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2012 anti-government protests: digital media at stake**

Denisova, A.

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Democracy, protest and public sphere in Russia after the 2011-12 anti-government protests: digital media at stake

Abstract:

The 2011-2012 Russian protest mobilisations were largely enabled by the rise of social networks. Social and technological advancements paired to pave the way for the “biggest protests since the fall of USSR’ (BBC, 2011). Ubiquitous and uncensored social media facilitated the networking and mobilisation for this protest activity: liberal masses were able to share and discuss their grievances, unite and coordinate online for the offline protest. The digitally savvy protest public developed to confront the government, which appeared to be astonished by the scale of protest. Those mobilisations marked an important gap between the government’s conception of the society and the real state of resistance.

This paper studies three main hypotheses regarding the potential of the protest movement in Russia. The hypotheses were drawn from recent sociological, political and media studies on Russian resistance. Current research aims to contribute to the debate from the digital media perspective. It therefore evaluates three main assumptions: digital media have the potential to empower, dependent upon the relevant political, social and economic factors; digital media isolates protest publics and therefore may be more useful for the government than the resistance; recent censorship of digital media communication signals a tightening of both formal and informal restrictions against opposition and protest politics.

This article uses theoretical and factual evidence on the limitations on democracy and the public sphere, and conceptualises the government’s management of resistance in Russia during and after the 2011-2012 protests. It studies how the hybrid political regime in Russia balances restrictions on freedom of speech with strengthened state propaganda; how it mediates media oppression and invites self-censorship. Lastly, it examines how the state communication watchdog has recently focused its attention at the digital realm. This move confirms the importance of the online protest communication for the Russian political environment. Yet the state’s acknowledgement of digital political resistance may lead to further oppression and curbing of this emerging component of Russian politics.

Keywords: *Russia, protest, digital protest, public sphere, hybrid regime, digital resistance, democracy, social media, digital activism*

The Russian political system is often characterised as a hybrid regime (Petrov et al., 2014). It contains elements of democracy and autocracy in substantial measures. However, the term

'democracy' often appears in public speeches of Russian officials, making it a regular constituent of the government's self-representation. In the early 2000s President Vladimir Putin's spin doctors implemented the term 'managed democracy' in the hegemonic discourse (Lipman and McFaul, 2010), thereby implying that it was still important for the Russian state to appear democratic. Yet, by the mid-2010s, the governance had embraced many autocratic measures, including eliminating political and media opponents, directly controlling regional elections and corrupting the economy (Petrov et al., 2014; Kiriya, 2012).

The interrelation of democratic and authoritarian traits in the Russian political system is dynamic, as the ruling elites change their approach depending on the circumstances, that is, they make specific choices in each particular case. Petrov et al. (2014) distinguished three main spheres where hybridity reaches its peak: elections, mass media and state institutions. In recent years, the Russian government has established a large number of 'substitutions' - puppet replacements for an independent electoral system, mass communication and representative institutions (Petrov et al., 2014).

The media sector has been under particular scrutiny. Authoritative governments require high-quality information and insights about the society to use them for their own interests and maintain the power relations (Shirky, 2011). The acknowledged demand for opposition voices and accountability may be among the reasons why the Russian government preserves a mixed media system consisting of state-controlled and independent outlets. This input from the liberal-minded professional journalists and resistant leaders allows the authorities to adjust their policy and guarantee popularity among the masses. Russian elites deliberately permit a small amount of liberal media to allow those in disagreement to release steam and consequently refrain from action (Petrov et al., 2014).

Information is a valuable asset in restricted media environments. While the government can impose control over traditional media, the digital realm remains less manageable due to its networked structure and global penetration (Shirky, 2011; Iosifidis, 2011; Zuckerman, 2013). Authoritarian and hybrid governments have to deal with the 'dictator's dilemma' when designing censorship and trying to restrain the Internet. The term refers to the dilemma created by the development of new media that increase public access to information, promote discussion and mobilisation and become problematic for the state (Shirky, 2011). The availability of liberating media tools puts the dominant regime at risk, and the ruling elites have to respond. The first immediate answer is censorship and propaganda. The alternative would be to shut down the Internet as a whole. However, the elimination of the Internet would not only silence those in dissent, but also disturb and radicalise the pro-government majority that would resist the measure. Besides, the state risks advertising resistant groups and speakers by pressing harsh charges against them. As a result, the most common solution to the dictator's dilemma, as the Russian case proves, is selective censorship and direct and indirect pressure.

The Russian government has replied to the dictator's dilemma in the media industry on several levels. First, in the last decades the Kremlin has increased its ownership in major broadcasting media, ensuring that the most popular Russian medium is under the total control of the state (Kiriya, 2012; Robertson, 2012). Second, it has used economic pressure on private companies. Third, a series of restrictive criminal laws has assured the population of the government's ability to find legal pretext to withdraw a publication or prosecute its author. Many of the restrictive laws are vaguely worded and open to interpretation, thus making media

extremely vulnerable to state abuse (see Malgin, 2014). Subsequently, all these measures have led to the emergence of self-censorship among media professionals and popular bloggers.

Hypothesis 1: Digital media have the empowering potential yet largely depend on political, social and economic factors

Anti-government protests of 2011-2012 in major Russian cities indicated that the Kremlin lacked information about the protest moods in parts of its society. It is believed (Robertson, 2012) that the government underestimated the amount of liberal publics. Massive rallies against the results of the corrupted Parliament elections gathered up to 100,000 people in one of the central squares in Moscow (BBC, 2011). The government did not expect these numbers and initially rushed to condemn the protests (Petrov et al., 2014). It did not stop the mobilisation, however, as people continued exposing the corrupt officials in social networks, and calling for new rallies. There were two waves of mass protest: first in 2011 after the Parliament elections and second in early 2012 before and after the Presidential elections.

The very first mobilisation of 2011 gained the name of 'snow revolution'. The title was coined as a metaphor: snow is known to come unexpectedly and melt with the spring (Robertson, 2012). The same was said about the first attempt of politicised Russia to express itself – the press called the massive protests 'unexpected' and saw them vanish when spring came. By May 2012, the hopes of protesters had faded, as the massively criticised Vladimir Putin was elected President again. His press secretary Dmitry Peskov responded harshly to the protests, accusing them of violent behaviour towards police. He used bitter rhetoric on the issue, reportedly noting that 'an injured riot police officer should be avenged by smashing protesters' livers on the asphalt' (Hoft, 2012: para. 2).

The whole social stratum of protest publics was not born in one day. Russian protest activities have changed considerably over two decades, from the 1990s to 2011: from local issue-based, direct action protests, to major political 'democratic' style marches, rallies and gatherings with demands to curb corruption or calls for the government to obey the law (Robertson, 2012; Gladarev, 2012; Clement, 2012). Since the mid-2000s, Russian society has been gradually learning to become politically aware. By 2011, 'the organizational and cultural apparatus for large scale protests was already in place' (Robertson, 2012: 2). The uprising of the 2010s indicated the society's request for new power relations in the country. A significant part of the population was ready to express their discontent and felt empowered to openly do so.

In late 2011, Putin's government fell victim to its own authoritarian management of political and media systems (Petrov et al., 2014). American academic, and former US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul (2007: para. 19) noted that 'Putin has systematically weakened or destroyed every check on his power, while at the same time strengthening the state's ability to violate the constitutional rights of citizens'. Not only lack of information, but also lack of representation of different groups in public institutions resulted in street unrest, the last resort for the under-represented to have their voice heard. Not by chance, one of the most popular slogans of the 2011-2012 rallies was 'You do not even represent us/ You have no idea who we are' ('Vy nas dazhe ne predstavlyayete'). In Russian, the slogan is a single phrase with a pun in it (the verb 'predstavlyayete' meaning both 'imagine' and 'represent'), while the English translation requires two sentences.

Curiously, the 2011 protest slogans exploited a lot of humour, puns and jokes. As Asmolov (2012) explains, people were not showing anger at their leaders but, rather, laughed at or mocked them. This may have signified the end of fear of the government. Educated urban middle-class citizens were at the forefront of the newly emerged protest mobilisation (Levada-Centre, 2011; Robertson, 2012), and the digital technology was one of their strong mobilisation and organisational weapons. Creative forms of dissent, such as street theatre and performance art joined the arsenal of protest weapons. Many mobilisations in big cities obtained traits of theatricality (Gladarev, 2012): for instance, in St Petersburg people were protesting against the construction of the skyscraper that would damage the skyline of the historical city centre. During their demonstrations, they were wearing costumes that resembled historical buildings, or invited passersby to help them build a 'tower' of the cans of canned corn. The activists suggested that this version of the proposed skyscraper would emphasise the ugliness and inappropriateness of the actual project of the city authorities.

These findings can be explained using Bakhtin's concept of the 'carnivalisation' of protest, a dissent expressed in an artful form, a glorious 'celebration' of the civil society (Bakhtin, 1984; Gladarev, 2012: 24). The Russian hybrid political system of the 2010s disabled traditional institutions of representative democracy and inadvertently forced the public to be inventive in their dissent. 'We are learning to be citizens,' one protester explained during the 2012 protest (Englund and Lally, 2012: para. 6). Gudkov (2012) calls the 2011-2012 protests a significant rise of civil activism, a call for dignity of life and equality before the law after a decade of political apathy. This new style of protest (BBC, 2011) demanded new language. Carnivalisation of the expressive practices of dissent led to the production of Internet memes that served as the verbal and visual expression of the dissent's views and values and matched the globally experienced 'need for alternative repertoires for political expression and mobilization' (Norris, 2007: 641). The Internet memes constitute puns with ambiguous meaning. They have proven to be instrumental in overcoming censorship. Russian and Chinese protest activists (see Li, 2010) have notably utilised many, similar memes in recent dissent communication due to their capacity to express a political message in a humorous and seemingly harmless form.

Contemporary protest mobilisations – with Russia not being an exception – are often leaderless and coordinated by networks of networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Asmolov, 2012). The Russian protesters of 2011-2012, Asmolov (2012) suggests, were networked individuals who made a conscious choice to participate in protest activity both online and offline. This evaluation fits into Norris' (2007) acknowledgement of the rise of alternative organisational and framing forms of activism. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have introduced the concept of 'connective action' that partially replaces 'collective action' in the current electronic environment; contemporary mobilisations can be leaderless and organised by the efforts of networked crowds. Castells (2007) and Wellman (2001) encourage the shift from analysing societies built on place-based solidarity to 'networked societies' organised around networks of individuals. Social networks have a potential to serve as 'fragmented systems of joint action' (Lindgren and Lundstrom, 2011). Sharing individualist accounts permits users to become more involved in large-scale communication and mobilisation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Diani, 2011) without swearing allegiance to any established political party or organisation. Granovetter's (1973) 'strength of weak ties' further explains how disperse weak connections may provide access to larger populations than strong consistent ties. Therefore, social networks that loosely unite various users with bespoke personal accounts

and frames can grow into large networks of multiple interrelation and provide a fertile platform for engagement of all sorts. For instance, Gerlach's (2001) study on social movements and digital networks revealed that interpersonal communication becomes more instrumental for the popularisation of movements than shared ideologies.

Nonetheless, the accumulation of protest publics in a virtual space does not secure the initiation of collective activism. Juris (2012) criticises the connective action concept with his notion of 'aggregation'. He states that masses of users may indeed unite in a shared digital platform and even follow the same interests and webpages. Yet this assembly is weak and, without additional organisation, has a high risk of remaining a crowd of disengaged individuals. A large amount of personalised frames may amass a chaotic collective space in need of filtering and supervision (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011). Besides, the open nature of digital communication leaves room for misunderstandings that can lead to alienation and fragmentation of publics. It is hard to predict which personal action frames will get recognition and spread (Morozov, 2011; Morozov, 2013).

Partially due to the absence of trustworthy representative democratic institutions, Russian opposition users coordinated independently via digital networks, thus revealing the significance of 'networked individualism' and 'strength of weak ties' for the Russian networked mobilisation. Russian dissenters employed traditional tactics of political struggle (rally, speakers, posters), but enriched them with digital tools (raising the awareness and coordinating via social networks, reporting in real time on Twitter, connecting with like-minded individuals online and so forth). Interactive technology not only facilitated information dissemination, but aided mobilisation. 89% of participants of the Sakharova square rally in December 2011 learned about the event online (Levada-Centre, 2011). However, Russian protest activity post-2012 has been mostly confined to the digital realm. As such, it cannot sustain the legitimacy of the connective action concept for the Russian case.

Russian social mobilisation of 2011-2012 was activated by socioeconomic and technological development. After the Soviet time and prosperous 2000s, Russia demonstrated one of the fastest Internet usage growths in the world. In 2011, 37 million Russians were logging onto the Internet every day, and 52 million were using the Internet some of the time (Englund, 2011; Aron, 2012). Lally (2011) adds that, by 2011, three out of four Internet users aged 25-34 would go online every day, twice as many as among their parents' age. Not only the generational divide and availability of technology, but also a so-called existential or mindset divide can be noticed here. 'This new generation know more freedom than fear', Lally (2011: para. 6) suggests. The advance of technologies and young generation's media literacy skills made the Internet a huge advantage for those advocating for freedom of speech and democratic change in the country. As one of the December 2011 protesters put it, 'The Internet is the only way for people to find out the truth. I'm on the Internet until my eyes hurt' (Lally, 2011: para. 48).

However, many Russian scholars (see, for instance, Dmitriev, 2012; Rogov, 2012) refrain from being overly optimistic about the future potential of Russian protest activity. An established sociologist, Rogov (2012), for instance, points to the polarisation of the country in two 'camps': Russia-1 and Russia-2. Russia-1 consists of 44-50 million people living in large cities, belonging to the middle class and having a higher or professional education, who are able to access the Internet and may be interested in politics. Russia-2, in contrast, is made up of the rest of the population: 100 million people living in small cities with low income, low level of education, constant exposure to state television channels, and scarce or no access to modern

technologies. These conditions result in a lack of resistance to state media propaganda and limited interest in modernisation and politics. Dmitriev (2012) and Gudkov (2012) back this view by adding that Russia-2 is a solid social base for anti-modernisation. It mostly consists of regions that live on government subsidies, and whose citizens are accordingly 'paternalistically oriented' and do not express any interest in a pluralistic political system. This binary division is limited, however, as it does not incorporate all the complexity of media uses and political experiences of Russian citizens. Lipman (2010) and Aron (2012) assume that the citizens of less-developed Russian regions are very diverse in their social statuses, levels of education and political sentience. In support of this, the national survey on corruption held in 2012 (The Moscow Times, 2012) revealed that every third Russian was outraged by the level of state corruption. The study took place in 43 Russian cities and involved 1600 respondents, involving 'Russia-1' as much as 'Russia-2'. Recent sociological studies (Volkov and Goncharov, 2014) demonstrate that even those with high digital literacy and a habit of harvesting their news from the Internet may not be prone to liberal moods per se. These users exploit a variety of media sources to get their information and analysis (up to 4 or 5 media outlets, both traditional and electronic), yet tend to seek the points that confirm their pre-existing views (Volkov and Goncharov, 2014). Therefore, even digitally savvy publics may demonstrate high approval levels of the government and engage in the online discussions that praise the elites (Volkov and Goncharov, 2014; see also Cottiero et al., 2015).

Conclusively, Russian digital resistance has a potential to inform and connect protesting publics. Yet the social and digital divides make it problematic to unite populations in the political discussion online. The tradition of media consumption along with the intensified state propaganda make it challenging for protest activists to attract more members of the general audience. However, the Russian digital realm has proven to be a developed space for the deliberation and advancement of resistant ideas and identities. Before the 2010s, protest groups and opposition publics were marginalised (Robertson, 2012). The 2011-2012 mobilisations helped the liberal audience to realise the need for self-identification and self-representation; they started building connections among like-minded individuals and appointing leaders. The experience of initiating and maintaining online and offline mobilisation empowered resistant audiences with the vital skills of spreading information, mobilising and coordinating protest. The peak protest activism of 2011-2012 revealed the power of creative and humorous forms of communication for bypassing censorship and accumulating the unconventional dissent discourse. The development of online protest activism of the 2010s demonstrates that the digital realm matters and remains a precious hub of information and communication in the restricted media environment of contemporary Russia.

Hypothesis 2: Digital media isolate protest publics and therefore may be more useful for the government than resistance

The power of Soviet tradition is still evident in the habits of media consumption in Russia. The majority of the population are constantly exposed to the state-controlled television and consider it the main source of news and interpretation (Kachkaeva and Kiriya, 2007). In the USSR, maintaining an effective propagandist media and culture was crucial for the state to promote and preserve the Soviet identity (Kiriya, 2012). The centralised flow of mass communication was accessible to all as television and radio broadcasting reached people free of charge and had no advertising. Newspapers were sold to individuals at a fixed price; besides, one free copy of every issue was sent to the workplaces of all the citizens, making sure they had access to it (Kiriya, 2012). Counter-flows soon emerged as some people were

looking for a wider understanding and reflection on political, social and economic developments of the state – these alternative media and tiny cultural production was called shadow activity. 'Samizdat' became one of the key forms of cultural opposition; a dissident activity that involved individuals copying prohibited books by hand and secretly passing them to each other (Saunders, 1974).

Nonetheless, Kiriya (2012) suggests that this cultural dissent communication was maintained and followed by a very narrow group of people as the majority were inevitably exposed to the large-scale mass propaganda. The economy had no small share in it. The state-controlled economy provided for the production of a centralised flow of media and cultural products – as non-profit projects, state media and culture relied solely on the state budget. Alternative means of information had therefore to be fuelled from individual resources that were limited in the socialist Soviet economy. Kiriya (2012) calls the accessibility of media and culture in the Soviet times a type of social contract where accessibility was exchanged for control over content.

The modern condition of Russian media resembles the Soviet media system as the state controls media and culture either directly (through ownership), or legally (restricting laws, imposing censorship and limiting certain types of expression), or via financial grants given to loyal culture figures. The current Russian social contract over the media has a few liberal television and radio channels (Ren-TV, Echo of Moscow, Dozhd), which Kiriya (2007) counts as an institutionalised alternative media sphere.

The majority of Russians are accustomed to using the media as the main interpreter of reality (Kachkaeva and Kiriya, 2007). They see them as a state establishment that explains and enlightens. Only a minor part of the audience exercises a more practical approach to the media - utilising them as a source of information, but making decisions themselves (Klimov, 2007). A small number of independent offline media and the Internet serve the needs of these people (Kiriya, 2012). It should be noted though that many researchers (see, for instance, Kiriya, 2007; Kiriya and Degtereva, 2010) call the few remaining 'alternative' media 'information ghettos' that reproduce the tradition of the dissident parallel communication of the USSR. The government further challenges the engagement of the large audience with the digital media discussions: it consistently refers to the liberal protesters and critical users of social networks as 'traitors' (Yaffa, 2014; Kates, 2014). This negative labelling presents any criticism emerging from the digital realm as biased and 'paid for by the West' (Kates, 2014: para. 5), thus encouraging the general population to treat the Internet with prejudice.

The state may tolerate these alternative voices to monitor the non-hegemonic political and social discourse (Etling et al., 2010). The communication watchdog is empowered enough to exercise control over offline media, but has less influence over the Internet. People generate content on many platforms, including social networks that are often owned by Western companies, which creates difficulties in access and control.

On the other hand, the open and ubiquitous character of the Internet, the disorderly interconnection of multiple discussions and its flexible structures (Iosifidis, 2011) are simply characteristics of a useful tool. Yet it is for the population to decide how to employ it: for political or many other reasons (Helsper, 2008). The number of Russians using the Internet for political information and discussion is relatively low. By 2010, the number of Internet users interested in politics and public affairs in Russia consisted roughly of 11,000 people (Kelly et al., 2012; see also Etling et al., 2010), which seems moderate for a country with 140 million citizens.

These users form the so-called 'Discussion core' of social networks: they are highly active and combine the benefits of blogging platforms with the networking features of social networking. For these reasons many of them prefer Facebook to other social networks. News and opinions may migrate from blogs to the opposition outlets, but rarely find a way to the institutionalised outlets of the dominant media. Kiriya (2012) further notes that politically engaged social media users generate a parallel public sphere online, the realm that does not intersect with or influence the dominant discourse (see also Smyth and Oates, 2015). From this perspective, the government may tolerate the existence of digital clusters of dissent communication in social networks – liberal users engage there, but rarely transfer their discourse to larger media platforms with more exposure to a general audience. The tendency to engage in 'clicktivism' further fosters the isolation of Russian dissent users in a number of limited online aggregations (see Smyth and Oates, 2015, or Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2014, for recent study of the Russian politicised Twitter). One may feel as if he or she has already contributed to the protest activism by sharing or 'liking' an opposition message or criticism (Halupka, 2014); the low level of commitment and high level of reward for this online activity may inhibit further offline activism or efforts in spreading the dissent campaigning to larger media platforms. Nonetheless, the recent research on the development of pro-elite and protest networks in the largest Russian social network Vkontakte (Shertsobitov, 2014) suggests that many active digital protesters of 2011-12 have transformed their efforts in the formation of NGOs, election monitoring, anti-corruption blogs and other types of civil campaigning. These findings further display the existing restrictions on the protest political activism in Russia, as users largely prefer to engage with civil activism and refrain from forming political movements (Sherstobitov, 2014). This may signify self-censorship at the level of personal identity (many Russians traditionally resist being distinguished as 'political activists', referring to themselves as 'active citizens' or 'civil activists' (Clement, 2012), as well as the fact that the expansion of political resistance requires many other factors beyond the availability of the Internet (Smyth and Oates, 2015). Structural, political and economic opportunities are required in order to let activists exploit digital media as a tool in further mobilisation and protest community building; connective action cannot yet replace collective action in the Russian case.

Discussion on the applicability of the public sphere concept to the Russian online sphere

Applying the concept of public sphere to the restricted media environment may be a challenging task, but it has some potential in the Russian case nonetheless. Habermas (1989) defined 'public sphere' as an open inclusive democratic space for mutual exchange of ideas from individuals of all backgrounds and interests. Cyber-optimists led by Benkler (2006) insist that networked communication has the phenomenal potential of facilitating public sphere. It can promote freedom of speech and balanced discussion, a flow of information and ideas existing even under an authoritarian state. The idea of seeing Russian cyber-resistance as 'networked public sphere' remains strong among Western media scholars (see Etling et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2012; among many).

However, other researchers argue that access to the Internet does not guarantee that the society would use it for creating liberal and open public spheres. For instance, Papacharissi

(2002) notes that the existence of social networks and Web 2.0 does not directly cause Internet users to engage in politics and generate a valuable discussion. Furthermore, Cass Sunstein (2001) reminds of the risk of fragmentation and isolation, as digital communication can result in the creation of numerous 'echo chambers', where like-minded individuals isolate themselves in small groups (see also Gilbert et al., 2009). This corresponds to the concern expressed by Dahlgren (2006) and Wellman (2001) who noted that different social groups may use the Internet in different ways and establish segmented communities, 'public spherettes' of micro-publics (Cammaerts, 2008).

The Russian Internet does not fit into either of these extremes. We can hardly call the Russian Internet - and social networks in particular - a networked public sphere, because the information flow is dispersed among various platforms, not all groups of population are represented, and political discussion gets disordered and unbalanced (Kelly et al., 2012; Etling et al., 2010). At the same time, Russian social networks cannot fit into the 'public spherettes' definition. According to the recent findings of the Russian blogosphere of the 2000-2010s (Etling et al., 2010), politically active Russian users engage in cross-linking debates and are less likely to form self-referential 'echo chambers' than Internet users in the US, for instance. However, the inclination towards 'public spherettes' and fragmentation may be strong in certain clusters of political communication online. Politically informed users tend to filter out the opinions that do not correspond to their pre-existing views (Sunstein, 2001).

Furthermore, Fossato et al. (2008) have developed a list of the specific features of Russian cyberspace in their widely cited account of the political use of the Internet in Russia. They argue that politically active users in Russia demonstrate a high level of suspicion and mistrust. There is a lack of established opposition political parties and anti-government communities, and people fear manipulation by the government. State propaganda employs plenty of paid users, as well as brainwashing through government-funded traditional and online media, and soft filtering of the content. Besides, state officials can frighten, compromise and convert leaders of the liberal political discussion in the blogosphere, there have been examples (Sunstein, 2001). Last but not least, the Russian Internet audience seems to be quite resistant to political campaigning on the Web and does not engage much in traditional politics (Fossato et al., 2008). The protests of 2011-2012 have so far remained the largest manifestation of the discontent of resistant population. When the 2011 protest's leader Alexey Navalny ran for the mayor of Moscow in 2013, he only came second (Schepp, 2013). Prior to that, during his campaigning, he had almost no or limited coverage in traditional media. The result of the elections proves, on the one hand, that digital politics have yet to find the way to connect with a large number of offline public. On the other hand, it also shows that the popularity of blogging and microblogging has a democratising potential and may facilitate alternative information flows.

In conclusion, the Russian online environment is far from being a networked public sphere but has significant potential in providing alternative flows of information, ideas and debate. The alternative political communication online remains largely contingent upon the historical tradition of alternative public sphere in the USSR, such as samizdat and forbidden culture. While this communication in the Soviet times did not aim at political change, it raised the awareness of political wrongdoings and exposed lies of the state propaganda. Yet the Soviet alternative political sphere remained isolated from the public discourse and could not affect it much. The contemporary digital resistance in Russian social networks facilitates spread of information and the raising of awareness, but has little influence when it comes to recruiting

new members or generating a change offline. Protest users and groups tend to connect with like-minded individuals and communities. The government's policy restricts the availability of alternative voices as liberal media are small and limited in their penetration. At the same time, politically active social media users often remain isolated in their echo chambers and have little impact outside their circles.

Hypothesis 3: Recent censorship of digital media communication signals a tightening of both formal and informal restrictions against opposition and protest politics

Researchers believe that it was Vladimir Putin who first understood the importance of state control over the media in the Russian state. It was he who came to rule in 1999 and reversed the privatisation of the media, thus ending the relative media freedom and commercialisation of the 1990s (Lipman and McFaul, 2010; Chernikova, 2014). From 1999 till the present day, Russian state media policy has developed to be more and more restrictive over alternative spheres and discourses. Large broadcasting and print media are subjected to censorship and filtering of their content (Koltsova, 2006); only a few independent media outlets had survived by 2015. Managers and top editors of the main broadcasting companies are required to attend Friday meetings in the Kremlin where pro-government points are distributed and the media agenda shaped (Baker and Glasser, 2007).

The economic crisis of 1998 became a turning point in the popularity of the Russian Internet – people were looking for additional sources of information in order to protect themselves from the falling economy. By 2000, the Russian Internet had 3 million users (Chernikova, 2014). The next big step for the RuNet was the year 2008, when the Russian-Georgian 5-day war caused a wave of publications in independent online media and blogs. Many of those outlets gained significant popularity and were featured in the rating of top blogs provided by the biggest Russian search engine 'Yandex', and the Mailing system Mail.ru. Opposition blogging and criticism of the government thus became too visible for the general audience. By that time the Kremlin was even considering creating a state search engine, but cancelled the project due to the high costs of production and promotion (Chernikova, 2014). The government then reportedly pressed Yandex to close their ratings system. This caused a backlash from the blogging community as users blamed the company for restricting freedom of speech. The Internet ownership wars of the 2000s (Chernikova, 2014) indicated that the government became aware of the growing influence of the medium and attempted to secure control over it.

The 2011-2012 protests in Russia coincided with many other resistance movements and protests all over the world. The political power of social networks became evident in many recent social uprisings, especially in the Middle East, the US and the UK (Occupy) movements (see Anderson, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Juris, 2012). The Russian government publicly condemned the global and Russian protests and swiftly introduced a series of the most restrictive laws in current Russian media history.

The legislative projects that followed the 2011-2012 social unrest were harsh, both towards freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. Recent amendments to the Law on the Freedom of Assembly were passed on the 5th June 2012 and were quickly approved by the State Duma and Federal Council. The Human Rights Watch (2012) declared that these adjustments severely undercut the right to peaceful assembly; they dramatically increased the already high fines for individuals for the violation of the rules of public gatherings. The penalty rose from

10,000 roubles (£170) up to 300,000 roubles (£50,000) for individuals and from 15,000 roubles (£250) up to 600,000 roubles (£100,000) for organisers. Among the violations mentioned are the unsanctioned assemblies, blockage of transport routes and alcohol consumption. The biggest sanctions are imposed on those who repeatedly take part in unauthorised gatherings (more than twice in 180 days) – they could be fined up to the Russian equivalent of £17,000 or sent to prison for up to five years (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Dobrokhotoy, 2012).

The legislative measure was supported by an odious court decision to sentence eight participants of the anti-Putin rally in May 2012. Tanya Lokshina, Russia's Human Rights Watch programme director, deemed this case as 'deeply flawed' with 'inappropriate charges'; nonetheless, in February 2014 the judge handed down prison sentences varying from two and a half to four years to all the defendants (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Subsequently, a law was passed on the NGOs receiving foreign funding – they were required to register as 'foreign agents'.

Troubled freedom of assembly was accompanied with a number of laws restricting the freedom of speech that followed in the period between 2011 and 2014. In 2012, the Russian government passed a law allowing officials to shut down any website without a court order – the measure was explained as a means of protecting children from inappropriate content, such as drugs, suicide promotion and child pornography (Prikhodin, 2012). The opposition media and activists condemned the initiative arguing that it leads to further censorship of the Internet as executors can abuse the law as a means of curtailing freedom of speech (Malgin, 2014).

In 2013, Russian communication regulators required Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to remove material that the watchdog considered objectionable, with only YouTube resisting and filing a lawsuit in the Russian court (Kramer, 2013). By 2014, the restriction was intensified by the notorious Law on Extremism that imposed unprecedented sanctions on those posting extremist pledges, such as 'liking' or 'reposting' extremist information and pleas on the Internet – these users could face up to five years in jail (Kremlin Russia, 2014). The Law provided a rather vague definition of extremism and even labelled offences to human dignity and the spreading of non-Russian values as possible grounds for sanctions. The resistant public called the law controversial, open for abuse and manipulation against opposition (see, for instance, Malgin, 2014).

The year of 2014 brought worrisome news for four main sectors of independent media and alternative discourse platforms – the biggest online news outlet, major social network, independent television channel and social media faced new attacks from the government. Lenta.ru, the biggest independent online news website, had its respected editor-in-chief Galina Timchenko ousted for political reasons. That decision was followed by the resignation letters of dozens of journalists working in Lenta.ru, and the complete change of content and ideology (BBC, 2014). The statement released by the loyal editorial staff in response to Timchenko's dismissal produced a now famous summary of the decline of free journalism in Russia: 'The problem is not that there is nowhere left for us to work. The problem is that there is nothing left, it seems, for you to read' (BBC, 2014).

The largest online television channel Dozhd (TV Rain), famous for its independent investigative reports, experienced pressure on the economic side when leading cable and satellite operators suddenly dropped it. For example, Pavel Durov, the founder and general director of the most popular Russian social network Vkontakte, had a conflict with the

government's security services over data protection and privacy. He was forced to leave the company and flee from the country (The Moscow Times, 2014).

Last but not least, a series of highly controversial laws imposed further restrictions on Russian social media. From the 1st August 2014, all popular blogs (more than 3000 visits per day) have been required to register with the communication watchdog and be judged on the same grounds as a media outlet. According to this Blogger Law, any popular blog could be shut down without a court order or be accused of extremism. In addition, this measure marks the end to online anonymity, as the owners of the blogs need to pass their personal details to the state agency. The Blogger Law provides a very ambiguous definition of a 'blogger': 'the owner of the website or a webpage on the Internet which is used for publishing openly accessible information accessed by over 3000 people daily' (Malgin, 2014). This provides a broad space for speculation, as the law does not clarify whether the owner of the Twitter account or Twitter as a company should register, whether Amazon.com or private users are affected. The Blogger Law punishes perpetrators for posting 'false information presented as truthful' or 'insulting individuals or specific categories of citizens with reference to their gender, age, race, nationality, language, religion, profession, place of residence and work, and their political views' (Malgin, 2014: para. 25). The law thus leaves room for interpretation. A liberal blogger, for instance, can no longer accuse an official of corruption without a court decision as her post can be judged as 'false information'. Insulting another's political views is a second interpretative term for an offence. Furthermore, the law penalises for the deliberate suppression or concealment of the publicly important information. No criteria are provided. In summary, the ambiguity of recent Russian restrictive laws means that executors can treat them at their own discretion. As such, one could argue that the ruling elites have secured their immunity against criticism.

In 2014, the Russian government issued another polemic law that guaranteed further Internet restriction until 2016. Vladimir Putin obliged all Internet companies to store personal data on Russian citizens on Russian servers only, making them an easy target for the communication watchdog and intelligence services (Newsru.com, 2014). According to the Russian legislation, this data should be presented to the government officials at the first notice.

Lastly, in 2014, the Russian government officially banned four main swear words in the Russian language from their use in the media, theatre, literature, music and blogs (Omidi, 2014). The law on profanity is framed as a measure to protect the beauty of the Russian language; however, media professionals and researchers have called it an attack on the freedom of expression. Omidi (2014) reminds us that in China the similar ban on vulgarity led to a rise of euphemisms online. Klishin (2014) further notes that profanity played a serious role in resistance communication during the Soviet era. Dissent literature used profanity and slang as a linguistic opposition to the heavy clumsiness of the official bureaucratic expression. Klishin (2014) supports Omidi (2014) in assuming that the Russian Internet would resist this measure by use of euphemisms and savvy puns that further distinguish the resistant public from the conformist ones.

The number of legislative restrictions and cases of economic pressure on digital media and networks shows the political importance of this type of medium in modern Russia. Curiously, the firm position of the state willing to control and filter new media, points to the power of the Internet sphere in promoting alternative spaces for information distribution, discussion and political deliberation. Digital resistance of the mid-2010s is looking for ways of overcoming

state pressure and limitations. The history of Soviet dissent communication has shown that restrictions boost creativity and make people search for new methods and channels of expression. On the one hand, state pressure may inspire and annoy the protesting public, encouraging them to find innovative channels and styles of political activism. On the other, creative communication cannot be an end in itself. The protesting public need access to larger audiences to disseminate their message. The Russian government's restrictions validate the role of the Internet as the facilitator of dissent, but pose serious challenges to dispersed resistant crowds.

Conclusion

The role of digital resistance in the current Russian political ecology has become a topic of much debate. The apparent success of the opposition publics in raising the awareness and calling people to the rallies in 2011-2012 was followed by the re-election of the same President and severe restrictions on freedom of speech. The hybrid regime of Vladimir Putin has proven that it would not tolerate criticism and reflections on the hegemonic political discourse. The resistant publics were condemned and further isolated into information ghettos. While a majority of the population believes state propaganda and traditional media, liberal publics find comfort in a small number of remaining liberal media and social network discussions.

Social networks have a considerable potential in generating and maintaining political deliberation that has been excluded from the offline discourse. However, the translation from online discussions to offline actions remains a problematic task. The individualistic character of many liberal bloggers and Twitter users and the lack of affiliation with a specific political formation result in a dispersed political communication. Besides, the majority of the population tends to harvest their news and opinion from the state-controlled traditional media such as national broadcasting and press. Even those who obtain information and analysis from 4 or 5 various resources, including online and offline outlets, mostly adhere to the predisposed views and seem reluctant to explore alternative perspectives.

Currently, the remaining Russian political dissent is shaped not by groups, but individuals. People are suspicious and careful in joining groups and communities and prefer individual over group identity. This specific characteristic of the Russian Internet poses challenges for political mobilisation and campaigning – people rely on their independent views and expressions and refrain from commitment to either online or offline groupings. Nonetheless, this peculiarity of the Russian Internet makes users less isolated in polar camps and facilitates interconnection between different platforms; the discussion migrates between individual accounts, uninhibited by membership or privacy settings. Furthermore, individualistic political deliberation online has a capacity to overcome censorship: it is dispersed and therefore less visible to the government watchdog. However, it has yet to be established whether this scattered and opinionated social network resistance is an obstacle or a benefit for political activism.

The protest community online faces challenges not only from within, but from the outside. The government separates liberal publics from the general audience by promoting dominant agenda via state-controlled outlets and labelling the dissidents as traitors. It allows existence of a small number of liberal media and opposition bloggers, which often aggregate protest

audience around burning issues. The government can monitor them to get insights on the protest moods in the society. At the same time, these segregated opposition hubs have little access to the broader audience and hence remain safe for the regime. Surprisingly, harsh media restrictions that fell on the Internet in recent years can be seen as a positive sign for the protest publics. This may mean that the Kremlin sees more threat in digital resistance than we do for the moment. It also signifies that in order to thrive, digital resistance needs more media resources and political opportunities becoming available. If the public approval of the President shifts or the state propaganda misidentifies with the public opinion, digital resistance has the most resources to reach the publics in doubt. Online resistance is open and accessible, free of charge and produced by people with solid writing skills – the only component missing is the inclination of the majority to look for the alternative points of view. Liberal media online and social networks resistance have already developed a fruitful platform to connect, debate and analyse. But in order to expand from an information ghetto to a larger medium, it requires structural and ideological changes in the society.

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