hutchby, 2001). Post-Gibson studies place affordances into a broader sociocultural context to develop a middle ground between social constructivism and techno-determinism. In this account, affordances have been seen as “imagined” (Nagy & Neff, 2015), “enacted” (Costa, 2018), or “actualised” (Jansson, 2022) in social practices. Jansson identifies three main affordance registers of digital environments: representation, connectivity, and logistics. Representation means the visibility that media traditionally provided, which was reinforced by digital technologies affording recontextualisation and constant updating of media texts (Jenkins et al., 2013). Connectivity highlights forms of mediated togetherness—online crowds—organised as socio-technical assemblages of algorithmic connections (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Finally, an increasingly crucial role in our current media ecology, where “data sets define our situation” (Rossiter, 2021, p. 135), is played by “logistical media” (Peters, 2015): “A logistical shift implies that the controlled, generative *movement* of various types of representation becomes more significant than representation *per se*” (Jansson, 2022, p. 17). Simply put, logistical affordances mean a thickening of data around certain informational units. Through analysis, I develop this theoretical point by looking at how such “thickness” becomes instrumentalised via different tools—hashtags, visual symbols, and Telegram—propelling both coordination across streets and the orchestration of data streams.

4.3. Telegram as a Facilitator of Logistics

Telegram, owned by Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov, has been discussed as a tool of “deplatforming” (Rogers, 2020) in the sense that, unlike other instant messaging platforms, its affordances enable private communication through chatbots and public communication via channels. Yet, its encryption has been deemed vulnerable and problematic for use in an authoritarian context—experts point out that Telegram secret chats offer optional end-to-end encryption, whereas default “cloud chats” are only server–client encrypted (Lucien, 2021). Scholars situate Telegram within a broader model of “digital authoritarianism” in countries like Iran (Alimardani & Michaelsen, 2021), Russia (Wijermars, 2022; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022), and Belarus (Rudnik & Rönnblom, 2025), where states have tightened technological and legal constraints. Unlike mainstream platforms, Telegram is not primarily algorithmically driven; the app’s extended architecture supports one-to-one and many-to-many communication which has become crucial for coordination. Herasimenka (2022) shows how Telegram enabled shadowed “poly-centric leadership” during Navalny’s 2018 protests when many opposition leaders were arrested. This study makes another contribution by

examining Telegram’s role not only as a stand-alone platform for protest mobilisation, as previous studies have done, but as embedded within the wider media ecology of Russian anti-war activism—focusing on how Telegram fosters logistics across physical localities and digital loci.

4.4. Navigating In-Visibility, Organising Proximity

This framework situates tactics and affordances as co-dependent and overlapping. Thus, amplification, evasion, and hijacking tactics (Treré & Bonini, 2024) are not only considered to be algorithmically based but they can also be carried out through the opportunities and constraints of both digital and physical environments, while affordances become meaningful when enacted. This mutual entanglement is especially important for an authoritarian context where being “seen” by the wrong audience can carry heavy consequences.

By emphasising logistical affordances (orchestrated through Telegram, hashtags, and more mundane symbolic chains), the analysis below reveals how activists amplify “in-visibility” (internal distributed visibility) when goals remain opaque or difficult to decipher for the authorities. The analysis demonstrates how anti-war actors can coordinate, motivate each other, and organise a palpable sense of proximity between scattered localities by creating “hidden transcripts” (Scott, 1985) through shared symbols and tactical repertoires.

5. Methodology

The data in this article form part of my PhD project, *Infrastructuring the Counter-Publics: Anti-War Civic Engagement in Russian Authoritarian, Militarised and Exile Contexts*, and derive from long-term ethnographic research carried out following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Between 2022 and 2024, I conducted online and offline observations in Georgia and Germany, both of which became informal hubs for anti-war Russians in exile. Additional fieldwork took place in the Czech Republic and in Sweden, where other prominent anti-war diasporic communities have formed. My observations include not only street rallies, such as those in Stockholm and Berlin, but also participant observation of more routine practices embedded in everyday life, such as writing letters to political prisoners and attending activists’ conferences and hackathons. In Tbilisi, for example, I visited several co-working spaces where anti-war Russians gathered and a shelter where I conducted interviews with those in exile.

In constructing the ethnographic space of this study, I combined on- and offline observation. Following Postill and Pink’s (2012) call to avoid reducing sociality to a “network vs community” dichotomy, I treat “ethnographic places” as emerging through the research process, tracing how localities are intertwined. Accordingly, I regularly followed the public Telegram channels and Instagram accounts of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, the Vesna movement, Russians Against the War (Stockholm), and several civic organisations such as OVD-Info, Go to the Forest, Teplica—Technologies for Social Good—and the open digital space Platforma. During interviews, participants were invited to share links and materials they considered important artefacts of their experience.

I employed purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 45 participants who became involved with Russian anti-war activism either as core organisers of such initiatives—such as the youth movement Vesna and the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR)—or as supportive publics: those who participated in anti-war protests

before they were forced into exile or those who left Russia pre-emptively to avoid potential risks. I interviewed only those who at the time of the interview had left the country to minimise the risk of exposure. Twelve participants left Russia before the war, and 33 during the first two years following the invasion. Core activists were recruited through ethnographic observation at street protests and related events such as conferences and workshops, which enabled me to establish trustful relationships. Participants on the fringes were recruited via snowball sampling: Initial interviewees circulated a recruitment announcement in closed Telegram groups and personal networks. I am not an activist myself and was transparent about my role as a researcher when taking part in these events.

The interviewees were geographically dispersed, reflecting the broad scattering of anti-war actors worldwide. Most were between 25 and 35 years old; more than half were women, others men, and several self-identified as LGBTQ+. I did not systematically collect data on ethnicity. The key inclusion criterion was involvement in anti-war activity, either as activists (organisers, core members of initiatives) or as part of the public who supported anti-war initiatives as volunteers or through mediated engagement, and/or were involved in protest action rallies. The majority of the semi-structured interviews were conducted online, and the length of each interview was between 1 and 1,5 hours. Each interview was structured in four main blocks: the personal background of participants of the study, personal motivations for their involvement in anti-war activism, their media practices and other forms of engagement, and reflections on platform affordances and constraints (upon request).

Standards of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority were adhered to: All participants were informed of the possible risks and gave their consent to have their interviews recorded, provided that the interviews were to be anonymised.

6. Constituting Proximity Across Protest Spaces

6.1. “Memetic Signifiers” as Amplifiers of Visibility

The procession I joined in Stockholm on June 12th, 2022, carried the Ukrainian national flag as well as white-blue-white flags, with a large banner at the front. This new flag design was directly drawn from social media discussions over the Russian tricolour’s association with the war, wherein the red field was thought to invoke associations with the colour of blood in its use by Russian military forces to mark occupied territories. As a symbol of anti-war protests, this revamped flag had appeared spontaneously and quickly spread among Russian communities abroad. At that moment, the flag as a symbol of protest helped to map and make visible a number of self-organised anti-war groups and individuals across the world. Here, both the representative and logistical affordances of platforms were enacted in practices (Costa, 2018). Actors used the representation of social media, particularly Instagram, which many refer to as an effective visual instrument, in order to flood online spaces with new white-blue-white symbols (see Figure 1).

In parallel, “logistical affordances” (likes, shares, hashtags) enabled a “thickness” of data (Jansson, 2022), allowing white-blue-white symbols to be tracked, aggregated, and promoted. These protest actions were collected and shared under common memetic banners in social media feeds. As one of the activists from Stockholm noted, one of the first videos that their organisation produced for Instagram was about the white-blue-white flag, and this video became viral. My participants describe how they added

increase its potential reach” (p. 90). This, in my study, describes precisely how hashtags were imagined and enacted by dispersed diaspora-based anti-war groups.

Demonstrations for peace at the outbreak of the war in 2022 involved more than 80 anti-war communities across the world, and their online appearance was often framed through hashtags such as #whitebluewhite, #russiansagainstwar, and #standwithukraine. My participants describe how they aimed to make the hashtags equally open for any political propositions and identities: “We didn’t use any words related to...I don’t know—liberal values or democracy. Back then we just wanted people against war to join us, and we made our hashtags maximally open for everyone” (Respondent 049, male, age 30–40).

Such openness for anyone means that hashtags link individuals with collectives and enable organised spatio-temporal modes among heterogeneous actors via “synchronisation” (Jordheim & Ytreberg, 2021). In this regard, hashtags as material objects become latent infrastructures for logistics. Unlike “hard infrastructures,” they appear as situated in contexts and evoked through practices as both a technology for mobility and a cultural form that carries meaning (Krämer & Otto, 2023).



Figure 2. Instagram hashtag search #russiansagainstwar regarding announcements of anti-war demonstrations: (a) Stockholm, Sweden, (b) Seoul, South Korea, (c) Bellevue, USA. Source: (a) Russians_against_war_se (2024); (b) Tochka_opory_kr (2024); (c) Russianseattleforfreedom (2024).

6.1.2. “Focusers of Attention”: Activists as Celebrities and Celebrities as Activists

The newly organised anti-war groups enforce their visibility with the support of those celebrities who have become part of anti-war activism as well as those who have achieved fame by virtue of their activism and management of personal accounts on social media. Such networked “microcelebrity activists” possess an ability to command and focus attention (Tufekci, 2013), making use of the mechanisms of personalised communication and self-representation that platforms encourage. Glazunova and Amadoru (2023) identify “anti-regime influentials” as key social media actors who gained prominence during protests triggered by Alexei Navalny’s imprisonment in 2021. Their study demonstrates how influencers across X, YouTube, and Facebook managed algorithmic recommendations to leverage their criticism of the regime and the visibility of their dissent.

Furthermore, the network of celebrities and influencers has become an important amplifier of Russian anti-war activism. One such example is the activist and writer Daria Serenko, who left Russia shortly after the war

and initiated the public Telegram channel FAR, which quickly gained popularity (as of today, FAR has more than 30,000 subscribers). Not least, Daria has become known for her anti-war poetry, autofiction novels, and feminist statements. In her personal accounts on Facebook and Instagram, Serenko shares life stories of activism in exile, of being wanted in her home country, and of making public anti-war statements as a writer and feminist activist. The embeddedness into grassroots activism, as well as the representative power that such microcelebrities wield, puts them in a unique position that facilitates the bringing together of very disparate levels of the anti-war movement and connecting the fringes with the core. As another activist with such a microcelebrity status told me, “after two handshakes we all know each other and we of course coordinate our actions when it is important to make certain things visible” (Respondent 032, female, age 30–40).

Moreover, following the Russian army’s invasion of Ukraine, numerous public figures, including musicians, actors, and journalists, who had made anti-war statements were forced into exile. Many were branded as “foreign agents” or were classified as being linked to extremism. A number of these celebrities—for example, the comedian Tatyana Lazareva and the rap musician Noize MC—became integrated with the grassroots, involved with internal communication, and provided another level of visibility of the meso level of anti-war actors:

We asked so-called leaders of public opinion to support and share information about the upcoming rally. Some people among the organisers knew someone in person, while others we just contacted on social media. Many supported us since it was the first such globally organised action of Russians abroad, they started to share our information. (Respondent 049, male, age 30–40)

Through such organised synchronisation, networks of influencers impose another level of logistics inside Russian anti-war communities, wherein personal accounts with large numbers of followers are used to bypass and rechannel algorithmic logistics in order to amplify the visibility of particular events, providing an arena for recognition. Again, these amplification tactics follow the same pattern as that considered above, relying on different levels of imposed logistics: memetic symbols, hashtags, and personal accounts with a high level of visibility.

6.2. In the Space of In-Visibility

6.2.1. Telegram Connectivity and Evasion Tactics

While anti-war actors outside Russia by and large aim to amplify visibility, the anti-war actors inside the country, under imposed legal restrictions, have been forced to operate under the radar. Tréré and Bonini (2024) coined the concept of evasion to describe a form of algorithm-based tactics—for example, when Turkish activists used vernacular images from popular culture for criticism of the president, thus lowering the risk of being detected by the government. In Russia, since the outset of the war, evasion tactics have changed the pattern of everyday usage from algorithmically driven social media platforms to communication on Telegram. The Messenger app was frequently used during the initial anti-war protests but also when there was a crackdown on mass rallies and people urgently began leaving the country.

The youth movement Vesna (Spring) was one of the organisations behind the calls for street protests in Russia. Vesna used loose coordination in Telegram underpinned by Facebook groups previously associated with Alexei

Navalny's headquarters, employing them as a submerged network for establishing contacts with those who could organise, lead, and broadcast protest actions across Russia. One of my respondents from the Vesna movement, which was behind this coordination, describes how the Vesna channel on Telegram began to grow quickly after they had announced their first anti-war rally across the country:

At the moment when the war started, previous oppositional structures were dysfunctional inside Russia; they were banned as extremist organisations (like, for example, Navalny's foundation), but Vesna still existed plus we were well known among the broader activist community. When we announced an anti-war marathon across the country through our Telegram channels, the information started spreading very quickly. People just reposted our announcement or shared a link because the demand for protest actions was very high....We had something like 1,000 subscribers on the federal Vesna channel, but in the first few months of anti-war protests, we got more than 50,000 followers, and at our last protest wave against mobilisation in April 2022, we had 120,000. (Respondent 012, male, age 25–35)

My respondents describe how, at the beginning of the war (before the pro-war so-called "Z-channels" began actively mastering Telegram for pro-war mobilisation), citizens taking steps into protest actions were sending each other direct links inviting each other to join newly appeared anti-war groups and channels.

Elena, an actress at a small alternative theatre, joined anti-war rallies in Saint Petersburg in February 2022. She started following Vesna's public channel, which was then gaining in popularity. In parallel, she joined small "secret chats" where people were invited through "friends of friends" and which became informal coordination points for them, mainly self-organised, chaotic, and spontaneous. Many of Elena's friends followed the OVD-Info public channel, a civil rights organisation providing monitoring and legal aid, for example, to those who had been detained:

There was a lack of coordination, of course, but we, for example, also followed the OVD-Info channel. They regularly published information on where people were detained and constantly updated these statistics. This helped us, also, to regulate our actions on the streets to avoid the places where we could be caught by the police. Plus, OVD-Info could ask their followers to call the police to find people who had been detained....I myself helped find such people, those who were detained and needed legal assistance. (Respondent 041, female, age 25–35)

Through Telegram's connectivity, such organisations as OVD-Info and a number of other civic and journalistic projects made protest actions and cases of detention visible. In parallel, these organisations also posted detailed instructions on how to prepare for protests—recommending, among other things, methods for locking away sensitive information on mobile phones and whom to contact in the case of arrest and the need for legal assistance. Another participant of the anti-war rallies in Moscow described how he printed and distributed leaflets that had been circulating on Telegram, spreading them on the street:

When you go for a street protest, you feel jitters in your body, and you try to overcome them. For these rallies in February, I took my backpack with warm socks, water, and leaflets. I printed OVD-Info leaflets on how to behave in the case of police detention and gave them to people on the streets.

Why did you decide to spread these instructions on the streets? Were you somehow affiliated with the organisation?

No, I wasn't, but I felt this duty; I wanted to do something meaningful. After the first crackdowns, it was evident that we needed better preparation for street rallies. (Respondent 017, male, age 25–35)

The combination of Telegram chatbot connectivity and representativity on social media has facilitated chains of logistical actions (Jansson, 2022) among anti-war actors. Such actions, as Jansson denotes, are not only the labour of users for the benefit of platforms, but they also strive to enable the communicative process and promote a sense of conducting meaningful actions (Jansson, 2022, p. 155). This is precisely how many of my participants reflect on their reliance on Telegram, which they appropriated for logistics, providing self-organised coordination between multiple actors—organisations and individuals.

6.2.2. Organising Logistics: Between Streets and Streams

The aftermath of the 2022 anti-war protests resulted in mass repression (reaching its peak in the first months of the war, with nearly 20,000 people detained). Thus, what began as tactical contention evolved into a more strategic use of media technologies for protest resilience in the face of growing control and repression. My respondents among the activists expressed the need to continuously adapt to a rapidly changing context, lacking organisational and human resources, and looking for new and more strategic forms of resistance. As one of the Vesna movement activists explained, “because many were detained and started leaving the country, we had to change the format of protest actions to a more decentralised one” (Respondent 012, male, age 25–35).

Movements like Vesna and FAR used their public channels on Telegram and Instagram to post anti-war symbols, slogans, leaflets, and stickers, which anyone could print and disseminate on the streets. In parallel, they produced visual cards with instructions for self-protection for those who were spreading anti-war agitation on the streets, which were circulating across social media—Instagram and Telegram channels primarily. At the same time, Telegram was utilised for a kind of reverse loop: Those who went on to the streets would take pictures of anti-war agitation and submit them via chatbots to Vesna, FAR, or other channels, which then created daily updates on protest actions (see Figure 3). As expressed by a Vesna activist, they adopted media infrastructures for these new dispersed actions:

People themselves started sending to our chatbot, at first, anti-war graffiti and leaflets. We realised that we could create an infrastructure for these actions. So we started generating leaflet templates on Instagram that people could print themselves and spread on the streets. At the very beginning, we received endless flows of such anti-war pictures in our chatbot, 300-500 per day. (Respondent 012, male, age 25–35)



Figure 3. Daily updates of anti-war agitation: (a) campaign "Mariupul-5000", (b) campaign "No war!" Source: (a) FAR (2022a); (b) Vesna (2025).

What seemed to be single and separated pieces of anti-war agitation on the streets, in the overlap of Instagram's visual affordances and Telegram's organised logistics, enabled datafied "semantic units" (Milan, 2015) that linked images, separated localities, and comments, making the anti-war actors visible to themselves and others on social media and also on the streets. In this way, my participant living in Stockholm recognised other people attending a protest on Sergels Torg with a white cross—a symbol that members of the FAR initiative were spreading in Russian cities after the assaults on the Ukrainian city of Mariupol:

I came to the square and immediately recognised the people with a white cross sign—Mariupol-5000, which I had seen on Instagram or maybe Telegram, I don't remember—used by activists in Russia, and that is how I met the people with whom we later organised the Feminist Anti-War cell in Stockholm. (Respondent 051, female, age 25–35)

In other words, Telegram enabled the logistical orchestration of fragmented street agitation and also datafied streams on social media, since people received direct links to particular Instagram accounts or Telegram channels. The reliance on Telegram not only provided anonymity but also propelled logistics for poly-centric coordination.

6.2.3. Hijacking as Counter-Logistical Intervention

Treré and Bonini (2024) designated "hijacking" as a common form of activist tactics for disturbing, for example, the algorithmic flow of hashtags. Here, I consider hijacking as a form of logistical intervention organised with the use of material and technological resources (both digital and physical) at the disposal of anti-war actors, looking at how such actors maintained the regime of in-visibility through "intervention into" existing communicative flows in order to disturb them (Jansson, 2022, p. 158).

Go to the Forest (Russian name *Idite lesom*) is an organisation that provides legal and financial support for Russian deserters and draft evaders (Telegram channel is *Go to the forest* [t.me/iditelesom_help] with 112,500 subscribers in October 2024). *Idite lesom* is what you would figuratively say to someone to mean “go away,” “get out of here,” “get lost,” and the name carries a double meaning since literally hiding in the forest is recognised as a common method for avoiding conscription. The organisation also provides and spreads information and instructions on how to protect relatives and friends from army conscription.

On October 1st, 2024, following rumours of a new mobilisation drive (the Russian government has, thus far, seemed determined to avoid the word “mobilisation” and never announced any official date), Go to the Forest announced an anti-war marathon, encouraging their followers to draw anti-war symbols by tracing their geolocation history while running. Step-by-step instructions were published, detailing how to perform anti-war routes by using the mobile app Strava for ranging and how to submit the task via a chatbot where images were published on Go to the Forest’s Telegram channel. Such marathons additionally functioned as fundraisers, with a 20€ fee for each participant. Tactics such as these could be said to have gone beyond algorithmic hijacking (Treré & Bonini, 2024) in rather imposing logistical intervention into physical and digital spaces: superimposing anti-war traces onto maps of Russian cities and linking them with marathon runners abroad (see Figure 4). Also, such protest actions have been considered comparatively safe to conduct inside Russia.

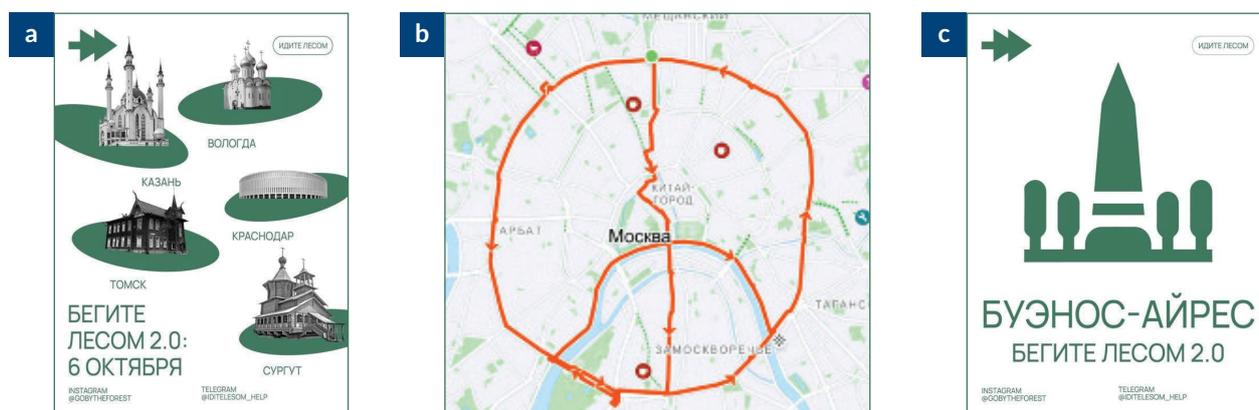


Figure 4. Announcements of anti-war marathon “Run to the Forest”: (a) Russian cities, (b) the anti-war route, Moscow, and (c) Buenos Aires. Source: (a) Go to the Forest (2024a), (b) Go to the Forest (2024b), (c) Go to the Forest (2024c).

Anti-war banknotes are another similar example of a logistical intervention launched as a campaign by the FAR. They promoted the use of banknotes and coins with added anti-war inscriptions, utilising money as a medium of logistics for the distribution of anti-war agitation. As their step-by-step instruction underlines, the initial link (the creator of the inscription) would soon become lost in the chain of exchanges. However, following intensified state restrictions, performing even such mundane actions inside the country has turned out to carry high risks of imprisonment.

In spring 2024, FAR began disseminating digital anti-war Easter postcards using the vernacular style of such digital cards that is popular among Russian users for sending congratulations via messenger apps or on Russian social media such as Odnoklassniki or V Kontakte (Figure 5). While the two examples above were aimed at interfering in the physical realm, the dissemination of anti-war Easter cards was organised as an

intervention into everyday communication by simulating the particular visual aesthetic of such communication but providing it with an explicit anti-war message. It became popular to send these cards to relatives or friends via WhatsApp or Telegram to declare one's anti-war position (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Anti-war banknotes (a) and anti-war postcard (b). Notes: (a) Money with anti-war slogans, and (b) Easter postcard, “enough of the war.” Source: (a) Vesna (2022); (b) FAR (2022b).

These examples highlight how anti-war actors organise (counter-)logistical actions for interfering in the public realm. This kind of hijacking relies on logistical affordances and their hybrid operability between the physical and the digital realms. By focusing on evasion and hijacking as key tactics, the analysis views them not only as algorithmic manoeuvres but as intertwined with socio-spatial infrastructures and material objects at the disposal of actors. These tactics encompass how anti-war actors aim to insert anti-war agitation into the everyday-life continuum, and to interfere in public spaces by organising proximity between streets and streams.

7. Discussion

Through the lens of media affordances, this article has examined two interconnected research questions: first, how proximity between protest spaces has played out inside Russia, where street rallies were criminalised and social media monitored, and outside Russia by actors in exile; and second, how anti-war Russians leveraged media affordances to organise covert street actions in the country and link them with coordinated rallies abroad to sustain collective agency across dispersed and high-risk settings.

In response to the first question, the study indicates that actors outside Russia primarily aimed for “visibility” in order to constitute a collective we among separated groups in exile and gain recognition as collective actors, whereas inside the country, they sought *in-visibility* by looking for tactics that would work under increasing repression (lacking organisational resources and with diminishing possibilities for open protests).

In exile, anti-war actors have aimed to establish collective agency through “amplified visibility” (Treré & Bonini, 2024). Dispersed and separated anti-war groups across the world have coped with the algorithmic

logic of platforms, as discussed. They have tactically achieved amplification by combining different affordances of platforms: representational and logistical. The memetic white-blue-white flag, Instagram visuals, and celebrity endorsements are representational affordances. In parallel, dispersed diaspora-based anti-war groups have developed hashtags—#whitebluewhite, #russiansagainstwar, and #standwithukraine—providing logistics and functioning as “an infrastructure of mobility, navigation, and reach” (Krämer & Otto, 2023, p. 90). These multiple layers were captured and streamlined through Telegram’s direct communication and coordination between a number of newly appeared anti-war initiatives that aimed to unite individuals. The analysis reveals how anti-war actors used Telegram for logistical orientation across informational streams by sharing direct links and also for polycentric coordination among separated groups abroad, whereas on mainstream platforms, orientation was underpinned by hashtags and templates as logistical organisers.

Domestically, anti-war actors followed paths of evasion and hijacking (Treré & Bonini, 2024). Evasion was initially about avoiding algorithmic or state detection but developed as repression intensified, shifting protests into small-scale, decentralised actions. Yet, as the empirical findings show, such tactics were not merely related to the algorithmic logic of the mainstream platforms. Instead, actors aimed to facilitate chains of “logistical actions” in order to highlight street anti-war agitation with datafied streams to make it visible for audiences on social media. Movements like Vesna, FAR, and human rights organisations like OVD-Info used their public channels on Telegram and Instagram to post anti-war symbols, slogans, leaflets, and stickers, which anyone could print and disseminate on the streets of Russia. Telegram was utilised for a reverse loop—to submit pictures of anti-war agitation on the street via Telegram’s chatbots to the anti-war channels of Vesna or FAR, which then created daily updates on protest actions. To hijack communicative flows (Treré & Bonini, 2024), actors advanced counter-logistical interventions. These interventions use existing logistical channels—maps, money, or greetings—to carry dissent into everyday life. Such tactics helped to establish the “regime of in-visibility”—a repertoire of protest actions under repression and surveillance.

Turning to RQ2, the study reveals how a trade-off between in-visibility and visibility shaped collective agency; yet, these two regimes overlapped and linked actors in exile and inside Russia. The collective agency has been exercised through organised polycentric coordination among activists in exile and people disseminating anti-war messages on Russian streets. Such coordination also facilitated risk distribution—actors in exile made anti-war agitation from Russian streets visible on platform streams, whereas those in the country took the risk of direct action. Ultimately, in failing to organise mass anti-war rallies in the country, anti-war actors manage to create a “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1985)—the offstage criticism of power voiced among multiple subordinated groups both inside and outside Russia. That contributed to finding and keeping open a venue for an action repertoire of political contention directed against the state and its attempts to establish loyalty and maintain the status quo in Russian society regarding the war against Ukraine. The collective agency of anti-war civic activists is not a unified or stable ideology but a processual capacity to act together despite disagreements and frictions, continually generated through proximity.

8. Conclusion

The ethnographic data and interviews presented in this article have demonstrated that social media networks do not generate protest spaces; rather, such spaces depend on the proximity that can be

constituted through mediated interactions between geographic localities. By operationalising Treré and Bonini's (2024) framework, the analysis emphasises how amplification, evasion, and hijacking are enabled within infrastructural affordances.

Placing Telegram as embedded into the broader media ecology of anti-war activism, the study makes an important contribution in that the platform not only provided actors with anonymity but also became an important "site of logistics." Telegram chatbots and channels (as well as other logistical organisers like hashtags and memetic templates) were widely used, enabling initially spontaneous and fragmented instances of anti-war agitation on the streets to be converted into streams of semantically coherent units. Moreover, logistics have been especially vital for coordination and navigation amid divergent contexts: rising authoritarian pressure inside Russia and the global dispersion of exile groups. Hence, proximity to a large extent depends on the coordination and logistical intensifications that Telegram fosters.

In her theoretical account, Massey (2005) shows how proximity privileges some actors (e.g., regime centres with media control) while distancing others (e.g., dispersed activists under surveillance), yet civic activists can counter this by manufacturing alternative proximities through polycentric coordination by turning relational closeness into hidden forms of solidarity.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

In accordance with the approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Reference number 2023-00388-01), the research data of this project is anonymised and stored on Karlstad University's system Sunet Drive, accessible only to the researchers of the project. Anonymised outtakes from interviews can be provided by the author at request.

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LLMs have been used for grammar revision, syntax, and coherence of sentences.

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