Protest, Mutual Aid, and Diasporic Belonging:

Russian Immigrant Integration through Navalny LA

Part I

Marianna Bezhanyan
University of California, Los Angeles

Research conducted under the supervision of
Professor Cecilia Menjívar *(Sociology, UCLA),*
Professor Victor Agadjanian *(Sociology, UCLA), and*
Nathan Hochman *(Ph.D. Candidate, UCLA Sociology)*

Author's note: *This paper represents Part I of an ongoing research project. The present analysis is based on secondary sources, public records, and preliminary field observations. Part II of the study, which will include data from formal interviews conducted under full UCLA Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, is currently in progress. That stage of the research is being conducted under the continued supervision of professor Victor Agadjanian, UCLA Department of Sociology. A separate working paper presenting the Part II findings will be uploaded upon completion.*

Introduction

There have been several waves of Russian migration, including to the United States, and we are living through a new one. This latest movement began when the Russian authorities criminalised the opposition group known as the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) in 2021 and gained speed after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. In the months that followed, hundreds of thousands of Russians left their country. In Los Angeles many of those immigrants regularly gather at protests organised by ACF-linked group Navalny LA.

The research aims to find how regular community gatherings, especially those organised by the Navalny LA, shape the economic, political, and social integration of Russians who arrived after 2022. It also explores four related issues: the group's basic demographics; the impact of recent changes in United States immigration policy; the ways members show a sense of cultural connection to Russia; and the reasons long-term residents keep taking part in these events.

This article argues that recurring Navalny LA gatherings accelerate economic, social, and political integration among post-2022 Russian immigrants precisely because protest rituals double as mutual-aid infrastructures and boundary-work arenas. Beyond its street protests, the movement offers an online space with clear rules, shared rituals, and practical resources such as legal advice and job leads. By analysing this emerging network, the study sheds new light on how political activism and immigrant integration intersect in the United States and moves the discussion of Russian migration beyond its usual quantitative focus.

Site background

The Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) was founded by Alexei Navalny, Russia's most prominent opposition figure, who died in prison in 2024. Navalny became a national symbol of opposition and an international voice who drew American and European attention to human-rights abuses.

In Los Angeles the Russian political exile community gathers around a Telegram channel called "Navalny LA." Its administrators are former ACF activists who migrated in 2021 and began the channel to find like-minded Russians and share news from home. Events usually coincide with key dates linked to ACF and to the war in Ukraine: the anniversaries of Navalny's arrest, poisoning, death, and birthday, as well as the start of the invasion. Between major dates members write letters to political prisoners, raise funds, and respond to new developments in Russian politics.

Literature Overview

Though the Navalny LA movement as well as the post-2022 Russian diaspora are underresearched, there exist extensive amounts of literature on its key characteristics: mutual aid and social support infrastructures and relationship between transnational activism and integration. They suggest a few expectations for the Navalny LA movement such as that gatherings that embed legal, housing, and emotional help should speed day‑to‑day adaptation; political protest and host‑country civic integration (segmented assimilation model) will advance in tandem rather than compete.

(1) Immigrant communities often build and sustain their own safety nets to compensate for limited access to formal resources (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006; Menjívar, 2002; Mormino & Pozzetta, 1985). These networks range from informal gatherings to highly organized mutual aid networks. One model outlines a four-level progression of social support interventions: individual exchanges, social network interventions, mutual aid groups, and community-wide programs. The last level integrates legal, housing and emotional help into the support system (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006). Mutual aid networks frequently substitute for community help, especially under conditions of exclusion such as undocumented or uncertain legal status. Guatemalan women in Los Angeles, for example, rely on local and transnational communities to obtain healthcare, illustrating how immigrant networks function as adaptive structures (Menjívar, 2002). Other historical cases also show this pattern: Cuban, Spanish, and Italian immigrants in Ybor City built mutual aid societies that provided healthcare, financial aid, housing networks, cultural spaces, and political advocacy when city institutions excluded them (Mormino & Pozzetta, 1985).

Similar patterns of network formation and boundary work appear in earlier Russian immigrant communities. Soviet Jews on Fairfax Avenue created a dense ethnic safety net of synagogues, Russian stores, and services, which supported upward mobility and economic success, but also led to relative social isolation from the broader community (Jayanti, 1995).

These patterns suggest that in the case of Navalny LA, it is not surprising for newcomers from one country to stick together and create mutual aid hubs. We can expect that although the community may help newcomers with practical questions and foster their economic success, it might also end up delaying their integration (classical assimilation definition).

(2) Studies show that for immigrant communities, protest, mutual help, emotional support, and debates about group identity often happen at the same time. In Los Angeles, protests often function as interconnected strategies for immigrants (Kotin, Dyrness, & Irazábal, 2011). There are examples, such as among Salvadoran church members, where individuals attend legal clinics during the week and participate in marches on the weekend (Heindl, 2013). The choice to participate in a protest and style of that protest in immigrant communities often reflects available resources, including financial capacity, legal support, group unity, and political alliances (Heindl, 2013). In the Navalny LA community, we can expect similar functions of the protest as well as similar motivations, with members attending events to support their legal cases and to access community resources.

Language and cultural comfort also shape political expression amongst immigrants (Skarlato, 2019). Former Soviet migrants in Los Angeles report greater openness when engaging within Russian-language speakers (Skarlato, 2019). This suggests that

Navalny LA members are likely to express stronger critiques of the Russian (and possibly U.S.) government in private chat spaces than in public protests. Additionally, migrant organizations frequently operate not only as mutual aid hubs but also as key spaces where community identity and political belonging are constructed and contested (Kurien, 2014). In contexts like Navalny LA, this suggests that the community is likely to develop internal political identities and shared rules, shaping both how members interact internally and how they present themselves to the broader public.

(3) Classical assimilation theory (Gordon, 1964) once treated homeland politics and integration as opposite poles. More recent work on segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993) shows that civic engagement in the host country can thrive alongside, and even because of, activism aimed at the homeland. The Navalny LA movement can be studied within the framework of these more recent theories and with this context in mind.

Data and methods

The findings that follow draw on two months of focused observation in a researcher role, four years of prior engagement as a participant, (1) fieldnotes from two protests observed specifically for this study and ten earlier protests attended in a participant capacity and a full archival pull of messages from the Navalny LA (2) public and (3) admin chats.These sources cover the majority of events as well as all levels on which the community operates; therefore, they are sufficient to establish an understanding of the community.

Because all data come from a single urban chapter, the sample leans toward digitally active members and probably underrepresents older or less connected migrants.The researcher's dual position as both participant and observer may influence how the evidence is interpreted, potentially introducing subjective bias in the reading of symbolic moments.

(1) Event observation

Most Navalny LA rallies draw about 200 participants, although some have exceeded 1 000 people, such as on the day Navalny's death was announced and on the first day of the full-scale war. The great majority of attendees are recent arrivals who have reached the United States in the last five years; most are asylum seekers who entered with various legal statuses, including visas, CBP One appointments, parole as arriving aliens, or entry without inspection. For this project I observed two events: a small letter-writing gathering on 27 May and a larger memorial in Beverly Hills on 4 June, held on what would have been Navalny's forty-ninth birthday. At each protest I took photographs and field notes discreetly, blending in with other participants who were also documenting the action.

(2) Public Telegram chat analysis

The main Navalny LA channel has roughly 1 200 members and several sub-channels: News, Main Chat, Photos and Videos, Protests, General, Adaptation and Help, and Events. This

structure shows that the network serves not only to announce protests but also to share news and mutual-aid resources. I read messages from the Main Chat back to December 2024, coded them manually, and noted recurring patterns. To check my manual coding, I exported the chat history to JSON and ran a secondary analysis with Pandas.

(3) Administrator chat analysis

The private admin chat is far smaller, which made a manual review feasible. I examined the messages to see how organisers prioritise issues and manage events, paying special attention to decision-making and risk management. There are 3 main admins, each an ex-member of ACF.

Findings

Four themes surfaced across fieldnotes and chat transcripts. First, protest weekends double as mutual aid fairs. Second, fear of surveillance now shadows both street and online activity. Third, debates over symbols, especially the Russian flag, reveal a community negotiating identity in exile. Fourth, worries about the political drift of the United States echo through private conversations even when they stay off the protest signs; many participants balance genuine dissent with a sense that documented activism can also help their legal cases.

Pattern 1: Protest as Mutual Aid Space

The Navalny LA network works first of all as a day to day help center for newcomers. Inside the main Telegram channel there is a subchat called Adaptation where people share “life hacks” for every bureaucratic step they face. One message explains that the Hollywood DMV issued a Real ID with only a passport and a rental agreement, another lists a lawyer who moved a work permit in three months, a third details the questions an asylum judge asked at a recent hearing. These posts stay in the archive so others can scroll back and prepare before their own appointments.

Help in the chat goes well beyond legal tips. Members advertise spare rooms and apartments, pass along furniture, give away children’s clothes, and sell homemade pirozhki and honey cake. They look for a company to attend Russian concerts, art shows, or lectures and they forward announcements from Ukrainian anti war groups. As one user wrote, “I would rather hire our people than somebody random,” and that attitude sets the tone.

The same spirit shows up at every street action. Protesters always set up a kids corner with toys and crayons. Parents take turns watching the children so everyone gets time to talk, hold posters, or write letters to political prisoners. At the letter-writing event, the children learned about political prisoners (many already knew the basics) and were invited to write letters

urging them not to lose hope. Next to the main banners there is usually a small market table where badges, pastries, and coffee raise money for prisoner support or humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Pattern 2: Strategic Participation and Emotional Realism

Most attendees are repeat participants who have been coming for years. Their motives are both pragmatic and symbolic. Besides coming to see friends or connect with others who share their views, some protesters attend rallies and take photos because doing so can strengthen their asylum claims. As seen in the chat, that is both general advice from immigration attorneys and a common knowledge within the community. This rationale sometimes sparks debate in the chat, where longtime members resent those who "grab a selfie and leave" without staying to socialize. This view is frequently expressed both at protests and in the chat.

Others see the protests as acts of solidarity and essential networking spaces in exile. One participant said in his speech at the event: "I left Russia because I could not go into the streets there, so I do it here." Speakers often remind the crowd of their debt to Navalny's sacrifice and to those who die in the war, urging continued public engagement.

Protests in Los Angeles usually take place later than related events in Europe, which many feel limits their impact. European rallies, especially those attended by Navalny's wife and close allies, draw larger crowds and wider media coverage. Even so, local participants find value in showing up to affirm their political stance and to strengthen emotional bonds within the diaspora.

Pattern 3: Symbolic Conflict and Identity Debates

The community has been active for years, and over that time it has developed its own rules and internal culture.

The use of the Russian flag is an ongoing point of debate. Most attendees oppose displaying it in public because they worry it could confuse outsiders, imply support for the Russian government, or raise questions from DHS about the credibility of their asylum claims. At the same time, no one objects to Russian food, music, or other cultural references. Protesters explain in the chat and in person that a flag is noticed faster than a protest sign, which makes it a risky visual. Yet many still feel a deep emotional bond with Russian songs about freedom and with cultural markers like traditional dishes, so the protest space becomes a place where national identity and political exile collide.

At the April event two protesters brought a Russian flag along with a Libertarian flag. They met hostility on site; some people threatened to call USCIS and report that asylum seekers were proudly displaying Russian symbols. The flag bearers replied that they have one homeland and one flag and that Putin should not be allowed to claim it. The argument moved to the Telegram chat when a woman posted their picture and asked, “I really love our events, but is it necessary to bring these flags? This sends the wrong message.” The discussion grew heated, with participants quoting figures such as Ilya Yashin, Navalny’s ally, who opposes the use of the Russian flag, and debating the “peaceful Russian flag” design that replaces the red stripe with blue.A similar argument was repeated on June 4, when the same individuals brought the flags again. The libertarian flag was not allowed, and the admins prepared a special banner reading “This is the Flag of the Aggressor Country,” which they required the person holding the Russian flag to display. The flag dispute shows that Navalny LA is not just an open protest scene but a community with clear internal rules.

Pattern 4: Concern About U.S. Political Direction

A fourth pattern that stands out is the community's growing worry about where United States politics is heading and how that trajectory could affect their status and safety.

Participants rarely voice U.S. politics on the protest stage, yet the public Telegram chat tells a different story. Threads spike whenever Congress debates immigration reform or when news breaks about measures from Trump's second term. Some members worry they may have traded one authoritarian system for another. Others reply that U.S. courts and constitutional checks will keep power in line. The back-and-forth exposes a second layer of anxiety that rides on each person's uncertain legal status.

Visibility at street actions adds to that stress. Several attendees now think twice before showing up in person, afraid that photographs could taint pending asylum cases or draw ICE attention. Administrators expected a bigger crowd in June but saw far fewer and blamed the drop on rising surveillance fears. They are testing safer formats such as online video appeals, letter-writing campaigns, and symbolic gestures that can be shared digitally. Telegram remains the planning hub because its encryption and limited public reach feel more secure.

Recent chat debate centers on Trump's decision to deploy the National Guard in California. Half the channel calls it an abuse of power, while others see it as a lawful response to rioting. Earlier members had argued over the closure of CBP One and the start of removal proceedings against migrants who have been in the country less than two years.

Even before ICE sweeps around Los Angeles, admins were uneasy. As seen in the private chat, with turnout already falling, they are unsure whether the next rally, set for 27 June, will go ahead or be cancelled in favor of another low-risk action.

Conclusion:

This study shows that Russian diaspora protests in Los Angeles operate as layered spaces of dissent, adaptation, and survival. For newcomers they are more than a stage for political expression. They double as informal support hubs where people trade legal advice, job and housing leads, and everyday encouragement. Participants learn to balance the need for public visibility with fears of surveillance and legal vulnerability. They negotiate identity by embracing some cultural symbols (food, music, shared jokes) while policing others, such as the national flag, that risk misinterpretation.

Attendance is therefore both principled and strategic. Protesters come because they believe in the cause, but also because documented activism can strengthen asylum claims and weave them into a like-minded community. Even if rallies in Los Angeles feel distant from the centers of Russian opposition abroad, they give participants a way to act, to connect, and to turn collective uncertainty into shared purpose. In doing so, Navalny LA illustrates how diaspora activism can foster immigrant integration and political agency far from home, opening a pathway for future research on similar communities across the United States.

These findings line up with the broader scholarship. Work on immigrant mutual aid shows that newcomers thrive when they build their own safety nets. Research on transnational activism and segmented assimilation argues that protest and integration often move together, and Navalny LA's cycle of legal help and street action follows that pattern. Together, the literature and my data point to the same idea: mutual aid, protest, and careful control of collective symbols push newcomers toward solidarity inside the group and richer adaptation in the United States. The finding that homeland-related political activism can encourage integration and adaptation, rather than pulling in the opposite direction, enriches and nuances Segmented Assimilation Theory.

A comparative study of Navalny chapters in New York or Berlin could test whether mutual-aid and strategic participation patterns hold across host societies. Longitudinal follow-ups after participants receive asylum decisions would show how legal certainty changes engagement. Limitations of this study could also be addressed in future research by involving non-interested researchers, including participant interviews at all levels of involvement, and accommodating members who do not use the chat.

References

Hernández-Plaza, S., Alonso-Morillejo, E., & Pozo-Muñoz, C. (2006). Social support interventions in migrant populations. *British Journal of Social Work, 36*(7), 1151–1169. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch396

Jayanti, V. (1995). *From Russia to Fairfax Avenue: The integration of Soviet Jewish immigrants in Los Angeles* (Doctoral dissertation). University of California, Los Angeles.

Kotin, S., Dyrness, G. R., & Irazábal, C. (2011). Immigration and integration: Religious and political activism for/with immigrants in Los Angeles. *Development Studies, 11*(4), 263–284. https://doi.org/10.1177/146499341101100401

Kurien, P. (2014). Immigration, community formation, political incorporation, and why religion matters: Migration and settlement patterns of the Indian diaspora. *Sociology of Religion*, 75(4), 524–536. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sru040

Menjívar, C. (2002). The ties that heal: Guatemalan immigrant women's networks and medical treatment. *International Migration Review*, 36(2), 437–466. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2002.tb00091.x

Mormino, G. R., & Pozzetta, G. E. (1985). The cradle of mutual aid: Immigrant cooperative societies in Ybor City. *Tampa Bay History, 7*(2), Article 5.

Portes, A., & Zhou, M. (1993). The new second generation: Segmented assimilation and its variants. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 530*, 74–96.

Skarlato, O. (2019). Qualitative phenomenological case study of former Soviet Union immigrants: Exploring their lived subjective experiences of acculturation and adjustment in Los Angeles County. *Slavic Review*, 79(4), 895–907. https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.15