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**THE SYMBOL OF CHILDHOOD  
AS A WEAPON OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE:  
THE COVERAGE OF THE RUSSIAN PROTESTS 2018-2019**

In Russia, in the past few years, images of children have been intensively used to cover protest activity, reflecting both the involvement of young citizens in the politics and the idea of the manipulative nature of using the symbol of childhood<sup>1</sup>. This is associated with both the participation of minors in protest activity and the involvement of the age factor in political rhetoric in the context of the irremovability of power

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<sup>1</sup> Riabov O., Riabova T., Kleshchenko L. (2021) "Save the Children!" The images of childhood and legitimation of power in contemporary Russian politics // *Children and Society* (submitted); Kleshchenko, L.L. (2019). Rerezentatsiia obraza detstva v liberal'nykh SMI sovremennoi Rossii, *Kompleksnye issledovaniia detstva* 1 (4): 312-319.; Pankratova, E. V. (2019) Vzgl'yad rossiyan na politicheskoe uchastie detej (po materialam sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya) [Russians' view of the political participation of children (based on the materials of a sociological survey)]. In: S. V. Rovbel', S. A. Il'inykh (eds.). *Sotsial'nye praktiki i upravlenie: problemnoe pole sotsiologii: Materialy II Sibirskogo sotsiologicheskogo foruma s mezhdunarodnym uchastiem [Social practices and management: The problem field of sociology: Proceedings of II Siberian sociological forum with international participation]*. Novosibirsk: Novosibirsk State University of Economics and Management Publ., pp. 96–101.

Thus, the well-known Internet-meme "They are just children", which was born during the events of 2013-14 on the Kiev Maidan<sup>2</sup>, has become popular in Russia as well. - both to cover young citizens' participation in the protest activity and to demonstrate the manipulations in exploiting the symbol of childhood

The paper aimed to analyze how childhood images are used by the authorities and the opposition in the discourse of Russian protest movement 2018-2019. It is associated with the anti-corruption campaign of Alexei Navalny and his supporters. The first protests took place on March 26, 2017, and their last stage began in January 2021, when the demand for the Alexei Navalny's release from detention was added to the anti-corruption demands.

The sources for the analysis are statements by leading Russian politicians and journalists, both pro-Kremlin and oppositional in which images of childhood appear, as well as data from an interview conducted in Russia in 2019. The chronological scope of the study is limited to the period of increased protest activity in Russia, 2017-2021.

First, we focus on the theoretical aspects of the problem of using childhood images to legitimize power. Then the subject of analysis is how pro-Kremlin and opposition politicians and media include images of childhood in political mobilization, legitimation and delegitimization of power.

### **Approaches**

1. A constructivist approach to childhood presupposes prescribing to a child certain meanings. Content of Childhood concept is flexible. It depends of social and cultural context.<sup>3</sup>

2. The potential of the using of symbol is determined by its semantics. On one hand, children embody dependence, unreasonableness, incompetence, inexperience,

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<sup>2</sup> See more details in Fournier, A. (2015) Immature publics: democratic revolutions and youth activists in the eye of authority, *Anthropological Quarterly*. 88 (1): 37-66.

<sup>3</sup> Cook, D.T. (2002). *Interrogating Symbolic Childhood*, *Symbolic Childhood*, ed. by D.T. Cook. New York: Peter Lang: 2.

and helplessness. On the other hand, they symbolize genuine humanity, sincerity, and peacefulness.<sup>4</sup>

3. The childhood images have all properties that make it convenient for political actors to exploit: they address to personal experience of every person, they are connected to the myth or the sacral, which determines its mobilization potential and its ability to trigger a strong emotional response; they have all the rest characteristics of political symbols: plausibility and subjectivity in interpretation; ability to serve as tools of inclusion and exclusion, contributing to drawing symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them”; relatively inexpensive way to challenge or justify particular political agendas.<sup>5</sup>

4. The use of different components of images of childhood by politicians (the helplessness of children, their vulnerability, the need for protection etc) is a common practice in political discourse, including Russian one. These images of children are created and supported for various purposes including for political mobilization, and for legitimation and delegitimization of power. As to legitimation, it should be noted that among the criteria of legitimacy of power are support of it by majority of the subjects; their willingness not only to defer to power but also to cooperate with it; their perception of power as righteous, just, and fair; minimum level of violence over them.

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<sup>4</sup> Riabova, T., Riabov, O. (2019) The “Rape of Europe”: 2016 New Year’s Eve sexual assaults in Cologne in hegemonic discourse of Russian media, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. 52 (2): 145-154. Q1 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2019.04.004>.

<sup>5</sup> See on political symbols in detail in: Elgenius, G. (2011). *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 248 p.; DeZalia R.A.P., Moeschberger S.L. (2014) *The Function of Symbols that Bind and Divide, Symbols that bind, symbols that divide the semiotics of peace and conflict*, ed. by R.A.P. DeZalia, S.L. Moeschberger S.L. New York: Springer, Cham: 1–12; Nieguth, T., and Raney, T. (2017) “Nation-Building and Canada’s National Symbolic Order, 1993–2015.” *Nations and Nationalism* 23 (1): 87–104; Gill, G., Angosto-Ferrandez L.F. (2018) Introduction: Symbolism and Politics, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 19 (4): 429-433, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2018.1539436](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2018.1539436).

In order to receive, keep, and restore legitimacy, political actors employ various legitimation strategies, which can be defined as authorities' attempts to promote their vision of what is right for the country and, in principle, are aimed at producing voluntary transfer of power to the authorities.<sup>6</sup>

5. The adult/child opposition is used as a sort of matrix of a power relationship which reflects the existing social hierarchies. As Ashis Nandy points out, the idea of childhood as an imperfect transitional state on the way to normality – adulthood (moreover, the state of an adult white man) – was established in Western cultures in the time of Modernity and was inseparable from the concept of progressive development<sup>7</sup>. Equating an individual or a community with a child (in metaphoring, first of all). is aimed at demonstrating the latter's lack of autonomy and need to be controlled. In this regard, the actors of symbolic politics employ such a way of political rhetoric as symbolic infantilization - likening an individual or group to a child in order to gain a political advantage.<sup>8</sup>. Infantilization includes both explicit labelling of someone as a child by direct comparison, and implicit – that is, endowment with qualities that are perceived as attributes of a child: emotionality, unreasonableness, helplessness, dependence, irresponsibility, etc.

## **2. IMAGES OF CHILDREN IN PRO-KREMLIN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

Both protesters and supporters of authorities use the symbol of childhood very actively. As to pro-Kremlin media and politicians, the dominant images which are employed are “children as inferior adults” and “children as victims”. In authorities'

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<sup>6</sup> Mazepus, H., Veenendaal W.P., McCarthy-Jones A. & Vásquez, J.M.T. (2016). A comparative study of legitimation strategies in hybrid regimes, *Policy Studies* 37 (4): 354.

<sup>7</sup> Nandy, A. (1984) 'Reconstructing Childhood: A Critique of the Ideology of Adulthood', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 10 (3): 359–375. DOI: 10.1177/030437548401000303.

<sup>8</sup> Riabova, T., Riabov, D. (2020) 'Infantilization of the Other: Metaphor of Childhood in Russia's Media Discourse on International Relations', *Australian Slavonic & East European Studies*, 34: 125.

view children have no political subjectivity independence, responsibility, competence. Children are completely depend on adults.

### **Images of childhood in practices of political mobilization**

The authorities use the images of childhood in the practices of political mobilization which helps to citizens to find the right line of political behavior.

First of all, such characteristic of childhood as vulnerability and needs of protection are involved in covering the protests. The mobilizing force of the images of children's suffering is so great that gives ground to defend them by any means, often disregarding other social norms. Picturing the opponent/ foe as a person who wage war against women and children allows representing him as dishonest and unheroic.

The leaders of Russian protest were represented in pro-Kremlin mass media as exploiting children in their own mercenary aims. The authorities accuse the liberal opposition of: manipulating the minds of minors; jeopardizing their health and life; taking them to protest rallies; and also carrying out the task of the Western secret services, which are trying to split Russian society by age. They exploit e.g., child broken mind (Vzgliad. 2019. 3 September).

Protests have been compared with school dances and young protesters-participants were been represented as deceived by Navalnyi who promised financial reimbursement for arrest. Young protesters were characterized as "pupils/ students", "children of Navalnyi", "teenagers", "children", «infantile little boys».

Opposition is blamed for using the children in its' purposes. E.g, conservative «Russian people line» named anti-corruption meetings on March 26, 2018 «Children's Crusade» (Russkaia narodnaia liniia. 27 March) Semantic of Child Crusade includes senses of betrayal of the interests of children by adults who deceived them.

Then, the organizers of the protests were accused of exposing children "under the batons of the Rossgvardeyts". The incident that occurred at the rally on July 27, 2019, when one of the organizers, S. Fomin, was accused of using an infant "as a human shield" in order to avoid detention and hide from law enforcement officers, caused a special resonance. Both the child's parents and the opposition politician were presented as people devoid of usual human feelings. Moreover, such dehumanization was

extrapolated to the leaders of the protest movement as a whole/ (Tzar'grad. 2019. 26 August) . For providing right line of political behavior Pro-Kremlin mass media use comparison protests of 2017 with Kiev Maidan events of 2013-2014, repeating regularly popular mem “They are just kids”. “We all know how Ukrainian state coup began... young people, teenagers come to squares to have fun, almost an open-air disco” (Russkaia narodnaia liniia. 26 March; see also Tzar'grad. 27 March).

On the contrary, the Kremlin positions itself as a pillar of strength to not only the physical, but also the spiritual health of Russian children, as the main defender of Russian children from the danger posed by the Western-sponsored liberal protest organizers. It also protects children from those forces in the West that are interested in weakening Russia and who are condemned at the highest level. At a meeting with the board of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia on March 3, 2021 President Putin stated that: “It is extremely important to prevent the involvement of young people, and especially minors, in uncoordinated mass actions, to protect them from various provocations.”<sup>9</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking at the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council, emphasized: “Today the global media space is becoming a place for solving selfish geopolitical problems. Of particular concern is the ease with which pseudo-defenders of democracy irresponsibly use adolescents and children for their political ends. It is unacceptable”<sup>10</sup>.

### **Image of childhood in Pro-Kremlin legitimation strategies.**

It should be pointed out another essential feature of legitimacy: as Steven Fish notes, “a regime is legitimate to the extent that the populace regards it as providing a satisfactory order and believes that *no available alternative* would be vastly superior”

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<sup>9</sup> Rasshirennoe zasedanie (2021). Rasshirennoe zasedanie kollegii MVD Rossii. Vladimir Putin priniat uchastie v ezhegodnom rasshirennom zasedanii kollegii Ministerstva vnutrennikh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Cited 2021 march 03] Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65090>

<sup>10</sup> Nazarova, A. (2021) Lavrov zaiavil o nedopustimosti ispol'zovania detei v politicheskikh tseliakh [Cited 2021, feb 24] Available from: <https://vz.ru/news/2021/2/24/1086574.html>.

(*emphasis added*) . <sup>11</sup>Thus, legitimacy has a referent character, and delegitimation of alternatives serves as an integral part of the practices of legitimation.

In creating this belief in legitimacy an important role is played by using symbols: legitimation may imply active exploitation of manipulative techniques, the appeals to symbolic and expressive aspects of power. <sup>12</sup>Symbols are essential for political legitimation because they are connected with power relations. The symbol of childhood is one of the most emotionally charged symbols. This why the political propaganda uses the images of children's suffering in delegitimation of political opponents.

Throughout the rule of Putin, the image of power as a protector of children is employed in the practices of legitimation. in the beginning of Putin's third term, in the time of so-called "conservative turn", the laws banning the adaptation of Russian children by foreigners (2012) and "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to minors" (2013) were enacted. These laws were represented as a reaction to the threat to Russian children posed by influence of the contemporary West which is considered by hegemonic discourse in Russia as a degenerate civilization, where traditional values are destroyed..<sup>13</sup>

. The issue of legitimizing the power in Russia of Vladimir Putin is of great interest to researchers who have shown how national, gender, confessional, historical discourses become a resource of legitimation.<sup>14</sup>However, such a resource for

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<sup>11</sup> Fish, M. S. (2001). "When More is Less: Superexecutive Power and Political Underdevelopment in Russia", in Victoria E. Bonnell & George W. Breslauer (eds), *Russia in the New Century: Stability or Disorder?* Boulder, Westview Press: 347.

<sup>12</sup> Eriksen, E.O. (1987). Symbols, Stratagems, and Legitimacy in Political Analysis, *Scandinavian Political Studies* 10 (4): 259–278.

<sup>13</sup> Riabova, T. B., Riabov, O. V. (2019) Obrazy detstva i detej v simvolicheskoj politike [The images of childhood and children in the symbolic politics]. *Politicheskaya ekspertiza: POLITEKS — Political Expertise: POLITEKS*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 417–434. <https://www.doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu23.2019.307>.

<sup>14</sup> Cannady, S., Kubicek, P. (2014). Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5 (1): 1 – 9;

legitimizing power as images of childhood has not yet been studied (although studies on the participation of minors in protest activity in Russia have already appeared<sup>15</sup>.

The demand of saving the children serves as a significant element in symbolic politics of the current authorities in Russia, and one can discern several legitimation strategies with the help of it.<sup>16</sup> The first one is symbolic infantilization of the protesters. Anna Fournier shows how during 2004-2014 the Ukrainian and Russian pro-government media subjected the protest movement to symbolic infantilization: protesters both in Ukraine and Russia were characterized as irrational, naïve, easily influenced by others and living at the expense of others<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, protesters in Russia in 2019 were attributed with children's dreaminess and lack of life experience<sup>18</sup>. Conservative media include the image of "children as inferior adults" in metaphor of infantilization; it is used to characterize political opponents. Navalnyi and other leaders

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Holmes, L. (2015). "Comparative Conclusions: Legitimacy and Legitimation in Eurasian Post-Communist States." In *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, edited by M. Brusis, J. Ahrens, M. Schulze Wessel, Palgrave Macmillan, 223 – 245; Riabov, O., Riabova, T. (2014) Remasculinization of Russia? Gender, Nationalism and Legitimation of Power under Vladimir Putin, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 61 (2): 23–35. DOI: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216610202; Petersson, B. (2017). "Putin and the Russian mythscape: Dilemmas of charismatic legitimacy." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 25 (3): 235 – 254; Blackburn, M. (2020) Political legitimacy in contemporary Russia "from below": "Pro-Putin" stances, the normative split and imagining two Russias, *Russian Politics*. Vol. 5 (1): 52-80 DOI: [10.30965/24518921-00501003](https://doi.org/10.30965/24518921-00501003) and others.

<sup>15</sup> Erpyleva, S. (2020) Active Citizens under Eighteen: Minors in Political Protests, *Journal of Youth Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2020.1820973](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1820973).

<sup>16</sup> See in detail on the strategies described below in Riabov O., Riabova T., Kleshchenko L. "Save the Children!" The images of childhood and legitimation of power in contemporary Russian politics // *Children and Society* (submitted)

<sup>17</sup> Fournier, A. (2015) Immature publics: democratic revolutions and youth activists in the eye of authority, *Anthropological Quarterly*. 88 (1): 37-66.

<sup>18</sup> Riabova, T., Riabov, D. (2020) Infantilization of the Other: Metaphor of Childhood in Russia's Media Discourse on International Relations, *Australian Slavonic & East European Studies*, 34: 125–149.



of opposition are infantilized. They are represented as dependent, weak, unreasonable, irresponsible etc. That allows not only delegitimizing the protesters' claim to the Kremlin but also declaring them to be victims of political manipulations themselves – irresponsible, dependable etc.

The second strategy – to represent the minors who participated in the unauthorized rallies as the targets under threat as I said above. It is argued that the organizers of the protest events hope that it will be possible to instigate law enforcement officials to act harshly towards children and adolescents, and possible injuries or even death of young protesters will cause irreparable damage to the legitimacy of the authorities. For instance, Anna Mitianina, the Child Rights Commissioner in Saint Petersburg, stresses that for the organizers of unauthorized rallies “our children is a target of political manipulation. They are after the sacred victims”.<sup>19</sup>

Besides that, the pro-Kremlin discourse represents the protests' organizers as completely immoral: they use the children as cannon fodder whereas keep themselves safe (and don't bring their own children at the unauthorized rallies). Their behavior at the rallies was blamed as unacceptable<sup>20</sup>; even Putin found it necessary to comment this situation; in his words, “this is the way of the terrorists — they put women and children ahead of them”<sup>21</sup>. Another significant comparison used by pro-Kremlin politicians - “Only the Nazi used women and children as a human shield, taking cover behind them”.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mitianina, A. (2021) “Tol'ko fashisty puskali zhenshchin i detei na pervyi plan zhivym shchitom, a sami priatalis' za ikh spinami”. [Cited 2021 Jan 30]. Available from: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2021/01/30/69738671/>

<sup>20</sup> Bolgov, A. (2021) Aleksandr. Taktika besstydstva: Detei staviat zhivoi tsep'iu pered tolpoi i iz-za ikh spin kidaiut v OMON butylki [Cited 2021 jan 24]. Available from: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27230.5/4356602/>

<sup>21</sup> Nel'zia vytalkivat' detei vpered (2021): prezident – ob aktsiiakh protesta [Cited 2021 jan 25] Available from: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2514861>

<sup>22</sup> Mitianina, A. (2021) “Tol'ko fashisty puskali zhenshchin i detei na pervyi plan zhivym shchitom, a sami priatalis' za ikh spinami”. [Cited 2021 Jan 30]. Available from: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2021/01/30/69738671/>

The third strategy of legitimation is positioning the Kremlin as a defender of children from ideological manipulations and psychological abuse of the protests' leaders. The authorities declare that the opposition aims at forming a negative attitude among minors towards Russian history and culture, that is at deepening the generation gap in Russia. Navalny is accused of the fact that his activities over the years are aimed at destroying teenagers' respect for the memory of the Great Patriotic War that serves as a cornerstone of contemporary Russian identity. This theme becomes especially visible in the trial process over Navalny for defamation of a WWII veteran (February 2021).

Finally, the fourth strategy is to accuse the organizers of the rallies of executing the order of those forces in the West that are interested in weakening Russia. After the case of alleged poison of Navalny and harsh reaction of the EU and the USA, the politician was directly designated as an agent of Western intelligence services even by senior officials, including Putin.<sup>23</sup> The leader of Russian communists Gennady Ziuganov claimed that "people from CIA and our fake friends from the West" are behind those who "called for throwing children under the wheels just to start the big fire here".<sup>24</sup>

Power, therefore, is presented as moral, strong, effective, caring for the future of the country with the help of images of endangered childhood. Protecting Russian children, it also defends Russia's national identity and culture, as well as national security, against attacks from internal and external enemies.

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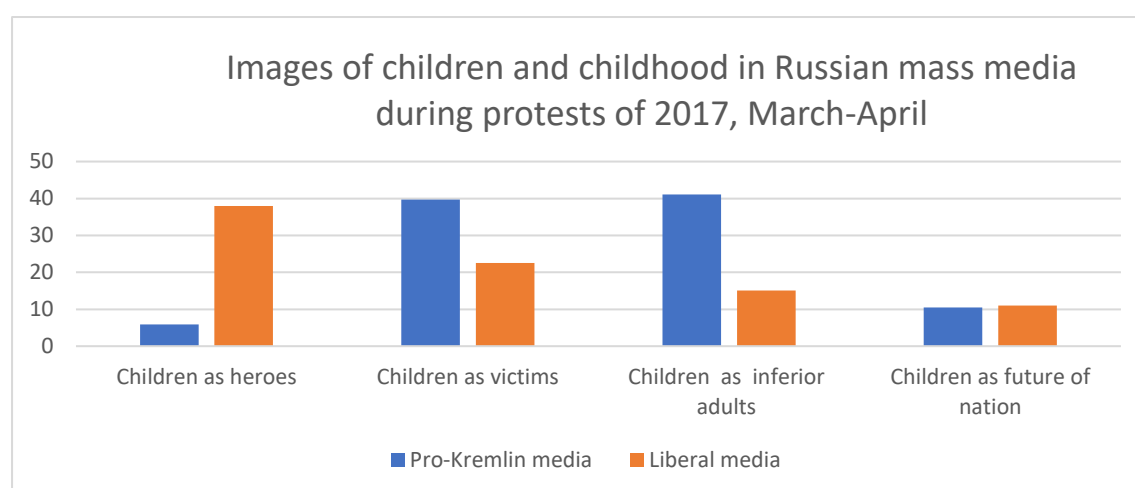
<sup>23</sup> Ryshkova, A. (2020) Putin zaiavil, chto "berlinskii patsient" pol'zuetsia podderzhkoi zarubezhnykh spetssluzhb. [Cited 2020 dec 17]. Available from: <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/4122406/>

<sup>24</sup> Pan'kova, K. (2021) Zyuganov nazval rezhisserov i sponsorov nezakonnykh aktsiy protesta v Rossii [Cited 2021 feb 01] Available from: <https://vz.ru/news/2021/2/1/1083026.html>

## Childhood images in oppositional discourse of the Russian protests

The liberal opposition actively employed the demand to protect childhood already in the time of protests 2011-2013 (so-called Snow revolution). Above all, this concerns the aforementioned law prohibiting the adoption of Russian children by foreigners – so-called “Dima Yakovlev’s Law”. The opposition accused the authorities of thereby depriving thousands of orphans, including those with serious illnesses, to find their families, even outside of Russia

Issue of childhood was essential topic in liberal media during Russian protests in 2017, 2019 and 2021. The following images of childhood were most widely presented: "children as heroes" and "children as victims".



## Images of childhood in practices of political mobilization

The positive meanings of images of childhood in the liberal media were used much more often than the negative ones. Such characteristics of childhood as fearlessness, decisiveness, uncompromising, energy, initiative, honesty, create the image of "children as heroes" who are independent subjects of politics. Children are shown as an alternative to adults whose passive conformism does not allow them to participate actively in politics (see for example: "... they are brave, they are not afraid of anything»

The author of an analytical article in Medusa, published at the end of the year, called the teenagers taking part in the rallies "heroes of 2017" and characterized their positions as— усталость от вранья, fatigue from lying, the desire for justice and sense

of dignity» (Meduza, 29 December). Discussing the participation of children and teenagers in politics liberal media emphasize its autonomous nature. Besides, marker “children as victims” became significant; young protesters are shown defenseless before the force of adults, the representatives of law enforcement agencies. Another form of using the image of "children as victims" is reminding that arrested opposition politicians have children themselves and these children suffer when their parents are arrested (Meduza. 13 April; Blog of A.Navalnyi, 13 April).

The protesters use the attitudes to children as sincere and innocent citizens who are angry about the authorities’ dishonesty and who have all right to resist. Besides, the young protesters symbolize the future of Russia and the right to define the ways of its development.

The victims and hostages of this stagnation are children whose future is under threat. The “Letter of political scientists” which was published by a group of opposition experts on 16 August 2019 in “Facebook”, emphasizes that “young citizens” represent the future; therefore, the right to determine the way of development of Russia belongs to them.<sup>25</sup> At last, the authors of the letter promising the young citizens’ inevitable answer to authorities’ repressions, stress such characteristics of childhood as maximalism.

### **Images of childhood in practices of legitimation**

Images of childhood are being included in the practices of legitimation. Protesters trying to delegitimize the Russian authorities representing firmness of authorities to minors/children on their action as cruelty. In particular, this technique was used when covering the story of the arrest of members of the “New Greatness” youth

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<sup>25</sup> Rogov, K. (2019) Facebook [Cited 2019 aug. 16] Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/kirill.rogov.39>

movement (the action “Let the children go home!” took place on August 16, 2018<sup>26</sup>. These theme was visible in covering Russian protests 2019 and 2021.

Opposition Russian media during the protests were full of photographs in which young Russians at the rallies were detained by the police. In discussing the actions of the Russian policy on protest meetings, the liberal journalists claimed to defend children from the authorities. (Ekho Moskvyy, 2019. 6 August) .

One of the opposition leaders, Dmitry Gudkov, explains the authorities’ harshness towards underage oppositionists by the fact that they feels powerless in front of them – “teenagers do not watch TV and it is more difficult to pull the wool over their eyes” (Gudkov, 2021). In addition, the police are condemned for the excessive use of force against minors at peaceful, although unauthorized, protest rallies.

One more way to bring the theme of defending children in political agenda and to delegitimize authorities is representation of the authorities as outdated and unable to ensure development of the country. The negative age-related qualities are attributed to the authorities and their supporters: mental and physical disability, incapacity. On the other hand, senility is a sign of aging, behind it you know what happens, no matter how hard medicine tries<sup>27</sup>. And this inspires optimism”<sup>28</sup>. In this regard, the opposition media began to find features of the Leonid Brezhnev’s gerontocracy in Putin’s rule. The other variant of delegitimizing authorities with the help of symbol of childhood is representing officials as infantile children who are not able to serious political dialogue and decisions.

The conflict between the government and opposition in modern Russia is considered as a confrontation between generations, past and future. For example, an article from the “Echo of Moscow” emphasizes that “young people are increasingly

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<sup>26</sup> Otpustite detei domoi (2018). Kak proshel “Marsh materei” v zashchitu figurantov “Novogo velichiia” [Cited 15 aug 2018]. Available from: <https://mel.fm/novosti/7610385-otpustite-detey-domoy-kak-proshel>

<sup>27</sup> Riabov O., Riabova T., Kleshchenko L. “Save the Children!” The images of childhood and legitimation of power in contemporary Russian politics // Children and Society (submitted)

<sup>28</sup> Ponomareva, A. (2020) Konstitutsionnaia purga. Peskov ne smog razieiasnit' novye popravki. [Cited 2020 march 04]. Available from: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30467985.html>

turning away from the Kremlin. “Old-fashioned, ridiculous, forbidding everything and depriving young people of a future in their own country - this is how teenagers feel the authorities! < ... > The Kremlin is losing the youth, and it is impossible to rely on pensioners infinitely for natural reasons. And what to do? Putin simply does not have a positive program for the young. He has nothing to offer to those who, unlike him, do not live in May 1945, but in the real world”<sup>29</sup>. An article published in another liberal media claims: “young people and Internet users are moving away from Putin by leaps and bounds, and ‘the party of TV’ and the elderly (55 plus) are confidently fighting for power — the future is obviously for the opposition, the government can offer to the youth nothing but the notorious stability”<sup>30</sup>.

Thus, the delegitimization of power includes the representation of it as outdated, unable to keep up with the times, which is afraid of the future, while any attempts by Russians, including young ones, to protest are brutally suppressed without any allowance for the age of the protesters. At the same time, the liberal opposition represents itself as a progressive one, which looks not at the past, but at the future and protects the interests of young people and adolescents.

### **Conclusion**

The symbol of childhood and, wider, the images of childhood have significant manipulative potential: images of the danger threatening children, who are the most vulnerable members of society, are used in Pro-Kremlin and oppositional political rhetoric in the practices of political mobilization of citizens and in the practices of legitimation of supporters and opponents. It is apparent that such images are actively exploited in the representation of protest activity in present-day Russia. Both the authorities and the opposition declare the protection of children’s interests as one of the

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<sup>29</sup> Orekh, A. (2021) Internet – k sozhaleniiu. [Cited 2021 march 03]. Available from: <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/oreh/2799386-echo/>

<sup>30</sup> Shpak, K. (2021) Stariki protiv Naval'nogo. Itogi nedeli odnim predlozheniem [Cited 2021 feb 07] Available from: <https://sobesednik.ru/politika/20210207-stariki-protiv-navalnogo-itogi>

key priorities of their own policy; opponents are accused of the fact that their policies pose a threat to children.

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Bolgov, A. (2021) Aleksandr. Taktika besstydstva: Detei staviat zhivoi tsep'iu pered tolpoi i iz-za ikh spin kidaiut v OMON butylki [Cited 2021 jan 24]. Available from: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27230.5/4356602/>

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