**RECOGNITION IN EXILE: A THEORY OF LEGITIMATION THROUGH CULTURAL (RE)PRODUCTION**

By

Anastasiia Posnova

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of International Relations

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in International Relations

Supervisor: Professor Xymena Kurowska

Vienna, Austria
2023

**ABSTRACT**

Throughout history, political exilees have been able to impact the international system in ways big and small — from delegitimating the home governments in the eyes of the foreign public to galvanizing support for the struggle at home. Yet, the literature on *how* they seek recognition necessary to achieve their goals has been surprisingly lacking. Despite exilees' importance as non-state actors in world politics, their legitimation strategies remain heavily under-researched and under-theorized. In this paper, I address that issue by proposing a theory of legitimation through cultural (re)production to elucidate how exilees might legitimate themselves and their pursuits. The theory emerges from my engagement with the empirical data, where I utilize an inductive thematic analysis informed by the basic premises of grounded theory to look at the cultural (re)production of the team of Alexey Navalny within the bounds of the team's campaign for the *Navalny* documentary to be awarded an Oscar. Through this engagement, I carve out four distinct legitimating strategies exilees deploy through cultural (re)production and show systematically how these strategies are used in reality. This theory builds on existing research that hints at this practice, but does not clearly elucidate it, and offers a novel way of looking at how exilees strive for authority within the international system.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**INTRODUCTION**

"We've been using this [newly established name recognition] like Garry Kimovich Kasparov," Leonid Volkov, the political director of Alexey Navalny's team, sits across from me in a kosher restaurant in Vienna on a sunny May day. He is delineating how the team's campaign for the awarding of an Oscar to the *Navalny* documentary has helped them in their pursuits. "Even though [Kasparov] says lots of [stupid things],[1] he is, for better or worse, the greatest chess master in history. Everyone knows his name, and he uses it as a door opener. Garry Kimovich can call any person in the world, tell them that he wants to talk, and they will be flattered because it is the great Garry Kasparov. This is objectively well-deserved; he has really earned that. We did not have [such recognition]. *The film has become this kind of door opener for us*."

*Navalny* documentary is, in essence, a political thriller. It focuses on the story of the poisoning of Alexey Navalny — perhaps Russia's most famous opposition leader — with a nerve agent Novichok, which is available only to the Russian security services. The film culminates in (spoiler alert) Navalny's phone call to one of his poisoners, where the poisoner confesses to the crime and even goes into detail about how the nerve agent made it onto Navalny's body (the security services laced the fly of his underpants with it). The film finishes with a clip of Navalny's return to Russia after he had been treated in Berlin's Charité clinic. He has been incarcerated ever since. The main leadership of his team is now — though Volkov himself eschews this term — in exile, conducting their activities from abroad.

The film has received many accolades since it first premiered on Sundance in January 2022, and the team spent all of last year campaigning to ensure that it wins an Oscar for Best Documentary in 2023. That recognition came on March 13th of this year.

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[1] Volkov uses an expletive here

Though the film is generally a riveting watch, my interest in the documentary and the Oscar campaign surrounding it lies more in elucidating how exactly this film has turned into a political "door opener," as Volkov puts it. Or, rather, how it has helped the team to legitimize itself internationally.

This interest emerged from a discovery that the question of how political exilees legitimize themselves within the international system has been mostly peculiarly absent from scholarship on the legitimation of non-state actors, despite exilees being an important subject of study in world politics. Many national historians from Poland to Spain, for example, highlight their historical political exilees' key role in the fight against and the delegitimation of the respective home regimes, but the main focus of these historians is on groups that have claimed representative legitimacy, which does not encompass all the possible permutations of exile political formations and legitimating tactics. (Goddeeris 2007, 397-9,405) Likewise, other scholars underscore the importance of international political pursuits for more contemporary groups in exile — from the Central Tibetan Administration to the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic — but also focus only on groups that explicitly claim to represent populations within their home states. (Vasanthakumar 2016; McConnell 2009; Wilson and McConnell 2015) Other strategies exile groups may employ to establish themselves as legitimate actors within the international system, thus, remain under-researched and under-theorized. This is a significant omission, given the relevance of looking into these practices today when the rising authoritarian and totalitarian governments worldwide have sent many opposition leaders abroad to ensure their own grip on power — and those leaders do not always immediately attempt to create a government in exile.

Though exilees, in fact, utilize a plethora of legitimating strategies, my particular focus will be on how they use cultural (re)production to legitimize their positions and gain recognition in the international system. This focus materialized through my engagement with

empirical data pertaining to the Oscar campaign and historical background data on activities of Russian and Soviet exilees, whereby a clear pattern of using cultural (re)production for legitimating purposes has emerged.

Based on this empirical engagement, in what follows, I propose legitimation through cultural (re)production as a new analytical framework that further elucidates the legitimating strategies of exiled actors. I first outline the existing theories on legitimacy and legitimation and explain my own analytical framework, as it emerges from my empirical engagement, and its ties to existing literature. I then provide a descriptive historical background to my actual case study by discussing the cultural (re)production of exilees from Russia and the Soviet Union going back to the 19th century that has been utilized in pursuit of legitimation. Lastly, I conduct an extensive thematic analysis of Navalny team's Oscar campaign to draw out the specific practices of legitimation through cultural (re)production, which serve as a basis for the analytical substantiation of the framework. I then conclude by discussing the limitations of this framework and further venues for research.

**RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS**

I answer my research question utilizing an inductive approach informed by the basic premises of grounded theory where analytical frameworks are developed through systematic collection and analysis of empirical data, as no theory has yet been clearly outlined in literature to elucidate my findings. (Noble and Mitchell 2016) In this work, I instead propose my own — a framework of cultural (re)production as a legitimating tool for those in exile.

The theory emerges from my case study, in which I look at the cultural (re)production of the team of Alexey Navalny within the bounds of the team's campaign for the *Navalny* documentary to be awarded an Oscar, which spanned the time between the premiere of the documentary at Sundance on January 25, 2022, and the Oscars ceremony on March 12, 2023. While Navalny's team utilized other vehicles of cultural (re)production this past year, such as its artistic rendering of Navalny's solitary confinement cell that has been traveling around Europe, the documentary case was selected based on documentaries' particular potency as a legitimating tool that has been illustrated in literature concerning its usage by state actors. (See Yu and Yan 2021; Galitskaya 2020)

Instead of engaging in an analysis of the documentary itself, however, I focus on the cultural (re)production surrounding the film — that is, public interviews, filmed panels, and media appearances that pertained to the documentary. This approach follows Whiteman's (2004) proposition that an analysis of potential political impacts of documentaries must "conceptualize films as part of a larger process that incorporates both production and distribution," through which activist groups act as "catalysts in the distribution process, when documentary films become tools available to activist groups as they seek political impact." (Whiteman 2004, 51) Whiteman argues that once a documentary is produced, actors can utilize targeted screenings and the media to create discursive spaces within which other actors

4

can "encounter [and] discuss … the issues raised in the film." (Whiteman 2004, 55) In my case, the proposed "political impact" would be the actors' legitimation.

Following this approach, twelve sources for analysis were selected.[2] The sources were chosen based on four criteria:

1. produced in English (to ensure that the production within them is aimed at the broader international society, rather than the team's supporters in Russia);

2. at least one member of Navalny's team is a participant in the discussion/interview (as discussions that included only the director or other producers would not have elucidated the legitimating strategies of the team itself);

3. either explicitly mention the documentary or took place in the context of the documentary's screening (to ensure that the production is indeed connected to the documentary's distribution process);

4. are at least five minutes long (to ensure that there is enough material to analyze in each instance).

The sources were analyzed via an inductive thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun&Clarke. (Braun and Clarke 2006) Utilizing a data-driven coding method, through my engagement and re-engagement with the material I identified 22 codes,[3] which were then collated into four overarching "themes," from which five legitimating strategies were drawn — as will be discussed later, Navalny's team happens to use the production of similar meanings to two different legitimating ends, thereby conflating those two strategies into one in their particular empirical case.

The sources for analysis were necessarily limited not only by the aforementioned criteria, but also by the virtue of many discussions and panels surrounding the documentary

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[2] See Appendix A.
[3] See Appendix B.

not having been filmed or published online. In light of that, I further contextualized the strategies through my interview with Leonid Volkov on May 2, 2023, which occurred after the themes were identified. Volkov's verbal consent was acquired according to the guidelines provided by the University of Oxford. (For more information about the guidelines, see Research Support) The interview was conducted in Russian, and all excerpts from it have been translated by me.

Though the theory emerged from *Navalny*'s case, I also use primary sources and archival print media to historically contextualize it by providing a limited descriptive background of several historical occurrences within the work of Russian/Soviet exile communities where cultural (re)production was utilized in pursuit of legitimacy, but has not been looked at through this lens.

## THEORETICAL CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS

In analyzing how politicians in exile legitimize themselves in the international system — with all the advantages that stem from such recognition, such as the ability to influence foreign policies of host and other states — I will focus on four key conceptual frameworks: legitimacy&recognition, legitimation and cultural (re)production. I will first broadly discuss the existing literature on the legitimacy and recognition of non-state actors, including exilees, in the international system, and why such recognition is important for their pursuits, followed by identifying the existing tactics that they utilize to achieve such legitimacy. I will then propose a new analytical framework for exilees' legitimating activities — namely, legitimation through cultural (re)production — that will then be utilized throughout my empirical discussion.

### *Legitimacy&Recognition*

Questions of legitimacy and discussions of who counts as a legitimate actor in the international system have long puzzled political science and international relations researchers. Long-term attempts to arrive at a static definition of the term have been unsuccessful — in most cases, legitimacy is defined in a relational manner, dependent on the context in which the term is used. (Hurd 1999; Bodansky 2012; Smith 1970) Authors going all the way back to Max Weber who first proposed discussing power in terms of legitimacy suggest that this difficulty of defining legitimacy stems from legitimacy being a fluid concept — it is, in essence, in the eye of the beholder. (Kratochwil 2016; Bukovansky 2002; Williams 1996) Per Kratochwil, legitimacy as a term lacks a cohesive taxonomy, and is best understood not as a descriptive term, but rather as an ever-shifting "term of appraisal," highly dependent on semantic fields within which it exists. (Kratochwil 2016, 305) This is particularly true when studying legitimacy of actors and their actions in the ever-changing

international society where the most commonly used definition of legitimate power — that is, power derived from the explicit consent of the governed (Raz 1987) — is often inapplicable. Non-state actors like international organizations and multinational corporations do not have such a mandate, and yet are engaged with as valid players on the international arena by many, if not most, states. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that even in international law, there is no clear-cut test of "legitimacy" of a government — let alone any other group striving for recognition as a player on the international arena — meaning that international status of a group as "legitimate" is more often based on normative and moral value judgments of recognizing states than on anything else. (Talmon 1999, 536-37) Essentially, an actor or an action in the international system ends up being legitimate simply if it is *recognized* as such by relevant beholders.

Because of this focus on arbitrary recognition, some key scholars of exile politics, like Yossi Shain, have even eschewed the term "legitimacy" as lacking "empirical rigor" and have proposed to use only the umbrella term "recognition" for the relationship between exilees and foreign powers. (Shain 2005, 165-7) Yet, focus just on "recognition," without evoking the concept of legitimacy, is at odds with how states themselves appraise actions and actors within the international system. From the famous conclusion that the NATO intervention in Kosovo was "illegal but *legitimate*" by the Independent International Commission on Kosovo to President Vladimir Putin's current claims that the international sanctions against Russia are "*illegitimate*," legitimacy is a term that permeates most actor's discussions and understanding of the international system and cannot be avoided in its study. (International Commission on 2000, 4; Putin 2022) Focusing solely on "recognition" also prevents one from engaging with the whole range of scholarship on the subject of actor participation in the international system, as the legitimacy-legitimation framework has remained the most commonly adopted one in scholarship.

A middle-ground in scholarship has proposed engaging with "recognitional legitimacy" instead of just "legitimacy" or "recognition" as a way to explain more concretely how legitimacy works in the international system. At its core, recognitional legitimacy boils down to the recognition by others in the system that an "entity … ha[s] the right to exercise authority in the international community." (Rocheleau 2011, 935) Though the term "recognitional legitimacy" has traditionally been reserved for state actors, considering the proliferation of non-state actors in the international system in recent decades and their attempts to achieve a standing in this system, I would contend that it has become applicable to non-state actors as well. Per this framework, then, a legitimate actor in international relations is one whose authority and standing are recognized by other actors, whose authority and standing have already been recognized by other actors, and so on. This understanding of legitimacy also fits neatly with the Weberian tenet that legitimacy, however defined, ultimately boils down to a beholder's belief in the rightfulness of a certain authority (*Herrschaft*),[4] with Herrschaft defined as "the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons." (Weber 1920/1947, 152) Recognition of an actor as legitimate in the international system, then, grants them such authority and ability to influence others in pursuit of their own goals.

But since there are no defined criteria for achieving recognitional legitimacy, actors are forced to constantly construct their identities based on their understanding of the system and what is appropriate within it to gain this status. This turns the question of *how* specific political groups strive to be recognized as legitimate actors to be engaged with into a relevant

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[4] The term *Herrschaft* eludes concrete translation into English, but I am using "authority" here as the closest translation for my particular context, which also fits neatly with the definition of recognitional legitimacy. Other suggestions for translation include "domination," "rule," and "imperative control," among others, which do not quite work for non-state actors. For a more detailed discussion of how to translate the term in various contexts, see (Onuf and Klink 1989).

and important research query. This is where the discussion of their particular legitimation tactics comes into play.

### *Legitimation Tactics and Strategies*

Legitimation tactics, as evident from the name, are deployed by actors on their quest to be recognized as legitimate by other relevant actors. Though we often think of legitimacy in terms of proving that a group has representative power, legitimation in the international community can, but need not be deployed in pursuit of just this goal. As actors try to establish their authority in the system, legitimation tactics can serve a variety of international political goals. (Steffek 2003, 258) International organizations, for example, legitimize themselves to prove that their "authority is appropriately exercised," while diasporas legitimize themselves to prove that they have the authority to influence both host and home country politics. (Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Kinnvall and Petersson 2010) For politicians in exile, beyond being recognized as a representative of the home country, goals can range from convincing host governments and other states to sanction specific political actors in the home country to simply procuring enough funding for their organizations to live another day.

Though legitimation is deployed by all actors within the international system, not much has been systematically written about the actual legitimation tactics of most non-state groups, with the exception of international organizations and other supra-national formations. Most research on legitimation in international relations has been either focused on case-by-case studies of how particular groups legitimize themselves or on deductively assessing whether or not non-state actors *are* legitimate in various international fora (particularly in international environmental governance) without a discussion of *how* they construct such legitimacy.[5] While this is likely due to the heterogeneity of most non-state actors and their

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[5] See (Bosire 2002; Alkoby 2003; Bäckstrand 2008; Bäckstrand et al. 2017) for examples of this.

specific strategies in various fora, this precludes one from building a comprehensive picture of various legitimation strategies non-state actors may deploy. Thus, the following discussion of legitimation tactics of non-state actors broadly, and diasporic and exiled actors in particular, does not encompass all the possible actors and all the possible strategies, but rather simply the ones that have been discussed in legitimation literature thus far — and presents examples of strategies from disjointed groups and regions, as overarching literature on this topic simply does not exist.

*Legitimation Tactics of Non-State Actors, Broadly*

Most research on legitimation tactics in international relations focuses on the legitimation of international governance and specific international organizations. Some researchers have shown how IOs utilize public-private partnerships worldwide to achieve a semblance of "democratic" legitimacy to gain support for their actions. (Börzel and Risse 2005; Korab-Karpowicz 2020; Marschlich and Ingenhoff 2022) Others have argued that IOs and other supranational structures like the European Union use their technocratic expertise as a way to legitimize their governance. (Bodansky 2017; Dellmuth, Scholte, and Tallberg 2019) Steffek goes beyond that, arguing that even expert-based international organizations construct themselves as legitimate actors discursively. (Steffek 2003, 269-70) Many others have also focused on discursive and rhetorical legitimation as the most commonly used device by IOs and supranational structures. (Halliday, Block-Lieb, and Carruthers 2009; Kutter 2020; Binder and Heupel 2021; Lenz and Söderbaum 2023) Beyond discussions of output legitimacy of IOs, research on discursive and rhetorical legitimacy in IOs has also focused on how they legitimize their work and authority internally. (von Billerbeck 2022, 2023)

Though research on legitimation strategies of other non-state actors is not as systematic as it is on IOs, much of it follows the same legitimation propositions made about IOs. Luyckx&Vaara, for example, have studied how multinational corporations have pursued discursive antagonism and discursive co-optation in media to legitimize their influence on politics and other spheres over time, while Joutsenvirta&Vaara have looked at how corporations have built "four legitimizing discourses" in an international dispute over a pulp mill project in Uruguay. (Luyckx and Janssens 2016; Joutsenvirta and Vaara 2015) Others have shown how MNCs join private-public partnerships to legitimize themselves on the international arena. (Detomasi 2006) And in the discussions of legitimation strategies of non-governmental organizations and international NGOs, researchers have also focused either on their technocratic legitimation or on their discursive constructions. (Hudson 2000, 2001; Collingwood 2006; Balboa 2015; Rubenstein 2019; Deloffre and Schmitz 2019)

*Legitimation Tactics of Diasporas & Exilees*

Closest to the tactics that politicians in exile might use would be the legitimation strategies of diasporas — who also occupy a peculiar space living in foreign communities while maintaining close ties to the home country. Some researchers have even argued that diasporas "defy the conventional meaning of the state" because of their in-betweenness *and* have jumbled exiled groups and diasporas together. (Shain and Barth 2003, 450) Like other non-state actors, diasporas, too, often utilize discursive strategies to legitimize themselves and their goals. For example, after the Sri Lankan civil war, the Tamil diaspora groups in the UK have discursively attempted to frame the violence against the Tamils in Sri Lanka as genocide, while distancing themselves from the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam group, to establish themselves as legitimate actors and influence international policy toward Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the war. (Walton 2014) Others have discussed how constructing

a certain exile identity has legitimized diaspora's continued involvement in the affairs of both the host and the home state, using the example of the Polish diaspora in the U.S. during the Cold War and its construction of anti-Soviet and American identities. (Kinnvall and Petersson 2010) Other groups, like the Somali diaspora, have used their marginalized and "misrecognized" identity as a way to underscore the validity of their struggle for recognition in their host communities and beyond. (Kleist 2008) In other cases, diasporic institutions have appealed to certain democratic legitimacy ideals to present themselves as legitimate representatives of their broader community — which is particularly evident in the example of Muslim diasporic and post-diasporic groups. (Kinnvall and Petersson 2010)

The most common tactic for exiled politicians to legitimize themselves is also appealing to some kind of traditional democratic legitimacy — often, they declare that they are *the* legitimate representatives of their home communities and thus the international community should work with them to achieve their visions of the home country. Whether these groups had truly attained legal legitimacy or not prior to exile does not always matter for these claims — the main difference being that the so-called "governmental groups" who had been elected prior to exile, like the current Belarusian Coordination Council led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, tend to claim full representative legitimacy, while "non-governmental groups," like the recently-founded Russian Action Committee led by Garry Kasparov and Mikhail Khorodkovsky, tend to either claim representative legitimacy for just a part of the electorate or combine multiple exile coalitions together to present themselves as a better alternative to the current regime. (Shain 2005, 27-9; Russian Action Committee ; Schultz 2023)[6] Other examples of this type of legitimation include groups going all the way

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[6] RAC, for example has urged the world to consider them "the rightful representatives of those citizens of Russia who refuse to be part of Putin's murderous and morally bankrupt system … When the unavoidable collapse of Putin's dictatorship arrives, we are poised to coordinate the reconstruction of a free and peaceful Russia," hence claiming to represent a part of the population, and implying their prowess as a potential future government, while Tsikhanouskaya has recently opened an office in Brussels in hopes of gaining full diplomatic recognition for her government-in-exile.

back to the 20th century, like the Polish government in exile (GiE) formed in the aftermath of the invasion of Poland in 1939 or the Spanish Republican GiE formed after Francisco Franco took power in Spain. The most well-studied example of this legitimation tactic is the activities of the Central Tibetan Administration after the annexation of Tibet by China in the 1950s. Throughout the exile of Tibetans and the cabinet, the Dalai Lama has undertaken multiple reforms to give the CTA a more democratic flair, including holding elections for the Tibetan Parliament in Exile among Tibetan community members all around the globe. (Vasanthakumar 2016; McConnell 2009) Other exile groups, like the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which claims authority over Western Sahara, currently under Moroccan rule, have also pursued establishing representative offices an providing welfare for the exiled community as a means of proving their legitimacy. (Wilson and McConnell 2015)

For governmental exile groups, the main goal indeed tends to be official recognition by the international community as a GiE. Attaining such official recognition is "the highest diplomatic acknowledgment" any exile group can possibly gain, as it legitimizes a whole host of their activities and might even prompt the recognizing governments to engage with the exilees, and not home regimes, in diplomatic discussions. (Shain 2005, 113) But such support is both difficult to obtain and potentially fleeting. Just to qualify as a governmental entity in exile in the eyes of international law, per Talmon, authorities in exile must represent a recognized state, hold a representative character, be independent of authority of any other entity, and come from a state where the government *in situ* is clearly illegal per international law. (Talmon 1999) And even when groups in exile check every box on that list, other political considerations by foreign states come into play — recognition by host states and others in the international system depends vastly on the goals of the respective recognizing and non-recognizing governments, and formal recognition can be swiftly withdrawn if the political situation calls for that. (Shain 2005, 118) A key example of that is the withdrawal of

recognition of the Polish government-in-exile by Britain and the U.S. after the countries'

agreement with the Soviets during the Yalta conference in 1945 and the transfer of such

recognition to the Soviet-backed government in Warsaw. (Shain 2005, 115)

While appealing to representative legitimacy remains a key tactic for many exile

groups, as their recognition as a GiE seems to promise a host of advantages, it is by no means

all that their legitimating work consists of. Shain argues, more broadly, that exilees seek to

"obtain international assistance by latching onto issues that the global international

community finds symbolically resonant … [that] are usually part of a storehouse of political

mythologies widely accepted … as archetypes of legitimacy," including human rights, self-

determination, freedom of religion, and others. (Shain 2005, 128) For example, SADR has

appealed to its history of resistance against Morocco and the 1975 International Court of

Justice decision that "found in favour of the right to self-determination of the people of the

territory" to showcase its contest for self-determination and understanding of the values of

legal authority. (Wilson and McConnell 2015, 207) Others, like the Palestine Liberation

Organization, have appealed to the UN and other international organizations as a way to

maximize international assistance by presenting themselves at appropriate fora. (Shain and

Barth 2003, 128) Goddeeris even argues, in fact, that representative legitimacy claims have

not had much of an impact on the success or failure of exile organizations, while this kind of

alignment of their goals and understandings with the goals and understandings of the

respective host countries and institutions has allowed them to propel their interests forward.

(Goddeeris 2010, 151)

*Legitimation through Cultural (Re)Production*

Goddeeris also laments in his review of historical and political science literature on

politicians in exile that almost all key literature on the subject focuses solely on the exilees

who claim to be the true representatives of their home country and its people. (Goddeeris 2007, 397) He contends that the information dissemination activities of exilees have been much more influential in propelling their causes than representative legitimacy claims — supported by the argument of Jean-Michel Palmier who has reconstructed the impact of German exilees' anti-Nazi "propaganda," arguing, for instance, that the 1933 publication of *The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror* by Otto Katz has been instrumental in the "organization of a counter-trial in London in August 1933, which would have prevented the accused communists at home from being beheaded." (Goddeeris 2007, 404) Though the impact of this dissemination of information has been questioned by contemporaries of those exilees, Goddeeris further argues that the impact of this writing hinged not on legitimacy or lack thereof of any particular author, but rather on their "charisma and the quality of [their] writing."(Goddeeris 2007, 404)

I would argue, however, that much like other scholars of legitimation of exilees, Goddeeris is missing a key overarching framework that provides a productive lens into studying exilees' legitimation in international relations — that is, looking at their legitimation through various forms of cultural (re)production.

Cultural production is defined most broadly as "the social processes involved in the generation and circulation of cultural forms, practices, values, and shared understandings." (Chandler and Munday 2011a, 516) It is usually discussed together with its paired term, cultural reproduction, first introduced by Pierre Bordieau and defined as "the maintenance and perpetuation of dominant values, norms, cultural forms, and power relations." (Chandler and Munday 2011b, 518) Cultural (re)production is a crucial tool for any politician and, thus, also for anyone engaging in politics because such (re)production can shape what the public and other actors view as "legitimate" in regards to the actors' behavior (See for example Kern 2009) Historically speaking, (re)producing the legitimacy of certain shared cultural values

has been a key part of political struggles — from the "cultural Cold War" described by Frances Saunders to the ubiquitous discussions of "culture wars" in media today. (Saunders 2013; Anthony 2021)

Cultural (re)production takes place in a variety of ways — from art and literature and music to interviews and speeches — and at a variety of fora, large-scale media included. Most exiled actors, in fact, already utilize these cultural (re)production tools to achieve legitimacy — such a clear link between their activities and cultural (re)production has just not been drawn in scholarship. For example, the aforementioned discussion of SADR's representation of their resistance as a legitimizing tactic explicitly references poetry written by a Sahrawi refugee to highlight the "importance of both indigeneity and a history of resistance for pro-independence Sahrawis," but does not discuss it in terms of cultural impacts. (Wilson and McConnell 2015) Palmier&Goddeeris's discussion of the impact of *The Brown Book* is yet another instance of the legitimizing influence of cultural production that has allowed exilees to achieve a very clear political goal that has simply not been registered in these terms. (Goddeeris 2007, 404) Shain's argument that exilees are successful when they "latch onto issues that the global international community finds symbolically resonant," too, is an example of how understanding of the cultures that are (re)produced by host actors can aide in legitimating exilees and their goals. (Shain 2005, 128)

This said, though an overarching theory of cultural (re)production as a legitimating tool for exilees has not been introduced, there has been discrete research engaging with links between legitimacy and cultural (re)production at a level of certain diasporic groups. Boulanger Martel has reconstructed how Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia have utilized organized music production for both internal and external legitimation by showing the internal unity within the rebel group and, via lyrics, indicating that they, and not the dominant politicians, speak for the people. (Boulanger Martel 2020) Dag has argued that the

17

Kurdish diasporas in Berlin and Stockholm have organized Kurdish film festivals at least in part as a way to emphasize the importance of constructing their homeland and build up international solidarity, while legitimating their cause and state against predominant narratives put forward by countries where the proposed territory of Kurdistan lies. (Dag 2022) Valassopoulos has shown how the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine have utilized "innovative rhetorical strategies in documentary film-making" to construct their identities and achieve international recognition for Palestinian self-determination. (Valassopoulos 2014) All of this research presents cultural (re)production as a potent legitimizing tool for non-state actors in their quest for authority in the international system and highlights the importance of its study for our understanding of their practices and impact on international relations.

In the following empirical discussion, I will draw on these descriptions and my own analysis to carve out five legitimating strategies exilees deploy through cultural (re)production.[7] The strategies I will discuss are:

1. Reproducing the cultures of the beholders by showing that the exile group shares basic values and understandings of foreign audiences;

2. Producing themselves as the best alternative to the regime by delegitimating other exile actors;

3. Producing themselves as holders of the "true" knowledge about the home country by showcasing that members of their group still engage in the struggle at home and highlighting other ties to the home country;

4. Producing understandings of the home country and its public as worth engaging with by showing that delegitimating the regime's narratives;

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[7] In Navalny's case strategies 3&4 are conflated, as the team uses their ties to the home country both as a means of delegitimating opponents and legitimating their own knowledge.

5. Producing the urgency of international engagement with them by identifying weaknesses within the regime at home, thereby showing that the time to act is now.

Though these (re)productions do not necessarily need to come in a chronological order, they still in a way build on each other. For example, if an exiled actor consistently shows that their values do not align with those of the foreign public they are appealing to, they will not gain the basic cultural capital required for the public to try and legitimize themselves as the best alternative to the regime — the audiences will simply not be receptive to their messages. Similarly, if they do not at some point highlight their ties to the home country, they will not emerge in the eyes of the foreign public as legitimate producers of knowledge of what is really going on on the ground, precluding them from building a trustworthy narrative of why engagement with the home public is not fruitless.

In the next two sections, I will first sketch out how Russian and Soviet exilees and dissidents have historically employed cultural (re)production in this vein to showcase the persistence of this legitimating strategy over time, better situate the work of Navalny's team within the long history of Russian/Soviet exile political activity and to be able to highlight certain historical parallels and continuities. I will then engage with my case study, the cultural (re)production surrounding the *Navalny* documentary, and show systematically how these strategies are deployed in practice.

Though this framework can be applied to various historical and contemporary cases, I focus on examples of exilees from one geographical region — the Russian Empire, its "successor," the Soviet Union, and Russia today — to avoid the pitfalls of drastic heterogeneity of examples that are presented in the literature thus far. Though exilees from these territories were and are a heterogenous group in and of themselves — ranging from pro-imperial Russians to colonial subjects — their exile activity is unified by a clear common

19

thread: its explicit anti-Russian/Soviet government nature, justifying the analytical decision of putting them together.

## LEGITIMACY THROUGH CULTURAL (RE)PRODUCTION IN IMPERIAL RUSSIAN AND SOVIET TIMES

Throughout history, exilees from Russia and the Soviet Union have pursued cultural (re)production tools to help them pursue internal cohesion as a block, debate about the future of their country, educate the public in the home country, and achieve their own political pursuits in exile. For these exilees, battles for the dominance of their narratives and pursuits against those of their home governments have been crucial long before the term "culture war" — or its German original, *Kulturkampf* — entered the everyday parlance.

Russian and Soviet exilees' cultural (re)production activities can trace their roots back to Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Ogaryov's *Polyarnaya Zvezda* and, later, *Kolokol* from mid-19th century — magazines that were founded in London explicitly to collect and disseminate ideas and literature that were prohibited under the imperial rule. (Alston 2018, 156-7) The two were "adapted for Russian eyes alone," but *Polyarnaya Zvezda* was nevertheless announced in the French press and pamphlets in French. (Alston 2018, 163) Though Herzen and Ogaryov's goal was only to facilitate a free exchange of ideas among anti-tsarist authors, and not to seek international support for their causes, their production nevertheless made a political impression on the government at home — under Alexander II, government officials "considered launching an anti-Herzen magazine, and/or reprinting articles from Kolokol in order to refute them," but ultimately decided against it. (Alston 2018, 169)

Later 19th century emigrants and exilees were much more explicit in their usage of cultural production for political goals. For example, when Sergei Kravchinskii and Felix Volkhovskii co-founded *Free Russia*, an English-language periodical published in London between 1890-1914, in the paper's first editorial Kravchinskii contended that while "many Russians of all creeds and persuasions" have been using Western freedom of press to

"propagate their ideas among their countrymen," *Free Russia*, "written in a foreign tongue[,] ha[d] evidently no such aim." Instead, the two hoped that this periodical, whose articles ranged from highlighting the Russian government's oppression of religious minorities to tracing the people's fight for constitutional reforms, would influence international opinion and, in turn, help exilees use that opinion to influence the tsarist government. Kravchinskii believed that "every energetic manifestation of sympathy" from Europe toward the struggle of people in the Russian empire could have a "beneficial impact." (Alston 2018, 164)

While *Free Russia* was producing these new understandings of what was happening in the Russian empire, to legitimize themselves and their cause, they were also consciously playing down some of their rhetoric to reproduce what was culturally appropriate for the British public — for example, by toning down "their advocacy of terror tactics" and changing their language to tactically appeal to "whatever segment of public opinion in England was most closely affected by particular developments in Russia." (Alston 2018, 165) Furthermore, in the first decade of its existence, *Free Russia* had two separate versions — one edited according to the British orthography and style, and one according to rules prevalent in the U.S., further highlighting Kravchinskii and Volkhovskii's understanding of the importance of appealing to certain norms adopted by their audiences to legitimize their own goals. (Alston 2018, 163)

This literary and journalistic production of the 19th century established a strong tradition among exilees and emigrants from the Russian empire and the Soviet Union to focus on cultural production as one of their main pursuits in exile — be it in Russian or in foreign languages. A plethora of examples of exile press followed in the 20th century. Among others, Vladimir Lenin published his famous *Iskra* from Germany; Alexander Kerensky, the last chair of the Russian Provisional Government, spent much of his time in Paris editing a Russian-language daily *Dni*; and Soviet dissidents Andrei Sinyavsky and Vladimir Maksimov

founded competing journals — *Sintaksis* and *Kontinent* — during their time in Paris in the 1970s. (Shain 2005, 39, 63; Skarlygina 2018)

Despite cultural (re)production's clear unyielding importance in Russian and Soviet exilees' pursuits, nothing extensive has been written about its international political impacts after 1917, let alone through the prism of using it as a legitimating tactic. In what follows, I will rectify that by broadly tracing two examples of such (re)production as a legitimating tactic to highlight the historical continuity of this trend. In particular, I will focus on the politics behind awarding Ivan Bunin the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1933; and the case of an HBO movie about Andrei Sakharov, first screened in the U.S. in 1984. These are by no means the only examples — these particular ones were chosen simply based on their loose similarity to the case study of Navalny team's campaign for the Oscar. The first one showcases the political importance of international awards and the second one highlights the usage of various forms of filmmaking — all in the name of gaining international recognition.

While each of these examples deserves its own 12,000-word thematic analysis, as I am utilizing them merely to show historical continuities and to underscore once more that these cases are, indeed, out there and have simply not been engaged with, my discussion in this section will mostly simply recap the textual evidence of their existence from diaries and various forms of archival print media before finally engaging more in-depth with my contemporary case study.

### *Bunin & the Nobel Prize in Literature*

In 1933, Ivan Bunin, a staunch anti-Bolshevik who has been in exile from Russia since 1920, became the first Russian to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. But while Bunin and his award are celebrated in Russia today, at the time it was preceded by several years of unseen lobbying between the exile community and its supporters one one side and the Soviet

23

government and its supporters on the other on a quest for the "right" Russian culture to be legitimated through the award and recognized as appropriate by the West. The emigre side introduced multiple candidacies into the fight — from Bunin to Dmitry Merezhkovsky, while the Soviets stood staunchly behind one key name — Maxim Gorky.

At the time, Bunin was hailed by many in the Russian emigre community and in Europe broadly as one of the most important reproducers of the cultural values of Russia as it used to be. By the 1930s, many of Bunin's writings had been translated into English to be widely disseminated in Europe, and he had published the edited version of the diary he kept during the first years after the revolution under the title *Okayannyye Dni* (*Cursed Days*) in the Paris emigre daily *Vozrozhdeniye* to showcase the horrors of the Bolshevik regime. (Klimova 2012; I.A. Bunin and Bunina 2016, 140)

Gorky, too, was no stranger to Europeans. Though at the time of the Nobel award, Gorky was living back in the USSR, he spent most of the 1920s in exile in Europe, and had successfully disseminated his works on the continent during that time. (Hingley 2023) Close to Stalin upon his return, but well-known abroad, he was the most viable Soviet candidate — but as the fight turned political, his candidacy was no longer supported by much of the international community. In their announcement of the prize being awarded to Bunin, *the New York Times*, for example, wrote mockingly that the prize could have been given to "Maxim Gorky, who could very suitably represent the old Russia and the new .... But Gorky is having magnificent memorial editions of his works published by the Soviet Government and he has had a big city renamed after him — Nizhni Novgorod, where the famous fair used to be; and a man can't have everything." ("Topics of the Times: Russian Nobel Prizeman" 1933)

Still, before the final announcement in November 1933, both the Soviet and the emigre side labored tirelessly to secure the victory. Bunin's wife Vera wrote in her diary in

1931 that family friend journalist Ilia Trotsky informed the Bunins that "the Bolsheviks [are] lobbying against an 'emigre prize,' spreading rumors that, [if Bunin wins], [the Soviets] will withdraw from an agreement [that the Soviets and the Swedes were negotiating at the time]" and that the Soviets secured Germany's support for Gorky's candidacy. (I.A. Bunin and Bunina 2016, 254) The existence of this blackmail is also implicitly confirmed by Alexandra Kollontai, the Soviet ambassador to Sweden at the time — who recalls that Rickard Sandler, the Swedish Prime Minister, was "almost apologizing" to her for Bunin's award in December of 1933, and underscored that the Swedish cabinet could not have influenced the decision. (Kollontai 2001, 198-99)

Bunin, on the other hand, was allegedly supported by the French. (Kollontai 2001, 198) Journalist Trotsky was also utilizing all of his possible connections in pursuit of Bunin's prize — in 1930, Bunin's wife wrote that Trotsky got introduced to "Lund University Professor Sigurd Agrell" and "Copenhagen Professor Anton Kalgren" to get Bunin re-nominated. (I.A. Bunin and Bunina 2016, 232-33) Ironically, Agrell ended up nominating both Bunin *and* Gorky for the prize in 1933 — he proposed "as first choice that the Prize be awarded solely to I. Bunin. Otherwise, the Prize could be shared either by I. Bunin and D. Merezjkovskij, or between I. Bunin and M. Gorkij." (Agrell 1933)

The importance of this cultural fight for both sides is also underscored by one short entry in Bunin's diary in October 1933. Bunin writes that he "woke up very early, [as he has been] struggling to identify the signature on some postcard [sent to him]." The rest of the postcard is summed up in one word: "Stalin." (I.A. Bunin and Bunina 2016, 288) It seems implausible that such a gesture from Stalin was not connected to the winding down fight for the Nobel. Bunin was informed that he was selected as the winner in November of that year.

Noting the power of Bunin's writings, and legitimating Bunin's importance as a reproducer of "old" Russia's culture, in his introduction of Bunin during the Nobel banquet,

Swedish Professor Wilhelm Nordenson emphasized that Bunin "has given [readers] the most valuable picture of Russian society as it once was" and then offered Bunin his "feelings of sympathy" to comfort Bunin "in the melancholy of exile."(I. Bunin 1933)

By using cultural production to showcase their values, then — which were more aligned with European values than those of the Soviets — and surrounding it with intense lobbying, Bunin and the other exilees behind him, managed to gain broad international recognition of *their* beliefs, while delegitimating the pursuits of the Soviet Union in the process. Bunin's award was celebrated by exilees as a recognition of their struggle and culture, and they saw it as a means of securing further international support for their cause. (Djakova 2019) This production of "proper" cultural narratives will become particularly important in Navalny's case as well.

Peculiarly, the start of intense Nobel lobbying efforts, particularly from the exile side, in the early 1930s coincided with a pause in formal international recognition of the USSR. After the initial wave of countries established diplomatic relationships with the Soviets in the early to mid-1920s, not a single further country granted the Soviets recognition between 1927 and 1932.[8] (McDougall 2023) One could argue, then, that by the early 1930s, exilees saw that with the recognition of the USSR dying down, the urgency of international engagement with the exiled community may have already been produced, so the time was ripe for them to make their move.

Having achieved the Nobel recognition, Bunin used it to continue delegitimizing the Soviet government and its values through other modes of cultural production — his speech at the laureate banquet and symbolic visual gestures. In a speech he delivered in impeccable French at the Grand Hôtel in Stockholm, Bunin declared: "For the first time since the

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[8] With the exception of the UK, which established diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1924, severed them in 1927, and then reestablished them in 1929.

founding of the Nobel Prize, you have awarded it to an exile," adding that the choice of the Academy "has proven once more that in Sweden the love of liberty is truly a national cult." (I. Bunin 1933) His mistress, Galina Kuznetsova, recalled in her diary that "the word 'exile'[9]elicited some trepidation, but it all ended well."(Kuznetsova 2016, 83) Through his speech, Bunin once again confirmed the importance of this award for the exile cause and reproduced the Swedes' understanding of themselves as a freedom-valuing nation — further legitimating him in their eyes.

Further, Bunin used the ceremony itself to visually and physically shun away the Soviets from the Swedish Academy's hallowed halls of cultural power. *The New York Times* wrote at the time that Bunin refused to be introduced to the Swedish king by the "Soviet minister," as is customary for foreign Nobel recipients, and that the committee struggled to find a flag to hang on the building in Bunin's honor, as the "hammer and sickle... was out of the question, but no flag of old Czarist Russia could be found in all Stockholm." Instead, they flew Swedish flags for the ceremony. ("Bunin is Acclaimed in Nobel Ceremony" 1933) In his diary, Bunin contends that they flew only Swedish flags "thanks to [his efforts]."(I.A. Bunin and Bunina 2016, 294) These symbolic gestures further helped him show the Soviet cause as illegitimate. The USSR would wait another 32 years to get recognition of "their" author at the Nobels — until Mikhail Sholokhov's award in 1965.

This importance of the literature Nobel for countries and groups striving for a certain kind of cultural capital in the West can also be traced beyond this singular Soviet case. China's similar obsession with getting this Nobel and its disdain for the academics who awarded the first "Chinese" literary Nobel to an exilee, Gao Xingjian, in 2000, has been well documented in literature, for example. (See Lovell 2006)

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[9] Though her entry is in Russian, she writes this word in French.

*Sakharov Documentary & HBO*

At 8 p.m. EST on June 20, 1984, U.S. cable channel Home Box Office organized a special screening of its new movie *Sakharov*, focused on the life of the eponymous Soviet nuclear physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov, one of the key figures in the Soviet human rights movement. Though most sources describe it simply as made "in consultation" with Sakharov's stepchildren who by then lived in exile in the U.S.,[10] it was, in fact, explicitly pitched by the children's lawyers, Tom Bernstein and Gregory Wallance, to various producers in the U.S. until they finally scored a meeting with HBO's Robert Berger and Herb Brodkin, who "sparked to [the idea] immediately." (O'Connor 1984; Hill 1984) The movie spans Sakharov's first forays into the human rights fight within the Soviet Union and ends with the discussion of his and his wife's, Yelena Bonner's, internal exile to Gorky in 1980.

Though the movie — whose "major thrust" is "the belief of the dissidents that worldwide public opinion can influence Soviet policy in regard to human rights"— was initially supposed to come out in September of that year, as Sakharov began a hunger strike in May 1984 to press the Soviet authorities to secure a medical exit visa for Bonner, and was not heard from for a while after, his stepchildren pressed HBO for an emergency earlier screening. (Unger 1984; Doder 1984) Berger recalls that Bonner's daughter Tatyana Yankelevich and her husband Yefrem came to see him and asked if Berger could get the movie on "immediately to stir public opinion." (Hill 1984) When announcing the special June screening, HBO mentioned explicitly that the screening was being made "to create a greater awareness of the plight of the Sakharovs, with the hope that the weight of public opinion might influence the Soviet Union to release this brave couple." (O'Connor 1984) For the special screening in June, the producers even rewrote the final narration of the film to say that

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[10] In 1977, Sakharov's grandson Matvey recalls, the Soviet government forced them to leave, as Sakharov's son-in-law, dissident Yefrem Yankelevich, was threatened with a jail sentence. (Sachkova 2020)

"although TASS, the Soviet press agency, has assured the world that the Sakharovs are in good health, this has not been confirmed by any reliable source." (Shales 1984) Underscoring the aim of the movie to influence the Soviet officials, on June 19th, 1984, an HBO spokesperson also noted in a tongue in cheek way that the Russian embassy subscribed to HBO "and that personnel stationed there would therefore be able to see the film." (Shales 1984)

The movie was also disseminated widely through other cultural and political fora — in May 1984, it was shown at the Cannes Film Festival and screened on Dutch television. On June 10, 1984, it was shown to French President Francois Mitterrand, "and the White House has received cassettes from HBO for the President in advance of a June 19 screening at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in Washington." (Kaplan 1984a) These screenings for politicians are similar to a strategy later employed by Navalny's team — who also held screenings of the documentary in parliaments to spark a conversation.

After the special screening on HBO in June, Sakharov's stepchildren have traveled around the U.S. campaigning for public support with the film — making appearances at screenings of the movie at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the University of Pennsylvania. (Callan 1984; "Sakharov, the Movie — and the Issues" 1984, 1) Locations for these screenings seem to have been selected quite strategically — not only are Harvard and Penn two of the most prestigious universities in the U.S., with the Kennedy School educating many future U.S. bureaucrats, but they also seem to have been located in areas where HBO was not offering its services at the time. Penn, at the very least, most certainly was — as the announcement of the movie screening in its *Almanac* explicitly mentioned that this is the first time Philadelphians would have been exposed to the movie "as the city lacks cable." ("Sakharov, the Movie — and the Issues" 1984, 1)

Sakharov's stepchildren used the screenings as a way to legitimize their cause of fighting for his release and human rights in the USSR broadly — by underscoring Sakharov's plight as a broader theme within human rights narratives worldwide and his unyielding fame within the Soviet Union, thereby signaling both their shared cultural values with the audiences and underscoring the continuation of the fight at home. (Callan 1984) Some viewers at Harvard apparently even shouted "What can we do to help?" at the end of the post-screening discussion. (Callan 1984) Tatiana also used the time to make, almost off-handedly, certain political suggestions to the audience — at Harvard, for example, she argued that "the U.S. should more stringently enforce the Helsinki Accords." (Callan 1984) We will later see these strategies utilized in Navalny's case as well.

Beyond these screenings, the film also remained in the public consciousness for quite some time, as it received three Golden Globe nominations (though did not emerge victorious) and earned four awards at the Awards for Cable Excellence — U.S. cable TV's equivalent of the prestigious Primetime Emmy, which did not deem cable production eligible for its award until 1988. (Gendel 1985)

After the film aired, the Soviets decided to sell a polished documentary "purportedly showing the Sakharovs in good health" to ABC through a West German publishing company, which ABC promptly aired in August 1984 — though mentioning on air that this was "Soviet propaganda, complete with narration, designed to counter world criticism of its treatment of the Sakharovs."(Kaplan 1984b) *Newsweek* noted at the time that the movie was sold to the Germans by "Russian journalist Victor Louis, a sometime salesman for the KGB." ("A KGB Home Movie" 1984) Though Tatiana agreed that it was a "KGB picture," she nevertheless saw its appearance on ABC as "a minor victory," as "it [was] clear that these films have been put out as a sort of a concession by the Soviets to say to the world that they have yielded to the pressure of providing some evidence, some proof of their existence."(Kaplan 1984b) I

would argue further that the Soviets' choice to combat a movie with a documentary also underscored that they must have seen HBO's movie as a potent tool to galvanize support for Sakharov and his stepchildren abroad: they could have chosen any number of ways to provide information on Sakharov and Bonner to the U.S. public, but chose to fight fire with fire — that is, one public U.S.-wide movie screening with another one. It also created a clear counter-narrative: while the HBO movie discussed Sakharov and Bonner's plight, the documentary showed them as healthy, reading *Newsweek* ,and living off of "800 rubles … a month" — which amounted to a somewhat respectable $960 at the time. ("A KGB Home Movie" 1984)

Overall, all these outlined strategies of the historical actors — the collaboration with a U.S. media company, the appeals to the struggle at home and the shared values, the special political screenings, the creation of narratives about what the country at home looks like, the timing of the release and the campaigns, and others — will become key in *Navalny* documentary's case as well, showing the unyielding importance of using cultural (re)production for legitimation throughout time.

## *NAVALNY*, OSCARS, AND LEGITIMATION

"We understood that the situation of Navalny in prison, name recognition, international recognition are all things that keep him alive, that allow us to hold certain talks connected to his name, and that allow us to keep [the public] interested in what's going on in Russia, and so on," Leonid Volkov says, sitting across from me in Vienna, after I ask him why it was so important for the team to campaign for the Oscar. "And a movie that has been watched by millions of people around the world is a reason [to start] a discussion."

Volkov and I talk for almost an hour about the campaign and the team's other engagements. He discusses how the film has been viewed as a political tool by the team from the very start of its production — Navalny, I learn, *hates* when someone follows him around with a camera, and yet gave director Daniel Roher "full access" because Navalny "understood that he'll arrive [in Russia] and go to jail, and that [the team] needs something tangible left that could work [without him]." Volkov delineates how most of the events during the Oscar campaign were organized by impact produces hired by CNN — except for four, which he organized himself in his capacity as the political director of the team: special screenings in the German Bundestag, the European Parliament, U.S. Congress, and the UK Parliament, which the team used to promote the "right narratives" about Russia and Russians. We finish with a discussion of the team's other cultural engagements — and him enthusiastically reciting how he managed to source a piss-soaked mattress from Skelbiu, a Lithuanian secondhand marketplace, to ensure that the traveling replica of Navalny's solitary confinement cell is as close to the original as possible (the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service is not known for providing inmates with even a semblance of a dignified existence). Both the film and other forms of engagement, he says, are used to appeal both to politicians and to the "broader masses" and create spaces for discussion.

In what follows, I will analyze how exactly these appeals have been made and spaces have been created by finally outlining in detail my proposed analytical framework through the engagement with the team's production within the bounds of the Oscar campaign.

### *Reproducing the Cultures of the Beholders*

Before actors can *shape* the audience's values and beliefs, they need to showcase that they share the basic values and knowledges of their interlocutors — that is, reproduce the cultures they are trying to appeal to. This is key in appeals for international authority because it imbues the actors with similar basic cultural capital that interlocutors bestow on their compatriots — as it highlights to beholders that the exiled actors are not just representing the cultures of their home states, particularly when the home state is viewed as behaving in an improper manner, but rather share common understandings with these beholders.

Navalny's team does this most prominently by continuously discursively underscoring their commitment to Western-style democracy and rule of law. This is evident particularly from the recurrent narrative of Navalny being a viable *candidate* for Russia's future presidency, underscoring that he has not been given the mandate quite yet. "I am confident in our powers that when the day of free and fair elections in Russia [comes] ... that [Navalny is] … almost certainly... Okay, extremely likely to win," Pevchikh contends when asked about what's to come in the post-Putin future. (The Wilson Center 2022, 45:40) She seems to slip up a bit in the level of confidence of her verbiage, as she does in other appearances as well, such as in a discussion with *The Washington Post* where she says that in the documentary, Navalny "explains what he would do *once* he" — she corrects herself — "*if* he becomes the president." (Washington Post Live 2023) That she corrects herself and hedges her wording highlights how crucial it is to the team to underscore that they understand how democracy works in the West and how elections work in a way that some other members

of the Russian opposition abroad might not — I have already mentioned, for example, that the group led by Mikhail Khodorkovsky has been claiming a certain representative legitimacy without having received an electoral mandate. When I ask Volkov about whether these representative claims of other opposition leaders hinder the team's work, he also dismisses them outright: "First of all, nobody takes them seriously … in the Belarus case, Tsikhanouskaya at least won an election." (Interview with the author) The group's legitimacy as an actor in this way, thus, would paradoxically stem from the fact that they do not explicitly claim legitimacy at all, but rather appeal to the shared understandings of electoral democracies with their audiences.

The reproduction of Western cultural values and shared understandings continues in other ways. Both Volkov and Pevchikh, for example, underscore that there is no longer a question of whether the current Russian political elites should simply be lustrated once Putin is gone — instead, Volkov says that the current elites are "war criminals," and Pevchikh continues by discussing whether an "international criminal tribunal" would be a more appropriate forum for dealing with them, which discursively highlights their engagement with the rules and norms of international law. (The Wilson Center 2022, 47:00) Further, when discussing how the world should approach Russia during the war, Pevchikh suggests, "*I know that if you study political science, or international relations somewhere in the U.S. or in Europe, they will tell you that negotiation [is everything]* … Well, it doesn't work that way with Putin." (The Wilson Center 2022, 30:40) This knowledge, as any listener could then look up, since Pevchikh has highlighted that herself in other engagements, comes from her tenure as a student of Political Science at the London School of Economics — which further legitimates her as a reproducer of values shared by Westerners broadly and Western politicians in particular, since educational institutions are key in reproducing cultures and imparting them onto their students. (See Bourdieu 1973)

***Producing Themselves as the Best Alternative & Holders of Knowledge***

Once shared cultural understandings have been established, exiled actors engage in producing themselves as the best alternative to the current regime to ensure that the authority granted to them is not granted to their opponents, who, too, are in exile. This, once again, need not mean presenting themselves as the "true" representatives of the home country — rather, this type of legitimation is pursued by discursively delegitimating the opponents within the exile community and underscoring the group's popularity at home and clear ties to the struggle at home.

In the case of Navalny's team, the delegitimation of the opponents is done in part already through the cultural reproduction — particularly through the electoral narrative. But beyond that, it is pursued mostly by producing the image of Navalny as a "real" politician — unlike everyone else in the running. "In Russia, a politician is like a warrior and a fighter and a person who has absolutely no perception of risk or threats and all of that … And Alexey is exactly like that," Pevchikh argues. (Wolf 2022) She goes further in other appearances, underscoring that there was never even a question of whether Navalny would remain in Europe — "He is a Russian politician. He has built his career and he gained his popularity by telling people that they shouldn't be afraid. How hypocritical would that be if you ask people to be brave, to be courageous and then yourself, you make not the most courageous choice?"(Masters and Mputubwele 2023) These discussions produce two key understandings of what it means to be a "real" politician in Russia — first, it is a person who is brave and unafraid of the consequences of their actions; and second, it is a person who is *in* Russia and/or works *for* Russia.

Producing the understanding of the team abroad as also undoubtedly brave is easy enough — and often done by their interviewers who, for instance, highlight in their introductions of speakers that Volkov has "seven politically motivated criminal cases brought

against him in Russia," and yet continues his work. (The Wilson Center 2022, 01:45) But at first glance, it might seem that the production of the second meaning of what being a "real" Russian politician entails would delegitimize not only other members of the opposition abroad whose leaders are not currently inside Russia, but Navalny's team itself, since they, too, are working out of Europe. However, here, other narratives come in: the affirmations that Navalny himself is still running the organization and the eschewing of the term "exile" as it pertains to the team.

While Navalny was still allowed to exchange letters and have somewhat unobstructed conversations with his lawyers, the team consistently underscored that he continues fulfilling his duties as the head of the organization and that he is "very productive" even from prison, finding ways to give the team "new ideas and projects."(Rayner 2022; The Wilson Center 2022, 07:22) Beyond that, the team has always discursively underscored that they, too, are "Russian politicians" working *with* the Russian public *for* the Russian public — and do not consider themselves politicians in exile. (The Wilson Center 2022, 33:31) Volkov underscored that in his conversation with me as well — saying that while exilees like Leon Trotsky could not choose whether they wanted to actively engage with diasporas or the public at home, technology today allows politicians to engage in home country politics regardless of their location, recalling the time when he was a World Fellow at Yale and did not miss "a single meeting" with the Russian team during his entire time in New Haven. As Navalny team's internal polling shows that 75 percent of their supporters still live in Russia and do not intend to leave, the team is "trying to live sort of in Russia — read what's going on, conduct a lot of polls, pursue [their] activities there and think about what [they] can do to impact the situation there" as opposed to engaging with "the migrant agenda." (Interview with the author) Their work as Russian politicians who serve the needs of Russian public is also highlighted in their public discussions of their creation of the *Populyarnaya Politika*

YouTube channel — created at a time of an information vacuum when almost all remaining independent journalists were pushed out of Russia — where the team conducts daily streams to educate the Russian public about what is really going on with the war and in the world. (DOCNYCfest 2022, 12:16) This focus on the remaining ties to the struggle at home and their work to such ends legitimates the actors further as an alternative to other actors by showing that they are not simply asking the West to solve their problems for them, but rather simply search for support in what they are already doing themselves.

Beyond these more elaborate productions, legitimation via ties to the home country is pursued by constructing the team or its leader as a truly popular politician at home. Even for groups who do not pursue representative legitimacy, showcasing that they do, in fact, have a following at home is crucial to presenting their goals as legitimate.

Navalny's team does this mostly by highlighting Navalny's charm, reach and following. "But Navalny's charisma, Navalny's conviction, and his ability to organize people around him definitely worked its magic [in galvanizing support for his causes]," Pevchikh says in an interview, adding that Navalny has consistently "attracted an audience that Putin had assumed was his." (Remnick 2023) Later she goes further, highlighting that he can attract followers from all social strata — "[in 2017] the biggest myth about Navalny was busted— that Navalny was only for middle- and upper-middle-class people from St. Petersburg and Moscow," as he started campaigning across the country for a nomination for the presidency of the country. (Remnick 2023) At some point, she also adds numbers to further justify her production — she says she was excited that the documentary will allow foreigners to "meet the guy who inspires millions of Russians, who raised this incredible support base of people who are willing to not only support our work at the Anti-Corruption Foundation but also protest in the streets." (Washington Post Live 2023) The discussions of this reach and

following of Navalny and, by proxy, the team further legitimize them as "Russian" actors who understand Russia and have access to the consciousnesses of Russians.

### *Producing Understandings of the Home Country*

Once the group has delegitimated its opponents and legitimated itself through highlighting its work at home, they can legitimate themselves further by engaging in production of narratives and understandings of what is going on in the home country. By showing their remaining ties to home, the groups get legitimated as producers of true knowledge of the situation on the ground — since they must be in the know to act in their capacity as politicians of their home country — which helps them legitimate their pursuits by allowing them to produce understandings of why engagement with and support of the public in the home country is not a lost cause.

Navalny's team does this by highlighting three key aspects of what is and has been going on back in Russia: that Russians are brave and have been and continue to protest; that Russians are simply brainwashed and afraid, and their lack of large-scale action is not indicative of their disdain for democracy and civil liberties; and that opinion polling from the country is not to be trusted. "[The documentary shows] that not all Russians are like Putin," Pevchikh says. "Russians aren't evil and we don't all support the war and we don't hate Ukrainians." (Rayner 2022) She goes further in other appearances, arguing that "you see from Russia when some extremely brave people – by themselves, just on their own – they go into the square and just stand there with a poster," and providing some clear statistics, such as discussing how 17,000 Russians applied to work in the reopened political offices of Navalny's team within Russia itself despite the risks associated with it. (Wolf 2022, 16:21) She and Volkov also explain that perhaps it's "just fear" that prevents more Russians from speaking out and taking action, as the repressions have grown immensely in the last year, but

that Russians did not "make a choice" for the country to grow authoritarian, and that people in the 1990s were quite open to democracy, but Putin spent all his time in power "manipulating" everyone through propaganda. (The Wilson Center 2022) Pevchikh also recalls her own time at school and university in Russia to argue that she, too, was "brainwashed; … [that] there [was] no politics." (Masters and Mputubwele 2023) Volkov contends that "maybe 10 percent of the population" genuinely supports Putin and that polling from a country "at war and with the worst wartime censorship" simply cannot be trusted. (The Wilson Center 2022, 17:59)

Having elucidated the situation on the ground, the team offers hope for the future to legitimate engagement with them and with Russia. "The Russians are fine by themselves, and they are good and smart and educated people and when they have access to … free media, fair elections, they will be well," Pevchikh contends in one appearance. (The Wilson Center 2022, 28:27) Volkov argues further that "if Putin is gone for whatever reason, there will be at least an enormous window of opportunities for civil society to move things back on track to … a democratic transition." (The Wilson Center 2022, 40:06)

Volkov underscored the importance of this production in our conversation as well, arguing that one of the team's goals is to create a counter narrative to the idea that "'rusnya'[11] are all genetic slaves," which, he says, is helpful for Putin and propelled by "useful idiots" in the West because if Russia truly has no hope for a democratic transition, "then [French president Emmanuel] Macron is right and we should sit down and negotiate now, since if there is going to be a next Putin after this … it is better to negotiate with this [one];[12] at least we know him." Navalny's story, he says, "is the most important instrument for [the team]" to engage in the formation of a counter narrative, as through the documentary people can see

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[11] A derogatory collective term for Russians that emerged during the war.
[12] Volkov uses an expletive here.

that Russia had "protests, [campaign] offices, political campaigns … [and] that even in 2021 the coordinator of Navalny's office in Novosibirsk campaigned and won elections [against a United Russia candidate]."(Interview with the author)

Beyond legitimating the team's pursuits by showing that engagement with Russians can prove fruitful, this kind of knowledge production also underscores the team's indispensability as potential strategic partners for the Western countries — as it showcases that the team has the kind of knowledge of and access to the Russian public and the public opinions that the international society cannot match on its own.

### Producing the Urgency of Action

Having legitimated the need for engagement with the home country and its population generally, actors are still left with one crucial issue: legitimating engagement with their agenda *right now*, and not some time in the future. Countries worldwide have limited resources, so highlighting why the time for engagement is ripe is key to achieving authority within the system. Actors can pursue such legitimation by identifying certain weaknesses within the home regime and using their established expert legitimacy on questions pertaining to what is happening at home to produce understandings of these weaknesses within the broader international society.

Navalny's team engages with this by constructing the image of Putin as weak and incapable of continuing ruling the country for a very long time. "[With the start of the war,] Putin has shortened his term," Volkov said already in April, 2022. "And I'm saying it like a scientific fact, as a mathematician." He goes further, contending that "[Putin] knew how to operate the system as of February 23, 2022, and he could have kept going for 20 more years, but … he doesn't know how to operate [the new system], and the chances are not so high that he will be able to find a new point of stability." (The Wilson Center 2022, 09:47) Pevchikh

produces a similar understanding in another interview, highlighting both biological limitations of Putin's rule and underscoring further the instability within the system — "Putin is a human being. He is 70. Life expectancy in Russia for a man is 60, maybe 65. He can't be president for another 10 years; it's just physically impossible," she says, adding that "it's a very vulnerable position that he has put himself into by pursuing this insane dream of taking over Ukraine." (Rayner 2022) These discussions of Putin's mortality and weakness legitimize the urgency of engagement with the exiled actors *now* by underscoring that Russia is currently politically unstable in a way it has never been since the start of Putin's reign, so this is an unparalleled opportunity to strike.

**CONCLUSION**

Cultural (re)production has emerged throughout history as a compelling legitimating tool for exiled actors through which they seek to create shared understandings with their observers and shape their narratives. In this paperm I proposed an overarching framework that analytically captures and elucidates these legitimating practices that may have been hinted at in other literature, but never outlined in such a systematic manner. Though these cultural events might at first seem purely aesthetic or affective, they are strategically made to politically matter by exilees — as in the *Navalny* documentary case and many others.

As this framework was fully established based on an extensive analysis of just one empirical example, it comes with limitations, however — the key one being that it likely does not encompass all the potential legitimating strategies that can emerge through cultural (re)production. My focus on just one discrete region also potentially limits the framework's reach — as certain steps within it might work differently for those of different cultures and ethnicities. Someone working in the post-colonial tradition would view "reproduction of culture," for instance, as mimicry, with all the ambivalence and analytical baggage that this brings. Still, I would argue that regardless of these limitations, engaging with how any exile groups use cultural (re)production for their international pursuits is a productive lens through which to look at their work — as very rarely do these groups not produce any cultural artifacts explicitly targeting or simply made available to foreign audiences.

Future research should also go beyond this framework to assess two other key questions, both of which were beyond the scope of my research query: why this practice of using cultural tools for legitimation has become so widespread across time and space and what its impacts are. The second question in particular is key — and might even help in answering the first. It seems to me from my limited exploration of the impacts that they can be quite profound, explaining why actors continue engaging in this mode of legitimation.

In my conversation with Volkov, for example, I was struck by his discussion of the clear difference in the behaviors of German and French political actors in regards to Russia and Putin and his attributing it in part to the different level of engagement Navalny's team has had with the actors in those countries. For context: beyond campaigning with the documentary and other engagements, in Germany Volkov has also published a book about Russian politics — *Putinland* — this past October. It has since become a bestseller.

> "Macron says 'Russians are hopeless, we should negotiate with Putin,' and [German chancellor Olaf] Scholtz says 'This is not Russia's war; this is Putin's war.' Why do they think so differently?" Volkov asks. "Well, perhaps in part due to [the team] putting in varying levels of effort. I've been to Berlin around 20 times in the last two years, and just once in Paris. … You can't say that some specific action changed something. … But in one place you [engaged] and it somehow *formed the opinions* of political actors and experts … And all of these people from think tanks and such write something. All of this turns into some kind of critical mass. And then when Scholtz needs to make a speech, he doesn't write it himself, he draws from this mass. And we have not created this mass in France. Clearly, the result is different."

This discussion, together with my analysis presented throughout this work, hints at potentially vast implications of cultural (re)production for our understanding of exile actors' international political pursuits and their impacts. These impacts and the practices behind them are most certainly worth studying further — across time and space.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A — Source List

| Link | Participants | Date | Length | Short Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJ6VYPv9z4U&ab_channel=WGNNews | Pevchikh | 8/4/22 | 0:06 | short discussion with WGN |
| https://deadline.com/2022/12/navalny-daniel-roher-maria-pevchikh-christo-grosev-interview-contenders-documentary-1235188792/ | Pevchikh, Roher, Grozev | 12/4/22 | N/A | interview with Deadline |
| https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/12/putin-could-gone-tomorrow-realistic-alternative/? | Pevchikh | 12/4/22 | N/A | interview with Telegraph |
| https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q94CvXLJTQQ&ab_channel=WoodrowWilsonCenter | Volkov, Pevchikh | 18/4/22 | 1:00 | discussion with Wilson Institute |
| https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/24/politics/navalny-russia-maria-pevchikh-what-matters/index.html | Pevchikh | 22/4/22 | N/A | interview with CNN |
| https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prU5wCVV_Zw&ab_channel=blackfilmandtv | Pevchikh, Roher, Grozev | 22/9/22 | 0:19 | excerpt of a panel from NYC screening |
| https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61f04KjCRhg&ab_channel=FilmIndependent | Pevchikh, Roher | 13/10/22 | 0:42 | discussion with Film Independent |
| https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2f8UIWCe7k&ab_channel=DOCNYCfest | Pevchikh, Roher | 23/11/22 | 0:21 | docNYCfest panel |
| https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-12-14/alexei-navalny-documentary-maria-pevchikh-nerve-agent | Pevchikh | 14/12/22 | N/A | a column with a short interview |
| https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r0FoHQWdWA&ab_channel=WashingtonPostLive | Pevchikh, Rae | 31/1/23 | 0:35 | discussion with Washington Post |
| https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2023/02/15/amanpour-pevchikh.cnn | Pevchikh | 15/2/23 | 0:17 | interview with CNN |
| https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interviewwithmaria-pevchikh-alexey-navalny-vladimir-putin | Pevchikh | 4/3/23 | N/A | interview with New Yorker |

**Appendix B — Codes and Themes**

| Cultural Reproduction | Regime Alternative | Understandings of Home Country | Urgency of Action |
|---|---|---|---|
| Elections | Navalny is well-known/name recognition | Russians aren't a lost cause | Putin is weak and will be gone soon |
| Tribunals | "Real" politician is brave | Russia isn't going anywhere | The Russian government is doing unspeakable things |
| European education | Doc shows "real" Navalny | Russians are brainwashed | |
| Value of life | Navalny is an alternative | Russians are protesting | |
| | Navalny will be out soon | Russians are afraid | |
| | Navalny can attract a following | | |
| | "Real" politician is in Russia | | |
| | Ties to home | | |
| | Navalny is productive from prison | | |
| | The team is doing productive work | | |
| | Educating Russians | | |