



# Mobilization of Protest Activism on «TikTok»: Scale, Features and Threats

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**Abstract.** The article presents the results of an applied political research on the use of the digital service “TikTok” as a tool of protest mobilization on the example of mass actions that took place in Russian cities in the winter 2021. The aim of the study was to determine the distinctive characteristics of the platform that make it possible to effectively use it for organizing, coordinating and providing information support for protests. The scale of user involvement in the protest agenda, the demographic profile of the audience involved, key discourses and protest triggers were revealed through the use of a hybrid strategy that includes social media analysis, event analysis, and cognitive mapping of digital content. According to the results of the study, it can be concluded that the service is highly politicized, combined with a wide user reach. The multimedia and informal nature of political content correlates with a high level of emotionality and opposition. At the same time, the study showed the practice of using a number of mobilization technologies and psychological triggers targeted at different social groups. The authors are convinced that the prevailing opinion in the media about the dominance of children and young people in the general age structure of the service is outdated, which is confirmed by the empirical data obtained. The authors identified the risks of further use of “TikTok” to mobilize mass civil actions, which requires the development of comprehensive measures, taking into account the declared characteristics of the service.

**Keywords:** Tiktok · Civic activism · Protest mobilization · Social media · Digital environment · Social media analysis · Information flows

## 1 Introduction

Modern research demonstrates an increase in the use of social media as the main source of information. According to sociologists, the share of Russians receiving daily news from social networks has doubled over the past 5 years [1]. Researchers note the dynamically increasing demand for large social media and the highest level of trust in them on the part of young people [2]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed not only real life, but also the digital space. The Chinese entertainment service “TikTok” gained the greatest popularity in Russia with the beginning of large-scale epidemiological restrictions.

The service attracts with developed recommendation systems, a high degree of adaptability to the interests of each user, as well as providing a wide space for self-expression.

Since 2019, the platform has managed to increase its own base of domestic users by more than 7 times. The active influx of users made it possible to form of 25 million audience two years later, surpassing such popular platforms as Facebook and Twitter in this indicator.

Simultaneously with the rapid growth of the audience, the subject of the content is expanding, specific thematic blocks appear, primarily of a political nature. The emergence of such materials has contributed to the actualization of “TikTok” as a potential political tool. One of the first examples of the use of “TikTok” as a digital protest instrument can be considered the regional protests in Khabarovsk, which began in the summer of 2020 and had a significant impact on the protest moods of Russians [3]. During the same period, “TikTok” created the basis for prolonged protests in Belarus, replicating manipulative discourses about the illegitimacy of the authorities, violent actions of representatives of power structures, heroizing representatives of the opposition [4]. These events can be interpreted as testing the political potential of the platform.

The political situation in Russia in the winter 2021 was characterized as rather tense. The factors of domestic policy tension can be considered the onset of the electoral cycle associated with the election of deputies to the State Duma; economic downturn associated primarily with the negative consequences of the pandemic; social uncertainty due to the rise in new cases of COVID-19. In this context, the return of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny becomes another trigger, which is complemented by his arrest. During the protests in January–February 2021, “TikTok” became a powerful tool for organizing and coordinating protests. The service provided a full-fledged informational support of the actions. In this regard, a number of research areas are being updated: analysis of the role of service in the formation of protest moods; identification of technologies and mechanisms for converting protests from online to offline, from conventional to non-conventional; defining the key characteristics of the service as a tool for mobilizing protest actions.

The main research questions of applied research: what is the specificity of “TikTok” as a tool for the protest mobilization of Russian Internet users? How the structure of the protest information flow in “TikTok” is related to the involvement of Russian users in the protest agenda of winter 2021. The structure of the article includes the following sections: theoretical and methodological basis of the research; key findings – characteristics of the information flow and the involved users; conclusion, discussion and research prospects.

## 2 Literature Review

Current research on civic engagement increasingly focuses on the analysis of digital communications and the role of social media in organizing, coordinating and converting protests. The information agenda in the digital space determines the level of public tension and creates conditions for the mobilization or demobilization of protest activity [5]. The largest digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter and others) aim at the formation of political participation, including protest, their functionality makes it possible to facilitate the exchange of information, emotional and motivational attitudes [6]. It should be borne in mind that social networks have a positive effect on engagement in civic activity and political participation, which allows us to speak of a direct relationship between social

media support of protest activity and the involvement of users [7]. Social media is increasing the involvement of young users in political issues (both conventional and non-conventional) [8]. Social media have become a platform for informing and mobilizing various disunited groups, while they are of the greatest importance for mobilizing and moderating the activity of members of the organization [9]. For a long time, social media have been an organizational platform for mobilizing and managing protests [10, 11].

The growing popularity of “TikTok” and the actualization of the questions raised has led to a number of studies. There are several options for modern scientific works. The first group is devoted to the analysis of political confrontation in individual service segments [12, 13]. It is noted that at the beginning of the US presidential race in 2020, “TikTok” uses its role in exacerbating political competition between candidates and their supporters. This is a factually capable ramified network structure, the ability to build wide information branches created through reactions to videos of other users (“duets”), as well as a set of internal political hashtags of the opposing sides.

The second group of works determines the dependencies between the technological features of the service and the practice of using the tool of political mobilization [14, 15]. According to the researchers, “TikTok” has a multi-level gaming architecture that defines the horizontal and informal nature of communication between users, which serves as a promising model of engagement. The attractive features for new users are high-speed content update services, multimedia, lack of media and politicians. These characteristics form a special environment favorable for the political self-organization of users. Among other things, the researchers note an increase in users’ trust in each other and a decrease in various barriers (language, geographical, value etc.)

The central theme for the third group of works is the increased popularity of the service among Gen Z and the underlying system of young microinfluencers, characterized by high density and dynamism [16–19]. A separate group of works is made up of studies of virtual and real threats emanating from the service. This direction has gained popularity among Russian authors, who argue about the significant risks of using “TikTok” as a means of spreading socially dangerous phenomena – the ideologies of terrorism and extremism, as well as the need to develop new approaches to counter these processes in conditions of low efficiency of political actors [20].

### 3 Methodology

The research is based on a hybrid strategy, embodied in the use of classical and modern theories and concepts. G. Le Bon, who considered collective behavior, pointed to the existence of a “collective mind” acting as a unifying factor and embracing all members of the crowd [21]. G. Reingold introduces the concept of “smart crowd”, characterized by a high level of cohesion and solidarity, which form the possibility of using new digital platforms for the spontaneous and operational organization of mass actions [22]. M. Castells points out that the process of modern communications is based on the principles of network interaction, where each individual is represented as a separate network node. According to the author, the active dissemination of digital technologies has significantly enhanced the development of network communications that form new types of political participation and mobilization [23]. E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld, within

the framework of the concept of opinion leaders, substantiate a two-stage mechanism for the perception of information by a wide audience through people who have the greatest influence on the addressee [24]. Meanwhile, “slacktivism” theory emphasizes the special nature of political participation in the digital environment, where most of the users do not show real activity, confining themselves to the mechanisms provided by the virtual environment [25]. In turn, R.K. Garrett notes that with the dominance of social media in the modern information space, civic activism has undergone radical changes. The researcher identifies digital activism as an autonomous model of social action [26]. Much attention in the study of modern digital platforms as tools for mobilizing civic engagement is paid to recommender systems and special algorithms focused on meeting the interests of specific users [27]. This scientific direction is especially relevant in the course of researching modern digital platforms built on recommendation algorithms.

The study is based on a combination of methodological approaches: 1) network approach – the use of which in this study is associated with the study of the features of the interaction of actors in the modern network space [28]; 2) cognitive approach – associated with the search for patterns in the development of user reactions to digital political content and the characteristics of its perception [29]; 3) post-behaviorism – taking into account the influence of information factors on the formation of strategies of political behavior of Internet users [30]. In addition, the research methodology is based on the general principles of social media predictive analytics, which includes the implementation of an intelligent search for markers of digital activity of political actors through the use of automated tools for collecting and processing big data, further scenario and forecasting of sociopolitical processes based on the collected data sets [31].

A complex of modern methods and tools was used to implement the set tasks. At the first stage, cognitive mapping of digital video content presented in the main segment of the “TikTok” service was carried out. The sample included 300 of the most popular videos. The analysis made it possible to establish the content characteristics of the published materials, the dominant protest triggers and discourses, the mobilization technologies used, and also to compile a search query dictionary consisting of key protest hashtags. At the second stage, social media analysis (SMA) was carried out by combining the capabilities of two automated tools (“Popsters” & “Pentos”), allowing to determine the quantitative characteristics of content through a group of selected thematic hashtags, as well as the characteristics of the audience involved. The collected dataset amounted to 20 000 videos relevant to the research topic in January–February 2021. The use of these tools made it possible to evaluate the following digital markers: the number of videos, the number of views, the number of likes, the number of reposts, the number of comments.

To deepen and interpret the data obtained, an event analysis was carried out using the web analytics tools “Google Trends” and “Yandex.Wordstat”, which made it possible to compare quantitative values with the main political events.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Content and Functional Characteristics of the Protest Information Flow

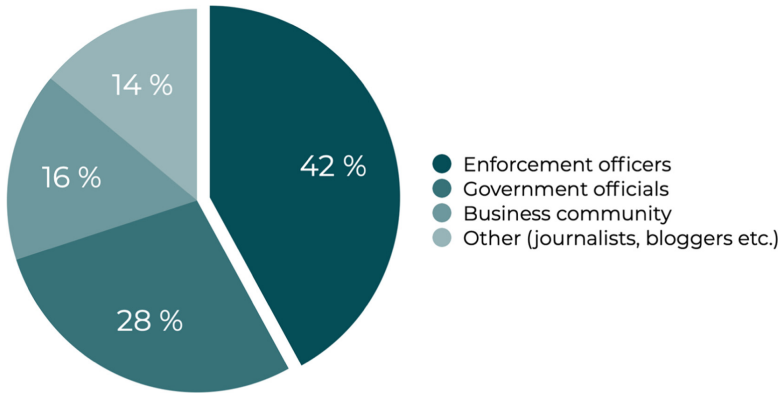
At the initial stage of the study, cognitive mapping of popular protest videos posted on the service was carried out. During the analysis, key hashtags were identified, dedicated to both specific protest actions and the general situation with politician and activist Alexey Navalny (#23January, #31January, #2February, #freenavalny, #wearenavalny, #livenavalny etc.<sup>1</sup>). It should be noted that hashtags are understandable and intuitive, contributing to their mass replication and attracting the attention of users in the feed of most popular videos ('for you page'). The recommended algorithms are structured in such a way that the content that instantly attracts the mechanism has additional opportunities to reach a wider audience.

The identified protest triggers are combined into 4 thematic groups, for each of which the representation in the total volume of the protest information flow is determined: 1) irremovability of power (32%), 2) violent actions by law enforcement agencies and mass detentions (29%), 3) injustice in relation to Navalny's team, criticism of law enforcement agencies and the judicial system (23%), 4) corruption (16%). A high degree of their intersection and joint use was also recorded in most of the analyzed materials. The distribution of triggers by topic shows the orientation of the protest towards criticism of the current political regime, and not towards the demands for the release of Alexey Navalny and his supporters.

Cognitive mapping made it possible to identify several important content characteristics of protest content. First, this is a high degree of unconventionality and opposition, expressed in the use of direct calls for the use of violent actions against law enforcement agencies, direct insults to Russian politicians and law enforcement officials. The most radical content with direct appeals is emotionally charged. At the same time, in the general array of videos, instructions and explanations for the protesters are highlighted, made in a purely rational style. During the analysis, the authors recorded the use of various manipulative techniques. These include dehumanization – in relation to the security forces, primitivization, stereotyping and juxtaposition – in relation to Russian politicians. The obtained data show that the main subject of manipulative influence is law enforcement officers (Fig. 1). The data obtained show that the main subjects of manipulative influence are law enforcement officers. The media strike associated with attempts to discredit the law system in order to increase the motivation and readiness of the protesters is directed at them.

Separately, it is worth mentioning the use of the latest multimedia mechanisms that form a special type of content through filters, neural networks, branded short audio (dance/entertainment trends that have developed into "protest anthems"), multi-user challenges that penetrate the political sphere and significantly increase the coverage and influence of the declared discourses. These mechanisms are similar to viral ones and are based on infection technology that is rapidly spreading in other social networks, repeatedly duplicated and sent to users personally. In this regard, it is worth returning to the branch-like structure of the service associated with the ability to record the reactions of other users' videos, increasing the speed of content distribution. The research

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter, hashtags are translated into English.



**Fig. 1.** Subjects of manipulation in the protest information flow.

experience of the author's team associated with the analysis of the political segment of Russian social media shows a significant difference in the speed and number of links with other digital platforms.

#### 4.2 The Scale and Dynamics of Protest Information Flows

The statistical indicators collected based on the results of the study demonstrate a wide scale of the protest agenda and a high level of user activity (Table 1). The average number of likes on one protest video is 10000, reposts – 300, comments – 200. In addition, a uniform distribution of videos by days of the week and time of day is recorded, which ensures their uninterrupted feed to the recommendation feed. The absence of long breaks in the publication of protest videos may also be due to their external administration.

The frequent use of comments as a form of user reaction to sensitive and topical topics is a distinctive feature of the platform, which forms a free space for citizens' self-expression. While on other social media the comment block does not attract significant user attention, on "TikTok", comments are an integral part of the content. Commentaries on popular political videos are turning into a platform for fierce political disputes and discussions. Individual comments, which often get more user reactions than original videos, have their own opportunities to influence the audience.

Despite the lack of content moderation capabilities for the authors of videos, they can mark comments themselves, which will be shown to users in the first place. This technical capability is actively used as a manipulation tool. Thus, at the top of the list of comments, only those opinions remain that are beneficial to the authors of the content. This mechanism is similar to the concept of the "spiral of silence" [32] and is highly effective both in the process of imposing specific political views on the audience and in the course of their political mobilization.

At the next stage of the study, an event analysis was carried out with the aim of additional interpretation of the results obtained in the course of SMA. As a result, the dynamics of publication activity for the selected hashtags was correlated with the main political events (Fig. 2). The first peak falls on January 17 – the date of Navalny's

**Table 1.** Aggregate indicators of user activity by protest hashtags.

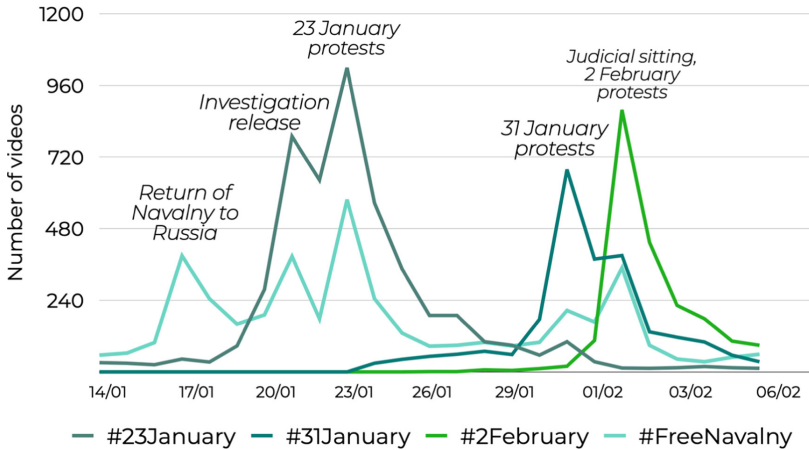
Hashtag	Likes	Reposts	Comments
#23January	58,683,354	1,736,222	1,368,718
#31January	8,436,988	264,068	220,481
#2February	1,037,583	50,486	46,002
#FreeNavalny	94,837,740	2,205,102	1,769,779
#LiveNavalny	1,199,833	58,766	22,849
#WeAreNavalny	3,150,400	70,94	93,421

return to Moscow, after a long stay in Germany. In addition to the fact that the return of Navalny himself is becoming a major informational occasion, additional attention is drawn to the situation with the redirection of the plane with Navalny to another airport and his immediate arrest by law enforcement agencies. These events are becoming a catalyst for not only political, but also entertainment content on “TikTok”, spawning a number of humorous videos from major bloggers. At the same time, several hashtags were launched in the service in support of the oppositionist, and the first proposals for holding single pickets and mass actions appeared. An additional trigger that actualized the protest mood was the court session, which chose a measure of restraint for the oppositionist.

The release of a new investigation by opposition about the alleged residence of President Putin, which attracted a lot of public attention, is becoming a central topic for the political segment of “TikTok”. The topic of corruption is added to the discourses of injustice and illegality of Navalny’s detention. Against this background, “TikTok” is launching a number of new trends and challenge. It is worth paying attention to the material characteristics of the protest content – a variety of protest artifacts, which were specially counted on in the investigation in the context of the creation of many political memes and their rapid distribution (“disco”, “mud warehouse”, “wineries” etc.).

With the film’s growing popularity and major opinion leaders joining its coverage, there are calls for massive unsanctioned actions across the country, the first of which took place on 23 January. “TikTok” has become a means of active campaigning, organization and information support of civil actions in both large and small cities. Despite the peaceful and sparse nature of many of the protests, they launched a new group of triggers, including reactions to mass arrests and targeted use of force against protesters. We also note the absence of a sharp drop in the number of publications after the promotion. Thematic hashtags were smoothly replacing each other, and videos for a long time summed up the results of protest events both in Moscow and in the regions.

Further actions on January 31 attracted less attention from the audience, primarily due to the narrowing of the geography of the protests. Added to the protest triggers are demands to release the protesters detained a week earlier. An important component is the level of protest moderation, which became a reason for discussion and attracting public attention. The last peak can be considered on February 2, when the next hearing on the Navalny case takes place, which also gathers a number of his supporters near the court, and then near the place of his detention. During this action, which had a



**Fig. 2.** Time distribution of videos by popular protest hashtags.

predominantly spontaneous nature, the service demonstrated technological flexibility and the ability to adapt to the current political situation, which was actively used by the organizers of the protests. A significant role in drawing attention to the events of the protest days was played by the demonstrative disregard of the rallies by regional and federal authorities, traditional media and even some social media. The lack of effective opposition to unconventional protest activity in the information field has led to the transition of the audience to new digital platforms.

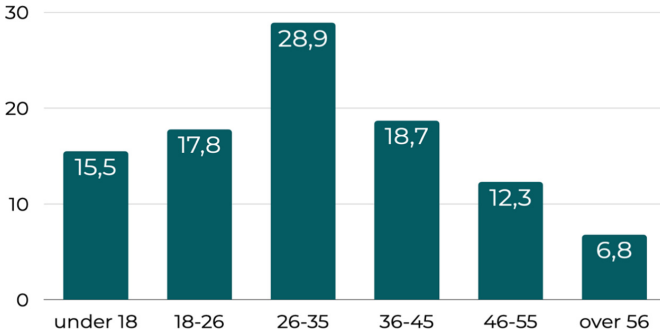
### 4.3 Characteristics of the Audience of Protest Information Flows

Combining the results of SMA and cognitive mapping made it possible to determine the age core of the protest information flow in “TikTok” (Fig. 3). Contrary to the opinion widespread in the media about the dominance of school-age children and their corresponding content, the analysis showed the predominance of the age groups of 26–35 and 36–45 years old. It can be assumed that the further development of the service and the influx of a new audience will only increase the increase in the share of the adult audience in its age structure. In addition, the study showed the growth of a group of dissatisfied with the excessive politicization of the service, which is formed mainly at the expense of an adult deideologized audience. This fact can lead to the fragmentation of the service into two large segments in terms of the level of involvement in the current political agenda and readiness for public discussion of sociopolitical processes.

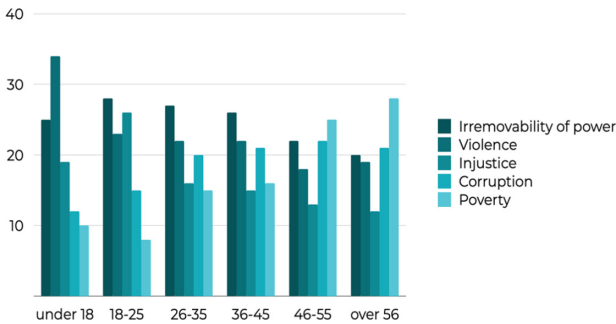
The distribution of the protest triggers described earlier by age groups demonstrates significant intergenerational differences, the reasons for which are changes in political requests and attitudes (Fig. 4).

For young people, the most significant problems are the irremovability of power and the preservation of the political system. With an increase in age characteristics, priorities change – socioeconomic problems become more important, the perception of corruption changes. It can be assumed that the formation of such gaps in the digital space is only increasing. This can be influenced by intelligent recommendation mechanisms





**Fig. 3.** Distribution of involved users by age, %.



**Fig. 4.** Distribution of protest topics by age groups, %.

and microtargeting systems that understand the current requests and moods of users, combining them into groups, including by age.

## 5 Conclusion, Discussion and Prospects

The following conclusions can be drawn from the results of the applied research. First, the political content on “TikTok” is characterized by a wide reach and level of user activity, which is confirmed by the downloaded statistics. Secondly, the publication activity on the service is situational and flexible, adjusting to the current political situation more quickly than other platforms. Thirdly, the published thematic content is distinguished by its unconventionality and opposition, which creates significant risks and requires the development of a set of measures to counter these processes. Fourthly, the process of protest mobilization in “TikTok” is accompanied by the use of a complex of psychological triggers, as well as various mechanisms for manipulating the audience, which increases its effectiveness. Fifth, the core of the protest agenda in the service is made up of adult users, who are targeted by the bulk of the disseminated political materials. Sixth, protest triggers are adapted to the age of users and take into account their values, political sentiments and expectations.

The strategy used in the presented research has a number of limitations. The tools of automated SMA show the greatest efficiency in the “here and now” mode. Carrying out

the main stage of the research at the end of the most important protest events narrows the research opportunities. It is also necessary to take into account the peculiarities of the Internet services and the limitations imposed by the platforms under study. In addition, any data obtained from such an analysis must be validated and verified through multiple iterations.

Given the high prevalence of manipulative information in “TikTok” and other social media aimed at misinforming the mass audience and violating social stability, the problem of countering the development of destructive information remains urgent. An increasing number of researchers from various scientific fields are paying attention to the problem of the formation and transformation of fake news in the post-truth era [33].

In particular, it mentions the complication of fakes in the digital era, an increase in the number of conspiracy theories and disinformation operations in the political sphere. The organization, mobilization and coordination of mass protest actions is only one of the directions of the development of digital manipulation tools. It is noteworthy that a popular technology for the implementation of these processes is deepfakes – products of the synthesis of images and videos using modern neural network technologies. In the course of the current study, the use of a number of high-quality deepfakes was recorded, dedicated to calls for unconventional forms of civic engagement and the popularization of protest in general.

It is assumed that the multimedia nature of “TikTok” provides huge opportunities for the distribution of deepfakes, along with other manipulation technologies. At the same time, media researchers note that the perception of deepfakes in the online space is subject to broad segments of the audiences [34]. These facts form the risks of misleading the mass audience, as well as the formation of a stable public opinion based on non-existent phenomena.

In the conditions of high volatility of political processes in the modern world, such an impact of digital technologies on public consciousness poses a serious threat to society and the state. At the same time, it is necessary to understand that new digital platforms provide significant opportunities for self-organization, the development of civil society institutions, which can be used as a tool for building a constructive dialogue between the state and citizens. According to experts, the positive experience of working with social media should be expressed in the desire, opportunities and availability of sufficient competencies of government representatives in the process of building sustainable digital communications with citizens in various areas [35]. The dysfunctionality of the authorities and other political forces in the online environment will continue to contribute to the spread of destructive ideas and phenomena that pose a serious danger. Researchers are attracted by the latest technological innovations used by states as a tool for building systemic interaction with society. For example, the concept of e-government is actively complemented by the Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain technology in the development of various areas: combatting ecological challenges, improvement of the global healthcare system, e-voting. We are more often faced with attempts to automate social and political relations in a digital environment that make life easier for citizens [36, 37].

The use of new formats of interaction with users and the multimedia nature of content form promising areas of current research related to the analysis of political memes, entertainment videos, relevant audio materials, the practice of using neural

network technologies and augmented reality. This study proves the fact that the study of modern processes of civic activity that take place mainly online is impossible without the use of modern interdisciplinary tools. One of the methods for solving new research problems can be considered the evaluation of protest visual content using portable eye trackers and cardiometers. The use of such an oculometric/cardiometric analysis will allow us to analyze the unconscious reactions of users and significantly deepen the data obtained during the research of the social media [38]. Recent applied research in the field of oculometry demonstrates the wide possibilities of this technique for assessing the personal security in the digital space [39]. The results of such interdisciplinary studies can form the basis of new recommendations for public authorities on building a digital communication system and limiting the negative effects of mobilizing mass political protests.

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