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# ZOiS REPORT

## MOBILISING FOR REGIONAL PROTESTS ON RUSSIAN SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CASE OF Khabarovsk

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## Summary

The 2020 protests in Khabarovsk Krai, triggered by the arrest and subsequent detention of the governor Sergey Furgal on allegations of organising killings in the early 2000s, continued for several months; at their peak, the demonstrations and rallies had more than ten thousand participants in the region’s capital alone. This ZOiS Report offers several possible explanations for the longevity and mass character of the protests.

First, it discusses pre-existing socioeconomic and political developments in the region. Territorial disparity, one of the major structural factors driving social inequality in Russia, affects Khabarovsk Krai on several levels:

- Due to the southern districts’ modernised occupational structures and infrastructure, they were more vulnerable to the recent economic crisis and the decrease in real incomes.
- Considering Russia-wide centre-periphery relations and inequality, Khabarovsk Krai lies mid-field in terms of dependency on federal budget transfers. Such transfers, however, were not used in Khabarovsk during the 2018 gubernatorial election to buy the loyalty of voters (a popular electoral techniques). This helped Furgal to win against the Kremlin-backed incumbent, together with the escalation of protest voting when discontented

non-voters participated in the second round after seeing the incumbent's vulnerability.

- The results of other major elections and votes in 2018, 2019 and 2020 reinforced Khabarovsk's newly acquired reputation as a protest region and were vividly remembered during the 2020 protests, in both a positive variant ("Our governor, our choice") and in a negative framing ("Moscow's revenge for protest voting").

Second, the report explores the framing (interpretation) of events around Furgal's prosecution and the protests on Russian social media. Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques were used to reconstruct the long-term dynamics of positive, negative and neutral social media coverage, and, for two selected periods, to identify clusters of similar texts and main frames supporting mobilisation. The two levels, i.e. background and framing, are interrelated:

- Furgal's election was a political victory for discontented voters, and this powered the "our governor" variant of the "people's governor" framing. Another variant, "the good governor", complements the "our governor" variant and emphasises Furgal's own qualities. If both frames are combined, the framing is about Furgal who was elected "by us" out of desperation and then proved himself worthy.
- The Far East identity as the symbolic counterpart to the socioeconomic centre-periphery dimension has been recursively reproduced through framing of Khabarovsk as the "rebellious city" of the "krai of freedom-loving people".
- The negative interpretation of "revenge on the protest region" is constructed in a further group of texts. Regional identity can be reproduced not only by providing related interpretations of events, but is created performatively by posts which make protest actions in the small towns and villages visible.
- The protest practice of "pigeon feeding" is at the heart of the last cluster and stands both for the ironical prevention of digital repression and for actual street action.

The second period analysed covers events in early October: the attempted protest camp in Lenin Square and its violent dispersal, the first of its kind during this mobilisation:

- While the expression of shock and indignation is quite similar to the first period, the framing does not show the plurality of voices and interpretations of the initial protest phase and is focused mainly on police violence and mass detentions (however, different aspects and episodes are emphasised in different clusters).
- The transformation of who are seen as opponents of the protests and Furgal is crucial here—police forces are no longer seen as "police [that] are with

the people”. The regional dimension is applied mainly to the antagonists, with the violent dispersal and the acting governor Degtyarev as its initiator being brought in (to Khabarovsk) from Moscow. While the reaction to repression and police violence can become a mobilising factor and re-invigorate protests, this did not happen in Khabarovsk.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The July 2020 arrest of the then governor of Khabarovsk Krai in the Russian Far East (on allegations of organising several killings in 2004–2005) sparked large-scale protests in the region, which took outside observers by surprise. Their surprise was to some degree unjustified, given both the rich history of political conflicts in the Russian Far East and the many recent protest mobilisations in Russian regions, the most prominent cases being the protest camp in Shies in Arkhangelsk Oblast against a new landfill for Moscow’s waste and protests in Bashkortostan against plans to use Kushtau Hill for limestone mining. However, the level of popular support for Sergey Furgal, elected as the candidate of the “systemic opposition” party LDPR in 2018, was something new in terms of both mass character and longevity. An overview of protest events in July 2020, which was marked by the largest street actions, and the subsequent four months of protests is provided in [FIGURES 1 and 2](#).

To enhance our understanding of how this mobilisation became possible, this ZOiS Report focuses on social media as a main communication sphere for alternative discourses and oppositional activities in Russia. The study “Regional protests on Russian social media”, which started at ZOiS in December 2020 and whose initial results are presented here, uses Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to identify the dynamics of social media mobilisation and major mobilisation discourses around the Khabarovsk Krai protests.

As becomes immediately apparent, the most popular slogans such as “Freedom”, “I am/We are Furgal” and “We are the power” are flanked by a plurality of voices that express different aspects of unfair treatment of the region and its governor. This plurality and the impressive number of relevant posts on Russian-language social media make the study of online-based framing, i.e. construction of shared interpretations of problems, actors and possible actions in the context of protest mobilisation,<sup>2</sup> both important and challeng-

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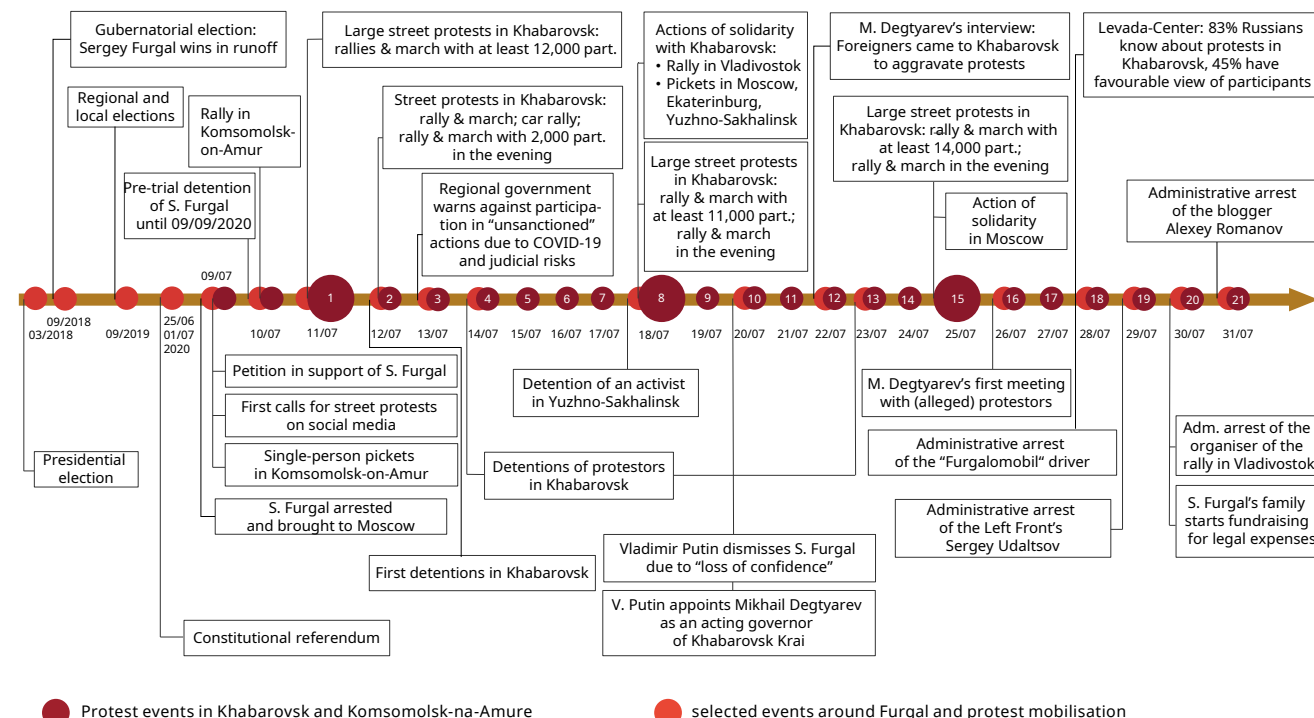
1 I thank Alena Surina, research assistant at ZOiS, for her contribution in mining and analysing the social media data and compiling timelines of the protests. I also thank Dr Gregor Lämmel for programming the NLP models.

2 Benford, Robert D. and David A. Snow (2000). Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611 – 639.

FIGURE 1

### Protest events in Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure and selected events around Furgal and protest mobilisation up to and during July 2020

Numbers refer to the day of protests in Khabarovsk. Larger dots mean larger protest events.

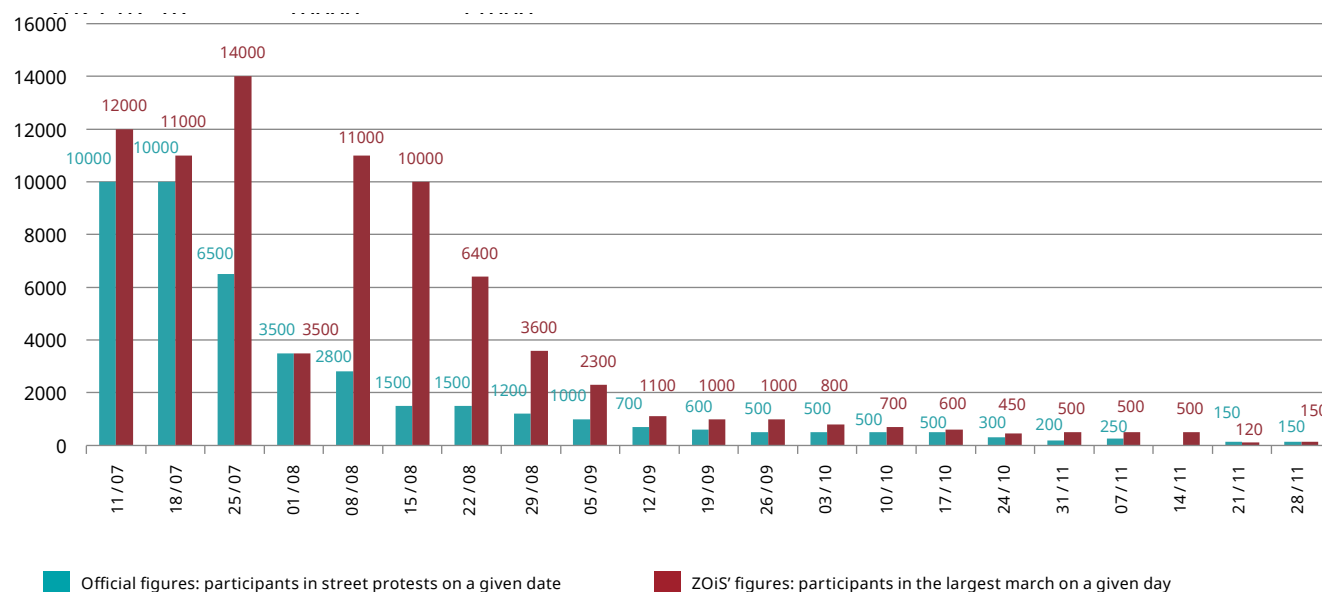


Sources: [www.dvnovosti.ru](http://www.dvnovosti.ru), [www.interfax.ru](http://www.interfax.ru), [www.interfax-russia.ru](http://www.interfax-russia.ru), [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru), [www.ovdinfo.org](http://www.ovdinfo.org), [www.rbk.ru](http://www.rbk.ru), [www.vedomosti.ru](http://www.vedomosti.ru), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), [www.znak.com](http://www.znak.com), own figures

FIGURE 2

### Number of participants in larger protest events ("Saturday protests") in Khabarovsk

July – November 2020



Source: Official figures as published by the Ministry of Interior or Khabarovsk municipality, ZOIS' figures estimated using <https://mapchecking.com> with Youtube and Instagram videos

ing. To structure the large corpus and to reconstruct the main lines of interpretation, the study uses semi-automated computational analysis, which is then combined with qualitative interpretation of texts representing certain clusters, as explained below in the Method section. This analysis focuses on two periods: the start of the protests in July and the violent dispersal of an attempted protest camp on Lenin Square in Khabarovsk in October 2020.

## Context

### Protest vote for Sergey Furgal in 2018

**Sergey Furgal is not an oppositional leader like Alexey Navalny.**

The protests in Khabarovsk Krai after the arrest and detention of Sergey Furgal in July 2020 are unique in terms of their longevity in contemporary Russia. However, despite being at the centre of the protest mobilisation, Furgal himself is not an oppositional leader like Alexey Navalny or the late Boris Nemtsov. In fact, he has more in common with the KPRF governor Valentin Konovalov, elected in the Republic of Khakassiya in the same super-elections in autumn 2018. Both political figures, candidates fielded by the so-called systemic opposition (parties represented in the State Duma and part of the hybrid authoritarian system rather than the opposition) are products, not initiators, of protest voting. We can understand the singularity of the Khabarovsk protests better by comparing the election there to other regional or gubernatorial elections in the framework of “united election day” in 2018.

For many years, the authorities in Russia have been using a bundle of electoral techniques—more or less legal, more or less direct—to influence outcomes and enable loyal candidates and parties to win. One widespread strategy, used during the 2018 elections as well, is to pacify voters or buy their loyalty by increasing transfers from the federal to the regional budget and boosting social benefits (e.g. financial contributions to utility payments) or incomes for public sector employees such as teachers or health workers in the months before the election.<sup>3</sup> While the federal authorities had used this tool in several regions, they had not done so in the regions where the state-supported candidate lost. For Khabarovsk Krai as one of these cases, the federal transfers were not raised, but slightly reduced. Furthermore, to implement Putin’s “May decrees” of 2012, issued to fulfil his election pledges, and to increase the wages of public sector employees, the regional government had to cut social spending while simultaneously dealing with a budget deficit.<sup>4</sup> The fact that voters had not been “pacified” by budgetary measures helped Furgal win the election against the incumbent Vyacheslav Shport from United Russia/Edinaya Rossiya.

Another feature that the last gubernatorial election in Khabarovsk has in common with other regions where the authorities’ candidate could not win

3 Zubarevich, Natalia (2018). “Podkup” imeet znachenie, no ogranichennoe. Socialno-economiche faktory regionalnykh vyborov 2018 g. In: Rogov, Kirill (ed.), Stress-test na pol-Rossii. Tekhnologii elektoralnogo dominirovaniya i ikh ogranicheniya. Analiz regionalnykh vyborov 2018 g, 19 – 24, 20.

4 Zubarevich 2018, 21.

in the first round (Primorsky Krai, Khakassiya and Vladimir Oblast) is what has been dubbed an escalation of protest voting: the pro-Kremlin candidate's poor results inspired the initially pessimistic oppositional non-voters to participate in the second round, so that we see a sharp increase in turnout and votes for alternative candidates.<sup>5</sup> For Khabarovsk, this resulted in a 11.4% increase in turnout and a 33.8% surge in votes for Furgal, who won a landslide victory with 69.6% of the votes. Moreover, the planned and heavily criticised pension reform in 2018 overshadowed the regional election campaigns and fuelled voting against the pro-Kremlin candidates.<sup>6</sup>

When Shport was challenged by Furgal at the gubernatorial election in 2013, he easily won against all “technical candidates” (who were meant to legitimise the election without posing a threat). In 2018, the incumbent, who was now feeling the pressure, offered the unlikely winner of the first round an opportunity for cooperation and the post of first vice-governor—and Furgal accepted, but did not withdraw. Neither Shport nor Furgal campaigned actively, at least not before Shport tried to resolve the situation.<sup>7</sup> Furgal told journalists that people wanted change; that the Krai needed to focus on “regional self-interest”, which in reality meant more support from Moscow; that the government had to be accountable to the people; and that he would address a raft of socioeconomic problems.<sup>8</sup> We might describe him as a “hands-on populist”, but before being elected, Furgal had not attempted to mobilise popular support. He was not an outsider, but a well-integrated representative of the Russian political elite, a second-term member of the State Duma (he won a direct mandate in Komsomolsk-na-Amure in 2016<sup>9</sup>) and the deputy head of its Committee on Public Health.

To sum up, Furgal's election was a political victory, first and foremost, not for the politician who was able to mobilise supporters most effectively, but for discontented voters who were unhappy with the status quo. People in Khabarovsk Krai took to the streets in 2020 after being deprived of their victory in order to protest against humiliating treatment, their lack of a voice and the absence of democracy.<sup>10</sup> That is very different from the situation of politician Alexei Navalny, who, despite the immense popularity of his anti-corruption videos, could not have been legitimised by election and is associated with “anti-systemic opposition” rather than being seen as the “people's choice”.

**Furgal's election was a political victory for discontented voters.**

5 Kynev, Aleksandr, Perov, Nikolay and Kirill Rogov (2018). Regionalnye vybory-2018: Tekhnologii elektoralnogo dominirovaniya i ikh ogranicheniya. In: Rogov, Kirill (ed.), Stress-test na pol-Rossii. Tekhnologii elektoralnogo dominirovaniya i ikh ogranicheniya. Analiz regionalnykh vyborov 2018 g, 6 – 18, 10 – 12.

6 Kynev et al. 2018, 12.

7 Pertsev, Andrey (2018, 19 September). S vyborov snyali problemu pobeditelya. Kak prohodit vtoroy tur golosovaniya v Khabarovskom Krae, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3745194>.

8 Debri DV, Kandidat v gubernatory Khabarovskogo Kraja Sergey Furgal rasskazal o budushchem v Krae, 11.09.2018, [http://debri-dv.com/article/20067/kandidat\\_v\\_gubernatory\\_khabarovskogo\\_kraya\\_sergey\\_furgal\\_rasskazal\\_o\\_budushchem\\_v\\_krae](http://debri-dv.com/article/20067/kandidat_v_gubernatory_khabarovskogo_kraya_sergey_furgal_rasskazal_o_budushchem_v_krae); DV-Khab, Mir glazami Furgala: chto predlagaet sdelat v Khabarovskom Krae kandidat v gubernatory, 11.09.2018, <https://www.dvnovosti.ru/khab/2018/09/11/88119/>.

9 United Russia refrained from nominating its own candidate in the district in a move which was criticised as an implicit “sharing” of districts; see Nagornyyh, Irina (2016, 28 September). Edinaya Rossiya naznachila dogovornye okruga. Parlamentskie partii prinyali podarok bez vostorga, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3024833>.

10 Kobrin, Kirill (2020). Demokratichesky socializm ili varvarstvo: Sluchay Rossii XXI veka. Open Democracy Russia. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ru/demokraticheskiy-sotsializm-ili-varvarstvo/>.

After the 2018 gubernatorial election produced poor results for many Kremlin-backed candidates, the regime reviewed its approach, relying even more on the restriction of access for oppositional candidates, repression of activists and key NGOs ahead of elections, and direct manipulation of results.

### Khabarovsk Krai: socioeconomic situation

The socioeconomic situation provides the background to Furgal's victory in 2018 and the 2020 protests. The study of social movements shows that economic grievances per se are rarely enough to spark open protests, especially if these grievances became permanent. However, they can generate a level of background discontent and make mobilisation around even non-economic topics (which dominated the 2019–2020 protests in Russia) more likely.

Experts disagree on the relevance of socioeconomic factors to regional elections in Russia. Geographer Natalia Zubarevich argues that the regional socioeconomic situation did not directly influence the outcomes of gubernatorial elections in 2018.<sup>11</sup> Political scientist Maria Snegovaya, however, makes a plausible claim that the economic decline is more pronounced on the regional level, and the political dynamic in the regions may be more responsive to the country's economic dynamic.<sup>12</sup> A comparison of first-round elections of regional leaders between 2012 and 2018 shows that the social and economic situation in the regions, indicated by the dynamics of real incomes, has a significant impact on public support for Kremlin-backed candidates.<sup>13</sup> The decreasing incomes that cause relative deprivation are not only influenced by federal-level or global economic trends, but follow peculiar regional logics. In Khabarovsk Krai, the local authorities and the federal centre failed to address economic problems, which led to a decline in employment opportunities in some important traditional sectors, so that the discrepancy between the official discourse of a thriving region and decreasing real incomes triggered protest voting.<sup>14</sup>

Khabarovsk Krai is a mid-ranking Russian region in terms of its dependency on the federal budget (measured by transfers) and socioeconomic development (measured by combined economic, budgetary and demographic indicators), being neither a better-off region nor an outsider.<sup>15</sup> In comparison to other regions of Dalnevostochny Federalny Okrug, Khabarovsk Krai, together with Primorsky Krai and the Republic of Sakha, constitutes a middle group in this very disparate macro-region.<sup>16</sup> Territorial disparity, described as a major dimension of social inequality in Russia,<sup>17</sup> is reproduced again

11 Zubarevich 2018.

12 Snegovaya, Maria (2020). Russia's Crumbling Power Vertical: Decreasing Disposable Income Drives Discontentment. PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 669, September 2020, 2.

13 Kozlov, Vladimir and Maria Snegovaya (2019). Factors of Competitiveness in Russian Gubernatorial Elections, 2012–2018. Free Russia Foundation.

14 Kozlov and Snegovaya 2019, 24.

15 Zubarevich, Natalia, Makarentseva, Alla and Nikita Mkrtchyan (2020). Sotsialno-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie regionov i demograficheskie itogi 2019 g. Russian Economic Development, 27 (4), April 2020; RIA Reiting, Reiting sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo polozheniya sub'ektov RF. Itogi 2019 goda, Moscow 2020, [http://vid1.rian.ru/ig/ratings/rating\\_regions\\_2020.pdf](http://vid1.rian.ru/ig/ratings/rating_regions_2020.pdf).

16 RIA Reiting 2020: 37

17 Zubarevich, Natalia (2015). Four Russias and a New Political Reality. In Aron, Leon (ed.), Putin's Russia: How it rose, how it is maintained, and how it might end. Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 22–35.



within the Krai's borders: the southern subregion, where the two largest cities Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-na-Amure lie, has a modernised infrastructure and occupational structure and provides educational and cultural opportunities, but has been largely depleted of natural resources; the northern districts, by contrast, are part of the "northern Far East"—rich in natural resources, but lacking an adequate infrastructure and human resources.<sup>18</sup> These disparities are mirrored in political activities, such as protest actions, and in the results of the 2018 gubernatorial election.

The effects of the current economic crisis on Khabarovsk Krai are mediated by these internal discrepancies. The latest economic crisis in Russia, which combines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, falling oil prices and the aftermath of the previous crisis of 2014–2016, has triggered a decline in real disposable incomes and budget revenues.<sup>19</sup> Export-oriented extractive (and related) industries and the private service sector are most affected.<sup>20</sup> Partly due to the lockdown during the first wave of COVID-19 in spring and early summer 2020, private services in the Krai shrank by about 25%.<sup>21</sup> Khabarovsk, with its relatively strong reliance on the tertiary economy, oriented towards individual consumption and services, was especially vulnerable to the crisis.<sup>22</sup> While the region as a whole had not been hit particularly hard, parts of its urban population who were employed in small and medium businesses and/or the service sector were affected by the new economic challenges. The 2020 protests in Khabarovsk Krai thus developed against the background of the local economic crisis.

The 2020 protests developed against the background of the economic crisis.

### The reputation as a "protest region"

As shown above, the 2018 gubernatorial election in Khabarovsk Krai were of direct relevance for the 2020 regional protests. There are three additional votes that laid the foundation for the Krai's reputation as a "protest region", both locally and Russia-wide: the presidential election in March 2018, the elections to Khabarovsk Krai's parliament in September 2019, and the vote on amendments to the Russian Constitution in summer 2020. The high turnout and the share of supportive votes are traditional indicators of voter loyalty and the effectiveness of local elites in the hybrid authoritarian regime, which depends on electoral legitimation. At the last presidential election, the turnout in Khabarovsk Krai (still under governor Shport) was 64.2%,

18 Blyakher, Leonid and Aleksandr Obirin (2019). Dalny Vostok: instruktsiya po primeneniuyu, ili zachem Rossii Dalny Vostok. Regionalistika, 6(3), 13–30.

19 Snegovaya 2020; Zubarevich, Natalia (2020). Regionalnye riski novogo krizisa dlya zanyatosti i byudzhetrov regionov, Monitoring ekonomicheskoi situatsii v Rossii. Tendentsii i globalnye vyzovy sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya, №7 (109) April 2020, 3–13.

In 2020, regional budget deficits were partly offset by an unprecedented level of financial support from Moscow, see Zubarevich, Natalia (2021). Regionalnye ekonomiki v 2020 godu: Pandemiya sozdala problemy v resursodobyvayushchikh regionakh i krupnykh gorodakh, Monitoring ekonomicheskoi situatsii v Rossii. Tendentsii i globalnye vyzovy sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya, №6 (138), March 2021, 13–16.

20 Zubarevich 2021.

21 January–June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. See Pokazateli sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya Khabarovskogo Kraja za yanvar-iyun 2020 goda, 23.10.2020, <https://khabkrai.ru/officially/Ekonomika/EconomDoc/173881>.

22 Among extractive and related industries, oil refining, wood processing and metal processing were most affected. See O sotsialno-ekonomicheskoy razvitiy Khabarovskogo Kraja po itogam 2020 goda, 04.02.2021, <https://khabkrai.ru/officially/Ekonomika/EconomDoc/173881>.

Khabarovsk is part of an East-West electoral divide which adds weight to respective political conflicts.

i.e. not particularly low, but Putin received only 65.8% of votes; the region therefore belongs to the “outsiders” (Putin’s vote shares vary between 64.4 and 93.4% across Russia). Interestingly, while the group of regions where the support for Putin was highest has not changed much since 2012, the low-support regions are now concentrated in the Far East and Siberia, which makes Khabarovsk Krai part of the East-West electoral divide rather than an exception.<sup>23</sup> This adds weight to political conflicts in which the East-Centre dimension is relevant, such as the removal of Furgal. The electoral divisions between Khabarovsk Krai’s subregions are shown in FIGURES 3 and 4: while the northern areas showed more support for Putin, the southern districts and the two large cities were very reluctant to back him.<sup>24</sup>

Furgal’s election, however surprising, changed the regional political field. During the Khabarovsk Krai’s parliamentary elections in September 2019, United Russia had to prove its ability to mobilise support without the “administrative resources” which it had lost in 2018 along with control of the regional executive.<sup>25</sup> The party suffered a crushing defeat and had to be satisfied with 12.5% of the votes and two seats (it failed to win a single direct mandate). It became painfully clear that the “party of power” only functions when it is actually in power. The clear winner was the LDPR, which received 56.1% of votes and all the direct mandates it went for, taking 30 seats out of 36.<sup>26</sup> The ongoing popularity of the governor was a major factor, as the LDPR candidates made pledges to support the governor and the party campaigned under the slogan “LDPR—a proven choice”. Two factors are relevant: first, once the disintegration of power relations starts, it can happen very quickly. Second, the LDPR’s success looks like a prolonged “escalation of the 2018 protest voting”, when discontented people saw that their votes could genuinely make change happen.<sup>27</sup> A new aspect was that people voted not just out of protest, but for the existing “good power-holder”.<sup>28</sup> This idea can mobilise those who would not identify with the opposition and was actively discussed after Furgal’s arrest.

Against this background, the results of voting on the amendments in 2020 were not unexpected. A package of amendments announced in early 2020 and put to an “all-Russian” popular vote between 25 June and 1 July 2020 included legally resetting Putin’s presidential terms to zero, which would allow him to stay in power after 2024 for two further six-year terms, until 2036.<sup>29</sup> This met with outrage from the regime’s critics and was widely discussed as the real reason for the amendments. In Khabarovsk Krai, 62.3% of the votes were in favour and 36.7% votes against, with 44.2% voter turnout, making it one of the least enthusiastic regions, so the region and Furgal

23 KGI (2018). Osnovnye tendencii i itogi vyborov presidenta RF 18 marta 2018 goda. Komitet Grazhdanskikh Inicativ, Moscow, 26 – 27.

24 The similar geographical distribution of support and protest voting in the 2018 gubernatorial election is visualised at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2018\\_Khabarovsk\\_Krai\\_gubernatorial\\_election\\_map.svg#/media/Файл:2018\\_Khabarovsk\\_Krai\\_gubernatorial\\_election\\_map.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2018_Khabarovsk_Krai_gubernatorial_election_map.svg#/media/Файл:2018_Khabarovsk_Krai_gubernatorial_election_map.svg).

25 Pertsev, Andrey (2019, 26 August). Partiya vlasti zdes — LDPR, <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/08/26/partiya-vlasti-zdes-ldpr>.

26 In the parallel elections to the Khabarovsk City Duma, LDPR won 34 out of 35 seats.

27 Pertsev 2019.

28 What looked like a successful experiment by LDPR — riding the wave of the protest vote and discontent from one election to another — is now almost impossible to reproduce, as the LDPR lost its credibility by failing to support Furgal, even at the cost of the regional branch’s split.

29 The two-term limit no longer applies to persons elected before the 2020 constitutional amendments, i.e. Putin and Medvedev.

FIGURE 3

The 2018 presidential election: turnout in Khabarovsk Krai by territorial electoral commissions

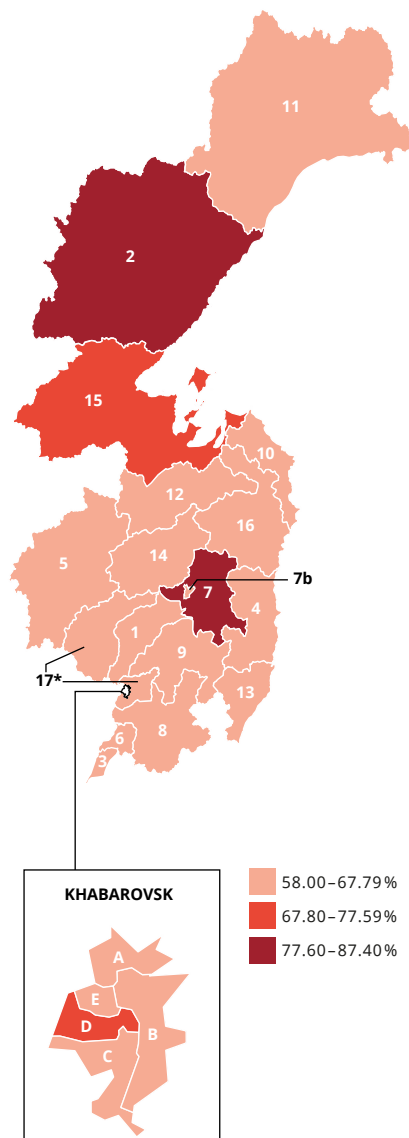


FIGURE 4

The 2018 presidential election: votes for Putin in Khabarovsk Krai by territorial electoral commissions

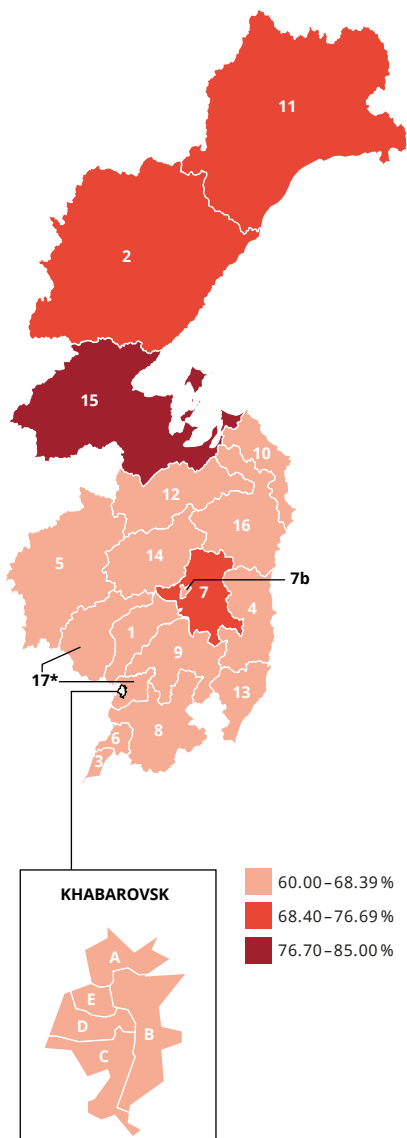
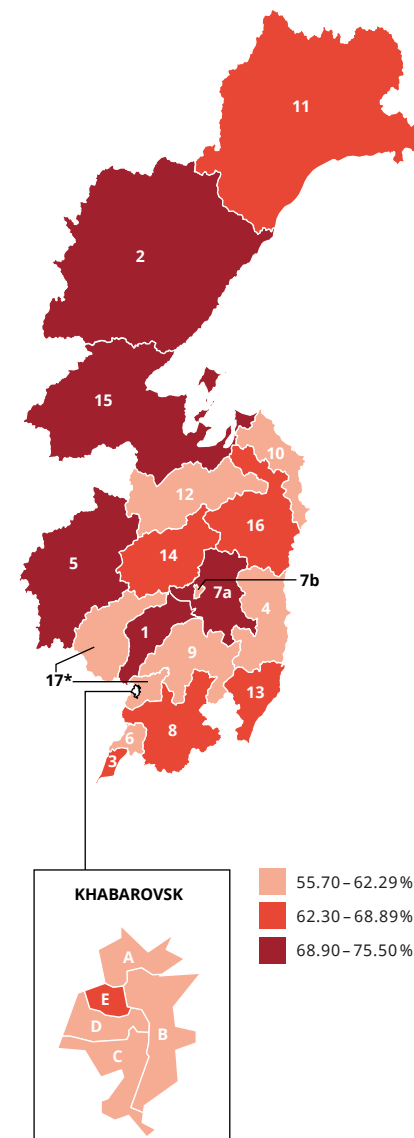


FIGURE 5

The 2020 popular vote on constitutional amendments: Yes votes in Khabarovsk Krai by territorial electoral commissions



- |                      |                                    |                              |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 Amurskaya          | 7a Komsomolskaya (district)        | 12 Osipenkovskaya            |
| 2 Aiarno-Maiskaya    | 7b Komsomolskaya (Komsomolsk city) | 13 Sovetsko-Gavanskaya       |
| 3 Bikinskaya         | 8 Lazovskaya                       | 14 Solnechnaya               |
| 4 Vaninskaya         | 9 Nanaiskaya                       | 15 Tuguro-Chumikanskaya      |
| 5 Verkhnebureinskaya | 10 Nikolaevskaya                   | 16 Ulchskaya                 |
| 6 Vyazemskaya        | 11 Okhotskaya                      | 17 Khabarovskaya (district)* |

- Khabarovsk**
- A Krasnoflotskaya
  - B Zheleznodorozhnaya
  - C Industrialnaya
  - D Tsentralnaya
  - E Kirovskaya

\*This electoral commission refers to both upper and lower parts of the Khabarovsk district, excluding the city of Khabarovsk.

Sources Figures 3 and 4: Data: Golos, <https://2018.golosinfo.org/>, map: based on Gajmar (CC BY-SA 4.0).  
Sources Figure 5: Data: Khabarovsk Krai' electoral commission, [www.khabarovsk.vybory.izbirkom.ru](http://www.khabarovsk.vybory.izbirkom.ru), map: based on Gajmar (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The centre-periphery dimension is a major structural element of regional politics.

Furgal's victory allowed people to put trust in the elections as a way to make themselves heard.

performed poorly in terms of their support for Putin.<sup>30</sup> The subregional differences are visualised in **FIGURE 5**. Again, the southern areas of the Krai and both large cities showed lower support for the regime, although the differences from the northern districts are not as clear-cut as they were during the 2018 presidential election.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to these votes, the relocation of the capital of Dalnevostochny Federalny Okrug from Khabarovsk to Vladivostok in December 2018 following Putin's decree was an important event. This heavy blow in terms of symbolic, administrative and financial resources was remembered during the July 2020 protests: "First they took away the capital, now they are taking away the governor." While being connected to the general "Putin is a thief" oppositional discourse, it involves a specific interpretation of "(unjustified) deprivation" as a punishment for the defiant region, as I will show in the section on clustering. This framing feeds on the traditional discourse of "Far East identity" (*dalnevostochnaya identichnost*), which constructs a special character of the region and people living there (*dalnevostochniki*). Some lines of this frontier discourse refer to the Russian colonisation of Siberia and the Far East.<sup>32</sup> The 2014 discussions around the new city anthem demonstrated that these ideas are not uncontested (the anthem mentions "the stubbornness and will of the common cossacks" who built a "lucky city" in the wilderness).<sup>33</sup> The main idea that is shared by various Far East identity discourses is that of being "an outpost" or, more specifically, an "outpost that has been forgotten (by Moscow)". The centre-periphery dimension, therefore, is a major structural element of regional politics, where governors should be on the side of residents, represent them effectively in dealings with, and protect them from, Moscow.<sup>34</sup>

To sum up, between 2018 and July 2020, Khabarovsk Krai and its capital experienced several events which, first, were themselves related to popular discontent and, second, were remembered during the mobilisation. The votes built on each other: Furgal's victory not only left United Russia without administrative resources in the following regional elections, but allowed people to put trust in the elections as a way to make themselves heard. The LDPR's landslide victory over United Russia did not need a "warm-up" round, and there was probably more to it than reactive protest voting as a straightforward expression of discontent. The acceptance of democratic practices does not necessarily require a long-term, profound change in values; experiencing that these practices work can be enough. After Furgal's arrest, the previous instances of democratic discontent in the region and regional identity were "upcycled" and built into the "protest region" discourse by participants and experts alike. A major arena where these and other variants of mobilisation framing happened were social media, the focus of this study.

30 Results on <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/>.

31 While Komsomolsk-na-Amure shows relatively low support for the regime, the surrounding Komsomolsky district belongs to its strongholds.

32 Khabarovsk was named in the 19th century after a controversial Russian coloniser from the 17th century.

33 Kokurin, Boris (2014, 28 January). Torzhestvennaya pesnya "Gorod udachi", nesmotrya na kritiku, vse-taki stala gimnom Khabarovska. <https://www.hab.kp.ru/online/news/1643437/>.

34 Blyakher and Obirin 2019.

## Method

An analysis of social media discourses around protests is helpful in enhancing our understanding of the current dynamics of mobilisation in Khabarovsk Krai against the socioeconomic and political background discussed above. The digital sphere is neither the originator nor a mirror of the street actions; rather, they are connected in an online-offline action and communication system.<sup>35</sup> The individualisation of action, the heterogeneity of participants and the absence of organisational structures and leaders make independent coordination via digital networks essential.<sup>36</sup> In the protests in Khabarovsk (as in other recent protests), social media became a mobilising agent: in addition to the temporary “free spaces” of open and critical communication created by the mass street actions, social media were the sphere where users could interactively make sense of what was happening and develop shared interpretations (frames) of what needed to be done.<sup>37</sup> Given the sheer number of posts and comments related to the street protest activities, structuring them becomes a challenge. The study uses Natural Language Processing (NLP) methods to achieve a more systematic evaluation of mobilisation framing in Khabarovsk. In supervised learning, automated analysis is applied to large quantities of texts. This means that the computer uses statistics-based models developed on smaller data subsets labelled by humans for predicting how to sort unseen data.<sup>38</sup>

In our case, the corpora of texts for the analysis were obtained using keyword-based searches via the commercial service Medialogia SMM, focused on Russian-language social media.<sup>39</sup> We collected (a) explicit mobilisation texts using the most popular slogans (such as “Freedom for Furgal”) and (b) texts about protests, using complex search requests on different protest forms in combination with mentions of Khabarovsk and/or Furgal. A human coder labelled posts and comments (5840 texts) from different periods as positive (pro-protest, quite restrictive), negative (anti-protest), neutral and irrelevant; results of dummy search requests enlarged the irrelevant collection.

After testing different approaches, a model<sup>40</sup> was trained to classify texts as irrelevant and relevant (with the latter sorted into pro-protest and anti-protest) using collocations, or frequently co-occurring words. In terms of mobilisation, specific phrases can help to identify collective and individual interpretations of what the problems are (diagnostic framing), who are the different actors involved and what are their qualities (identity fields), and what has to be done (motivational and prognostic framing).

35 Pavan, Elena (2014). Embedding Digital Communications within Collective Action Networks: A Multidimensional Network Approach. *Mobilization*, 19(4), 441 – 455.

36 Denisova, Anastasia (2017). Democracy, protest and public sphere in Russia after the 2011 – 2012 anti-government protests: digital media at stake. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(7), 976 – 994.

37 Benford and Snow 2000.

38 Ghani, Rayid and Malte Schierholz (2017). Machine Learning. In Foster, Ian et al. (eds.), *Big Data and Social Science: A Practical Guide to Methods and Tools*, 147 – 186.

39 [www.mlg.ru](http://www.mlg.ru).

40 Developed by Dr Gregor Lämmel.

### Details of method 1: Parts-of-speech phrases

Looking for collocations instead of single words allows context-dependent and domain-specific meanings and patterns to be accounted for, while single-word frequencies suggest that the word means the same in different texts, even if that is not necessarily the case. For the model, part-of-speech chunking—an NLP technique—was implemented, which breaks sentences into smaller groups of words.<sup>41</sup> It is based on the assumption that a group of words carrying a particular type of meaning can be identified as a combination of parts of speech like nouns, verbs and adjectives (part-of-speech phrases or POS-phrases). For instance, the part-of-speech combination “adjective+noun” (e.g. “powerful protest”) is describing someone or something. Therefore, we are looking not for all collocations in texts, but for certain POS phrases, and build our automated text analysis on them. Due to the requirements of statistical analysis, the resulting POS phrases consist of words in the original dictionary form (e.g. “protester go” can refer to “protesters went” in texts). Which kinds of POS phrases are most relevant depends on the type of text. The patterns relevant in the Khabarovsk protest corpus were identified by visual evaluation of colour-coded POS-tagged texts and included “sequences of nouns”, “adjective followed by a noun”, “noun followed by a proper noun”, “verb followed by a noun” and their variants.

By applying the model to the whole corpus of texts around the protests in Khabarovsk Krai for July 2020 to January 2021 (N=2.1 million), we can classify the texts automatically and reconstruct the dynamics of social media activities. As FIGURE 6 shows, the positive posts and comments tend to dominate over negative throughout the whole period. The general public interest in the Khabarovsk events on Russian-language social media is most visible at the start of the protests and then around the Saturday street actions along with few other events.

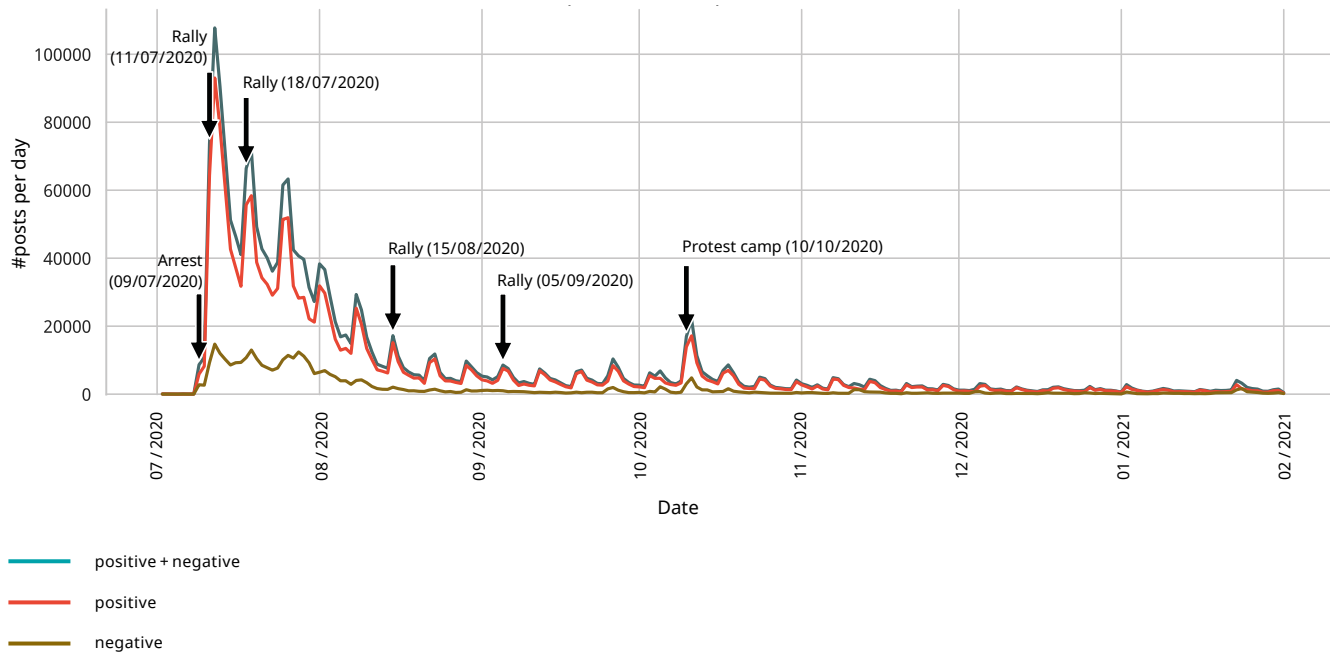
As the framing of protests and specific phrases used for it change over time, automated identification of topics and related text clusters for the whole period would make little sense. The reconstruction of the dynamics of social media (counter-)mobilisation can also be used for the selection of periods for further analysis. For this report, two periods were selected to identify the main topics of positive texts in each time frame. Texts were sorted into clusters based on the POS phrases using a variant of the spectral clustering method known as self-tuned graph clustering.<sup>42</sup> This allows us to go beyond the positive-negative distinction and find out, using NLP techniques and without referring to pre-defined categories, what was motivating people at the time.

41 Klochikhin, Evgeny and Jordan Boyd-Graber (2017). Text Analysis. In Foster, Ian et al. (eds.), *Big Data and Social Science: A Practical Guide to Methods and Tools*, 187 – 214; Choudhary, Divya (2021). NLP and POS based chunking to generate Amazon style Key phrases from Reviews. 22.02.2021 <https://towardsdatascience.com/nlp-and-pos-based-chunking-to-generate-amazon-style-key-phrases-from-reviews-239084543225>.

42 Ciortan, Madalina (2019). Spectral graph clustering and optimal number of clusters estimation. An overview of spectral graph clustering and a python implementation of the eigengap heuristic. 01.01.2019. <https://towardsdatascience.com/spectral-graph-clustering-and-optimal-number-of-clusters-estimation-32704189afbe>.

FIGURE 6

**Dynamic of the Russian-language social media posts and comments around protests in Khabarovsk Krai**  
July 2020 – January 2021



Source: T. Golova, ZOiS

## Framing in the initial protest phase: Interpretation of clusters

To identify mobilisation discourses around protests in Khabarovsk Krai, I selected two periods of most intense social media coverage: at the very beginning and the smaller but clearly visible peak around the attempted protest camp on Khabarovsk's Lenin Square in October. I included posts and comments that were published on three major social networks in Russia (Odnoklassniki/OK.ru, VKontakte/VK.com and Facebook)<sup>43</sup> and classified as positive (pro-protest and/or pro-Furgal) by the model described above. Only texts on accounts based in Khabarovsk Krai were included: while this restricts the sample to explicitly geolocated accounts, it places the emphasis on regional protest mobilisation. First, I analysed the representation of protests during the first and largest wave of street actions and social media interest from 9 to 14 July 2020. I assume that for the mobilisation of online and offline support, not only is the discussion around initial events—here, the arrest and detention of Furgal on allegations of murder—crucial; so too is the discussion around the protests themselves. Therefore, rather than merely following the social media response to protest events, we reconstruct how

<sup>43</sup> Telegram messenger and Instagram were actively used for mobilisation as well, similar to the 2020 protests in Belarus or elsewhere, but these texts could not be included in the study due to technical and ethical restrictions.



people make sense of protests and frame their own relationship to them, which can encourage or discourage participation.

For the initial protest phase, the 7088 texts<sup>44</sup> sampled were divided by our model into six clusters of texts defined as similar according to their “phrases profile” (i.e. texts in one cluster have more similarity to each other than to other texts). Then the clusters including more than 1000 texts were divided in subclusters using the same technique. In addition to the comparison of cluster-specific phrases, the texts most typical for each cluster were interpreted qualitatively. The word clouds below represent specific phrases for comparison to other clusters in the “beginnings” subcorpus of positive texts.

### Details of method 2: Clusterisation

For each cluster, the most iconic POS phrases consisting of one, two or three words were identified by the comparison to the rest of the “beginnings” sample in order to identify specific lines of mobilisation discourse. Because the most common important phrases such as “Freedom for Furgal” and “Khabarovsk Krai” are shared by different lines of discourse and would thus not be found by comparing the clusters with each other, each cluster was then separately compared to the corpus of irrelevant texts. The following interpretation of five selected clusters (each cluster or its best interpretable subcluster, with the exception of Cluster 3, where no meaningful and specific topics could be identified) is based on both kinds of typical phrases and, additionally, on the ranking of texts within each cluster. The texts which contain the most cluster-typical phrases (i.e. widespread in this cluster and unpopular in others) are given high scores, and the high-ranking texts relevant for clusters were selected for qualitative interpretation. ► FIGURES 7 – 11

### Cluster 0-1: Our governor

The texts in the first group, Cluster 0-1, emphasise the mass character of protests (phrases like “powerful protest/мощный протест”, “protest action attended by thousands/многотысячный акция протест”<sup>45</sup>). In the most popular text here—an annotation text attached to the shared YouTube video by Khabarovsk-born blogger Alexey Romanov—the comparison with mass protests by the movement For Free Elections 2011/2012 (“Most powerful protests since Bolotnaia”)<sup>46</sup> brings in an additional meaning, that of the political character of protests and the context of elections (more specifically, stolen election results). The topic of elections (history of how Furgal was elected) is extremely important for the participation (see “to win candidate/выиграть кандидат”, “vote/отдать голос”, “vote at elections/голос на выборы”). “We are ALL Team Furgal, this is our governor, we elected him

44 The direct reposts were excluded from the sample to avoid the overvaluing of a few popular texts, as this would endanger phrase-based clusterisation. However, the reposts flanked by comments, i.e. with changed texts, were included. These are the reposts with which the users interacted most intensively.

45 The POS phrases are given in English and in the Russian original to document the analysis and to provide additional information for Russian speakers.

46 The citations were translated by the author and are cited as (VK.com, 11.07.2020).



FIGURE 7

most important part-of-speech phrases (15 unigrams, bigrams and trigrams) as ranked against other clusters (not against irrelevant)

Source: T. Golova, ZOIS

by ourselves!” (OK.ru, 13.07.2020), “Furgal is our choice” (FB, 14.07.2020). People take to the streets to protect their own votes and voice, and Furgal is “our governor” or “the people’s governor”, because he was elected by the people; now, this choice/election is being re-enacted by the street action to demonstrate support for him and to protest against his arrest and pre-trial detention in Moscow. One major demand was that a public trial be held in Khabarovsk. Taking to the streets is therefore related to agency or self-empowerment. Additionally, this is reproduced in the meta-discourse about the protests, e.g. in the reposted pieces by professional media (it is important to note that the professional media discourse and the social media users’ discourse are not separated, but interfere in the framework of the current hybrid media system<sup>47</sup>).

47 Bodrunova, Svetlana and Anna Litvinenko (2016). Fragmentation of Society and Media Hybridization in Today's Russia: How Facebook Voices Collective Demands. *The Journal of Social Policy Studies / Zhurnal Issledovaniia Sotsialnoi Politiki*, 14(1), 113 – 124.

The texts emphasise the mass character of the protests and interpret them as political and elections-related.

mass media. These media companies, according to the framing, are lying by downplaying the protests (indeed, the federal TV channels completely ignored the protests at first) or by misrepresenting them, e.g. by suggesting that the protests are being orchestrated by dangerous individuals operating behind the scenes. By negating such constructs, the social media users are framing protests as authentic expressions of the people's will.

Another antagonist in this cluster is clearly Putin (phrases “Putin is a thief/путин—вор”, “dismiss Putin/путина в отставку”, “down with Putin/путина долой”). The widespread protest slogan “Putin is a thief”, which featured prominently in anti-corruption and pro-democracy protests by Navalny's supporters, gains an additional meaning: Putin or the Kremlin has removed the “people's governor” Furgal, who was not only arrested but taken to Moscow.

The socioeconomic centre-periphery dimension of social inequality in Russia (see the above section on the socioeconomic background to the protests) expands into the level of shared interpretations by being integrated into regional identities. In the cluster of pro-protest texts discussed here, regional identity is related to the “rebellious city” or “protest city” of Khabarovsk or to “Khabarovsk Krai of freedom-loving people”. The latter in particular is nurtured by the pre-existing regional and sometimes regionalist discourse on the Russian Far East, which is built upon positive qualities of the Eastern Frontier people and upon distancing from Moscow, which allegedly tends not to understand or respect the specific characteristics of the region and its people.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, this identity becomes amplified through the protests.

To sum up, the texts in Cluster 0-1 emphasise the mass character of protests and interpret them in terms of election-related political protests. They also define opposing identities: “our governor” and “we” who elected him, living in the “rebellious city”, vs. Putin himself and state-loyal media who downplay the protests.

### Cluster 1-1: The good governor

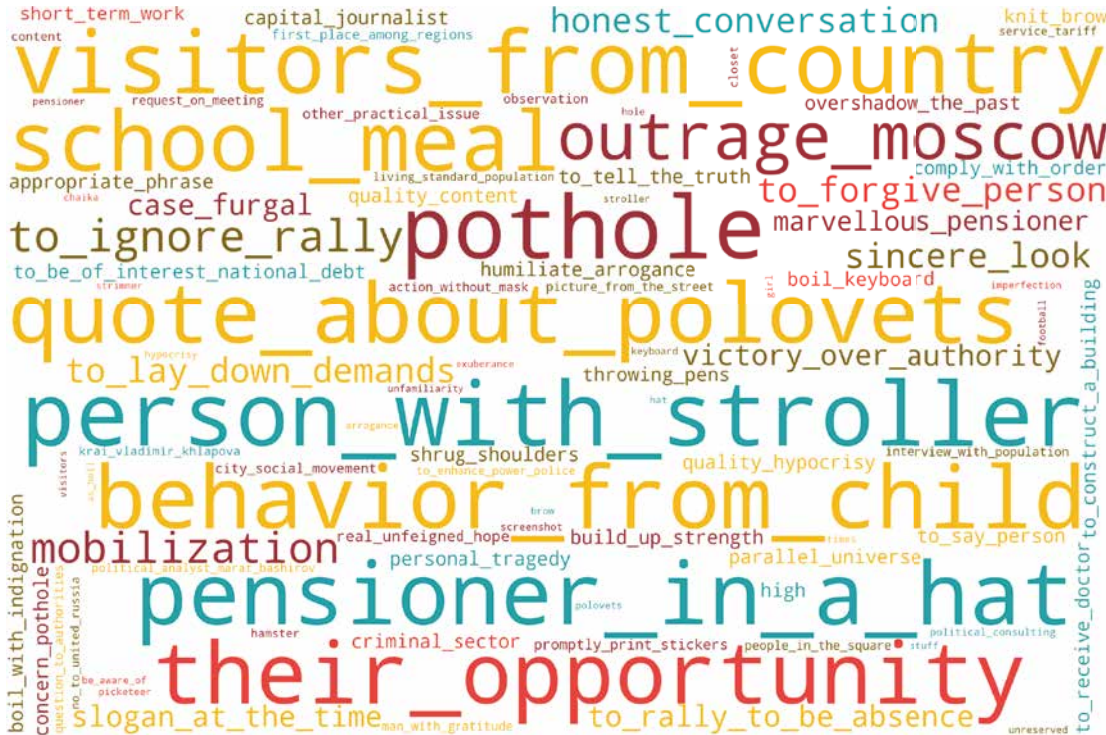
In this group of texts, the “people's governor” discourse has a different focus: Furgal is worthy not because he is the people's choice, but due to his qualities as a person and a governor: he acts like a normal person and talks with the people in their language (phrases like “look you straight in the eye/открытый взгляд”, “honest dialogue/честный диалог”). This contrasts with typical state officials: “People will make a lot of allowances for someone who looks you straight in the eye and engages in honest dialogue. But the people who are being prepared for such positions seem to be trained in outright hypocrisy” (FB, 12.07.2020). Furgal is seen as someone who cares about the issues that matter to people and takes action accordingly. “I think people basically saw how Sergey Ivanovich cares about ordinary people. He listened to our problems and made decisions” (FB, 14.07.2020). This framing

48 Blyakher and Obirin 2019; Savchenko, Anatoly (2020, 3 August). Pochemu Dalny Vostok ne lyubit Moskvu i varyagov. <https://www.proekt.media/opinion/savchenko-pochemu-dalny-vostok-ne-lyubit-moskvu/>.

FIGURE 8

**Word cloud for the Cluster 1-1 for the “beginnings” period:**

most important part-of-speech phrases (15 unigrams, bigrams and trigrams) as ranked against other clusters (not against irrelevant).



Source: T. Golova, ZOIS

relates to the pre-existing discourse and popular social media self-representations by Furgal as someone who cares. In these videos, he typically (1) learns about the problem or sees it for himself, (2) criticises the responsible parties, such as local officials, from a position of power while remaining calm and friendly, and (3) proposes a solution or sets a goal. The “people’s governor”/“народный губернатор” communicates not just “for the people”, but with the people; he is accessible via social networks and reaches out to the protesters in person. Although this could be interpreted as populism, it is also in line with democratic ideas of open communication, public decision-making and accountability.

Related to the personal level of communication and belonging are texts which emphasise emotional responses, such as shock (phrases like “personal tragedy/личная трагедия”): “Nobody was coordinating this rally, nobody was manipulating the people. I have never seen such unity in my life. My first reaction to the detention was shock; it was like a real physical pain. Many friends wrote that they cried! They were weeping! ... Where have you seen people reacting so painfully to what happens to a politician? This is not something you could buy or fake” (FB, 12.07.2020). Thus, the “people’s governor” framing, which is most important here in comparison to other clusters, has a clear emotional aspect.

The mass media are being criticised mainly not for ignoring the protests, but for disseminating false information/fake news. Here, once again, they are not neutral observers of the protests, but are among their opponents<sup>49</sup> and are associated with Putin: “The mass media of corrupt channels, and many networks within Putin’s system are trying to twist the facts that are happening in Khabarovsk! Fake news. Friends, it’s just a bunch of lies! Rallies are taking place, but far more calmly. Everything is peaceful and there are no provocations!!!” (OK, 14.07.2020).

The texts in this cluster produce another variant of “people’s governor” framing, one that focuses on Furgal’s own qualities and establishes a personal relationship between the governor and people in the Krai.

## Cluster 2: Revenge on the protest region

The framing combines regional identity as a protest region and the unexpected election of Furgal.

The basic building blocks of meaning found in different clusters of texts are similar in part, but their combinations and different foci create new interpretations. That is the case with the framing of Furgal’s arrest as Putin’s revenge on Khabarovsk Krai (phrases like “protest region/протестный регион”, “waiting for repression/ожидать репрессия”, “hidden political motivation/политический подоплека”). This framing combines two lines introduced above: first, regional identity as a protest region and second, the unexpected election of Furgal (here, the emphasis is on his landslide victory over the Kremlin-backed incumbent Vyacheslav Shprot from United Russia). “Khabarovsk Krai’s governor Sergey Furgal is accused of murders that happened 14 years ago. Maybe it is true, maybe not, but his arrest is solely politically motivated” (FB, 12.07.2020)—again, this is a comment on a widely shared YouTube video (by a pro-Communist blogger Maxim Shevchenko). The region’s affinity for protest was evident not only during the 2018 gubernatorial election, but also from United Russia’s poor results in local elections, Putin’s relatively poor showing in 2018 and the vote on constitutional amendments in 2020.<sup>50</sup> Similar to the 0–1 Cluster variant of the “our governor” discourse, Furgal looks like a subject rather than a major player here; he is caught between the autonomous will of the region’s residents/rebellion and the centralist state/oppression. With “people’s governor” being a popular phrase in the cluster, much of this is about the “Kremlin’s war against the people’s governor” (VK, 14.07.2020).

The less prominent line in the cluster deals with the reaction of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of Furgal’s party LDPR, to the detention; he claimed that the entire parliamentary group in the State Duma could resign in protest (unsurprisingly, this did not happen). The topic of popular support for the arrested governor (phrases like “support to arrest/поддержка арестовать”<sup>51</sup>, “to arrest governor/арестовать губернатор”) is quite prominent here, mainly in brief descriptions such as: “In Khabarovsk Krai,

49 See Hunt, Scott A., Benford, Robert D. and David A. Snow (1994). Identity Fields: Framing Processes and the Social Construction of Movement Identities. In Larana, Enrique, Johnston, Hank and Joseph R. Gusfeld (eds.), *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 185–208.

50 See “Context” section.

51 “Support arrest” goes back to “support arrested” in texts. POS phrases consist of words in the original dictionary form (see “Method” section).



FIGURE 9

**Word cloud for the Cluster 2 of the “beginnings” period:**

most important part-of-speech phrases (15 unigrams, bigrams and trigrams) as ranked against other clusters (not against irrelevant).



Source: T. Golova, ZOiS

mass demonstrations of support for the arrested governor took place. Sergey Furgal faces life imprisonment” (FB, 11.07.2020), but does not appear as frequently as in the previous Cluster 1-1. In fact, it belongs to the topics and related phrases which are included in all clusters and therefore only become visible through comparison to the irrelevant texts that do not deal with the protests at all. The major framing in Cluster 3, namely the interpretation of Furgal’s arrest as “revenge on the protest region”, differentiates the cluster from “positive” texts in other clusters.

### Cluster 4: Rallies in the province

This cluster stands out: although the phrases “rally” and “spontaneous rally” occur quite frequently in the whole corpus, here they feature very prominently—enough to separate this cluster from the rest. This is due to the prevalence of very brief texts that hardly include any other possible phrases: “Rally in Chegdomyn! Freedom for Furgal!” (OK, 13.07.2020), “Tomorrow on 12 July a rally in Innokentievka will take place in support of S.I. Furgal. 9pm” (OK, 13.07.2020), “11.07.20 Rally in support of our governor Sergey Furgal and his release! Need to do it again!!! City of Amursk” (OK, 13.07.2020). Most of these posts, which include calls for participation or the

FIGURE 10

**Word cloud for the Cluster 4 of the “beginnings” period:**

most important part-of-speech phrases (15 unigrams, bigrams and trigrams) as ranked against other clusters (not against irrelevant).



Source: T. Golova, ZOiS

titles of user-created videos about the protests refer to actions in smaller towns and villages in the region, not to what was happening in Khabarovsk or Komsomolsk-na-Amure. Another difference is that Putin is hardly mentioned as an antagonist. The cluster has a specific language profile: more everyday language, more errors in grammar and style, less official and eloquent mass-media language. The phrases related to the frames “people’s governor” or “Khabarovsk Krai” are marginal, but the short and “simple” texts on local protest actions are nonetheless relevant for regional identity, because they make protest actions in the whole region visible.

### Cluster 5: “Pigeon feeding” and the opponents<sup>52</sup>

The key line in this cluster refers to a relatively new protest practice of “feeding the pigeons” (phrases such as “feed the pigeons/кормить голубей”, “хабаровский голубь/Khabarovsk pigeon”), which has gained prominence in Russia in the context of Khabarovsk protests. In recent years, the use of public

52 Topics represented in the same cluster can be brought together by being combined in just a few very popular texts.

FIGURE 11

**Word cloud for the Cluster 5 of the “beginnings” period:**

most important part-of-speech phrases (15 unigrams, bigrams and trigrams) as ranked against other clusters (not against irrelevant).



Source: T. Golova, ZOiS

spaces for protests in Russia has been systematically restricted (along with restrictions on the use of other spaces for political activities and free public discussions) and participation in street actions has become increasingly risky in terms of both violent response and prosecution. The repression around street protest has a digital dimension, as online calls for participation or the mere mention of a street action on social networking services (SNS) have repeatedly been criminalised, first and foremost for VKontakte users.<sup>53</sup> So the harmless and essentially individual activity of “feeding the pigeons” became an ironic code for collective protest action: “The plan is to feed the pigeons collectively. Saturday at 12 at Lenin Square in Khabarovsk. You can support the Khabarovsk pigeons” (VK.com, 16.07.2020). “All actions are peaceful; today at 22:45 people thanked the police and went home in peace. And as far as I understand, people intend to go out and feed the pigeons every day” (VK.com, 15.07.2020).

The field of opponents, which is significant in the cluster, combines Kremlin and Putin himself (“Putin is a thief”), Yury Trutnev, i.e. Putin’s representative

53 An example in the context of Khabarovsk protests: OVD-Info, Sud arestoval lidera “Levogo fronta” Sergeya Udaltsova, 28.07.2020, [https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2020/07/28/sud-arestoval-lidera-levogo-fronta-sergeya-udaltsova?utm\\_source=tw&utm\\_medium=social](https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2020/07/28/sud-arestoval-lidera-levogo-fronta-sergeya-udaltsova?utm_source=tw&utm_medium=social).

## The field of opponents comprises Putin himself, his representative and official mass media.

in Dalnevostochny Federalny Okrug (whose arrival in Khabarovsk is being criticised) and, again, Putin's official mass media/TV, which tend to ignore the mass protests or to mispresent what happened: "So funny. Khabarovsk has not laughed like that in a long time :)) This is how the mass media are covering the march in support of Furgal" (VK.com, 16.07.2020). Similar to the 0-1 and 1-1 Clusters, the opponent field promotes regional identity, connecting Putin's system to the centre-periphery dimension: "Freedom for Furgal! Moscow go home! Putin is a thief!" (OK.ru, 16.07.2020), "Moscow, think! Dalnevostochniki are actually calm people. But we have one weakness—a strong sense of justice. And that is what Moscow's bespredel<sup>54</sup> has done to us ... and yes, these are the consequences ..." (OK.ru, 13.07.2020).

Digital practices of solidarity are sometimes described pejoratively as "slacktivism", but they are pivotal in Russia, where the traditional media barely function as a critical force and social media for a long time were a major sphere of relatively free political communication. With digital media being especially important to Russia's NGOs, activists and opposition, it is surprising that the meta-discourse about this practice is only relevant for one subcluster: "The 4th day of protests for Furgal. Support people of Khabarovsk by liking, reposting or commenting!" (OK.ru, 14.07.2020).

The texts in this cluster resemble the first Cluster 0-1 in their focus on identity framing: they describe protesters by depicting their practices in the online-offline nexus ("feeding the pigeons", which takes place offline as a collective action but due to the risks is described online in an ironical and individualised way). The field of opponents again comprises Putin himself, his representative and official mass media.

The "positive" texts from the initial phase of protests were sorted by the computer model inductively into different clusters, so that each text belongs to just one cluster. However, some major elements of the discourse on Furgal and protests in Khabarovsk Krai are shared by different clusters. The comparison shows that their combinations and different emphases (partly due to the different wordings) create new shared interpretations, or frames, which not only assist social media users in making sense of what is happening, but have relevance for mobilisation.

- Even the most prominent tags and phrases such as "Freedom for Furgal" (important for Cluster 1-1) or "I/We are Furgal" (Clusters 0-1 and 5) are unevenly distributed.
- The same is true of frames relating to mass participation in protests (Clusters 0-1 and 1-1) or their serial character (Clusters 0-1, 4 and 5), both indices of successful mobilisation and factors encouraging further engagement.
- The positive frame of "our governor" as a variant of "people's governor" framing (Cluster 0-1) is not identical with the "people's governor" variant in Cluster 1-1, because it emphasises the people's (autonomous) will as embodied by elections, instead of Furgal's alleged qualities.

<sup>54</sup> *Bespredel*: a situation when the powerful act without being constrained by any rules or considerations other than their own wishes, damaging the social order.



- The negative figure of Putin seems to be omnipresent during the protests and, as an indicator of the political and radical character of the Khabarovsk protests, is of particular interest to observers, but in fact it defines only Clusters 0–1 and 5.

The variety of language styles and interpretations reflects the plurality of voices mobilising to protest. Social media users supporting one interpretation of the problem (why Furgal was arrested and dismissed) and the related collective action (why people are taking to the streets) sometimes criticise alternative framing explicitly, so that plurality is not necessarily embraced. However, it confirms that the framing of the Khabarovsk protests has not been strategically planned.

## Framing around the attempted protest camp

How did the framing of the 2020 protests in Khabarovsk Krai change over time? The period chosen for the comparison over time is the second larger peak in the social media coverage of the protests, which occurred in early October. While it does not reach the “explosion” of posts right at the start of the protests, it still clearly exceeds regular weekly peaks around Saturday street actions with several hundred—and in the first few months, several thousand—participants (► FIGURE 2). The October peak reflects the qualitative changes in both protest practices and the state’s responses: on Saturday 10 October, the protesters tried to build a protest camp in Lenin Square in front of the regional government building, which had been a main focus of protests since the start. The practice is not new in Khabarovsk but this was the first attempt of this kind during this particular campaign. The camp was dispersed by the special police forces, with numerous incidents of police violence and dozens of persons detained. The shock provoked new spontaneous actions, one in the evening and one the next day, so that qualitative changes were flanked by quantitative. This explains the rising numbers of posts, and it is worth taking a closer look at the framing.

For the second period, the topic of violent dispersal of the 10 October rally is prevalent.

The corpus of 1757 SNS texts from Khabarovsk region for the period from 8 to 16 October 2020 was selected as described above and divided using spectral clustering into six groups of texts defined as similar according to their “phrases profile”. For all clusters, the topic of violent dispersal of the rally on 10 October is prevalent (phrases like “силовой разгон/violent dispersal”, “жесткий разгон/brutal dispersal”, “задержание/detention”, “разгон омон/ dispersal by special forces”), but they have different emphases and language profiles.

The violent dispersal and detention of protesters are discussed in Clusters 0, 1 and 3 as practice brought in from or initiated by Moscow: “Hello everyone! Would you look at that: security forces out of control in the middle of Khabarovsk. For sure, an order came in from Moscow and they were eager to carry it out” (Cluster 3; VK.com, 10.10.2020). The symbolic Dalny Vostok–Moscow dimension is applied directly to the police operation.

While in the first period many clusters emphasised the exceptional level of mass participation in the protests (motivational framing), it did not work for the second period. Instead, in Cluster 0, police brutality was directly

related to the declining numbers, and the loss of mass character is presented as a problem: “Three months after the people’s marches took off, there is less activity on the streets and here you are, the authorities (vlasti) go back to their favourite tactics towards the subject people: baton, prison truck, detention facility, hospital” (Cluster 0; OK.ru, 10.10.2020). By contrast, the framing of endurance, reflecting the long and now well-established series of protests, can still be observed and sometimes develops an additional meaning of defying the repression: “People took to the streets again, despite yesterday’s events!!! 11.10.2020 93rd day of protests in Khabarovsk. [...] // Khabarovsk— We will not leave” (Cluster 5; VK.com, 11.10.2020).

The violent dispersal of protests was interpreted as a reaction to the attempted protest camp in many texts in Clusters 0 and 3: first, in mass media reports, which are based on official statements and then reposted, usually with comments, by SNS users; second, in the original user posts, which diverge from the official interpretation in terms of both language used and disapproval expressed:

“10 October. Saturday. 92nd day of protests. Khabarovchane began to pitch tents on the square. The authorities (vlasti) seem to have got scared: could it be another maidan? OMON attacked peaceful protesters. People were beaten up. About 40 people were detained. Tents were broken. What will happen tomorrow?” (Cluster 3; OK.ru, 11.10.2020).

The topics which defined the first period were overshadowed by the violent dispersal of the Saturday afternoon protests. Nevertheless, some were still important:

- The phrases “in support of Furgal” and the like were significant in most clusters (see first period). It may sound trivial, but “protest against arrest” (a perfectly conceivable option) was much less relevant, and the positive framing of “support” helped to legitimise street actions.
- On the negative field of opponents, a new figure is the acting governor Mikhail Degtyarev (LDPR), who had a rough start with the protesters and people in the region, being dubbed “Moscow’s protégé” or “sauna boy”. He was appointed by Putin at the end of July, in a move that follows the strategy of appointing governors with no connections to the region while pacifying the head of LDPR. In one cluster, Degtyarev’s lack of reaction to the violent dispersal was criticised, whereas another includes a sarcastic video announcement “Degtyarev tells people of Khabarovsk that peaceful protests are allowed”.
- The police forces are now seen as antagonists, contrasting with the start of the protests, when the slogan “The police are with the people” was used.
- Putin is still interpreted, first and foremost, as faulty antagonist (“Putin is a thief/путин вор”) and as the subject of demands (“dismiss Putin/путин в отставка”), not as a referee standing over regional conflicts, as was previously the case during the regional protests. However, he does not feature prominently.

To sum up, the framing in the second selected period is dominated by the violent dispersal of the attempted protest camp. The indignation at the

The police forces  
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repression did not lead to any increase in participation in street actions over the following weekends (as a short-term response, however, more actions took place the same weekend). Some elements are recognisable from the first period, even if their foci have shifted: the symbolic centre-periphery dimension and the framing of “revenge on the rebellious region” re-emerge as framing of police violence as coming from Moscow. The mass character of action is described as sadly absent, while the endurance of protesters is emphasised. The field of opponents, by contrast, has changed and now includes the new acting governor and the police forces.

## Conclusion

“I/We are Khabarovsk” was a popular expression of solidarity in other Russian cities, and Khabarovsk became a new signifier for politicised regional protests.<sup>55</sup> But can such networked mobilisation, which undoubtedly posed a major challenge to the Kremlin, happen elsewhere? The protests in Khabarovsk Krai developed out of a combination of factors: an economic crisis which mainly affected people in urban settings; the history of the protest votes in the region and the related experience of voters’ self-efficacy (transformed into indignation when they were deprived of their previous success); the regional identity discourses which nurture the symbolic opposition to the federal centre—and, of course, the popularity of the “systemic opposition” governor himself. While the mobilisation seems unique, all these elements and the general discontent with the federal and local power-holders (which I have not discussed in detail) can be found in other Russian regions, first and foremost in the European regions of the Russian North, in Siberia and Dalny Vostok (Far East) with strong regionalist discourses built around the centre-periphery dimension, which is open to politicisation.

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Khabarovsk Krai’s mobilisation was born out of the nexus between street protests and electoral politics, the constellation that is related to the ambiguous role of the so-called “systemic opposition”: it is part of the regime to the extent that its candidates are allowed to stand in elections,<sup>56</sup> but these candidates can still become the focus of popular support, up to and including street protests. Here, however, we can see how the course of protest and the behaviour of actors impact the prospects for future mobilisations. The LDPR benefited from the discontent in Khabarovsk Krai and from the popularity of its governor. However, the party did not support Furgal or the protesters; indeed, the LDPR found itself on the “wrong side” of the symbolic Khabarovsk Krai-Moscow divide as Mikhail Degtyariev, who had no connection to the Krai, was appointed as the acting governor by Putin and became the head of the regional party branch.<sup>57</sup> The comments on social media show that the party lost its credibility in the region and is unlikely to repeat

<sup>55</sup> The protests in smaller towns went largely unnoticed outside the region.

<sup>56</sup> That is, of course, not always the case and can change very quickly, as the KPRF’s candidate in Primorsky Krai’s gubernatorial election experienced in 2018.

<sup>57</sup> It fuelled the conflict between the regional branch and the LDPR’s municipal deputies in Khabarovsk, who announced their party resignation in November 2020. The independent deputies held a majority in the local Duma for just two days until the deputies revoked their party resignation and rejoined the LDPR group (Interfax, Obyavivshie o vykhode iz LDPR khabarovskie deputaty peredumali pokidat partiyu, 25.11.2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/738567>).

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its success as the “voice of discontent” here or in other regions (even if the party’s core electorate does not withdraw its support).

The economic and political factors do not spark protests by themselves; they do so only if they are interpreted—or framed—in ways that support mobilisation. The first reaction of indignation would not be enough to sustain the mass protests over several weeks and the subsequent protests over a longer period as happened in Khabarovsk (► **FIGURE 2**)—and even the emotional reactions of potential participants are not only individual embodied experiences, but negotiated and interpreted interactively. The social media are a main arena for alternative and oppositional discourses, especially in Russia, and the analysis of framing on social media not only captures the dynamics of how the street protests are reflected (► **FIGURE 6**), but also allows the mobilisation discourses to be reconstructed. This ZOiS Report focuses on the framing of the protests on social networking sites by users from Khabarovsk Krai. The initial protest phase, the study assumes, was when the interpretations of Furgal’s arrest, the political situation in the region and the street actions were developed that laid the foundation for the mass character of the protests and their longevity.

Due to the sheer number of posts and comments around Khabarovsk Krai’s protests, semi-automated text analysis methods were used to undertake a systematic assessment of the Khabarovsk protest for the first time. Combining NLP methods with the qualitative interpretation of texts typical of certain clusters (groups of similar texts), the report reconstructs the major lines and variants of framing, such as “our governor” and “good governor” and the prevalence of the “people’s governor” framing. Regional identity and the stories of protest voting have been interwoven in the framing of the arrest as “revenge on the protest region”. The main opponents of the region and the protesters are Putin himself, state-loyal mass media and, later, as the analysis of the second selected period shows, the police and the new acting governor. The mass and serial character of the street actions and the endurance of protesters were relevant for motivational framing from the start and are pointed out again and again by protagonists and observers alike.

The element of surprise is what helps us to understand the success of the framing: Furgal was elected in 2018 as a “dark horse”, not due to his own qualities or his unremarkable campaigning, but due to voters’ discontent with the status quo, the dominance of the unpopular United Russia, which seemed to be permanently entrenched and provoked voters’ feeling of not being heard, and lack of democratic representation.<sup>58</sup> After his election, however, Furgal proved himself to be an “untypical official”, who was responsive to people, i.e. he demonstrated exactly the qualities the discontented voters had missed. The feeling of surprise and the new hope (now being taken away) are visible in both variants of “people’s governor” framing: “our governor” (we have elected him and want to protect our choice and our dignity) and “good governor” (he is worth it), which are constructed in different groups of texts. This plurality is typical of the mobilisation framing around the Khabarovsk Krai protests and shows the non-strategic character of framing and the networked, leaderless character of mobilisation.

58 Kobrin 2020.

