Online Public Sphere in Russia and Its Role in the Movement "For Fair Elections"

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This article examines the evolution of the online public sphere in Russia and its democratic potential, which was several years ago considered as 'failed' (Oates, 2008; Fossato, 2008). However the formation of the protest movement "For fair elections" in the Internet in December 2011, that managed a spill-over from online into offline public sphere, has shown that the RuNet was underestimated. The author argues that the democratic potential of the Russian Web has undergone rapid development, not only due to the political conjuncture, but also because of the emergence of a new generation of young "digital natives" coming into political activism. The author also analyses specific features of the online social mobilization in Russia and makes conclusions about the perspectives of deliberative discourse within the Russian web.

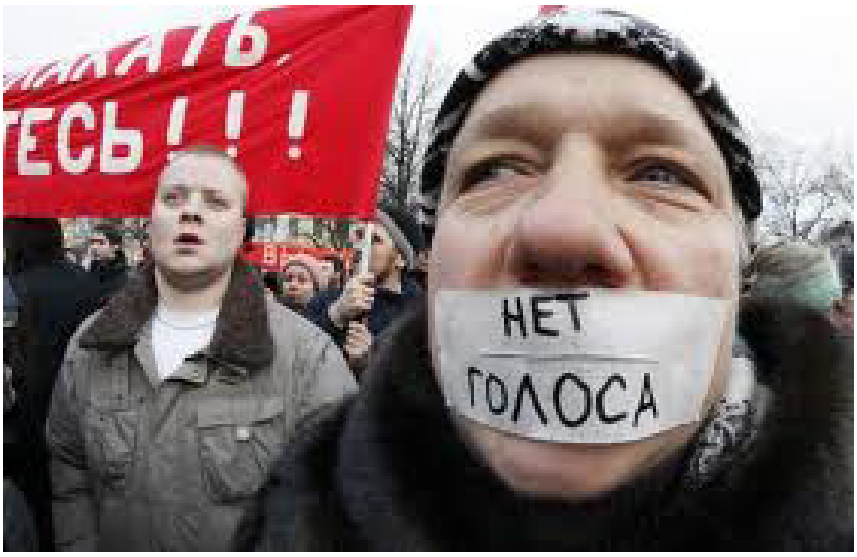
Prior to 2011 Russian civil society has been estimated by experts as rather underdeveloped, to a big extent due to the persistence of soviet patterns on the institutional level as well as that of the citizens behavior: "Reviewing the changing political and economic circumstances highlights the fact that classifying the country's political transformation as a failed 'transition to democracy' oversimplifies the complex, multidirectional nature of Russia's post-soviet experience – an experience in which soviet institutions bend to accommodate new realities, formally democratic structures are infused with patronage and corruption, and economic incentives are shaped by both the market and the state. Ultimately, however, domestic factors combine to create a generally inhospitable environment for social activism." (Henry 2010, p. 33)

In the late 1990s and early 2000s the rise of Internet was praised as a chance for democratization in Russia via free access to political information and pluralism of opinions (Rohozinski 1999), however, by the late 2000's this potential continued to be viewed as unrealized. Sarah Oates wrote 2008 based on research of the Russian blogosphere that "despite the presence of the internet, Russia has remained a relatively authoritarian state in which political parties and grass-roots organizations have had little role to play" (Oates, S., 2008, p. 2).

Mass demonstrations against the falsification of elections in big Russian cities followed. The two biggest took place on December 10 in Bolotnaya Square and on December 24 along Akademik Sakharov Avenue gathering approximately 50 000 and 100 000 people, respectively, the largest protest wave in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union (it must be mentioned that official figures and that of the opposition vary enormously). Protesters were mobilized mainly via social networks sites such as Vkontakte and Facebook - a fact that finally demolished the argument that the Russian web was ineffective at mobilizing citizens.

She argues that the Internet in Russia is being influenced by the norms of the traditional media system and can be better understood via the conception of national models (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) rather than via the Western ideas of the democratic impact of the Web. Reuters Institute for the study of journalism even named their article based on the examination of the Russian blogosphere "The Web That Failed" (Fossato, 2008) referring to the same problem of the underdevelopment of political discourse in the RuNet. But at least since the Russian parliamentary elections in 2011 we can speak about the new stage of development of the Russian public sphere in the Internet. Many experts and journalists immediately after the first protests of opposition drew parallels to the Arab spring and talked about a "white revolution" in Russia, but these comparisons turned out to be too rushed: whereas the tools such as social media were used in both cases, there are crucial differences in the respective political situations and the structure of societies in Russia and the Arab countries. In this paper I will examine the specific features of the online political discourse in Russia and its mobilization potential referring to the protest movement "For Fair Elections" in December 2011 as an example.

The protest wave in Russia was triggered by the big amount of information made available through social media exposing instances of fraud during the parliamentary elections that took place on 4 December. Several months before, top-blogger Alexey Navalny and his allies had started a campaign encouraging citizens to register as official observers for the elections and to track all the possible violations of election law with their cameras. Partly as result of this offline engagement of people, a large number of fraud reports filled RuNet starting during the day of the elections and for several days after. According to the official results, the pro-Putin party "United Russia" gained 49.3 % of vote (which is a 25% reduction since the 2007 elections), but according to the claims of the opposition in the Internet this result in reality was much lower. In Moscow for example 'United Russia' officially received 46.6%, but according to exit polls the figure was closer to 25-27% of the vote. (Golosov, 2011) Mass demonstrations against the falsification of elections in big Russian cities followed. The two biggest took place on December 10 in Bolotnaya Square and on December 24 along Akademik Sakharov Avenue gathering



approximately 50 000 and 100 000 people, respectively, the largest protest wave in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union (it must be mentioned that official figures and that of the opposition vary enormously). Protesters were mobilized mainly via social networks sites such as Vkontakte and Facebook – a fact that finally demolished the argument that the Russian web was ineffective at mobilizing citizens. Although about 30 000 people registered to the event on Facebook, there was a great deal of skepticism as to whether the protests could make a spill-over from online-communication to offline-action.

Network Society in Russia and the Participation Divide

After the December protests it became obvious that the modern Russian "Network Society" (Castells 2007, 2010) has the same characteristics that have been observed in other countries, facilitating horizontal and (at least at first) non-hierarchical structures, where a deliberative process of decision-making is possible (Habermas 1989). One demonstrative example of such deliberation was the discussion of measures against violence during rallies: people discussed and agreed upon rules of behavior in blogs and on social networking sites, and then followed these rules during demonstrations (ex. giving flowers to policemen, booing provocateurs etc.). Yet another example is that people used Facebook to discuss and bring to a vote the question of whom they wanted as speakers for the rally, resulting in a very diverse composition of personalities from leaders of legal and illegal opposition groups, civic activists and journalists to singers, a poet, and an "it-girl."

It is necessary to mention that the 'digital divide' in Russia, and in particular the 'participation divide' (Marr M., Zillien N. 2010), is so huge that it is impossible to create a more or less common public sphere.. Although the rise of Internet users in Russia has been exceptional in the last years (it passed the mark of 50 million people in September 2011 (Ioffe 2011) and the Russian internet-community is now considered to be the biggest in Europe, it is still only one-third of the Russian population. But even if people are online or using blogs, most of them are hardly interested in politics (Etling B., Alexanyan K., Kelly J., Faris R., Palfrey J., Gasser U. 2010), which correlates with the international patterns of internet usage (Castells 2007). Russian Facebook, which can be considered as a core "meeting point" of intellectuals and political opposition (according to Business Week (Ioffe, 2011), "Whereas Odnoklassniki.ru has become the domain of the older generation, and VKontakte the hangout of young middle- and lower-class Russians, Facebook is the network of choice for the urban and the urbane. Facebook's Russian users are generally of the wealthier, well-traveled, cosmopolitan variety, have foreign friends and tend to live in Moscow and St. Petersburg"), has only 9 million users. That represents a big figure to support a rally in Moscow, but a small one to influence the 142 million Russians. Russia's most popular social networking site, Vkontakte, has more then 110 million users in the CIS-States, and was also used as mobilization tool, particularly for organizing the rallies in cities other than Moscow.

It can be concluded that there exist at least two big information "worlds" in Russia, which are more or less isolated from one another in the field of political issues, and that within each exist thousands of information cocoons of different groups of interests. These two "informational worlds" are that of traditional media, of which TV is the most important having the biggest access of all to the Russian households, and that of online media. As the December protests showed, it is challenging for acute political topics to make a spill-over from the blogosphere to traditional media, especially to state-controlled TV-channels, and if they do manage it, then these topics get a certain political spin that matches with the usual news framing of these TV-channels. Thus, Russian Federal TV-channels, with the exception of Ren-TV (which doesn't have a wide access to Russian households anyway), did not cover the protests until the rally on Bolotnaya Square, which was then shown as an attempt by spin doctors to manipulate the public and to organize an "Orange revolution" in Russia. As result, most of the Russian population didn't really know what was going on in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other big cities. According to statistics of Levada-Centre, only 6 percent of Russians know who Alexey Navalny is – the top-blogger and one of the most famous leaders of the "Internet-opposition" and of the December protests.

It can be concluded that in terms of the political field we still cannot speak in Russia about a 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick 2011), that would represent a full convergence of traditional and new media. Not only is the society fragmented, but TV and mass media in particular contribute to this gap between different information "worlds."

"Modern Performers" and "Post-Materialism" as motors of the protests

Although the Russian society is highly fragmented, it is nonetheless possible to speak about the common atmosphere of a crisis of political legitimacy in the country that was indicated by the elections results (even the official figures of votes for pro-Putin party

were 25 percent lower than 2007). This corresponds with the global trend of declining trust in political elites which leads to a "processes of counter-power linked to social movements and social mobilization" (Castells, 2007, p.246). Until recent years Russia remained rather an exception in this global trend of declining trust in the Government, a fact which correlated with the relatively low interest of citizens in the Internet as a source of political information and as a result the underdeveloped democratic impact of the web. But the situation began to change rapidly starting in 2010 and one of the main reasons was obviously the appearance of the "new user". On the one hand, as everywhere else in the world, there is an increase of Internet literacy facilitated by the ease of access to online communication and the ability to self-publish content. The so-called "digital natives" or "Generation Z" (Hawkins P., Schmidt L. 2008) – young people who don't remember life without Internet and who were media-socialized as children, have come into their own. On the other hand, the Russian "Generation Z" has the additional important feature of being born in post-soviet Russia and already politically socialized in the frame of democratic rhetoric. That's why the growing-up of this generation is even more significant for Russia as a country of democratic transition then it is for established democracies. This is a historic "switch" of generations that in my opinion can be compared with that of the 1960s in the western world. Let us take a look at the post-war West Germany: the country was established as a democracy in 1945, but in the first years it was mostly just the change of form, because a lot of functionaries, teachers etc. from the old regime were engaged in the new democracy. It was only the so-called "generation of 1968" (young people already born in the new Germany) who were at last ready for the true democratization of society. As for Russia, we can observe a similar process of transition to the democratic political system. As Oates writes, "There is the appearance of democratic institutions in form, including a range of media outlets with various types of ownership, elections, parliament, and a popularly elected president, but these institutions lack democratic content." (Oates, 2008, p.5)

Apparently it was this lack of democratic content that became the main reason for the rise of discontent among the young Russians. As the analysis of profiles from social networking sites of those who were registered for the rallies in December shows (Basiliklab, 2012), most of the registered people were from 18 to 28 years old with the peak figures in the age group from 23 to 24: these are internet-affine young people, who have little fear of opposing the Government because they were raised in a democratic country, and as result there are easy to mobilize via the Web. "Generation Z" will definitely continue to play a significant role in the democratization of the country. But of course the social portrait of protesters is much more complex.

According to a Levada-Centre poll made during the second big rally in Moscow, on the 24th December, 31 percent of protesters in Moscow were between 25 and 39 years old, and 25 percent between 18 and 24. They were mostly well-educated, middle-class people; the urban elite. (Levada-centre, 2011) Unfortunately there was no poll made during the first big rally on the 10th of December, where according to journalist reports the constellation of the crowd was a somewhat different, with even more young people, so-called "hipsters," turning up in contrast to the second rally where there were more older citizens (Pishtschikova, 2011). This diffuse crowd of protesters mobilized by online social networks belong apparently to the new social milieus that appeared in Russia in the 2000s, the so-called "Modern Performers" and "Post-Materialists" (classification of the Sinus-Institute). The first group is well-educated people, internet-affine, under 30, with large number of students and self-employed entrepreneurs among them and understand themselves as "non-conventional, technological and culturally elite" (Sinus-Institute, 2011). The second group, the "Post-Materialists," represent creative industry. They are intellectuals, for whom freedom is more important then security and who fight against ossified bureaucratic structures. These social milieus were formed in Russia only recently and they do not have any political party they could consider as representative of their interests (similar to the situation we can also observe in the western world, where in Europe for example "pirate parties" gain popularity, addressing exactly these two social milieus).

As journalist Kolesnikov from "Kommersant"-newspaper puts it, "it was the demonstration of satiated", that essentially differs from the rallies in Russia of the 1990s, where mostly socially disadvantaged people took part practically to fight for survival. Julia Ioffe from the online-magazine "Foreign policy" mentions in her article "Decembrists" that the proterstors have all the basic benifits and now the time has come for them to long for living "with dignity and justice" (Ioffe, 2011). It seems to be the classic example of Maslow's pyramid in work: the urban elite has satisfied its basic needs and now seeks a higher quality of living. They want to be heard and respected by the government and to take part in the decision-making process.

Online mobilization process

In Russia social mobilization via the Internet started in 2008 with the local cases, where interest groups tried to solve some practical problems, and has increased enormously since 2010. (Etling, Alexanyan, Kelly, Faris, Palfrey, Gasser 2010) The most prominent examples of such mobilization are automobilists with their campaign

against violation of the road regulations by VIP-cars or the ecological movement against the felling of the Khimki forest. A lot of people organized help-communities, for example via the platform Ushahidi during the summer fires in Moscow 2010.

Thus, at the beginning social mobilization was mostly focused on the local level and on solving practical problems before it developed an increasingly political and nationwide character. I would like to pinpoint the following characteristics of the Russian protest movement in December which can also be considered applicable to online political mobilization processes in other "network societies":

Thanks to the ease of political participation, political activism is facilitated: "You don't have to go out of your comfort zone and put up with all the unnerving external stimuli. All you have to do is sit comfortably and press few buttons and you are really done with it. (…) It has shattered the taboo of political campaigning of holding placards in rain and sun (…) Now even a slight political inclination can make you take part in this social media frenzy." (Raza S.)

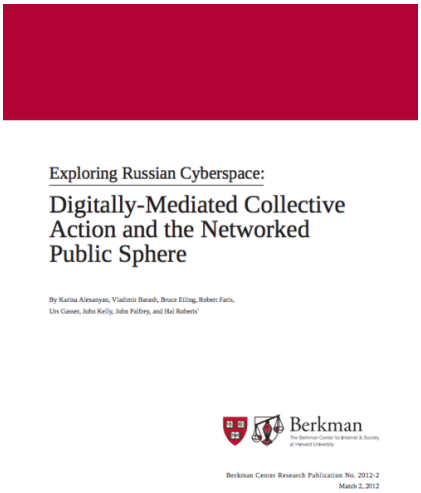
The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1993) works as well in the social networking sites. It can be assumed that its effect is even stronger online then offline, because people see their own friends (and not just strangers) sharing views and attitudes, so it becomes even harder to express an unpopular opinion and for example to support publicly an unpopular politician. This was obviously the case in the Russian Facebook, where expressing pro-governmental ideas in December was considered to be bad manners. The famous TV-anchor Tina Kandelaki fell into strong disapproval on Facebook and Twitter for expressing publicly her support for the rulling party.

At the beginning it was unclear if the online protests would manage to spill-over into offline rallies, and afterward many participants of the rally wrote in their status-updates that it was the first time ever that they attended a demonstration. This successful spill-over from online-communication to offline-activism can be explained by the "spiral of silence" theory: when a person gets the feeling that overwhelming number of his friends ("the critical mass") is supporting the rally and is going to go, he decides to go.

Although it is assumed that political mobilization in online social networks is based on non-hierarchical and horizontal structures, it seems only partly to be true. The whole campaign of tracking falsification during elections was obviously started by the top-blogger Navalny, who is now one of the leaders of the non-parliamentary opposition in Russia. After that there was a period of an intensive horizontal communication, but after the first big rally on 10 December it was clear that the movement badly needed leaders and a clear vision. In Moscow, where a group of popular activists exist who undertake the role of leaders, the second rally became a highlight of December, whereas in other cities, even in St. Petersburg, the lack of charismatic leaders lead to a decline in "revolutionary mood" according to several bloggers (e.g. Chuviljaev 2011). It appears that successful online mobilization presupposes a combination of hierarchical and non-hierarchical communication as well as horizontal and vertical communication.

One more feature of Russian protests that shouldn't be underestimated was humor: a lot of satirical placards during rallies, funny videos and caricatures in social media, which were both politically pointed and entertaining, were perfectly crafted to go viral. This amount of humor also shows the lack of fear towards the political elite and expresses a feeling of freedom on the part of the protestors. It is also worth mentioning that protestors were also self-ironical, ready to laugh at themselves: for example after being abused as "Facebook hamsters" they wrote a placard "hamster expanded shoulders".

The Blogosphere makes it difficult to control the content and the sources of information making it easy for provocateurs to spread a mess into the rows of the opposition, but the "collective mind" managed until now even in difficult situations not to "lose its orientation" such as after the publication of recordings of the phone conversations of one of the opposition leaders Boris Nemtzov where he speaks rudely about other opposition leaders and protesters.


Exploring Russian Cyberspace:

Digitally-Mediated Collective Action and the Networked Public Sphere

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The example of two big rallies, which ran to a great extent peacefully thanks to the self-organization of the crowd, shows that a deliberative model of the public sphere can be considered applicable to Russian online social networks.

Based on the analysis made above it can be concluded that there are significant changes going on in the Russia public sphere due to the usage of social media in political communication. It is not appropriate to talk about "a revolution," because only a relatively small part of the population takes part in the oppositional discourse, but there are definitely some signs of an evolution towards democratization to be seen, although a more exact prognosis of the future development can be given only after the presidential elections in March 2012.

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