

The Ethics of Civic Participation under Conditions of Digital Control: Volunteer Networks of Navalny's Headquarters as a Space for the Formation of Political Subjectivity (2017–2023)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the internal motivations and ethical orientations of volunteers in Navalny's headquarters during the period 2017–2023. The study examines volunteer networks as a space for the formation of civic subjectivity under conditions of increasing legal and digital control.

Based on the analysis of public materials, interviews, and observational data, the research demonstrates that participation in the headquarters' activities was perceived by many participants not primarily as political activity in the narrow sense, but rather as a moral choice and a form of personal responsibility.

Special attention is devoted to the transformation of motivations after 2021, when the designation of the organizations as extremist significantly changed the legal status of participation and increased the risks faced by volunteers.

The study shows that even under conditions of heightened pressure, mechanisms of solidarity, mutual support, and the reinterpretation of civic identity continue to persist.

Keywords

volunteerism; civic subjectivity; political motivation; digital control; ethics of participation; Russia; 2017–2023

1. Introduction

The volunteer networks of Navalny's headquarters in 2017–2021 became a notable phenomenon of contemporary Russian civic activism. For many participants, they represented not only an organizational structure but also a space for forming personal positions, developing skills of public interaction, and understanding political responsibility.

In public discourse, the activities of the headquarters were often viewed exclusively through the lens of electoral campaigns or opposition politics. However, for the volunteers themselves, participation carried a more complex meaning. It combined elements of civic service, a pursuit of justice, and the search for social solidarity.

After the court decision in June 2021, which designated the Anti-Corruption Foundation and regional headquarters as extremist organizations, the situation changed significantly. Participation in the activities of the headquarters acquired a different legal status, and volunteer engagement became associated with increased risks. This shift affected not only the external conditions of participation but also the internal motivations of participants.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the value foundations underlying volunteer participation, how volunteers interpreted their activities, and how their perception of their own role changed under conditions of increasing pressure and legal constraints.

2. Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and is based on a combination of analysis of open sources and semi-structured interviews with former participants in the volunteer networks of Navalny's headquarters.

During the period 2017–2023, the following materials were examined:

- public materials produced by the headquarters (appeals, reports, and instructions for volunteers);
- social media publications reflecting internal communication;
- interviews and comments by participants published in the media;
- the author's own observations based on participant involvement within the volunteer environment.

In addition, during 2022–2023, informal conversations were conducted with former volunteers (without recording personal data). The purpose of these interviews was to identify motivational attitudes, value orientations, and perceptions of risk after the change in the legal status of the organizations.

The study does not aim to provide a quantitative assessment of the scale of participation. Instead, it focuses on reconstructing the internal motivational models and ethical arguments that guided participants.

Methodologically, the research relies on:

- qualitative analysis of narratives;
- thematic coding of recurring motivational expressions;
- comparison of statements before and after 2021;
- interpretation of changes in the self-descriptions of volunteers.

A limitation of the study is the inability to cover the full spectrum of opinions and regional diversity. Nevertheless, the motivations identified demonstrate stable and recurring patterns.

3. Research Results

3.1. Internal Motivations for Participation: Justice, Dignity, and a “Normal Life”

An analysis of interviews, public testimonies, and observational materials indicates that the motivations of volunteers in Navalny’s headquarters were rarely reduced to “politics for the sake of politics.” In many cases, participation began as a reaction to a concrete experience of perceived injustice—corruption, arbitrariness, social inequality, and the feeling that ordinary citizens lacked effective instruments of influence in everyday life.

3.1.1. The Motive of Justice as a Personal Rather Than Ideological Category

In participants’ narratives, one frequently encounters the language of everyday morality rather than ideological terminology such as “liberalism,” “opposition,” or “regime.” Instead, volunteers often framed their motivations in simple moral terms:

- “This is not right.”
- “This is unfair.”
- “I don’t want to stay silent.”
- “If everyone remains silent, nothing will change.”

For many volunteers, participation was important because it allowed them to restore a sense of internal consistency—to live in a way that would not produce feelings of shame for passivity.

3.1.2. The Motive of Dignity and Self-Respect

A second recurring theme is the motive of dignity. Participants described volunteer activity as a practice that enabled them to feel like subjects rather than objects of decision-making. This was expressed through attitudes such as:

- “I have the right to a voice.”
- “I don’t want to be just a statistic.”
- “I want to be part of something real.”

An important feature of these narratives is that the political and the personal are not clearly separated. Participation becomes a way of defending not abstract principles but one’s own self-respect.

3.1.3. The Motive of a “Normal Life” and the Pragmatic Ideal

A third group of motivations is pragmatic in nature. For some volunteers, participation was connected less with protest and more with the idea of normality—functioning institutions, predictable rules, and respectful treatment of citizens within state structures.

This aspiration was articulated as a desire:

- for clear and understandable rules;
- for a reduction of arbitrariness;
- for the ability to plan one’s future.

This pragmatic motivation often contributed to psychological resilience, since participation was perceived as a contribution to normalization, rather than as a romanticized confrontation.

3.1.4. The Motive of Community: “I Am Not Alone”

Finally, an important motivating factor was the social dimension of participation. Many participants noted that the volunteer environment provided a sense of support and belonging, particularly in situations where expressing one’s position publicly was difficult.

For some volunteers, a decisive experience was the realization that:

- “I saw people who care.”
- “I realized there are many of us.”

- “This is not a sect or a small club—it is a real network of people.”

The community factor often explains why participation continued even as risks increased: it provided not only an idea or cause but also human relationships and solidarity.

3.2. Volunteerism as a School of Civic Skills and Horizontal Self-Organization

Beyond value-based motivations, participation in the activities of the headquarters also fulfilled an important educational function. For many young people, this was their first experience of involvement in organized civic work requiring discipline, coordination, and responsibility.

3.2.1. Learning Public Communication

Volunteers were involved in:

- campaign outreach activities;
- work with citizens’ appeals;
- dissemination of information;
- organizing meetings and election observation.

This experience fostered skills in public speaking, argumentation, and interaction with individuals holding different views. Participants often noted that they initially experienced anxiety when engaging in open communication, but gradually developed greater confidence.

Importantly, communication within the volunteer networks was not based solely on slogans but also on attempts to explain positions, respond to objections, and build dialogue. For some participants, this became their first experience of constructive political conversation.

3.2.2. Skills of Self-Organization and Role Distribution

The structure of the headquarters implied a distribution of roles: coordinators, volunteers, observers, and staff responsible for data and communications. Even within a centralized organizational framework, a significant portion of tasks was resolved at the horizontal level.

Volunteers learned to:

- plan events;
- coordinate actions within a team;
- follow internal procedures;
- take responsibility for results.

This experience differed from participation in many state or educational organizations in that responsibility was perceived as voluntarily assumed rather than imposed.

3.2.3. Formation of a Culture of Mutual Support

Under conditions of pressure and negative attitudes from parts of society, the volunteer environment often became a space of psychological support. Participants discussed not only organizational matters but also personal experiences and concerns.

Support was expressed through:

- collective discussions of potential risks;
- the exchange of information regarding legal assistance;
- moral solidarity in cases of detentions or inspections.

Thus, a culture of mutual assistance emerged, which was significant not only for the functioning of specific campaigns but also for the personal development of participants.

3.2.4. Experience of Interaction with State Institutions

For some volunteers, an important stage was their first encounter with law enforcement and administrative institutions—document checks, administrative protocols, or so-called preventive conversations.

Even when such interactions did not result in serious sanctions, they often changed participants' perception of the state as a neutral arbiter. Volunteers began to understand law not only as a system of formal norms but also as a practice of enforcement and interpretation.

For many participants, this experience became a turning point in the development of a more conscious civic position.

3.3. Ethical Dilemmas and the Transformation of Motivation after 2021

The designation of the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) and regional headquarters as extremist organizations in June 2021 became not only a legal but also a moral turning point for many participants in the volunteer networks. Whereas participation had previously been perceived as a form of lawful civic activity, after the change in legal status it became associated with criminal risk.

This shift generated a number of complex ethical dilemmas.

3.3.1. The Conflict between Convictions and Personal Safety

One of the central dilemmas concerned the relationship between personal convictions and personal security. Many former volunteers noted that after 2021 they began to reassess the consequences of their past and potential involvement.

The question was framed not simply as “whether participation is right or wrong,” but rather as:

- “Am I ready to bear the risks for my past participation?”
- “Am I prepared to continue expressing my views publicly?”
- “Do I bear responsibility before my family for possible consequences?”

Thus, the ethical decision ceased to be abstract and became directly connected with practical risks.

3.3.2. Reinterpretation of the Concept of Civic Duty

Before 2021, civic duty was often understood as active participation—volunteering, expressing public positions, and serving as election observers. After the change in legal status, many participants began to reconsider the very meaning of responsibility.

For some former volunteers, civic engagement began to take forms such as:

- private discussions;
- expert or analytical work;
- support for human rights initiatives;
- maintaining personal convictions without public demonstration.

This shift illustrates a transformation of participation, from open action to more cautious strategies.

3.3.3. The Question of Retrospective Responsibility

A particularly sensitive issue was the retrospective dimension of participation. The realization that actions undertaken during a period when the organizations operated legally could later be reinterpreted created a sense of instability in legal boundaries.

This influenced personal self-identification. Some participants described experiencing a “rupture” between the past and the present: activities previously perceived as ordinary civic engagement became legally stigmatized.

3.3.4. The Persistence of Value Foundations

Despite the increase in risks, the value foundations of participation did not disappear. Many interviewees emphasized that withdrawing from public activity did not necessarily mean abandoning their convictions.

Rather than a change in position, what occurred was a change in the form of its expression. This suggests the persistence of internal motivation even as individuals adapted their external behavior to new conditions.

3.4. Transformation of Self-Identification: From Volunteer to Citizen Beyond Organizational Structures

After the termination of the headquarters' activities and the change in the legal status of the organizations, many former participants faced the need to reconsider their own roles. Whereas self-identification had previously been linked to a specific structure ("I am a headquarters volunteer"), after 2021 it gradually shifted toward a more abstract formula: "I am a citizen with a particular position."

3.4.1. The Break in Organizational Affiliation

The disappearance of the institutional framework led to the loss of the familiar form of collective activity. For some former volunteers, this meant losing the environment in which skills, social connections, and a sense of purpose had been formed.

At the same time, this transition contributed to a shift from organizational identity to personal responsibility. Participation ceased to be a function of an organization and became part of an individual biographical experience.

3.4.2. Internal Autonomy as a New Form of Subjectivity

Some participants noted that after the closure of the headquarters their position became less dependent on external coordination. The absence of a centralized structure led to greater autonomy in decision-making regarding public expression, professional trajectories, and forms of civic engagement.

This process may be interpreted as a transition from collective to more individualized forms of civic subjectivity.

3.4.3. Memory of Participation as an Element of Personal History

For many former volunteers, the period of participation remained an important part of their personal biography, regardless of their subsequent behavioral strategies. It is often perceived as a stage of personal maturation, the formation of principles, and the understanding of one's own limits.

Even under conditions of reduced public activity, the experience of volunteering continues to influence value orientations and attitudes toward state institutions.

3.4.4. The Normalization of Caution

One of the most enduring consequences has been the acceptance of caution as a new norm. Whereas in 2017–2020 openness and public visibility were perceived as natural forms of participation, after 2021 caution increasingly came to be viewed as a rational strategy of self-preservation.

This shift does not necessarily imply an internal rejection of convictions, but it significantly transforms the ways in which those convictions are expressed.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study make it possible to consider the volunteer networks of Navalny's headquarters not only as a political phenomenon, but also as a space for the formation of civic subjectivity under conditions of limited institutional competition.

First, the analysis shows that participation in the activities of the headquarters was, for many participants, a form of moral choice. Motivation was structured around the categories of justice, dignity, and "normality," rather than exclusively around ideological identity. This allows volunteerism to be interpreted as a practice of personal responsibility, rather than merely an element of an electoral campaign.

Second, volunteer activity performed the function of informal civic education. Participants acquired skills of public communication, self-organization, and collective responsibility. This experience contributed to the development of a more reflective attitude toward state institutions and legal procedures.

Third, the designation of the organizations as extremist in 2021 significantly altered the context of participation and introduced new ethical dilemmas for volunteers. Whereas previously their activity had been perceived as a legitimate form of civic expression, after the change in legal status it became associated with criminal risk. This shift led to a transformation in forms of participation, though not necessarily to the abandonment of underlying values.

Thus, it is possible to speak of a dual effect: external pressure limited public activity, but at the same time encouraged a deeper internal reflection on civic identity and responsibility.

Finally, the observed transformation of self-identification—from “volunteer within a structure” to “citizen beyond organizational structures”—suggests that the experience of participation continues to exert influence even after the institutional framework has ceased to exist. This allows volunteerism to be viewed not merely as a political campaign, but as a biographical and value-forming stage in the lives of participants.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyze the internal motivations and value foundations underlying the participation of volunteers in Navalny’s headquarters during the period 2017–2023. Unlike approaches that consider the activities of the headquarters exclusively within a political framework, this research focuses on the subjective dimension—that is, how the participants themselves interpreted their involvement.

The analysis shows that for most volunteers participation was structured around the categories of justice, dignity, responsibility, and the aspiration for a “normal” social environment. Volunteer activity functioned as a space for the formation of civic skills and personal subjectivity, rather than merely as an instrument of electoral mobilization.

The change in the legal status of the organizations in 2021 significantly transformed the conditions of participation and increased the associated risks. This led to the emergence of ethical dilemmas and a shift from open forms of activity toward more cautious strategies. Nevertheless, the underlying value foundations of participation in many cases persisted, even if the forms of their expression changed.

A limitation of this research is its qualitative nature and reliance primarily on open sources and interviews. Future studies could include broader regional analysis and comparative research on other volunteer networks.

Overall, it can be concluded that the volunteer networks of Navalny’s headquarters during the period under review represented not only a political structure, but also a social space for the formation of civic identity. Even under conditions of increased pressure, the experience of participation continues to influence the self-identification and value orientations of former volunteers.

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