

**CYBER MONOLOGUES WITH AN AUTOCRAT: THE LIBERAL-NETWORKED  
PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE 2011-2012 PROTEST MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA**

By

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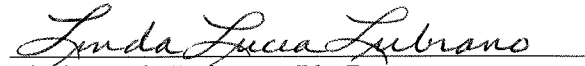
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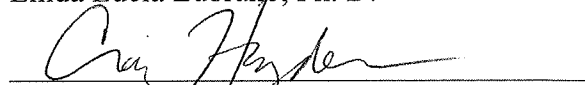
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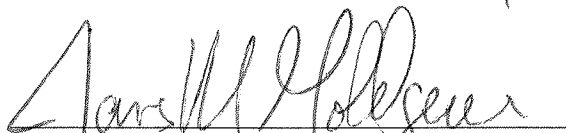
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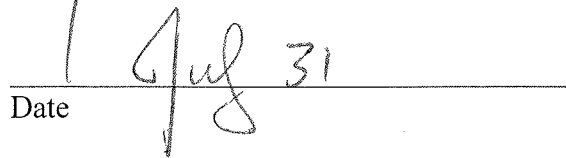
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To my parents, Sergey and Marina

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of information communication technologies on the public sphere and political participation in Russia. It argues that communication technologies have enabled a new communicative space, a networked public that interacts with the public sphere of the liberal mass media, but encompasses a wider range of human interaction. Together the networked public sphere and the liberal mass media constitute what is termed a liberal-networked public sphere, a hybrid public space that allows people to act politically and contest the regime's ownership of the public discourse. The regime also recognizes the political value, and dangers, of the liberal-networked public sphere and adjusts its tactics in the attempt to control this space. The result is a new power game, in which the new hybrid communication space becomes the main locus where Russian civil society organizes and contests with the regime for its rights for information and political participation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.

—John Perry Barlow (1996)

The protests that erupted after the allegedly fraudulent Duma election process in Russia made headlines in major news outlets across the world. The situation was intensified by the fact that the parliamentary elections preceded the presidential election, the outcome of which many believed had already been decided. The Putin-Medvedev “tandem of power” was to remain, with the two politicians merely switching places. What was interesting about the protests is that the abuse of power during the 2012 elections was not the first incident of this kind, nor was it the only sign of the increasing authoritarian “turn” of the Kremlin.<sup>1</sup> Yet this time, after a long period of silence and apathy, not only did people take to the streets, they did so in great numbers and all over the country, with an impressive 70,000 to 100,000 participants attending the Sakharov Avenue rally in Moscow on December 24.<sup>2</sup>

There is strong evidence, first of all from the media coverage of the protests, and second from the emerging scholarly work, that new communication technologies, in particular the internet, played a key role in these protests serving as a tool for information dissemination and mobilization, and, more importantly, as an alternative communication space which facilitated the

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<sup>1</sup> Evgeniya Lukinova et al., “Metastasised Fraud in Russia’s 2008 Presidential Election,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 4 (2011): 603-621.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: “Moscow Election Protest: LIVE Updates,” Russia Today, December 10, 2011, <http://rt.com/moscow-protest-live-updates-497/> (accessed May 1, 2013); “Moscow ‘Fair Election’ rally: LIVE Updates,” Russia Today, December 24, 2011, <http://rt.com/news/moscow-rally-live-update-589/> (accessed September 2012).

formation of the protest movement's identity.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, typologically,<sup>4</sup> and indeed chronologically, the Russian protests were very similar to the "Occupy Wall Street" protest movement for economic justice that rippled through several Western democracies,<sup>5</sup> even though the Kremlin preferred an analogy with Ukraine's "Orange Revolution."<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the analogies, it is clear that the Russian protests are part of a global trend. Grassroots social movements that employ modern information-communication technologies (ICTs) to self-organize and act outside the institutions of traditional politics have become the enduring feature of Western democracies and the ever looming nightmare of authoritarian regimes.<sup>7</sup> In her assessment of the role of ICTs in the "Arab Spring, for example, Ekaterina Stepanova wrote

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<sup>3</sup> Among journalistic reports see, for example: Ellen Barry, "Young and Connected, 'Office Plankton' Protesters Surprise Russia," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2011; Andrew E. Kramer, "A Kremlin Strategist Tries to Defuse Discontent and Undermine the Protesters' Leaders," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2011; Oleg Mikhailov, "Protesty oppositsii v Rossii: internet kipit, TV molchit," BBC Russian Service, December 7, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/12/111207\\_russia\\_protests\\_media\\_coverage.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/12/111207_russia_protests_media_coverage.shtml) (accessed May 1, 2013). Among scholarly work, see issue 7 of *Digital Icons*, <http://www.digitalicons.org/> (accessed May 1, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Russian protesters extensively used symbols (Anonymous masks, ribbons, slogans, for example, "Occupy Abai") and techniques (performances, sit-ins, speeches by public intellectuals) that were present, for example, in Zuccotti Park; sociologically, Russian protesters, like the protesters in the West, were also city dwellers of all ages, with a high level of education, and had diverse political views; arguably, the reactions of the authorities and of the mainstream press were also quite similar. For the "social portrait" of the OWS and Arab Spring movements, see, for example: Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, "Politics as an End in Itself: The Arab Spring and the Creation of Independent Publics [online publication]," Democracy and Diversity Institute, August 2, 2012, Part 1, <http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2012/07/politics-as-an-end-in-itself-from-the-arab-spring-to-ows-and-beyond-part-1/>; Part 2, <http://www.deliberatelyconsidered.com/2012/08/politics-as-an-end-in-itself-from-the-arab-spring-to-ows-and-beyond-part-2/> (accessed May 1, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Goldfarb, "Politics as an End in Itself," Part 1.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Fedor and Galina Nikiporets-Takigawa, "What's the Colour of Russian Protest?" Memory at War Blog, entry posted May 4, 2012, <http://cambridgeculturalmemory.blogspot.com/2012/05/whats-colour-of-russian-protest.html> (accessed May 1, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Dieter Rucht and Friedhelm Neidhardt, "Towards a 'Movement Society'? On the Possibilities of Institutionalizing Social Movements," *Social Movement Studies* 1, no. 1 (2002): 7-30.

that,” “[n]o region, state, or form of government can remain immune to the impact of new information and communication technologies on social and political movements.”<sup>8</sup>

These global changes in political communication and contentious politics<sup>9</sup> should be considered within the broader framework of societal transformation that has taken place at the turn of the century and what Manuel Castells famously called the “information technology revolution.” According to Castells, the network architecture of new communication technologies has had deep structural effects on the societies it spans, triggering a whole series of economic, social and cultural transformations.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of global financial markets, transnational flows of commodities and information, global migrations of labor, accelerating geographical, professional, and social mobility and cultural hybridity, to name just a few, signify the advent of a new era that will be very different from the industrial one. Manuel Castells calls this era the “information age,”<sup>11</sup> Mark Poster calls it “postmodernity,”<sup>12</sup> for Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck it is “reflexive modernization.”<sup>13</sup>

The new flexible, decentralized, and pervasive horizontal communication networks have also profoundly affected power relationships established in the industrial era. ICT’s, such as the internet, mobile communication, and other digital media have facilitated the growth of horizontal networks of communication connecting likeminded people all over the world, providing tools for

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<sup>8</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova, *The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the ‘Arab Spring’: Implications Beyond the Region*, Policy Memo no. 159 (Washington, D. C.: PONARS Eurasia, George Washington University, May 2011), 3, [www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm\\_159.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm_159.pdf) (accessed May 1, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, The Rise of the Network Society*, v.1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Poster, *What’s the Matter with the Internet?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ulrich Beck et al., *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

the publishing and quick dissemination of information in many-to-many mode, as opposed to the one-to-many model of the traditional media. These changes have reduced the individual costs of participating in civic life and have provided technical infrastructure for the emergence of a new type of movement, such as the Mexican Zapatistas, who used communication technologies to defend local interests by appealing to the global community, or the green movement and anti-globalization movement that are transnational and decentralized by nature.<sup>14</sup>

The powerful mobilization potential of the new communication technologies has made scholars think about the consequences of these tools for the future of democracy and authoritarianism.<sup>15</sup> After the initial enthusiastic discourse of the “technologies of liberation” has faded away, the assessments of the democratizing potential of network information technologies have grown more restrained and nuanced. Indeed, as the latest research shows, it is impossible to establish a linear correlation between the availability of technology, civic engagement and democratization.<sup>16</sup> The main concern is that there is no guarantee that the grassroots views will necessarily be pro-democratic or even civil. For example, both the Islamic fundamentalist and Green Peace movements successfully reach out to their publics and use the internet for their respective goals; the American Tea Party movement, as research demonstrates, is also far from

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<sup>14</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, The Power of Identity*, v.2, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Peter Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation,” *Political Communication* 22, no. 2 (2005): 148.

<sup>16</sup> Sean Aday et al., *Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics* (Washington D. C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010), <http://www.usip.org/publications/blogs-and-bullets-new-media-in-contentious-politics> (accessed May 1, 2013); Joshua Goldstein, *The Role of Digital Networked Technologies in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution*, research publication no. 2007-14 (Cambridge: The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University), <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications> (accessed April 5, 2013); Sarah Oates et al., ed., *The Internet and Politics: Citizens, Voters and Activists*, (London: Routledge, 2006); Bruce Etling et al., “Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing,” SAIS Review (Summer-Fall 2010). A notable exception to this list is the study by Philip Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Information Technology and Political Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

democratic.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, major institutions and power-holders, such as states and corporations, also recognized the importance of the new communication technologies and the danger they pose to their power. Starting from around 2000, they have sought to manage internet access and content in various ways to limit its mobilizing and disruptive potential.<sup>18</sup> The most extreme example of such regulation is China—home of the “great firewall,” “the world’s most advanced internet censorship and surveillance regime.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the network architecture of the new technologies is highly political, because it sets new parameters for individual and collective action, allowing individual people to act independently and outside the organizations of formal politics, while also empowering the old institutions in new, often unexpected ways. This kind of double empowerment creates new patterns of power/counter-power relations reshaping the actors themselves and the ways democratic (and authoritarian) politics are made.<sup>20</sup>

The main goal of the present study is to explore the role of the internet’s network technology on the dynamics of power and counter-power in the Russian political and cultural context. More specifically, I will examine how technical characteristics of the digital information environment—such as its decentralized nature, ubiquity, the simultaneous availability of its content to users of all types regardless of their location, interactivity, and the complexity of

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<sup>17</sup> Tyler S. Branson, “Steeped in Rhetoric: Digital Populism and the Tea Party Movement” (Masters Thesis, University of Kansas, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> The research of the OpenNet Initiative published in the monumental trilogy: Ronald J. Deibert et al., ed., *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Internet Filtering* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008); Ronald J. Deibert et al., ed., *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010); Ronald J. Deibert et al., ed., *Access Contested: Security, Identity, and Resistance in Asian Cyberspace* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Deibert et al., *Access Contested*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey L. Herrera, *Technology and International Transformation: The Railroad, the Atom Bomb, and the Politics of Technological Change* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 205.

control—challenge and gradually redefine the existing power relationships between citizens and political authorities in Russia.

Such a study is particularly timely because previous research has revealed little evidence of the democratizing effects of the internet on Russian society and politics.<sup>21</sup> Yet, as I pointed out earlier, network communication played a major role in the latest protests, which became one of the first bold manifestations of civic activity since the early 1990s. When something like this happens “suddenly” for the majority of observers, it means that the phenomena under question require a revised and detailed assessment, preferably in a different analytical framework. This ‘unexpected’ nature of the protests is particularly alarming given that all previous large transformations in that part of the world, most notably, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, also came ‘suddenly.’ There are also certain enduring traditions and stereotypes of thinking about Russia in Western academia that stress normative (liberal democracy vs. authoritarianism)<sup>22</sup> and structural-functional approaches, such as ‘transitology’ and later ‘hybridology’. Along with significant benefits, these approaches have serious shortcomings: namely, they rarely go beyond the analysis of the traditional institutions of the nation-state and their functioning.<sup>23</sup> They tend to look at macro-level changes, bypassing the multitude of changes that take place on the micro-

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<sup>21</sup> Floriana Fossato et al., *The Web that Failed: How opposition politics and independent initiatives are failing on the Internet in Russia* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2008); Egor Panchenko, “Integratsiia Internet-SMI i sotsial’nykh setei v Runete: Novaia publichnaia sfera ili prostranstvo kontroliia?” *Digital Icons* 5, (2011): 87-118; Sarah Oates, “Comrades Online?: How the Russian Case Challenges the Democratizing Potential of the Internet,” (paper prepared for an international conference, Politics: Web 2.0, New Political Communication Unit, Department of Politics and International Relations, Royal Holloway, University of London, April 17-18, 2008), [www.media-politics.com](http://www.media-politics.com) (accessed May 1, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Olessia Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Natalia Roudakova, “Comparing Processes: Media, ‘Transitions,’ and Historical Change,” in *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 246-249.



level of daily life. The role of the media and technology in these processes also tends to be neglected.<sup>24</sup>

In the present research I will suggest a framework that stresses the *processual* nature of historical change and highlights the interplay of media and politics. I believe that the approach that foregrounds processes, rather than structure, has a number of advantages. First, it helps us see that at the core of every social institution there are individual people and their daily interactions, and that these interactions can lead to both the legitimation of the existing order and its undermining. Therefore institutions, including the institution of the state, are fluid and constantly changing entities, although this change does not necessarily have a clear trajectory. Second, it will help us consider the media as an important site of power and meaning making, and the processes of restructuring that took place within the institution of the media itself. Third, the *processual* approach is helpful in that it restores human agency to the social process and stresses “mutual constitution of structure and agency through process.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, it is important to place Russia in a wider context of transformation processes that take place globally, to account for a fast pace of change in the sphere of communication technology, and thus to acknowledge the *very* tentative nature of every finding.

The following research question will guide this study:

*What is the impact of information communication technologies on the public sphere and popular political opposition in Russia?*

When considering Russian media and politics in the global context I will argue the following:

- (1) *Information communication technologies have enabled the formation in Russia of a new communicative space that functions like a public sphere, alternative to the*

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<sup>24</sup> Roudakova, “Comparing Processes,” 248-252.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 252; Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Reinventing Political Culture: the Power of Culture versus the Culture of Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 1-5.

*government-controlled traditional media. I call this space the liberal-networked public sphere.*

- (2) *The liberal-networked public sphere is a hybrid space that includes purely online communications, online media, and traditional liberal media that are not censored by the state and that are well represented online as a result of media convergence. The information in the liberal-networked public sphere circulates freely between the media and the blogosphere.*
- (3) *Apart from information production and dissemination, the horizontal networked architecture of this space facilitates a wider range of human interaction, including private interaction via email, self-publishing, collaboration in loose associations with others, reaching out and sustaining contact with likeminded people, and self-organization for grassroots activism. The liberal-networked public sphere in Russia has facilitated an alternative space for people to act politically and for counter-publics to form, deliberate, and coordinate their activities.*
- (4) *Counter-publics have enriched the narratives of opposition in the Russian political discourse, thereby affecting the formation of public opinion and contesting the regime's ownership of the public sphere.*
- (5) *The regime has recognized the political value of the new networked space and has changed its tactics in an attempt to control online publics and individuals.*
- (6) *The result is a new game of Russian politics being played within the hybrid space of the liberal-networked public sphere, where Russian civil society organizes, deliberates, reaches out to the public at large, affects opinion formation, and contests with the regime for its rights for information and political participation.*

When talking about the questions of power and counter-power in any society, the concept of the *public sphere* comes to the fore because it denotes the space where communication between power-holders and civil society takes place, and the structure and degree of openness of this space defines the polity of a society. The concept was introduced by Jürgen Habermas in his seminal work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and has been significantly developed by other scholars, when it became obvious that rational face-to-face deliberation among the propertied citizens, who treat each other as equals and have equal access to communication, is not how the politics of the 20th century was made, even in the Western democratic countries that were the object of Habermas's analysis. Later revisions of the concept

merit our attention because they laid the groundwork for our understanding of the mediated political communication of late modernity. In the following section I will introduce the key concept of the ‘public sphere’ and the literature that contributed to its revision and evolution. I will then outline the framework of this study, which builds on the revisionist literature and the work of Manuel Castells, Jeffrey Goldfarb, and Yochai Benkler, the latter of whom coined the term “networked public sphere.”<sup>26</sup>

### The Public Sphere Theory Revisited

The main argument of Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is that the free communicative space that in the European bourgeois societies of the 18th and 19th centuries was physically located in coffee houses, literary societies, and salons, where private individuals could come together and exchange opinions about issues of the common good outside state control, is no more. The main reason for such degradation is the rise of the mass media and cultural industries in the 20th century, and the resulting commodification of communication that led to a shallowing of the political consciousness of the public and of its general cultural levels. Thus, Habermas concludes, once an active and critical political agent, the public of the 20th century degraded to become an uncritical and passive consumer of entertainment. The mass expansion of modern democracies for Habermas included a tragic tradeoff in the form of deterioration of the democratic process.<sup>27</sup>

One cannot help but discern the intellectual influence of the Frankfurt School of Communication, that “pessimistic cul de sac,” which Habermas himself sought to overcome, but

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<sup>26</sup> Yochai Benkler, *Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Luke Goode, *Jürgen Habermas: Democracy and the Public Sphere* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

essentially failed to do, ending up idealizing the bourgeois public sphere.<sup>28</sup> Other social scientists essentially took up Habermas's theory as a starting point for their research, rather than a final destination; there are three main lines of critique along which the theory of the public sphere has received further development.

First, scholars have argued that the notion of a singular bourgeois "public" is neither historically accurate, nor does it constitute an advance in terms of representative democracy. Marxist and feminist scholars such as Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, Rita Felski and Nancy Fraser have advanced the notion of a multiplicity of publics, their subordinate position in society and their competing and oppositional relationship to the dominant public.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the bourgeois public sphere of the 18th and 19th centuries was discriminatory along gender and class lines, and women, peasants, and working-class people constituted "counter-publics" in relation to it. Fraser defines counter-publics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."<sup>30</sup> Thus, feminists, for example, have introduced a whole range of new terms to the public arena, such as "sexism" or "sexual harassment," which reflected the reality women were routinely facing, but which before women's emancipation was considered a private domain and therefore outside the discussion of the public interest.

Throughout history, counter-publics have existed in every known society, acquired a variety of forms, identities, and adopted values specific to their historical situation and society,

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<sup>28</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1972); Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Calhoun.

<sup>30</sup> Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 123.

but they have always served as loci of counter-power that challenged dominant power structures, values, and interests institutionalized in society.<sup>31</sup> Social movements embody these social forces of counter-power and counter-publicity. In the most recent history of 20th century social movements, such as the student movement of the 1960s, the human rights movement, the sexual liberation movement, and the massive movements for decolonization and racial emancipation, have renegotiated the boundaries between public and private, political and nonpolitical, and state and civil society. They have challenged what was commonsensical for the bourgeois society of the 19th century and seriously affected the political cultures of many societies.

Yet, the Habermasian model of the bourgeois public sphere does not account either for this form of power (counter-power), or for the conflictual change of the social order, and this constitutes the second major critique of his theory. Scholars have noted that Habermas privileged the rational-critical discourse as a form of public interaction and consensus as its ultimate goal. It has been argued, however, that in stratified societies public interactions “among differently empowered publics are as likely to take the form of contestation as that of deliberation.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, studies have revealed that in various cultural contexts and social settings critical discourses can be systematically inhibited rather than supported by social actors for various conscious and subconscious reasons.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the public sphere is also a space of conflict and contradiction caused by power imbalances and clashes of interests, where discursive acts “may

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<sup>31</sup> Manuel Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society,” *International Journal of Communication*, no. 1 (2007): 248-249.

<sup>32</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 125.

<sup>33</sup> For example, see: Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), quoted in Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 145-146; Victor Sergeev and Nikolai Biryukov, *Russia's Road to Democracy: Parliament, Communism and Traditional Culture* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1993), 112-151; Terence Chong, “Asian Values and Confucian Ethics: Malay Singaporeans' Dilemma,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32, no. 3 (2002): 394-406.

serve a number of purposes, including expressing identity, raising awareness, celebrating difference, and enabling play.”<sup>34</sup> Even in the instances when formal consensus is achieved, a closer rhetorical analysis reveals a complex interplay of hidden motivations and the presence of rhetorical coercion that defy the formal outcome.<sup>35</sup> In fact, as I will discuss, the creation of popular meaning in the time of mass media has become a primary source of power.

There is also a problem with the definition of ‘rational.’ The power to define what belongs to the sphere of ‘rational’ and what does not, the Foucauldian truth regime, is another form of social control and domination, and is precisely what various counter-public projects have always sought to challenge.<sup>36</sup>

Habermas’s adherence to the project of Enlightenment and concentration on a single form of civic behavior—rational-critical deliberation—prevented him from accounting for other forms of human interaction, for example humor, performances, and other creative and irrational practices that involve emotions and can be used to make political statements, especially in societies where traditional channels of communication are blocked.<sup>37</sup> For example, Jeffrey Goldfarb showed how theater in Soviet Poland contributed to the creation of public space where people were interacting as free individuals outside of official ideology, thus creating alternative meanings that challenged official truth and contributed to the participants’ identity formation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, ed., *Counterpublics and the State* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric,” *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 35-66; Jean-Frédéric Morin and E. Richard Gold, “Consensus-seeking, distrust and rhetorical entrapment: The WTO decision on access to medicines,” *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010): 563-587.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 54; Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”

<sup>37</sup> Asen and Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost: The Post-Totalitarian Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Similarly, Natalia Roudakova reports how journalists from a newspaper for youth engaged in creative forms of interaction with their readers, while Alexei Yurchak talks about the parallel culture of irony and political jokes “right inside and in spite of the official order” that allowed Soviet people to distance themselves from the official sphere, and contributed to the erosion of the latter.<sup>39</sup>

The emancipatory power of counter-publicity, then, lies in the ability of counter-publics to serve as both a space of retreat, where like-minded people come together to communicate outside the supervision of dominant groups and the state, and as an outward-oriented public arena where people voice their concerns to the mainstream public, thus expanding the latter’s discursive space and redefining the notion of “common good,” which essentially does not have any predetermined boundaries.<sup>40</sup> It is true that counter-publics and the social movements they form can be reactionary by nature, or they can be subverted for purely political or ideological purposes, but in all cases they are originally aimed at “changing the values and interests institutionalized in society.”<sup>41</sup>

What Habermas captured correctly, however, and what remains valid to this day is the role of autonomous communication for the emergence of counter-power. Humans come together, communicate—that is, share meaning through the exchange of information—and thus create new

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<sup>39</sup> Roudakova, “Comparing Processes,” 256-258; Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the Anekdot,” *Public Culture* 9, no. 2 (1997): 161-188.

<sup>40</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), quoted in ed. Asen and Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State*, 10; Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 129-132.

<sup>41</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 249.

meanings and share or reinforce their identities.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes these encounters “conform to social rules and norms, but not always.”<sup>43</sup> This process of communication and meaning productions lays at the basis of counter-power, and Habermas himself acknowledged the agency of the excluded groups, such as women and peasants, whose resistance to the dominant bourgeois public sphere created the potential for its transformation from within. He wrote:

This [plebeian] culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines.<sup>44</sup>

However, having admitted the multiplicity and agency of counter-publics, Habermas never provided an account of how this agency is being formed and realized, focusing his analysis on official public space.<sup>45</sup> In his analysis of the effects of mass media on modern democracy, Habermas essentially constrained himself to a “binary opposition between information/informed publics and entertainment/uninformed,”<sup>46</sup> or duped publics that limited the application of his theory to the modern reality, where new communication technologies have completely transformed the communication environment, which directly affected the forms of meaning production and the ways in which power and counter-power are being produced and maintained, and are engaging in interaction.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Yifat Gutman and Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, “The Cultural Constitution of Publics,” in *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, ed. John R. Hall et al. (London: Routledge, 2010), 497; Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 249.

<sup>43</sup> Gutman and Goldfarb, “The Cultural Constitution of Publics,” 497.

<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Calhoun, 427-429.

<sup>45</sup> Gutman and Goldfarb, “The Cultural Constitution of Publics,” 498.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 496.

<sup>47</sup> Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 89-90.



Thus the concept of the public sphere, as it emerges from the revisionist literature I have discussed here, denotes a complex social space, where multiple publics and counter-publics coexist and interact by representing, deliberating, negotiating, and contesting their different meanings, interests, and projects of social organization. This space, therefore, is wrought with conflict and tensions that emerge among a multitude of differently empowered actors. The public sphere is also an important container of meaning and knowledge that results from human interaction. This knowledge constitutes the material for the “formation, shaping, and reinforcement of identities”<sup>48</sup> of all social actors that participate in a given public sphere, and informs the future production of knowledge. The public sphere is also a historically contingent concept: thus, face-to-face encounters in a variety of public spaces dominated the bourgeois public sphere of the 18th century; the public sphere of industrial societies was built around the institutions of the nation-state and was characterized by the one-way, top-down distribution of messages through the mass media. In modern societies, new digital information technologies extended “the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in a network that is at the same time global and local, generic and customized in an ever changing pattern.”<sup>49</sup>

Technical characteristics of communication technologies structured the public sphere of every age and defined both the opportunities and limitations of human communication. In the 21st century the public sphere has multiple levels, from a local community network, to a city portal, to a national information space, to a global public sphere that unites multinational civil societies into a global civil society that interacts with the institutions of global governance. The effectiveness and reciprocity of communication between power holders and citizens in the public

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<sup>48</sup> Gutman and Goldfarb, “The Cultural Constitution of Publics,” 497.

<sup>49</sup> Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 6.

sphere are at the core of modern democracies: the more open, collegial, and transparent is the process of political decision-making in a given state, the more democratic is its polity and the more legitimacy it enjoys among the citizenry.

### Power, Networks, and the Networked Public Sphere

Manuel Castells is one of the leading scholars of the sociology of the media whose scholarship on “communication, power and counter-power in the network society”<sup>50</sup> provides a helpful framework, because it sheds light on the relationship between technology, communication and power relations in modern societies while accounting for most of the shortcomings of Habermas’s theory. Castells avoids excessively normative judgments that were inherent, for example, in Habermas’s theory, but instead starts from the premise that power relations are constructive of all societies.<sup>51</sup> Institutions of any society, including media, reflect power relations as well as limits to this power as they were negotiated by a historical process of domination and counter-domination.

The most stable source of power in modern days is not coercion or intimidation, although they are very much present, but the ability to construct meaning in people’s minds, because the way people think determines the core organizational structures of societies. Thus, just as Habermas has argued, communication media, and their owners, wield great power by constructing messages and providing frames for meaning construction among large groups of individuals. However, “since societies are contradictory and conflictive, wherever there is power

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<sup>50</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power.”

<sup>51</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 4; Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

there is also counter-power . . .”<sup>52</sup> Counter-power, according to Castells, manifests itself in the “deliberate attempt to change power relationships . . . by engaging in the production of mass media message, and by developing autonomous networks of horizontal communication . . . If a majority of people think in ways that are contradictory to the values and norms institutionalized in the laws and regulations enforced by the state, the system will change, although not necessarily to fulfill the hopes of the agents of social change.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus Castells, unlike Habermas, sheds light on the workings of human agency in the process of counter-publicity in the age of a networked mediated environment. In addition, Castells takes into account the wider economic, social, and political *processes*, which he so potently lays out in his trilogy on the information age and the rise of the network society. The social and organizational model of a network is at the core of these processes. Networks allow for the proliferation of flexible, decentralized, and pervasive channels of communication, which in turn produce structural, multidimensional changes to the modern societies’ economies, power relationships, and identities of individual people.<sup>54</sup> Due to these networks, the public sphere has also undergone a historical shift, from the institutional realm to a new communication space, global in scope, which challenged the boundaries of a nation-state “as the relevant unit to define a public space.”<sup>55</sup>

Castells argues that several connected, but independent trends define the new technological framework of the public sphere:

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<sup>52</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 4; Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 9 and 5.

<sup>54</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*; Manuel Castells, “The Network Society: from Knowledge to Polity,” in *The Network Society: from Knowledge to Polity*, ed. Manuel Castells and Gustavo Cardoso (Washington, D. C.: Center for Transnational Relations, 2005), 3-22.

<sup>55</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 238 and 258.

- The key role of segmented, customized mass media in the social production of meaning;
- The predominant role of media in politics, and as a result personality politics and scandal politics as dominant forms of political expression that lead to a crisis of legitimacy in most countries around the world;
- The emergence of interactive, horizontal networks of communication referred to as “mass self-communication;”
- The uses of both one-directional mass communication and mass self-communication in the relationship between power and counter-power, in formal politics, and in the new manifestations of social movements.

Because the dynamics of power relations are at the core of societies, and the public sphere is the place where socialized communication and creation of meaning takes place, mass media has become the social space where power is made, contested, and decided. Any transformation in the communication environment of the public sphere “directly affects the forms of meaning construction, and therefore the production of power relations.”<sup>56</sup>

The institutions of any society, including media, according to Castells, reflect power relations as well as limits to this power as they were negotiated by a historical process of domination and counter-domination. The institutions of the nation-state have been evolving to their present form along with the evolution of industrial capitalism: they developed a multi-party system, separation of power between three branches of government, and powerful mass-media systems with capital-intensive production facilities that created serious physical constraints on information production — only those with significant capital could participate in the production of information and, therefore, in the social construction of meaning. Thus the public sphere of industrial capitalist societies was mostly concentrated around institutions such as parties, communities (including religious), unions, and the nuclear family, while media systems

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<sup>56</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 6; Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 240.

contributed to national unity by transmitting messages in a one-to-many format and performing a gatekeeping role between society and power holders.

With the emergence of horizontal networks of communication in the last decade we are observing a global shift in power relationships; the institutions of industrial society, the elites, and the “single axis system”<sup>57</sup> of political influence they produced are being challenged by the rise of popular self-communication. When millions of diverse individuals and social actors begin to interact in a loose self-directed and self-programmed network, they constitute what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call a ‘multitude’ capable of autonomous production of information and knowledge, a practice that contains a potential for true democracy — many peoples acting in concert.<sup>58</sup>

Although the internet as a technology was invented in 1969, it has only been in recent years that it reached throughout the world, including developing countries. As of 2011, about 35 percent of the global population, in contrast to, for example, 18 percent in 2006, was using the internet.<sup>59</sup> The usage of mobile phones is almost universal (6 billion cellular subscriptions as of 2011). At the nexus of the interaction between society and technology a new media space emerged, which often functions in opposition to the established hierarchies of power, reflecting the desire of many citizens to influence the world and communicate their own meanings, rather than buying them ready-made from the traditional mass media. I will use the term “networked

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<sup>57</sup> B. A. Williams and M. Delli Carpini, “Monica and Bill all the Time and Everywhere: The Collapse of Gatekeeping and Agenda Setting in the New Media Environment,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 47, no. 9 (2004): 1208-1230, quoted in Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 254.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> International Communications Union (ITU), <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/facts/2011/material/ICTFactsSeeFigures2011.pdf> (accessed August 19, 2012).

public sphere” which, I believe, gets at the core of this phenomena: it was coined by Yochai Benkler<sup>60</sup> to designate the new horizontal communication setting and the practices it produced.

The internet and new media have significantly restructured the infrastructure of the industrial public sphere: not only could average citizens communicate more with their immediate friends and family, but because of the radical reduction of the cost of information production, they could more easily apply their creativity to individual projects or to projects in loose association with other people; they could also organize and participate in social life outside the mainstream channels of participation, the legitimacy of which has significantly eroded.<sup>61</sup>

In order to denote the significance of these practices, I will use the notion of the “politics of small things,” introduced by Jeffrey Goldfarb. Goldfarb argues that along with the power of ‘big things,’ like states, institutions, or corporations, there is another source of power that exists in every society, but is largely overlooked: the power of people to freely meet and talk to each other, to develop common projects, to think critically, and thus to create free public spaces even within most totalitarian societies. This power is rooted in micro processes, the details of social interaction that constitute “the ‘stuff’ of everyday life.”<sup>62</sup> Most of the times these processes reproduce the existing social hierarchies and commonly accepted meanings, but other times, people start to behave more independently, thus producing “zones of autonomous action” and generating counter-power.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 212.

<sup>61</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*; Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power.”

<sup>62</sup> Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Roudakova, “Comparing Processes,” 251.

<sup>63</sup> Goldfarb, *Reinventing Political Culture*, 2; Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things*.

These spaces of individual freedom can be found everywhere people interact: at the kitchen table, in workplaces, universities, government bureaucracies, and media institutions.<sup>64</sup> When connected through the network, individual free public spaces can potentially connect to an unlimited number of others and thus multiply their power. Thus the technology of the internet enables new, fast and effective, ways of communication, reinforcing the old practice of face-to-face interaction and producing new ones, such as social networking or emailing, thus reconfiguring the very texture of everyday life, which in turn “shapes the economy, the polity, and civilization itself.”<sup>65</sup> This capability of new technologies reduces the structural bias of the public communicative space that in the industrial society was clearly in favor of powerful elites and produced new, unexpected forms of grassroots counter-publicity.<sup>66</sup>

Quite expectedly, this transformation did not go unnoticed: the incumbent political and business actors have recognized the potential of the networked environment and sought to assert, and if possible increase, their influence in the new communication realm. This recognition triggered a “new round of power making”<sup>67</sup> for the “institutional ecology of the digital environment.”<sup>68</sup> The result of this social transformation is what Castells calls the “double process of convergence: technological and political.”<sup>69</sup> To preserve their influence and credibility, traditional media expand into the new digital environment and are now well presented there. Politically, modern political and cultural battles for the public mind are to a large extent waged

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<sup>64</sup> Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things*, 4-8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 1; Hal Abelson et al., *Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness After the Digital Explosion* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2008), 9-10; Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*.

<sup>66</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 256-258.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>68</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 257; Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 364-365.

in the communication realm: as Castells puts it, “what does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind, even if it could have a fragmented presence in individual minds.”<sup>70</sup>

### The Internet in Russia: The Highlights

It is beneficial to consider the latest social protests in Russia within the wider framework of mass communication theories and the global context of new technologies discussed above. As I have pointed out, scholars of Russian media and politics tend to treat Russia as a separate case of the post-Soviet situation comparable only with other post-Soviet countries. While to a large extent this is true, it should also be kept in mind that Russia, as one of the leading producers of energy, is very much embedded in the global political and economic context, and, having one of the most dynamic media markets, is affected by global information flows. As the Russian economy stabilized and began growing in the 2000s, so did the spread of mobile and internet technology. Although the national internet penetration of 45 percent<sup>71</sup> in Russia is still well behind that of Europe’s 60 percent, and 70 percent in the U.S.,<sup>72</sup> Russia has the fastest growing internet population in Europe, which by 2011 has also become the highest in terms of the number of internet users aged 15 and above—around 52 million—surpassing that of Germany, 50.1 million.<sup>73</sup> These statistics imply that the emergence of horizontal networking facilitated by new technology will bring similar social transformations that earlier began in the United States,

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<sup>70</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 241.

<sup>71</sup> In 2012, a year after the protests began, this number was already 52-60 percent.

<sup>72</sup> Korina Alexanyan, “Social Networking on Runet: The View from a Moving Train,” *Digital Icons* 1, no. 2 (2009): 2; FOM Media, *Rossiiia oflain* (Moscow: FOM Public Opinion Foundation, November 14, 2011), <http://fom.ru/internet/10254> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> ComScore press releases from August 27, 2008 and November 14, 2011, [www.comscore.com](http://www.comscore.com) (accessed March 5, 2013); FOM Media, *Rossiiia oflain*.



Europe, and many other countries in the global communication web, although in a form that will reflect the unique characteristics of the Russian political and cultural contexts.

Using the framework discussed above, I will show how the introduction and rapid spread of internet technology in Russia has contributed to the emergence of a vibrant liberal-networked public sphere as a powerful space of communication, agenda-setting and mobilization, which, in turn, has facilitated the emergence of the oppositional counter-public, or, rather, several oppositional counter-publics, spanning from nationalists, to liberals, to unaffiliated citizens who have grown more aware of the country's political process. The parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011-2012, as well as protest movements in other countries, catalyzed the expression of these publics' protest against current electoral practices.

I will also argue that the protests of 2011 and 2012 became one of the first large-scale manifestations of the alternative grassroots politics, albeit not the first in the entire history of the Russian internet, and represent the type of counter-publicity that was nurtured by the meaning circulating in the networked public sphere, bypassing the mainstream media, and by the opportunities for self-expression this networked environment offers to those outside mainstream politics. A longtime observer of Russian society, Boris Dubin of the Levada Center, said that it was the "Russia of the internet" who came out to protest.<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, Russian protesters demonstrated a whole spectrum of non-traditional and symbolic forms of political expression, such as political parodies, flash mobs and peaceful walks with elements of a festival or performance, which had already been observed in many Western societies.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See *YouTube* video, "Levada – Tsentr' Boris Dubin o mitingakh I vyborakh," uploaded on February 16, 2012 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=WV7JTdRJFS4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=WV7JTdRJFS4) (accessed July 2, 2013).

<sup>75</sup> James Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication: Mediated Politics in Uncertain Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 157-175.

There is ample empirical evidence that the social processes triggered by the new network technology in Russia are similar to those in other countries. For example, RuNet is home to vibrant blogging and social networking communities, which already in 2009 demonstrated the highest levels of engagement in the world.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, the Russian internet is also shaped by the same logic of profit, and audience, maximization. There has been significant commercialization of RuNet with the proliferation of e-commerce, advertising and new patterns of corporate cross-ownership and concentration.<sup>77</sup> There is also a pronounced trend of media convergence, with media giants seeking to establish themselves in the new playground, embracing principles of interactivity.<sup>78</sup> Both state and independent media outlets have websites equipped with interactive tools.

By around 2007 the Kremlin and the ruling elites also realized the importance of having authoritative voices on the internet that would speak on their behalf. This realization resulted in a sophisticated system of mostly indirect control that combines legal and technical (temporary blocking, surveillance, botnet attacks) tools of control with the employment of “internet brigades” in order to spread ideas and opinions favorable to the incumbent regime.<sup>79</sup> These

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<sup>76</sup> According to ComScore, Russian internet users spend on average 6.6 hours online daily browsing through 1,307 pages on average; for a comparison, the corresponding numbers for Brazil, which has the number two most engaged audience, are 6.3 and 1,220; for Germany (the next, after Russia, largest audience in Europe) they are 4.5 and 793; for the U.S.—4.2 and 477; see ComScore press release from July 2, 2009; [www.comscore.com](http://www.comscore.com) (accessed May 2, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Ivan Zassoursky, “Free to Get Rich and Fool Around,” and Vlad Strukov, “Russia’s Internet Media Policies: Open Space and Ideological Closure,” in *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*, ed. Birgit Beumers et al. (London: Routledge, 2009), 29-41 and 208-222.

<sup>78</sup> Zassoursky, “Free to Get Rich and Fool Around”; Panchenko, “Integratsiia Internet-SMI.”

<sup>79</sup> Strukov, “Russia’s Internet Media Policies,” 220; Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski, “Beyond Denial: Introducing Next-Generation Information Access Controls,” in *Access Controlled*, Deibert et al.; Ronald Deibert et al., “Access Contested: Toward the Fourth Phase of Cyberspace Controls,” in *Access Contested*, Deibert et al.

tactics resulted in what Vlad Strukov called ‘networked Putinism,’ in which he discerns the workings of the “new style politics,”<sup>80</sup> which is consistent with the framework laid out above.

### A Word on Technology and Social Transformation

Some scholars argue that an analytical framework that places technology as one of the main factors of social transformation suffers from technological determinism.<sup>81</sup> Envisaging such arguments, and in order to provide some clarification of the assumptions taken in this research, I will quote Manuel Castells, who wrote that “technology *per se* does not determine historical evolution and social change, technology (or the lack of it) embodies the capacity of societies to transform themselves, as well as the uses to which societies, always in a conflictive process, decide to put their technological potential.”<sup>82</sup>

On the other hand, the trap of “societal determinism” that assigns all agency to social forces should also be avoided.<sup>83</sup> The argument that the internet will “allow us to do more of things we already were organized and oriented to do” misses the point, for if something that impacts social life grows exponentially (and internet technology does), we should watch it carefully, keeping in mind that quantitative change sooner or later transforms into qualitative change.<sup>84</sup> New technologies enable new practices, while rendering others obsolete, on the micro

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<sup>80</sup> Vlad Strukov, “Networked Putinism: The Fading Days of the (Broadcast) Era,” *Digital Icons* 7 (2012): 111-123.

<sup>81</sup> Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society* (New York: Routledge, 1995), quoted in Felix Stalder, “The Network Paradigm: Social Formations in the Age of Information,” *The Information Society* 14, no. 4 (1998): 301-308.

<sup>82</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth C. Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 4-7.

<sup>84</sup> Abelson et al., *Blown to Bits*, 9-10; Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 213.

level of everyday life, which at first can easily go unnoticed.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the horizontal interconnectedness of millions of internet users, for example, resulted in a relatively short time in the emergence of a new mode of production based on the non-market principles of the creative commons, which at times successfully competes with market-based production and challenges it.<sup>86</sup> The emergence of blogging, instead of reducing the public discourse to the levels of cacophony, triggered convergence of the mainstream media with the horizontal realm of citizen reporting, thus rendering the mainstream media less one-directional.<sup>87</sup>

Technological innovations, however, are usually introduced into various national systems with power structures of their own, which were shaped by previous years of technological, social, and military innovation: state institutions, economic structures and entities, and society at large with its customs, values, political culture, and ideologies—all that determines the ways in which certain technology will be adopted, the ends which it serves the best, and, ultimately, whether it will improve human conditions, or bring war and destruction.<sup>88</sup> It should not come as a surprise then, that nations such as the United States, China, Russia, and the countries of the EU have shown different patterns of adopting internet technology and of political contestation that take place in their national cyberspaces.<sup>89</sup> In this respect, the great Chinese firewall and contestations over the issue of net neutrality in Western liberal democracies are phenomena of the same order, that is, they are reflections of power relations that take place in different cultural

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<sup>85</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 17-18; Abelson et al., *Blown to Bits*, 9-10; Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 134-135.

<sup>86</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 35-132.

<sup>87</sup> Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-power," 252.

<sup>88</sup> Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-Out-Of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978); Herrera, *Technology and International Transformation*; Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*.

<sup>89</sup> Deibert et al., *Access Denied; Access Controlled; Access Contested*.

and political environments, but the mere fact of their existence was enabled by the invention and wide distribution of internet technology.

### Chapter Outline

This chapter has outlined the framework of the study. Chapter 2 examines the transformation of the public sphere since the information revolution of the 1970s, and the effects this transformation has had on the political life of postindustrial democratic societies. I will first consider the main characteristics of the industrial public sphere dominated by television, and then examine the structural changes introduced by the internet. Chapter 3 considers the political and social processes that define political communication in Russia, and the changes that the introduction of the internet has enabled. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the methodology, a qualitative approach to internet studies that represents a middle ground between a large-number quantitative studies and qualitative analyses of individual web pages. Chapter 5 introduces the concept of the liberal-networked public sphere and, using the example of political satire, demonstrates how it functions as an autonomous cultural space that allows for alternative ways of political self-expression and aggregates public opinion. Chapter 6 explores the bottom-up agenda-setting function of the liberal-networked public sphere, and demonstrates how it enhances human autonomy, allowing individuals to collaborate in loose association with others and to carry out individual creative projects. Chapter 7 traces the role of the internet in the mobilization that occurred in the last few weeks before the elections, but was primed by the multiple events discussed throughout this study. Chapter 8 concludes this study by summarizing the main arguments, and discussing the role of the internet in Russian society.

## CHAPTER 2

### MASS COMMUNICATION AND THE NEW MEDIA AGE

#### The Information Age and Transformation of the Mass Media

With the rise of complex modern societies, where the citizens most probably will never meet their fellow countrymen in a face-to-face encounter, the issues of governance, political participation, and national cultural integrity are predominantly decided through some sort of mediated communication, usually broadcast communication.<sup>90</sup> Thus media has become the crucial element in the infrastructure of the modern public sphere; some scholars have even argued that media are now the public sphere.<sup>91</sup>

Scholars have also noted that the prominent role of the media in social life has a crucial power component to it: in the political realm mass media, or the people who control it, are wielding power by actively shaping messages and editing content. Moreover, media audiences, as well as politicians themselves, grew more dependent on the messages the media deliver, which urged the latter to learn media language and abide by the ‘media logic’ of the time.<sup>92</sup>

These transformations of the media and political landscapes, and the new prominent role mass communication grew to play, were a result of many overlapping, interconnected social,

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<sup>90</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 176; Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, *The Crisis of the Public Communication* (London: Routledge, 1995); Castells, *The Rise of Networked Society*, 358; Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 21.

<sup>91</sup> John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1; Paolo Carpiagnano et al., “Chatter in the Age of Electronic Reproduction: Talk Television and the ‘Public Mind,’” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 33; Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh, “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features,” *Political Communication* 16, no. 3, (1999): 211; Ingrid Volkmer, “The Global Network Society and the Global Public Sphere,” *Development* 46, no. 1 (March 2003): 9-16, quoted in Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 258.

<sup>92</sup> Ralph Negrine and Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, “The transformation of Political Communication,” in *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, ed. Stylianos Papathanassopoulos (London: Routledge, 2011); Blumler and Gurevitch, *The Crisis*; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*; Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 211; David L. Swanson and Paolo Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy: an International Study of Innovations in Electoral Campaigning and their Consequences* (Praeger Publishers: Westport, 1996), 251.

political, and technological processes that took place in the second half of the 20th century, and fed off of one another. In terms of social change, societies all over the world have seen increasing urbanization that is still underway and already now achieved a threshold of 50 percent. The processes of modernization and economic globalization have driven millions of people of diverse backgrounds and religious affiliations together in search of work or shelter, so that all cities and metropolitan areas in the world are characterized by increased multiculturalism and diversity, infusing local populations with another source of anxiety.<sup>93</sup> Apart from this almost daily exposure to cultural “others,” modern city life in general grew much more unstable, increasingly demanding substantial levels of mobility—geographical, occupational, and psychic—from city dwellers, as long-term employment and predictable career paths have become less common, while social welfare guarantees have evaporated.<sup>94</sup>

As societies transitioned to a post-industrial economy and the world grew more globalized and interdependent, old (industrial-era) social and political affiliations that used to define identity, such as the patriarchal family, class and party affiliations, have lost their salience, giving place to more ambiguous, diverse, and individualistic life projects fueled by the culture of consumerism and based on complex individual experiences.<sup>95</sup> The globalized economy and unchecked capitalism also exacerbated uneven patterns of development, simultaneously “unleashing . . . formidable productive forces of the information revolution” and consolidating the “black holes of human misery.”<sup>96</sup> These trends, combined with increased uncertainty and the

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<sup>93</sup> Manuel Castells, “Preface to the 2010 Edition of the Rise of the Network Society,” in *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, The Rise of the Network Society*, v.1, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2010).

<sup>94</sup> Blumler and Gurevitch, *The Crisis*, 2; Castells, “Preface to the 2010 Edition”; Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 255.

<sup>95</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 256-258; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 8-9.

<sup>96</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2000 ed., 2.

rapid pace of change contributed to the growing salience of primary identities—religious, ethnic, territorial, national—that began filling the growing ranks of resistance to the cosmopolitan forces (and values) of the global capital and contributed to the explosion of fundamentalism of all stripes. Castells refers to this type of identity as “resistance identity.”<sup>97</sup>

On the other hand, there emerged a parallel trend, mainly among educated urbanites, of the development of so-called “project identities,” movements organized around a particular cause “aiming to change society by introducing new sets of values.”<sup>98</sup> Among the most prominent examples of such movements are the feminist movement and environmentalism, which have evolved into respected transnational forces. Many countries, however, saw the emergence of the project-oriented movements on a more local scale: for example, the ACT UP movement based in New York City to raise awareness about the inadequate response of authorities to the AIDS epidemic; the car drivers’ association in St. Petersburg, Russia, a collective effort to defend drivers’ rights in the city and beyond; or Malaysian “Bloggers United” contesting political censorship of the internet in that country.<sup>99</sup> These, and many other movements for gay rights, animal rights, and consumer rights are often fueled by ethical concerns and individual projects of self-realization. In these social conditions voter behavior grew less predictable, while the rise of the so-called “floating voter,” unaligned to any particular party, put audience considerations and public opinion polling at the core of political communication.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Castells, *The Power of Identity*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 157-175.

<sup>99</sup> Daniel C. Brouwer, “ACT-ing UP in Congressional Hearings,” in *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Asen and Brouwer; Markku Lonkila, “Driving at Democracy in Russia: Protest Activities of St. Petersburg Car Drivers’ Associations,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (March 2011): 291-309; Vee Vian Thien, “The Struggle for Digital Freedom of Speech: The Malaysian Sociopolitical Blogosphere’s Experience,” in *Access Contested*, Deibert et al.

<sup>100</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 8 and 20.



Politically, the regulatory, legal, and normative framework of business-led privatization and deregulation that prevailed in the early 1980s, arguably as a reflection of business's collective action effort in response to the setbacks it experienced in the 1960s, was decisive for the drastic transformation the telecommunications industry has undergone in the last 30 years.<sup>101</sup> This policy change, which took its most extreme forms in the U.S. during the 1980s, affected the popular thinking about the mass media as well as the structure of media ownership: if before telecommunications sectors of different Western countries were organized as state-owned, state-sponsored, and state-regulated natural monopolies that served domestic audiences,<sup>102</sup> in the 1980s and 1990s, after massive privatization and a series of corporate mergers, the world saw the rise of large media empires and the emergence of the global commercial media market.<sup>103</sup> No more was media “a government responsibility;”<sup>104</sup> instead it became a tradable market commodity.

In terms of technology, although the technological transformation of the mass media systems have continued throughout the 20th century, the latest transformation that began in the United States in the 1970s and, gaining a truly global scope after the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union, brought human communication to a new quantitative and

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<sup>101</sup> Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer — And Turned Its Backs on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 116-136; Castells, *The Rise of Networked Society*, 19 and 60.

<sup>102</sup> Wilson P. Dizard Jr., *Meganet: How the Global Communications Network Will Connect Everyone on Earth* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), quoted in Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, 65.

<sup>103</sup> W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10; Robert McChesney, “The Media System Goes Global,” in *International Communication: A Reader*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (London: Routledge, 2010), 188-220.

<sup>104</sup> Dizard Jr., *Meganet*, quoted in Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, 65.

qualitative level.<sup>105</sup> The dynamic, entrepreneurial, and creative milieu of American science coupled with flexible venture capital produced a constellation of revolutionary technological innovations in micro- and optoelectronics that provided the physical infrastructure for the information technology revolution.<sup>106</sup> Thus, for example, the first undersea fiber-optic cable that was laid across the Atlantic in 1988 provided far more transmission capacity than all the existing coaxial cables combined.<sup>107</sup> Consequently, if in 1963 the only two transnational direct dial lines in existence connected the high offices of London with Paris and the Kremlin with the White House, by 1990 international telephony was available in 200 countries.<sup>108</sup>

These social, political, and technological transformations, like connecting vessels, were mutually reciprocal: for example, when the prevailing type of media ownership changed, it affected not only media content itself, but also the behavior of states, parties, and individual political actors and their communication style, the relationships of the media with the audiences, and the audiences' behavior and attitudes. This process of mutual adaptation has been ongoing, especially after the introduction of the internet and other new media technologies. But, as scholars have argued, judging by what we can observe now, the change of relationships among the social actors involved in political communication has been fundamental, even if contradictory: media content, laws governing media and their internal workings, persuasion strategies and conduct of political communication, political-journalist relations, party structures, citizen participation in the communication process and their reception of politics, conduct of

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<sup>105</sup> Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: a Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 101-104; Castells, *The Rise of Networked Society*, 28-76.

<sup>106</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 61-69.

<sup>107</sup> Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, 49.

<sup>108</sup> Scholte, *Globalization*, 102.

international relations and war-making are now not what they used to be 30 years ago.<sup>109</sup> In this respect some scholars have even called for reconsideration of the very foundational theoretical concepts such as ‘public sphere’ and ‘democracy.’<sup>110</sup>

In the rest of this chapter I will look at the main arguments in the political communication literature about the effects of the new media environment on political communication in the last 30 years, and its consequences for the practice of democracy. In order to highlight yet another structural transformation of the public sphere that the global distribution of the internet triggered in the 1990s and 2000s, I will first discuss political communication mediated primarily by the traditional mass media systems, as was the case in the 1980s, before the advent of the internet. Also, it should be noted that, although most of the research I will cover in this chapter comes from Western democracies, it is appropriate and even necessary to compare the developments in the Russian communication system with those of other Western countries. Although each country’s system is unique due to differences in organizational and power structures, as well as national socio-political environments, scholars have shown that certain global trends in markets, technology, and the ways political entrepreneurs engage mass media are global, and with a certain degree of generalization can be assumed to have affected Russia as well.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>109</sup> Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, “The transformation of Political Communication,” 42; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*; Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age”; Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, 97-138.

<sup>110</sup> In the first chapter I have covered some of the latest literature on Habermas and the public sphere. On democracy, see, for example, Frank Webster, “Information and Democracy: the Weakening of Social Democracy,” in *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, Papathanassopoulos; J.B. Thompson, “Social Theory and Media,” in *Communication Theory Today*, ed. D. Crowley and D. Mitchell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), quoted in Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 92-101.

<sup>111</sup> Swanson and Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy*, 269; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, xi; Castells, *The Rise of Networked Society*, 20-21; Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*, 10; Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, 284; Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia*, 3 and 229.

the evidence from the Western countries will serve as a useful background for highlighting Russia's regional peculiarities.

### Commercial Mass Media and the Politics of Publicity

In the final quarter of the 20th century the world of mass media has been in a state of constant and rapid transformation. While new, better and cheaper technological innovations were arriving, market forces were appropriating them with dazzling speed: there was an explosion of media outlets—new cable and satellite television channels, magazines, newspapers, radio stations, all counting in the hundreds—and with them the number of non-state actors with stakes in the political process. The governments of many countries, such as Germany, Sweden, or England, where traditions of state regulation of the media were strong, had to recede before the logic of economic efficiency and opened their national media markets.<sup>112</sup> Other countries, like those of Eastern Europe, India, or China were suddenly exposed to the massive inflow of the Western entertainment content, Latin American soap operas, and international news broadcasts. As satellites, digital technology, and fiber-optics grew more affordable, the number of television channels has multiplied globally and locally in almost every county, allowing for increasing tailoring of the content to the tastes of specific groups or communities.<sup>113</sup> Above all other considerations, market forces began to increasingly define television content, as multiplied TV channels grew dependent on advertising sales, while mass distribution of consumer products grew dependent on television.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*, 10; James Curran, "Mediations of Democracy," in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, 4th edition, (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 123.

<sup>113</sup> Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, 64-82.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

Market-driven competition among the multiple media outlets, coupled with new technological capabilities, facilitated increasingly narrow specialization of the outlets and stimulated the emergence of new media formats and genres, most notably, 24-hour news service, MTV-style music channels, and *infotainment* programs that *blur the boundaries between entertainment and news*. Furthermore, as if this were not enough, the amount of communication equipment in people's homes has also increased: video recorders, audio devices, video games, photo and video cameras—all of these offered alternative ways of spending time to that of watching socially-relevant programs on television.<sup>115</sup>

These trends coupled with the above-discussed changes in the social environment contributed to the *demise of the mass television audience*. The once near-universal audiences of the daily evening newscasts, with their high level of societal consensus resulting from even exposure to the same information, were no more. Multiplicity of viewing options encouraged a selective “pick and choose” viewing culture, where political information had to compete for the viewer's attention with hundreds of other, often more attractive and entertaining, communication alternatives.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, the government in these conditions, as Blumler and Gurevitch put it, “is more difficult, popular support is more contingent and effective communication is more vital.”<sup>117</sup>

In the environment where media were omnipresent, all public figures, politicians included, found themselves extremely exposed to media scrutiny, with the television in the lead: despite the diversity of media sources, television remained dominant in most national media

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<sup>115</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 365-366; Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, 47-98; Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 213 and 218.

<sup>116</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 223; Shanto Iyengar, “What Does Information Technology Imply for Media Effects Research?” in *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, ed. Papathanassopoulos; Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*, 13.

<sup>117</sup> Blumler and Gurevitch, *The Crisis*, 2.

systems.<sup>118</sup> Technological characteristics of the medium of television and the 24-hour news broadcasting format accentuated the importance of images, both visual and audiovisual, in the shaping of public opinion like never before in the history of conduct of domestic and international politics.<sup>119</sup> The first televised presidential debate in the United States, between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy in 1960 turned into a classic case of difference in audience perception of different media: words-based radio and audiovisual television.<sup>120</sup> Later Nixon noted with regard to his experience, “I am the world’s living expert on what television can do *for* a candidate and what it can do *to* a candidate (italics added).”<sup>121</sup>

Under the increasingly sharp eye of a camera, the body language, facial expression, and general physical appearance of political figures came to play a crucial role in electoral outcomes, while the price of a single mistake increased. Politicians, like many other social actors with a stake in the political process, became increasingly reliant on the advice of media professionals setting the trend of *intensified professionalization of political advocacy*.<sup>122</sup> Although politicians have always relied on experts for policy advice, speech writing, and campaign organization, in

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<sup>118</sup> For example, the PEW Research Center reports that three-quarters of Americans get news from one or more of the traditional media sources – television, radio and print, and while there is a steady erosion of the radio and print audiences, television watching has remained stable at about 58%, see press-release from September 12, 2010, <http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/americans-spending-more-time-following-the-news/> (accessed May 8, 2012); the Reuters Institute reports that 76% of the British access news by watching TV, 54% in print, and 45% via radio; the corresponding numbers for Germany are 87%, 68% and 68%; for France 80%, 77% and 43%, see *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2012* (Oxford: Reuters Institute, 2012); for Russia VTsIOM reports 80%, 44% and 36%, see press release no. 1725, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=111495> (accessed September 7, 2012).

<sup>119</sup> Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, 100; Maria E. Grabe, Erik P. Bucy, *Image Bite Politics: News and the Visual Framing of Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>120</sup> Sidney Kraus, “Winners of the First 1960 Televised Presidential Debate Between Kennedy and Nixon,” *Journal of Communication* 46, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 78-96.

<sup>121</sup> Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas 1999), 249; quoted in Martin F. Nolan, “Orwell Meets Nixon: When and Why ‘the Press’ Became ‘the Media,’” *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 73.

<sup>122</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 213; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, “The transformation of Political Communication,” 49.

the era of television professionals such as political consultants, spin doctors, campaign advisers, and strategists outnumber journalists and are incorporated into government communications staff, some of them working across political lines.<sup>123</sup> The nature of their services, the openness of their access to the top politicians, and the levels of their compensation place them among the elite of the modern political process, to substitute for the withering influence of the mass political parties.<sup>124</sup>

The increasing professionalization and general *rationalization of political life*<sup>125</sup> in modern societies, a result of the mutual adjustment of all social actors and their reaction to the growing unpredictability of the communication environment, had profound transformative effects both on actors themselves and on the inter-actor relationships. Political communication specialists assumed the role of *another gatekeeper*, in addition to professional journalists, between political elites and citizens, adding another set of filters to the already existing practice of “indexing” common among journalists and editors.<sup>126</sup> Unlike the ethical code of impartiality and objectivity, which, at least in theory, guides political journalism, political communications advisers are guided primarily by *market values* and *advertising techniques* rather than the democratic ideal of the cultivation of an informed and engaged citizenry.<sup>127</sup> The main goal of

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<sup>123</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 242; Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*, 96.

<sup>124</sup> Ralph Negrine, Paolo Mancini et al., ed., *Professionalisation of Political Communication* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007); Blumler and Gurevitch, *The Crisis*, 171-174; Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, “The transformation of Political Communication”; Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*, 16-17.

<sup>125</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 211; Leon H. Mayhew, *The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 189.

<sup>126</sup> W. L. Bennett, “Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States,” *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (1990): 103-127.

<sup>127</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 211; Staney, *Modern Political Communication*; Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*; Robert M. Entman, “Media and Democracy Without Party Competition,” in *Mass Media and Society*, Curran and Gurevitch, 263.

such professionals is essentially *opposite* to that of professional journalists and independent media: they are hired to contain the media and manage the information that reaches the public domain, to deliver the coverage of a preferred story in a manner favorable to a client, and to set the scope and terms of public involvement in policy matters.<sup>128</sup>

Political competition, quickly changing technology, and audience adaptation force political intermediaries to balance a thin line between the need of being proactive and endlessly presenting in the news to *cultivate favorable public opinion*, as well as to *minimize*, or better *marginalize*, opposing voices, and at the same to *avoid leakage* of potentially harmful information and to *quickly respond* and *rebut* the opposition's claims and negative reports.<sup>129</sup> Political actors and their ever-growing armies of communications aids constantly innovate, utilize intricate market research and polling techniques, tracking public opinion almost on a daily basis, establishing "instant feedback loops,"<sup>130</sup> and in general improving campaign coordination, planning, and backstage discipline. Indeed this new approach to political campaigning more closely resembles military operations rather than a democratic process, with opponents often being treated as "*enemies* rather than political opponents."<sup>131</sup>

There was another reason why image-makers and communication professionals grew ever more important for political communicators: the language of the television is audio-visual, with video playing a more important role than textual material. The visual part of the

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<sup>128</sup> Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*, 5; Blumler and Kavanagh, "The Third Age," 213; Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*, 97-100.

<sup>129</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 42-71; Blumler and Kavanagh, "The Third Age," 214-215; Howard Tumbler, "Democracy in the Information Age: the Role of the Fourth Estate in Cyberspace," *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 1 (2001): 98-99.

<sup>130</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 24 and 48-50; Entman, "Media and Democracy Without Party Competition," 258.

<sup>131</sup> Entman, "Media and Democracy Without Party Competition," 257.



communicated information, especially the human face, is more quickly processed and retained longer by the human brain.<sup>132</sup> Researchers have found that the interactions of human beings with communicating machines, such as television or computers, in a “fundamentally social and natural” way resemble that of real life.<sup>133</sup> Thus the *image* of politicians, their physical characteristics, gestures, the quality of voice and the social information they convey became key factors defining political success and popularity.<sup>134</sup>

This centrality of images for television cameras coupled with the ideological disconnect between the parties and their members, have resulted in the transformation of political communication from being issue-oriented to more *image-oriented*, with considerable attention paid to individual political leaders and their families.<sup>135</sup> Scholars refer to this phenomenon as *personality politics*, when a party’s front-runner receives most of the limelight of the media attention and press coverage. The entire election campaign is geared toward the projection of her image, which is strategically tailored to the salient issues of the day, as revealed by opinion polls and focus groups.<sup>136</sup> By utilizing these advertising techniques originally devised in marketing and sales industries, political advisers often tap into citizens’ “fears, anxieties and deep-rooted desires” present in any national culture, and shape a candidate’s media presence connecting her

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<sup>132</sup> Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*, 13-21.

<sup>133</sup> Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass, *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), quoted in Poster, *What’s the Matter with the Internet*, 11-12.

<sup>134</sup> Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*, 13-21; McNair, *An Introduction*, 32.

<sup>135</sup> McNair, *An Introduction*, 94; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, “The transformation of Political Communication,” 48-50.

<sup>136</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 242; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 72-91; Swanson and Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy*, 251 and 272.

image to these issues in a favorable way.<sup>137</sup> Although rational information about policy still matters, it is rarely utilized as a main tool of persuasion: oftentimes voters are not aware of it, because few of them actually read candidate platforms, but rather rely on the information about the candidates available in the media; or, once having made up their mind, they “hear what they want to hear, almost regardless of what the favored candidate says.”<sup>138</sup> In addition, most news stories are too short “to do anything except present information about candidate character and personality.”<sup>139</sup>

Thus, the political information available to mass audiences from the TV screen grew significantly less “informative” on the issues of substance, too scripted and therefore predictable and repetitious.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, in the highly personalized political reality where success amounts to the credibility and trust the citizenry has towards the mediated persona of a party leader, the destruction of this persona and undermining of its credibility becomes one of the most effective, and widely used political weapons: scholars have noted that the increased *negativity* of political coverage is a trend that is “virtually universal across Western democracies.”<sup>141</sup> Political camps grew more willing to engage in “*attack campaigning*,” intermingling facts and fiction, and “*rubbishing*” tactics, which only contributed to the pool of “campaign professionals” hired to

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<sup>137</sup> McNair, *An Introduction*, 94; Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*, 97-101.

<sup>138</sup> McNair, *An Introduction*, 34.

<sup>139</sup> Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*, 100.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 92; Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 216-217; Swanson and Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy*, 271.

<sup>141</sup> Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3; Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 215; Swanson and Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy*, 273.

search for and manipulate damaging information.<sup>142</sup> Thus, political communication in the media-abundant environment becomes increasingly *expensive* even for the old, established parties, putting at a disadvantage any smaller organization with fewer funding sources. Moreover, the need to raise big money for publicity creates ripe conditions for illegal fundraising, machinations with party finance, and corruption. These transgressions, plus the private life of public figures becomes “the daily staple” of media coverage of politics, leading to the emergence of “scandal syndrome”: research has shown that *scandal politics* stands behind a large number of resignations and even regime changes globally.<sup>143</sup>

All these transformations in politician and party behavior were a result of their adjustment to the prominent new role of the media in politics, and, in turn, affected institutional media practices, and those of individual journalists. The changes in media were drastic and multidirectional. On the one hand, the market orientation of most of the media, including those that deliver news, gave them a strong incentive to treat their audiences as *consumers*, rather than as *citizens*: media professionals learned how to craft attention-grabbing stories that would maximize and retain their audiences. A lot has been written about the trivialization of coverage of socially significant issues: market-oriented journalism tends to infuse news coverage with emotions, color, drama, and sensationalism where it lacks, or outright prefers stories that already have a strong flavor of sensation and scandal — the so-called ‘tabloidization’ of the news<sup>144</sup> —

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<sup>142</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 215; Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 243-244; C. Edwin Baker, “Implications of Rival Visions of Electoral Campaigns,” in *Mediated Politics*, Bennett and Entman, 342-361; Entman, “Media and Democracy Without Party Competition,” 260-262.

<sup>143</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 58-60; Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 243; McNair, *An Introduction*, 37.

<sup>144</sup> Tumbler, “Democracy in the Information Age,” 96, and 101.

blurring the boundaries between news and entertainment.<sup>145</sup> The extreme case of catering to a certain group's tastes has been the rise of aggressive, ideological journalism (Fox News in the United States, El Mundo in Spain).<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, serious investigative journalism, which is time and resource consuming, frequently grew to resemble the sensationalist *dirt-digging*, aimed at attracting consumer interest, rather than revealing power abuses,<sup>147</sup> while the programming that contributes to civic education and covers issues of public interest has become a niche product available for those who want to be civically educated.<sup>148</sup> As Swanson and Mancini put it, the "media logic" requires reporting that "prefers personalities to ideas, simplicity to complexity, confrontation to compromise, and heavy emphasis on the "horse race" in electoral campaigns."<sup>149</sup>

This short summary clearly mirrors the changes in political communication that I have discussed above, and indeed, in the times of media abundance, there is a mutual interdependency between the media constantly scrambling for fresh content, and politicians seeking publicity: both parties cannot succeed without collaboration.<sup>150</sup> As the communication proficiency of political players increased, so did their capability to manage (manipulate, frame, spin) information available to the journalists. Consequently, politicians are increasingly able to deliver

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<sup>145</sup> Doug Underwood, "Reporting and the Push for Market-Oriented Journalism: Media Organizations as Businesses," in *Mediated Politics*, Bennett and Entman, 99-116; Blumler and Kavanagh, "The Third Age," 217 and 221; Curran, "Mediations of Democracy," 130; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 95-119; McNair, *An Introduction*, 49-50.

<sup>146</sup> Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-power," 241; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 120-136; Iyengar, "What Does Information Technology Imply for Media Effects Research?" 63.

<sup>147</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 110-111.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-119; Bennett and Entman, *Mediated Politics*, 12.

<sup>149</sup> Swanson and Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy*, 251.

<sup>150</sup> McNair, *An Introduction*, 34; Blumler and Kavanagh, "The Third Age," 215.

information, and entirely staged events—Daniel Boorstin calls them ‘pseudo-events’<sup>151</sup>—to the media on their own terms. The logic of profit maximization exacerbates this trend: media corporations ‘optimize’ their staffs by eliminating thousands of jobs and closing up their foreign bureaus, with a noticeable effect on the quality of news coverage.<sup>152</sup> Moreover, the 24-hour news cycle and the pressures built into it leaves almost no time for information verification; in this situation the lack of meaningful coverage by independent journalists is substituted by the information that comes directly from press releases generated by self-interested sources.<sup>153</sup> Thus, while the concentration of the media business is rising, the absolute number of media professionals is decreasing, and the pressures to comply with corporate interests—and with those of the state, especially in the conditions of modern warfare that include information wars—grow.<sup>154</sup>

On the other hand, the increasing pressures on the journalist’s professional integrity and encroachment of political public relations professionals in the territory of news production elicited a response on the part of the journalistic community. Scholars have registered a “noticeable decline in deference,” weariness, and skepticism among journalists toward the political actors and political process as a whole.<sup>155</sup> These attitudes were accompanied by the growth of the so-called ‘disdaining’ style of coverage, when journalists “‘disdain’ the very news

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<sup>151</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962), quoted in McNair, *An Introduction*, 39.

<sup>152</sup> Tumbler, “Democracy in the Information Age,” 96; Art Silverblatt and Nikolai Zlobin, *International Communications: A Media Literacy Approach* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 32; Timothy E. Cook, “The Future of the Institutional Media,” in *Mediated Politics*, Bennett and Entman, 187-188.

<sup>153</sup> Underwood, “Reporting and the Push for Market-Oriented Journalism,” 106; Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 213; Tumbler, “Democracy in the Information Age,” 98.

<sup>154</sup> Howard Tumbler and Frank Webster, *Journalists under Fire: Information War and Journalistic Practices* (London: Sage, 2006); Artur Jugaste, “Communicating Georgia: Georgia’s Information Campaign in the 2008 War With Russia,” (Masters Thesis, Stockholm University, 2011).

<sup>155</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 7; Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 215-217.

they are presenting,' commenting on and exposing the manipulative techniques of a campaign's management. The internal workings of the media industry, and the relationships of politicians and their spin doctors with journalists—what scholars refer to as 'meta-coverage'—are increasingly becoming the subject of a self-critical reflection and rationalization among journalists.<sup>156</sup> Politicians for their part have sought to bypass serious media and instead engage the nontraditional press, such as popular talk and music shows, or even appeal to the audience directly using advertising, articles 'written' by the leaders, and political spectacles.<sup>157</sup> Thus the proliferation of communication channels has created a complex environment characterized by often contradictory currents of affinity and disdain, complicity and sudden outbursts of scandal, sophisticated manipulation and competition, all of which contribute to the general worsening of relationships between governments and the media,<sup>158</sup> and feed the imperative of the power holders to remain in control of the popular frames and media agenda.

Despite the increased complexity of the television-dominated information environment and ever growing intricacy with which political actors craft their messages, the available audience studies revealed that the ability of political actors to affect social, and voting, behavior are limited by the social context and the interpreting power of individuals. The concept of 'active audience' implies that audiences are far from just passive dupes, or victims of ideological manipulation, as some left-wing critical theorists, including Marcuse and Habermas, might

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<sup>156</sup> Tumbler and Webster, *Journalists under Fire*, 20; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 7 and 65; Blumler and Gurevitch, *The Crisis*, 159; McNair, *An Introduction*, 124; Claes H. de Vreese and Matthijs Elenbaas, "Spin and Political Publicity: Effects on News Coverage and Public Opinion," in *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the Primacy of Politics*, ed. Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 75-91; Bruce I. Buchanan, "Mediated Electoral Democracy: Campaigns, Incentives, and Reform," in *Mediated Politics*, Bennett and Entman, 368-371.

<sup>157</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, "The Third Age," 215-217; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 60-61; Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams, "Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Age," Annenberg School for Communication, Departmental Papers (2001); McNair, *An Introduction*, 119-120; Cook, "The Future of the Institutional Media," 187.

<sup>158</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 60; Blumler and Kavanagh, "The Third Age," 215-216.

suggest, but rather possess a considerable level of individual autonomy. Every unit of information, even if sent through a one-way communication system of television, has potentially a range of possible interpretations, some of which can be opposite to those that were intended by the sender, and may provoke a variety of responses. These interpretations and responses do not primarily depend on the contents of the message, but rather on a variety of social, cultural, and historical factors, as well as on the type of message being transmitted. Thus gender, social status, education level, party affiliation (or lack thereof), ethnicity, as well as the general economic and political situation can all directly or indirectly affect message interpretation. In addition, people are capable of separating advertising from the more credible sources of information, and seeing through the practices of image manipulation, judging political performances by their tangible outcomes, not the media frenzies they produce.<sup>159</sup>

With all the variety of national contexts and types of media outlets that exist in the world, the transformations that I discussed thus far took place in the public sphere dominated by commercial mass-media, be that radio, press, or television, which has a fundamentally hierarchical technical architecture, that is when “a small number of producers transmitting to an audience that is many orders of magnitude larger.”<sup>160</sup> Due to the capital-intensive nature of the mass production of messages, be that cables, satellites, tele-towers or printing presses, these kind of unidirectional, few-to-many communication media are highly conducive to social control, and the twentieth century provided us with examples of such control and media monopolization by authoritarian states.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 364-365; McNair, *An Introduction*, 28-29, 118, and 135; John Zaller, “Monica Lewinsky and the Mainsprings of American Politics,” in *Mediated Politics*, Bennett and Entman, 252-278; Delli Carpini and Williams, “Let Us Infotain You.”

<sup>160</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 209.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

In liberal democracies the effects of the mass media, their scope, and consequences of the above discussed processes for representative democracy are a matter of vigorous scholarly debate.<sup>162</sup> Although the range of accounts is quite diverse, they generally fall into one of the two categories: one is a more optimistic approach, and another is a so-called ‘media malaise’ perspective. The optimistic accounts stress that in a historical perspective, modern mass media, particularly television, and modern practices of political campaigning, have been the most successful in playing the role of an equalizing agent, that delivers valuable public affairs information to very diverse audiences, including those who are illiterate, or poor and disengaged.<sup>163</sup> As Pippa Norris contends, people who consume more media are “more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory.”<sup>164</sup> Moreover, the complexity of contemporary decision-making is such that it precludes ideal-type public participation in government affairs, and the most the media can provide is a greater visibility of powerful individuals, which renders their activities more transparent.<sup>165</sup> The ‘media malaise’ argument stresses the manipulative nature of political communication available through the mass media, which has negative effects on the citizens’ attitudes to traditional party politics, breeds cynicism, undermines trust in governments and adversely affects election turnouts. According to this argument, democracy in Western societies is greatly undermined due to the commercial orientation of the majority of their mass media.

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<sup>162</sup> McNair, *An Introduction*, 204.

<sup>163</sup> Grabe and Bucy, *Image Bite Politics*, 24-26; Swanson and Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy*, 274.

<sup>164</sup> Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>165</sup> J.B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), quoted in Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 91.



When taking sides in this debate, several things should be taken into account. First, even in most liberal polities, the public sphere dominated by the mass media of the few-to-many type inevitably relies on the same basic top-down architecture, and industrial forms of message production and cost characteristics.<sup>166</sup> The opportunities for effective political communication are, therefore, far from equitably spread throughout the society, but rather skewed in favor of big business and established political actors, which means in favor of the status quo.<sup>167</sup> The urge to regain the upper hand in a more hazardous and unpredictable media environment encourages political actors with large stakes in the political process, including governments and parties, to centralize their coordination of media relations, which are increasingly geared toward one charismatic and media-literate leader. The organizational structures of these social institutions is also moving in the direction of a more hierarchical and centralized type, with a growing amount of power, autonomy, and resources concentrated in the hands of a charismatic leader.<sup>168</sup> This is not to argue that charismatic leaders were not important before television, but the image-dominated environment and one-to-many architecture are particularly conducive to the personalization of power.<sup>169</sup>

Second, the negative influence of television watching on individuals' psychological health and well-being are well documented.<sup>170</sup> In the developed world watching TV has become

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<sup>166</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 197.

<sup>167</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 197, McNair, *An Introduction*, 116 and 206; Cook, "The Future of the Institutional Media," 197.

<sup>168</sup> Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb, eds., *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Blumler and Kavanagh, "The Third Age," 215; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, "The transformation of Political Communication," 48-50.

<sup>169</sup> Poguntke and Webb, *The Presidentialization of Politics*, 76-77.

<sup>170</sup> Tannis MacBeth Williams, ed., *The Impact of Television: A Natural Experiment in Three Communities* (London: Academic Press, 1992); Marco Gui and Luca Stanca, "Television Viewing, Satisfaction and Happiness: Facts and Fiction," Working Paper no. 167 (July 2009), Department of Economics, University of Milan - Bicocca.

one of the three most common activities, the other two being work and sleep.<sup>171</sup> At the same time passivity inherent in the process of media consumption contributes to the atomization of social connections, because most television watching happens at the expense of social interaction, and undermines civic life, which in itself is a political effect.<sup>172</sup> As for audience participation in the public discourse, the best promise of the unidirectional media were letters to the editor, phone calls to a local radio show, and the Oprah Winfrey-style talk shows on TV, which after all are limited by material constraints in terms of actual audience contribution.<sup>173</sup> The growing negative perception of politicians and journalists, shrinking numbers of those who are voting, political apathy and declining levels of trust in democratic institutions and organizations (with the exception of Scandinavia, and until recently, Russia) are also very real phenomena.<sup>174</sup> Given that the majority of people now obtain political information through some form of mediated communication, the effects of the media on civic participation cannot be completely discarded.

And finally, “we continue to live with *and to depend upon* (emphasis in original) dizzyingly huge and opaque media complexes,”<sup>175</sup> and political actors with high stakes in the political processes (national and global) “are acting on the assumption that there *are* (emphasis in

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<sup>171</sup> Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>172</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>173</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, “The Third Age,” 177-178, and 203-221; Catherine Squires, “The Black Press and the State: Attracting Unwanted (?) Attention,” in *Counterpublics and the State*, Asen and Brouwer, 131.

<sup>174</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 244-245; Swanson and Mancini, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy*, 272-273; Cook, “The Future of the Institutional Media,” 185; Buchanan, “Mediated Electoral Democracy,” 371-375; McNair, *An Introduction*, 21-25; Diana Owen, “The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement in the United States,” in *The Internet and Politics: Citizens, Voters and Activists*, ed. Sarah Oates et al. (London: Routledge, 2006), 30.

<sup>175</sup> Goode, *Jürgen Habermas*, 98.

original) effects sufficient to justify substantial expenditure on time and resources”<sup>176</sup> therefore media effects on the social and political process can hardly be rendered negligible. Indeed, as practice shows, failure to comply with “media logic” and communicate effectively in the mediated environment costs politicians dearly, for “what does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind.”<sup>177</sup>

To sum it up, monological mass media of the analogue, industrial era, with a one-to-many type of architecture, may not be autonomous malevolent actors, as some scholars portray them to be, but they “set the stage” for all social and political processes, and even in the established democratic societies the way this ‘stage’ is structured favors individuals, organizations, and institutions at the top of power hierarchies.

#### The “Second Media Age”: the Internet<sup>178</sup>

The introduction, and mass diffusion by the late 1990s, of the internet has added new dimensions to already complex mass communication infrastructure of the late 20th century: millions of connected computers formed a transnational horizontal network that allowed individuals to interact in one-to-one and many-to-many modes, create content, and participate, defying time and space, in self-selected virtual communities.<sup>179</sup> When the commercial potential of the network, which had been initially limited to a handful of university campuses, was recognized, companies of all sorts had invested in the “speed, scale, content, and complexity” of

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<sup>176</sup> McNair, *An Introduction*, 41-42.

<sup>177</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 241; for political parties failing to comply with “media logic” see McNair, *An Introduction*, 108, on the British Left.

<sup>178</sup> Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

<sup>179</sup> Sonia Livingstone, “Critical Debates in Internet Studies: Reflections on an Emerging Field,” in *Mass Media and Society*, Curran and Gurevitch, 12.

the new multimedia system.<sup>180</sup> The abundance of new multimedia products “extended the realm of electronic communication into the whole domain of life, from home to work, from schools to hospitals, from entertainment to travel.”<sup>181</sup>

Mass expansion of the digital communication environment, especially after the arrival of Web 2.0 with its advanced interactive capabilities, brought “the change of paradigm of the relationship with information”<sup>182</sup> for all political actors, media business, and for their audiences, *exacerbating*, not eliminating, the trends discussed in the previous section.<sup>183</sup> The established mass media actors were among the first ones to enter the new lucrative market, which led to the convergence of traditional media with the new digital environment and borrowing by the former of the practices of communication modes of the latter.<sup>184</sup> WebTV emerged, internet broadcasts became available on cell phones, and newspapers and radio stations established a substantial presence on the internet, often with elements of video broadcasts and direct links to horizontal networks. At the same time the gatekeeping status of professional journalists in the sphere of reliable and politically relevant information was further challenged by digital media and citizen journalism, forcing media professionals to be more accommodating of the wants and needs of an audience, or even to establish partnerships, integrating information and audience commentary

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 9; Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 394-395.

<sup>181</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 394.

<sup>182</sup> Gustavo Cardoso, “From Mass to Networked Communication,” in *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, Papathanassopoulos, 131.

<sup>183</sup> Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, “The New Media and Our Political Communication Discontents: Democratizing Cyberspace,” *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 1 (2001): 1-13.

<sup>184</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 252; Michael Kackman et al., *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

into the mainstream of professional journalism.<sup>185</sup> Unable to compete with the 24-hour news broadcasts, print journalists adopted a new role of commentators and analysts of events, as opposed to reporting.<sup>186</sup> Thus, in the digital age, old mass media have undergone a significant change in the ways information is produced, delivered and marketed, and have evolved in the direction of greater interactivity and multi-platform compatibility.<sup>187</sup>

For established political actors the digitalization of communication meant more opportunities to communicate with the audience directly, bypassing journalistic hostility.<sup>188</sup> At the same time, the increasingly chaotic communication environment meant more adjustment to the new conditions, more competition for audience attention, and, therefore, further professionalization of political communication, with the ever-looming need for greater control over information flows that grew increasingly uncontrollable, because of the decentralized and open architecture of the network that accommodates a potentially unlimited number of communicating subjects. Political actors of all stripes have adjusted their communication strategies to include self-communication on the internet: they set up their websites, blogs, *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts, disseminate targeted political messages, and quickly adopt every new

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<sup>185</sup> Mark Deuze, "What is Journalism? Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered," *Journalism* 6, no. 4 (2005): 455-456; Linda Steiner and Jessica Roberts, "Philosophical Linkages Between Public Journalism and Citizen Journalism," in *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, Papathanassopoulos, 199; McNair, *An Introduction*, 12.

<sup>186</sup> Tumbler, "Democracy in the Information Age," 110; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 112-113.

<sup>187</sup> Kackman, *Flow TV*, 1.

<sup>188</sup> Tumbler, "Democracy in the Information Age," 101-104; Blumler and Gurevitch, "The New Media and Our Political Communication Discontents," 5-6.

digital communication trend for the purposes of fundraising, image-making and self-promotion.<sup>189</sup>

But the biggest change digital networks brought to the public at large, was in terms of the relationship with time, space, information, and politically meaningful communication. The key improvement can be characterized as an increased autonomy of individual and collective social actors vis-a-vis the institutions of society, and, in the case of teenagers, parental authority.<sup>190</sup> Mobile and internet communication and software innovations provided technical opportunities for people not only to consume information offered by the mass media, but also to produce and share things they were passionate about and enjoyed doing.<sup>191</sup> Internet users filled cyberspace with texts, pictures, and videos of their own production, as well as began organizing and collaborating in loose associations with others in ways no one previously expected them to: they began volunteering their time and knowledge to open-source projects of high social value, such as Wikipedia, Linux, or NASA's maps of craters of planet Mars, they digitized classic books, they reported from areas struck by natural or man-made disasters, and coordinated their activity to resolve real-world problems, like finding a carpooling partner, or cleaning garbage from a neighborhood. Most of these collaborative efforts defied the neoliberal theory of economic behavior, demonstrating that human motivation cannot be reduced to material interest, but also involves the need to be appreciated, feel connected with others, be generous, and so on.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> McNair, *An Introduction*, xviii; Owen, "The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement," 30-34; Luke March, "Virtual Parties in a Virtual World: The Use of the Internet By Russian Political Parties," in *The Internet and Politics*, Oates et al., 136-162.

<sup>190</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 8; Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 7; Mizuko Ito et al., *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning With New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 340.

<sup>191</sup> Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*; Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

This newly discovered autonomy of individual members of the audience had another dimension to it, namely, the scale.<sup>193</sup> Most socially significant internet-mediated projects became possible because thousands of people were willing to donate a few hours, or even minutes, of their time to a particular cause. The resulting aggregate energy, or what Clay Shirky calls “cognitive surplus,” is a new, previously unavailable, social resource that can potentially be directed to all kinds of locally and globally significant issues with tangible social and political consequences.<sup>194</sup> The emergence and growing incidence of social mobilization in the form of social movements and protest activity coordinated through the internet and mobile phones is one of the most vivid manifestations of the politically significant potential of the network.<sup>195</sup>

Scholars of communications and politics, as well as early internet enthusiasts recognized this civic potential, the empowering “new freedom to act in concert and in public.”<sup>196</sup> As the evidence of actual internet uses began arriving, the early optimism of the late 1990s gave way to more cautious and even pessimistic conclusions, and there were serious reasons for pessimism.<sup>197</sup> First, powerful actors, such as states and corporations sought to subvert or limit the internet’s freedom of association and discussion, and did so effectively due to the greater availability of resources.<sup>198</sup> Second, from early on, the process of the diffusion of the internet was characterized

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<sup>193</sup> Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 23; Livingstone, “Critical Debates in Internet Studies,” 13.

<sup>194</sup> Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 27-29.

<sup>195</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 251-251; Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 221-228.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>197</sup> Livingstone, “Critical Debates in Internet Studies,” 11.

<sup>198</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *The net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012); Erica Johnson and Beth Kolko, “E-Government and Transparency in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparison of National- and City-Level e-Government Web Sites in Central Asia,” *Digital Icons* 3 (2010): 15-48. Deibert et al., *Access Denied*; Deibert et al., *Access Controlled*; Florian Toepfl, “Managing Public Outrage: Power, Scandal, and New Media in

by unevenness within and across nations, following national and global patterns of economic and social stratification. Thus, North America and other developed countries have been ahead of the entire world in terms of the mass availability of new technologies; in the same manner, race, class, gender, age, education, and other factors will persist in defining the availability of patterns throughout the world.<sup>199</sup> Consequently, based on the available cross-national data, some scholars have argued that further diffusion of the internet will exacerbate the existing inequalities, advantaging early adopters and disadvantaging those who arrive later, and especially those for whom new technologies remain unavailable.<sup>200</sup>

Scholars have also voiced serious concerns regarding the nature of the effects internet communication can have on social capital and social cohesion, as well as on the quality of information coming from the public. There were arguments about the dehumanizing effects of the internet, and the inferior quality of interaction, compared to face-to-face communication, which it facilitates. The internet, these authors argue, will cause the further alienation of people from each other and more fragmentation of attention and discourse, so it is rather unlikely that the internet will make up for the decline of civic engagement in democratic countries, not to mention the authoritarian ones.<sup>201</sup> Moreover, the unrestricted multiplicity of voices will produce cacophony, where everybody is allowed to speak, but no one listens, and money again will

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Contemporary Russia,” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 8 (2011): 1301-1319; Etling et al., “Political Change in the Digital Age.”

<sup>199</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 383, and 402; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 139-175.

<sup>200</sup> Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>201</sup> N.H. Nie and L. Erbring, *Internet and Society: A Preliminary Report* (Stanford: Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, 2000); E. Uslander, “Trust, Civic Engagement and the Internet,” Paper presented at the European Consortium of Political Research (Grenoble, 2001), quoted in Oates et al., *The Internet and Politics*, 4-5; Robert Kraut et al., “Internet Paradox: a Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-being?” *American Psychologist* (September, 1998): 1017-31, quoted in Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 387; Craig Calhoun, “Community Without Propinquity Revisited: Communications Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere,” *Sociological Inquiry* 68, 3 (August 1998): 373-397.



dominate the ability to speak and be heard.<sup>202</sup> There is also a problem of the structural weakness of online publishing, because only the well-funded and well-organized professional media can offer a serious alternative to the power of governments and corporations, conducting quality investigations and defending themselves in courts.<sup>203</sup>

The main concern of the civic-minded scholars, however, is that the logic of money and power that structures modern societies will dominate over the mobilizing potential of the internet, and the elites of the present will find ways to control the discourse in cyberspace, whether through the ownership of its infrastructure, or through filtering and structuring its content.<sup>204</sup> As B.A. Williams and Delli Carpini put it,

Optimistically we believe that the erosion of elite gatekeeping and the emergence of multiple axes of information provide new opportunities for citizens to challenge elite control of political issues. Pessimistically we are skeptical of the ability of ordinary citizens to make use of these opportunities and suspicious of the degree to which even multiple axes of power are still shaped by more fundamental structures of economic and political power.<sup>205</sup>

These are all valid and well-grounded arguments that constitute the core of the current debate around the effects of the new technologies on society and politics. One aspect of the internet research that should be pointed out, and that the present study accounts for, is the incomplete, unfinished nature of the technological complex that we call “new technologies” with the internet at its center, and the problem this incompleteness creates for researchers. The internet has had the fastest rate of penetration compared to any other communication medium in human

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<sup>202</sup> Eli Noam et al., *The Internet: Still Wide, Open, and Competitive?* Internet issue brief no. 1, (August 2003), Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, quoted in Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 234, and 239; R. Davis, *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), quoted in Blumler and Gurevitch, “The New Media and Our Political Communication Discontents,” 4.

<sup>203</sup> The ideas of Neil Netanel, quoted in Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 236 and 261.

<sup>204</sup> Calhoun, “Community Without Propinquity Revisited”; McChesney, “The Media System Goes Global”; Etling et al., “Political Change in the Digital Age.”

<sup>205</sup> Williams and Delli Carpini, “Monica and Bill all Time and Everywhere,” 1209, quoted in Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 257.

history.<sup>206</sup> As technologies grew more sophisticated and affordable, the internet gradually became the platform that changed every dimension of human experience on the micro-level of daily practices: it changed the way people communicated with each other, obtained information, constructed meaning, and interacted with the media. All these changes were gradual, co-evolving with the technology, with human needs and skills for using this technology, but these micro-level changes affected the culture and the macro-level politics of societies. The internet of the early 1990s, at the early stage of penetration, with a few hundred thousand early adopters located primarily in the developed world, is a completely different social phenomenon compared to the internet, which connects a third of the global population, as we know it today.<sup>207</sup> The *processual* nature of this change, as discussed in chapter one, implies that all conclusions scholars make about the interaction of power, technology, and society must be considered as *tentative*. For example, while the ‘digital divide’ between developing and developed countries still persists, gender difference in the use of the internet was almost disappearing by the end of the century, while by 2011 the rate of internet penetration has already been much higher in the developing world than in the developed.<sup>208</sup>

Similarly, the initial concerns of the asocial, atomizing nature of virtual communication were refuted by later research that confirmed the existence of a connection between virtual and real-world communities and the fundamentally social nature of online communication.<sup>209</sup> Although the dominant type of social ties that exist online are weak ties, virtual communities

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<sup>206</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 382.

<sup>207</sup> International Communications Union (ITU), <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/facts/2011/material/ICTFactsSeeFigures2011.pdf> (accessed 8, 2012).

<sup>208</sup> ITU; Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 382.

<sup>209</sup> Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*; Barry Wellman, ed., *Networks in the Global Village* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), quoted in Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 387-389.

exhibited a substantial degree of reciprocal supportiveness and, when needed, mobilization, that made possible new forms of political expression, the so-called new social movements.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, online communication provides “the opportunity of social links for people who, otherwise, will live more limited social lives, because their ties are increasingly spatially dispersed.”<sup>211</sup> Thus both older people and younger people (under 15) are benefiting from the Net and increasingly acquiring the necessary skills to be able to use it.<sup>212</sup> There is also a generational difference in how children of the digital age use, and, therefore, shape, a medium they have been born with, compared to those who had to learn it later in life.<sup>213</sup>

Furthermore, the latest study of link distribution based on mathematical methods, a new and promising approach to internet studies, has shed light on the ways internet users ‘solve’ the problem of information overload. It turns out that a certain structure can be discerned in the abundance of internet messages that does not allow internet users to succumb to anarchy. There are few highly visible sites that are read by many, but there are also “clusters of moderately read sites” that “provide platforms for vastly greater number of speakers that were heard in the mass-media environment.”<sup>214</sup> These clusters are created through a “system of peer review by information affinity groups, topical or interest based.”<sup>215</sup> Participants in the clusters are intensely engaged with a particular topic and filter a wide range of statements and opinions, the most interesting and worthy of which are transmitted to broader online publics and ultimately can

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<sup>210</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 15; Owen, “The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement,” 34-35.

<sup>211</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 389.

<sup>212</sup> Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 31-38 and 98.

<sup>213</sup> Ito et al., *Hanging Out*; Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 60-61.

<sup>214</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 242.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

make it to the mainstream public. Online communication is not entirely norm-less; on the contrary, users of all ages establish communication norms in their virtual communities that serve as additional criterion of peer-review.<sup>216</sup> This type of information circulation and filtering is different from the one that was common in the mass media, where a small number of gatekeepers transmitted messages to an audience that was “many orders of magnitude larger.”<sup>217</sup>

Unfortunately, the emergence of new, sophisticated forms of elite control of virtual space cannot be completely ruled out, but it is important to remember that we must compare the democratizing effects of the internet with democracy as facilitated by traditional mass media, which was discussed in the previous section, and not with some imagined ideal situation.<sup>218</sup> Considered from this perspective, the networked public sphere has three main advantages: the internet is the medium of active users, it is decentralized, and its structure is open and, crucially, neutral, at least for now.<sup>219</sup> It makes the work of would-be controllers much harder. It enables a communication environment that has a different set of qualities compared to the one structured around the traditional mass media, and provides the technical capacity for the development of a new set of communication practices that change the daily behavior of individual people and, ultimately, a culture of societies. It normalizes the practices of speaking in public and double-checking the information that comes from professional communicators.<sup>220</sup> The networked public sphere does not exist separately from the mass media public sphere, but interacts and coexists

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<sup>216</sup> Ito et al., *Hanging Out*, 342; Yuri Misnikov, “How to Read and Treat Online Public Discussions Among Ordinary Citizens Beyond Political Mobilization: Empirical Evidence From the Russian-language Online Forums,” *Digital Icons* 7 (2012): 1-37; Thien, “The Struggle for Digital Freedom of Speech,” 53-56.

<sup>217</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 209.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 240; Blumler and Gurevitch, “The New Media and Our Political Communication Discontents,” 5.

<sup>220</sup> Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 61; PEW Research Center, press-release from 09.12.2010; Owen, “The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement.”

with it, encompassing a wider range of human interaction, including a private one. It offers a normatively more attractive alternative space for public discourse and unconstrained action, which is structurally less biased in favor of present-day elites, and encourages creativity and self-expression. As Yochai Benkler put it, the qualitative change that takes place in societies is “represented in the experience of being a potential speaker, as opposed to simply a listener and voter. It relates to the self-perception of individuals in society and the culture of participation they can adopt . . . The practice of producing culture makes us all more sophisticated readers, viewers, and listeners, as well as more engaged makers.”<sup>221</sup>

### The Internet, Self-Expressive Politics, and Political Activism

The popular distrust of traditional political institutions and lack of popular enthusiasm for traditional political processes does not imply the complete depoliticization of societies; on the contrary, there are signs that social and political mobilization in the world is quite significant, but what has changed is the nature of political opinion expression and participation, with new repertoires emerging and gaining popularity. People seek to act in the world around them and make it better, but they prefer to do so directly, focusing on single-issue projects that are often local and immediate. They mobilize community support, but do so outside the channels of mainstream politics, for which they have very low trust.<sup>222</sup> Young people in particular favor more participatory and direct forms of political attitude expression.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 213 and 275.

<sup>222</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 245-246.

<sup>223</sup> Owen, “The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement”; Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 157-175.

Changing socio-economic conditions in post-industrial societies, the development of post-material values<sup>224</sup> and the culture of individual autonomy have all contributed to the shift in the patterns of political participation, but the development of digital networks has provided technical capability for these new repertoires. Some of these new forms of protest, like joining a chain letter, organizing a flash mob, creating digital political parodies, or *Google Bombing*<sup>225</sup> were directly enabled by new media, while others, more traditional protest forms, have acquired new forms.<sup>226</sup> For example, the occupation of physical spaces and peaceful demonstrations as a form of protest have a long history, but in modern times a type of street protest has emerged, where protesters occupy or swarm symbolic places of power (Wall Street, the WTO), or perform other symbolic actions that challenge power not physically, but symbolically. These protest actions often contain elements of the festival with creative and performative self-expression, the roots of which can be traced back to the counterculture of the 1960s, and are coordinated through the internet. The symbolic power of the occupation is increased, if similar protests take place in different localities simultaneously, which modern technologies allow to organize.<sup>227</sup> Other modern symbolic gestures of solidarity include wearing a t-shirt, or colored ribbon, and, most recently, posting symbols of a protest (the same ribbon) on a profile in social networks.<sup>228</sup>

Apart from these instances of active mobilization, the new media environment has changed “both the manner of distribution and the content of political news” and, more

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<sup>224</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>225</sup> Affecting *Google* search results so that a search of a particular word or name that is being “bombed,” on *Google*, would reveal some dirty, or damning key words.

<sup>226</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 157-175.

<sup>227</sup> Graham St John, “Protestival: Global Days of Action and Carnivalized Politics in the Present,” *Social Movement Studies* 7, no. 2 (September 2008): 167-190; Owen, “The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement,” 35.

<sup>228</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 161.

importantly, “contributed to a shift in the nature of political engagement and activation.”<sup>229</sup> The internet environment is very welcoming of political opinion expression: multiple individual and organizational communicators continually encouraging internet surfers to share their opinion, while intricate information-sharing tools allow users to do so relatively fast and easily. Public opinion expression, therefore, is no longer limited to electoral voting; individuals can vocalize their opinion about virtually every news piece that interests or concerns them.<sup>230</sup> The ability to do so has opened new avenues for individuals and groups to interpret the political world, and to respond by producing their own content. Virtually anybody with the inclination to do so can participate in political newsmaking. Citizen journalism has become a factor in many instances of public opinion formation, social mobilization, and protest.<sup>231</sup> Low-cost video production that is available now on a wide range of personal devices, including cell phones, cameras, and iPads, allows bloggers to produce highly entertaining, and uncensored, content that attracts online viewers and sometimes even breaks through to the mainstream media. In fact, any person armed with a cell phone can potentially become a valuable witness to any event, and can tell the story of this event by simply posting a video on *YouTube*. Quite unsurprisingly, *YouTube* videos are increasingly found in the center of political scandals and even trigger protest movements.<sup>232</sup>

As online media were gaining greater public legitimacy, adults began actively using online sources to supplement their mainstream media “news diet,” while young people are

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<sup>229</sup> Owen, “The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement,” 21.

<sup>230</sup> Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, 157-175.

<sup>231</sup> Goldstein, “The Role of Digital Networked Technologies”; Mary Joyce, *The Citizen Journalism Web site ‘OhmyNews’ and the 2002 South Korean Presidential Election*, research publication no. 2007-15 (Cambridge: The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University), <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications> (accessed September 5, 2012); Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things*, 121-134.

<sup>232</sup> Stephen Clarke and Joseph Bamat, “Leaked Video Shows US military Killing of civilians, Reuters Staff,” *France 24*, latest update July 27, 2010, <http://www.france24.com/en/20100406-leaked-video-shows-us-military-killing-civilians-reuters-staff> (accessed February 2, 2013); Aday, *Blogs and Bullets*, 20; Toepfl, “Managing Public Outrage.”

inclined to trust online media even more than traditional outlets.<sup>233</sup> There has been a generational shift in news production as younger people with the necessary technical skills are hired for the newsrooms of online news companies.<sup>234</sup>

The new, hybrid communicative environment in which internet users exist has radically *reconfigured the allocation of the political* in societies. Political activity on the internet is not confined to the resources that were specifically developed for political purposes; instead, any virtual community, where people are drawn by the commonality of their interests, can become a potential site of mobilization. For example, in South Korea in 2008 one of the main sites of the mobilization of teenage girls, who protested the Korean government's lift of a ban on imports of U.S. beef, was a fan site of a popular boy band, where political issues incidentally crept in among the discussions of the cute singers' haircuts.<sup>235</sup> Similarly, during the Iranian protests bloggers with as diverse interests as Iranian poetry, Persian literature, and religion have posted links to political opposition sites.<sup>236</sup> The virtual and the real interaction in the new media environment are not opposite forms of social communication, where one inhibits the other, but rather two closely related ways of connecting with others. Pop culture, creativity, entertainment, and politics, none of these are now completely separate activities: as Diana Owen put it, "the division between political and social interests can be just a click away."<sup>237</sup> Under ripe conditions, and given the internet's scale, the cultural and creative can translate into the political.

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<sup>233</sup> PEW Research Center, press release from 09.12.2010; Owen, "The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement," 23-24.

<sup>234</sup> Owen, "The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement," 24.

<sup>235</sup> Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*, 31-38.

<sup>236</sup> Aday, *Blogs and Bullets*, 16.

<sup>237</sup> Owen, "The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement," 34.



Thus, by enabling new modes of connection among people, the new media environment has dramatically changed the nature of political activation, and the ways in which political movements take shape.<sup>238</sup> Given the absence of internet filtering, political information travels freely through the internet's digital vistas, often eliciting a response in the form of expressed opinion, reposts, forwarded letter chains, and participation in spontaneous flash mobs, or in a protest movement. Political activists and civil society organizations use all available digital tools to spread their message, recruit more sympathizers, and organize and coordinate their protest actions and achieve impressive results: some scholars argue that Obama's 2008 election campaign was a social movement in itself, and was largely facilitated by the internet.<sup>239</sup> People who have been once mobilized for a particular cause often develop solidarity bonds and afterwards stay in contact, thus building social capital, learning from experience, and adapting to the changing political conditions. The established connections among different groups allow them to mobilize quickly should another opportunity arise.<sup>240</sup>

In societies with hybrid regimes, such as Russia, where political competition formally exists, but elections are essentially defeat-proof, civil society institutions are weak and their formation is discouraged, protest activism can take forms of direct action, where people's health can be endangered, as well as symbolic forms.<sup>241</sup> In Russia in the 2000s, though there was no massive coherent bottom-up pressure for change, the protest activity was not completely absent: in fact, civic activism of various kinds has increased, and this has happened exactly during the

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<sup>238</sup> Owen, "The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement"; Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*.

<sup>239</sup> Etling et al., "Political Change in the Digital Age," 8; Goldfarb, *Reinventing Political Culture*, 93.

<sup>240</sup> Owen, "The Internet and Youth Civic Engagement," 34-35.

<sup>241</sup> Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.

economic “stabilization” that took place during Putin’s second presidency, and the repertoires of symbolic protest, such as demonstrations and marches, have also expanded considerably.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes*, 218; Tatyana Vorozheikina, “Samozashchita kak pervyi shag k solidarnosti,” *Pro et Contra* 12, no. 2-3 (March-June, 2008): 6.

## CHAPTER 3

### RUSSIAN POLITICS AND MEDIA

Russia, as a political system, represents what scholars call a “hybrid regime” that combines elements of political competition and authoritarianism.<sup>243</sup> The state and its bureaucratic apparatus constitute the core power center of this system, ensuring that no business or interest groups prevail over the interests of the system. This approach means a substantial concentration of power in the hands of a few elite members, many of whom control key sectors of the economy.<sup>244</sup> This approach to state management in Russia is now commonly referred to as the “vertical of power.”

The key difference between classical authoritarianism and the elites is that the formalities of a normal democratic process are still observed: the Constitutional term limits of a president are observed, there are elections in which “there is some real sense of political competition,”<sup>245</sup> there is a parliament, opposition parties, and an independent judicial system. There are also institutions that are meant to ensure the participation of civil society in domestic affairs, such as Federal and regional Public Chambers, and youth movements, such as *Nashi* (“Ours”) and *Molodaia Gvardiia* (“Young Guard”), organized under the auspices of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs. All of these institutions, however, can be put in quotation marks, because the main reason they exist is to reassure the stability and reproduction of the existing regime: to

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<sup>243</sup> Lev Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma,’” *The Russian Public Opinion Herald* 101, no. 3 (July-September, 2009); Robertson, *The Politics of Protest*.

<sup>244</sup> Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma’”; El’mar Murtazaev, “Gvardiia Putina: Kak Rabotaet Vertikal’ Vlasti,” *Forbes*, August 27, 2012, <http://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya/vlast/102436-gvardiya-putina-desyat-klyuchevyh-biznes-figur-putinskoi-vertikali> (accessed February 2, 2013).

<sup>245</sup> Robertson, *The Politics of Protest*, 3.

contain political competition, to manage elections and elite ambitions, and to channel discontent, but *not* to serve their primary democratic functions.<sup>246</sup>

The role of the Parliament in Russia was reduced to that of a body that formally legitimizes the Kremlin's policies and functions as a place where various unofficial economic and power structures lobby for their interests.<sup>247</sup> Opposition parties, or the so-called "systematic opposition," are loyal to the party of power, United Russia, and serve as lightning rods to channel the oppositional feelings of the population. Genuine democratic opposition to the Kremlin was systematically marginalized, subdued, and discredited to create an artificial situation of no alternative to the existing regime. Elections are held to sustain the visibility of the democratic process, but throughout the 2000s, serious violations in favor of United Russia and incumbent presidential candidates have been registered at all stages of the electoral process, including electoral administration, campaigning, voting, and counting.<sup>248</sup> Courts, especially in high-profile cases, are taking the side of the regime, and are a part of the mechanisms of exclusion of society from the political process. Moreover, a gradual confluence of various power branches with business interests have led to the formation of a single poorly differentiated government regime that is sometimes referred to as "Putinism."<sup>249</sup>

Most of the existing civil society institutions, at least those supported and funded by the government, are not accountable to civil society, but are run by Kremlin-appointed bureaucrats

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<sup>246</sup> Gudkov, "Priroda 'Putinizma,'" 6-21; Robertson, *The Politics of Protest*.

<sup>247</sup> Gudkov, "Priroda 'Putinizma,'" 19; Denis Volkov, *Perspektivy grazhdanskogo obshchestva v Rossii* (Moscow: Levada Center, 2011), 37, [http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/levada\\_civil\\_society\\_2011\\_report.pdf](http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/levada_civil_society_2011_report.pdf) (accessed March 3, 2013).

<sup>248</sup> Stephen White, "Elections Russian-Style," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 4 (June 2011): 531-556.

<sup>249</sup> Lev Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory: Elektoral'nyi protsess pri avtoritarnom rezhime* (Moscow: Levada Center, 2011), 4, <http://www.levada.ru/books/rossiiskie-parlamentskie-vybory-2011-goda> (accessed February 2, 2013); Gudkov, "Priroda 'Putinizma,'" 16.

and essentially represent dependent ersatz-formations. There are a number of Western-sponsored organizations, but their work is severely restricted. Pro-Kremlin youth movements emerged in 2005 as a reaction to the domestic protests of pensioners and various youth groups, as well as to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.<sup>250</sup> Although originally announced as being antifascist, they soon alarmed observers with the methods they were using in “fighting fascism” and with the choice of their targets: mass parades with demonstrations of loyalty to the president, harassment of diplomats from unfriendly countries, and defamation of opposition leaders as “traitors” and “enemies of the people.”<sup>251</sup> During the round of presidential and parliamentary elections of 2007-2008, it became clear that *Nashi* was primarily aimed at defending the regime from its own people who might disagree with the election results: shock troops of *Nashi* members were brought to Moscow so, if needed, they could “occupy every public square in front of every public building of importance,” so that “CNN would have a nice picture with the Kremlin in the background.”<sup>252</sup>

Ideologically, the regime promoted and built its legitimacy on compensatory nationalism—a combination of great power rhetoric and anti-Western sentiment, in which the regime was rendered a protector of the motherland from the fifth column—liberals, agents of the West, who seek to undermine Russia.<sup>253</sup> Similarly to the institutional space that is filled with ersatz organizations, the political platform of the regime is filled with ersatz statements about

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<sup>250</sup> Robert Horvath, “Putin’s Preventive Counter-Revolution’: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Specter of Velvet Revolution,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no.1 (January 2011): 1-25; Robertson, *The Politics of Protest*, 194-197; Anna Nemtsova, “Young Russia Rises,” *Newsweek*, May 27, 2007.

<sup>251</sup> Nemtsova, “Young Russia Rises”; Oleg Maslov, Alexandr Prudnik, “Chem ‘Nashi’ antifashisty otlichaiutsia ot fashistov Benito Mussolini?” *Ezhenedel’noe Nezavisimoe Analiticheskoe Obozrenie*, July 5, 2005, <http://www.polit.nnov.ru/2005/07/05/fascism/> (accessed February 2, 2013).

<sup>252</sup> Robertson, *The Politics of Protest*, 196.

<sup>253</sup> Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma,’” 10; Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium: a Eurasian Story* (Washington, D. C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 208.

economic and political modernization, and fighting corruption. This was especially the case during Dmitri Medvedev's presidency, which at first gave hope to many liberals in Russia and which resulted in disappointment and disillusionment: as became clear after Putin's reelection, modernization rhetoric covered up the only real, undeclared political program of the regime that is self-protection and retention of power domestically.<sup>254</sup>

It would be an impossible simplification to argue that "Putinism" is a product of one man's effort to restore the authoritarian power of the state over a reluctant society; on the contrary, the above-described "imitative democracy"<sup>255</sup> and the curtailing of democratic principles were taking place with the assistance of elite circles, including the media elite, and with the silent approval of the population. The consolidation of national consensus around Putin was a consequence of the economic hardships of the 1990s and a longing for order, as opposed to the social, economic, and political chaos that the 'democratic transition' turned out to be for the majority of the population. In the mid 2000s Putin's approval ratings were astronomically high—70 to 80 percent—both among the elite circles and among the population at large.<sup>256</sup>

In general, Putin's relationships with different groups of elites, and with the general population, was based on a series of non-official deals: in exchange for compliance and non-involvement with politics, Putin's government refrained from "examining the privatization process, through which the oligarchs acquired their wealth," and offered other professional and status benefits to various influential groups, particularly media and artistic elites, as well as the

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<sup>254</sup> Gudkov, "Priroda 'Putinizma'"; Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 4.

<sup>255</sup> Beumers et al., *The Post-Soviet Russian Media*, 10.

<sup>256</sup> Stephen White and Ian McAllister, "Putin and His Supporters," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no.3 (2003): 383-399; Tina Burrett, "The end of Independent Television? Elite Conflict and the Reconstruction of the Russian Television Landscape," in *The Post-Soviet Russian Media*, Beumers et al., 81-82.

leaders of the so-called systematic opposition.<sup>257</sup> The population was given almost complete freedom of private life and the opportunity to make money and careers in exchange for non-involvement with politics. Frightened by the economic crisis of 1998, Russians readily ceded democratic freedoms, which they did not have a chance to fully appreciate anyway, for the promised order and economic stability that the strong state was to guarantee.<sup>258</sup>

The establishment of state control over mass media, particularly television, was a big step towards the goal of “construction of the federal vertical of power.” Like Nixon, Putin had a chance to experience the power of media on his own: first, when in less than a year he was transformed from an unknown bureaucrat into a trusted leader of the country; and second, when media magnates, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, who earlier helped to create his image using their media assets, unleashed media wars against him in order to serve their own economic and political interests. These media wars, at the beginning of Putin’s first term persuaded him that power can as easily be taken away from him as it was given to him, and he decisively turned to the strategy of state control of the media.<sup>259</sup>

Interestingly, before the takeover of Gusinsky’s NTV, Putin again suggested a deal to the journalists: he offered a dismissal of all criminal charges against the channel, if the journalists stopped criticizing the war in Chechnya and reporting on corruption in the Kremlin. There was a split among the journalists on the issue of the extent to which the channel should oppose the president and his state-building project, with some journalists supporting ideas of order and state

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<sup>257</sup> Burrett, “The end of Independent Television?” 82; Boris Dubin, “Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir zhitelei Rossii: plasticheskaia khirurgiia sotsial’noi real’nosti,” *The Russian Public Opinion Herald* 83, no. 3 (May-June, 2006): 40-42; Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 10; Andrei Arkhangel’skii, “Prognul’sia pod nas,” *Ogonek*, October 24, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc-rss/1797323> (accessed February 2, 2013).

<sup>258</sup> White and McAllister, “Putin and His Supporters,” 384-385; Vorozheikina, “Samozashchita,” 19.

<sup>259</sup> Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia*; Burrett, “The end of Independent Television?” 73.

consolidation, and others valuing freedom of speech. As a result, the channel was taken over by Gazprom, and a group of its journalists in favor of freedom of speech left the channel.<sup>260</sup>

Beyond co-opted groups of business and media elites, who have grown cynical and pursue their own self-interest, the regime relies on many other organizations that provide professional services and extract benefits from such cooperation: these are, for example, public relations personnel and individuals who manage Kremlin youth groups. There is also a group of ideological supporters—intellectuals, journalists, public personalities, who shared the Russian version of political conservatism, seeing Russia as a civilization with its own logic of development, based on the strong state, Orthodoxy, and traditionalism (in all spheres, including morals), and a mission of its own. The motivations of this group can be less selfish, and more intellectual, although varying from individual to individual.<sup>261</sup>

In the Soviet Union the dominant mass medium was print: newspapers and magazines, with over 80 percent of the population reading them daily, weekly, or monthly.<sup>262</sup> By the early 2000s, however, television had become the dominant mass medium in the country, and has remained so ever since (see Figure 1). Putin did not engage in total censorship of the entire mass media system; rather, control was selective and proportionate to the audience size and the type of programming: news and thematic programs on Channel One, Russia, Rossiia24, and NTV have become nothing more than translations of the government's agenda; in the large-circulation print media the censorship is weaker, with the exception of the official government daily, *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*. There is also a small number of uncensored liberal and opposition media outlets that

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<sup>260</sup> Burrett, "The end of Independent Television?" 75-81.

<sup>261</sup> Aleksandr Verkhovenskii and M. G., "Konservatizm v salonakh i v bol'shoi politike: vzgliad liberala," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 37, no. 5 (2004), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2004/37/ko5.html> (accessed March 3, 2013); "Manifest' ot Mikhalkova," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, October 27, 2010, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/article/2010/10/27/539669-quotmanifestquot-ot-mihalkova.html> (accessed March 3, 2013).

<sup>262</sup> Dubin, "Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir," 35.



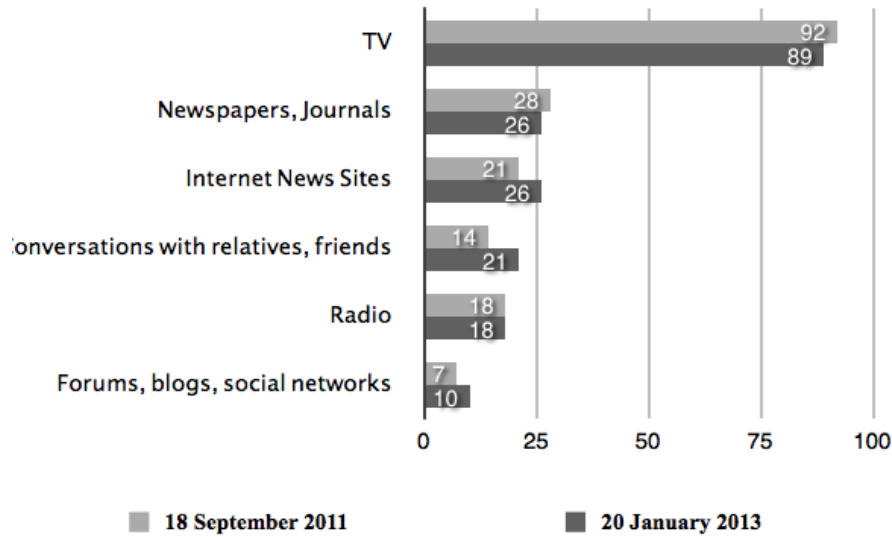


Figure 1. Which sources do you use most often for news and information? Source: FOM Public Opinion Foundation

include quality analytical periodicals, radio stations, newspapers, and television channels (including internet television) that do not occupy a central role in the overall Russian media system,<sup>263</sup> but, as will be discussed later, are crucial for the circulation of alternative public discourses.

Most of the media programming, however, falls between the state-controlled core and liberal-oppositional margins, and represents advertising-driven commercial entertainment media, among them television channels, music radio stations, global glossies, TV guides, and tabloids. According to a Russian media scholar, Olessia Koltsova, this sector closely resembles that of the United States, with its pop-star industry, reality and comedy shows, etc., and takes up a disproportionate part of the Russian media system.<sup>264</sup> Here most scholars agree that commercial interests of media businesses coincided with the government's desire to depoliticize Russian

<sup>263</sup> Olessia Koltsova, "Media, State, and Responses to Globalization in Post-Communist Russia," in *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*, ed. Paula Chakravatty and Yuezhi Zhao (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 62-63; Gudkov, "Priroda 'Putinizma,'" 10.

<sup>264</sup> Koltsova, "Media, State, and Responses to Globalization," 63.

journalism and push the media out of covering issues of public interest.<sup>265</sup> Regional television stations, controlled by the governors appointed from the Federal center, underwent a similar transformation.<sup>266</sup> “There is no strict censorship in Nizhniy Novgorod,” writes a journalist and local political activist, “there is simply no need for one. During the last several years all political talk-shows disappeared from screens.”<sup>267</sup>

In the journalistic profession the ethic of neutrality and impartiality never developed fully to become a virtue: even the journalists of the independent NTV channel at the time it was owned by Gusinsky “subverted objectivity of their reporting to the political and business needs of their channel, and its owner.”<sup>268</sup> When the state became the main powerful actor, they responded to its political demand, usually presented indirectly “through hints and indirect indicators,” that encourage self-imposed censorship among journalists.<sup>269</sup> Moreover, top media managers, in the manner of other elite groups, have become part of the system and have long since traded professional independence for vested business interests.<sup>270</sup> This is why media in Russia may be attending well to market demand and power interests, but the very understanding

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.; Elena Vartanova, “The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics,” in *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, Hallin and Mancini, 134; Beumers et al., *The Post-Soviet Russian Media*, 22; Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma,’” 10; Dubin, “Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir,” 39, and 43.

<sup>266</sup> Koltsova, “Media, State, and Responses to Globalization,” 63.

<sup>267</sup> Konstantin Baranovskii, “Zapiski kandidata,” *The New Times* 9 (194), March 14, 2011, <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/35926/> (accessed June 14, 2013).

<sup>268</sup> Burrett, “The end of Independent Television?” 76-77; Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia*, 159-160; Sarah Oates, “The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 8 (December 2007): 1279-1297; Vartanova, “The Russian Media Model,” 135-139.

<sup>269</sup> Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia*, 160.

<sup>270</sup> Dubin, “Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir,” 40-41; Vartanova, “The Russian Media Model,” 141-142.

of public interest and “social demand” is largely absent.<sup>271</sup> Observers note that in Russia the “media independence and low level of freedom of speech”<sup>272</sup> paradoxically coexist.

The reason these deals and bargains with the elite and society became possible, and the introduction of media censorship did not cause a public outcry was that Russian society, even its most enlightened members, had a very weak idea about the social and political workings of the democratic political process, of how to organize and formulate group interests, and of the democratic political channels of these interests’ representation.<sup>273</sup> Frightened by the prospect of economic insecurity, society quickly ceded many of its freedoms to the familiar institution of the state. Moreover, throughout the 2000s the country experienced stable economic growth, which kept the active population busy making money and enjoying stability. The incomes of public employees and pensioners were also increasing.

Many Russians were not blind to the essential weakness of Putin’s regime and realized that the promised stability happened not so much due to his economic achievements, but to the timing of high oil prices. There was an understanding about the need to modernize the economy and to reduce dependency on natural resources. Russians also felt in their own experience that almost all of the much-needed social reforms were poorly managed, insufficient, or even completely stalled. Opinion polls consistently revealed the low performance grades the population gave to the government in almost all important social spheres, such as health care, police lawlessness, corruption, ethnic tensions, the worsening ecological situation, etc.<sup>274</sup> Due to high corruption levels and a lack of the rule of law, people in all, even the most economically

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<sup>271</sup> Vartanova, “The Russian Media Model,” 139; Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia*, 160.

<sup>272</sup> A. Pankin quoted in Vartanova, “The Russian Media Model,” 139.

<sup>273</sup> Vorozheikina, “Samozashchita,” 19.

<sup>274</sup> Boris Dubin, “Instituty, seti, ritualy,” *Pro et Contra* 12, no. 2-3 (March-June, 2008): 33-34; Richard Rose, “Is Russia Becoming a Normal Society?” *Demokratizatsiya* 16, no. 1 (Winter, 2008): 80-81.

successful strata, felt vulnerable to the arbitrary administrative abuse of power, and were uncertain about their future, or the future of their business and economic achievements.<sup>275</sup>

Nonetheless, the regime, which is deeply corrupt, inherently weak, and struggles to modernize the economy, or enact efficient social reforms kept prevailing in elections with the passive approval of the population. The reason for this was that a truly independent and critical civil society was hardly ever encouraged in the country throughout its history; it was considered to be a threat, either to the ideology, as in the Soviet Union, or to the ruling elite, as in post-Soviet Russia. On the contrary, the Kremlin has been tapping paternalistic attitudes to the state to ensure Putin's (and Medvedev's) popularity.<sup>276</sup> As a result, social institutes were failing, but popular demand for properly working ones was not formed, so the population kept solving its problems through informal connections and bribery, which is a problem inherited from Soviet times.<sup>277</sup>

Russian sociologist Boris Dubin calls this condition 'adapting society' where people, instead of organizing in an attempt to change social conditions for the better, are constantly adapting to the existing situation, which has been the case for all social groups, including the business, artistic and media elites discussed above, and journalistic community, out of fear of losing what one already has.<sup>278</sup> The intelligentsia has long been distancing itself from politics, because the electoral law rendered voting meaningless—the winner in all elections was

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<sup>275</sup> Lev Gudkov et al., "'Srednii klass' as if: mneniia i nastroeniia vysokodokhodnoi molodezhi v Rossii," *The Russian Public Opinion Herald* 95, no. 3 (May-June, 2008): 27-41, <http://polit.ru/article/2008/08/26/middleclass/> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>276</sup> Dubin, "Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir," 46; Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 64.

<sup>277</sup> Richard Rose, "Getting things done in an antimodern society: social capital networks in Russia," in *Social Capital. A Multifaceted Perspective*, ed. Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Serageldin (Washington, D. C.: The World Bank, 2000), 147-171.

<sup>278</sup> Dubin, "Instituty, seti, ritualy," 33-34.

predefined—and stayed at home on election days. For urban office workers, politics was discredited even as a topic of conversation: those who tried to talk about it were automatically considered to be losers and social outcasts.<sup>279</sup> The majority of the population, almost two-thirds, lived in the socially and economically depressed countryside, and voted for the “party of power” in the paternalistic hope that the government would help them in their dismal condition.<sup>280</sup>

Lack of political debate, democratic political culture in general, and subdued social organizing led to the shortage of social solidarity bonds and scarcity of trust. If Western scholars worry about lowering levels of trust in Western democracies, in Russia trust for state institutions, especially for the Duma and political parties, is one of the lowest in the world, even if for different reasons.<sup>281</sup> The shortage of institutionalized trust leads to social atomization, fragmentation, and the shortening of social connections: people trust only their immediate family members and friends, while distrusting distant “others,” which does not contribute to the solidarity necessary for organized social protest.<sup>282</sup>

Thus, at the core of the problem of political change in Russia, and the relative stability of the existing regime, is an inert and atomized society in which even the most active and successful strata have adopted the mental tactic of noninvolvement with social processes; avoided mutuality, responsibility, and accountability;<sup>283</sup> and failed to make a connection between their economic and social grievances, the systematic characteristics of Putin’s regime, and their

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<sup>279</sup> Lev Danilkin, “Andrei Soldatov i Irina Borogan: ‘Poiavliaiutsia serye zony, kak v sovetskoe vremia, prosto dyra,’” *Afisha*, October 14, 2011, <http://www.afisha.ru/article/soldatov-borogan-on-fsb/> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>280</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 9-10.

<sup>281</sup> Vladimir Shlapentokh, “Trust in Public Institutions in Russia: the Lowest in the World,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2006): 153-174.

<sup>282</sup> Dubin, “Instituty, seti, ritualy,” 33-34; Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 62-63.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 28; Gudkov et al., “‘Srednii klass’ as if.”

personal non-involvement with politics.<sup>284</sup> Mass dissatisfaction with many aspects of life in Russia, instead of galvanizing political action, transformed into what Yuri Levada called “dispersed social dissatisfaction,” which had no specific target: neither particular politicians, nor the regime as a whole, nor the defense of particular rights and institutions.<sup>285</sup> At the same time, the majority of the population, 60-75 percent, believed that average people had no way of affecting the political and economic situation in the country.<sup>286</sup>

In the situation of the unfinished institutional modernization of the mass media, first of all, television, plays an important role as a regulator of social relationships, filling the gap between the state and society, which in democratic countries is filled with working institutions. Scholars refer to this phenomenon as the “virtualization of politics,”<sup>287</sup> when the lack of institutionalized political process is compensated through the creation of its visibility by means of top-down mass media communication. Moreover, both the state and the society grew dependent on mass media: the state needs it for self-legitimization and control of public opinion, while the society—for the feeling of belonging to the imagined community of the nation.<sup>288</sup>

The logic of virtual politics implies that the version of constructed social reality transmitted by the state-controlled media would be the one that is convenient for the regime and justifies its policies. For example, the promoted images of national unity were all negative: against an external “enemy” (the West and its agents), or against “Chechen terrorists,” or against

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<sup>284</sup> Gudkov et al., “‘Srednii klass’ as if.”

<sup>285</sup> Yuri Levada, “‘Chelovek nedovol’nyi?’” *The Russian Public Opinion Herald* 85, no. 5 (September-October, 2006): 12-17.

<sup>286</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 4; Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma,’” 11, and 16.

<sup>287</sup> Dubin, “Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir,” 40; Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>288</sup> Dubin, “Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir.”

the Orange Revolution (against Ukrainians, Georgians, etc.), so that the population's dissatisfaction could be directed at constructed images of enemies outside of the system.<sup>289</sup> For the national idea, instead of emphasizing modern civic virtues, such as law-based society, multiculturalism, and modernization, the Kremlin chose a mixture of often contradictory mythologems borrowed from Russia's imperial and Soviet history, locating the "positive" national reference point in a mythologized past, rather than in a future, for which an attractive image was lacking.<sup>290</sup> TV programming was filled with nostalgic shows and patriotic spectacles, such as military parades in Red Square, and the figure of the president was cast as a symbolic embodiment of stability and national unity against the nation's "enemies." Altogether 90 percent of the news-related airtime on all state television channels was allocated to coverage of the government, the personality of the president, and the United Russia party.<sup>291</sup>

There is, however, another side to the state control of mass media and public discourse in Russia that renders the situation less sinister. Television watching remains one of the top three most popular activities in Russia, especially in the countryside, where the size of income limits choices, but, as audience studies show, the effects of this watching are not necessarily those desired by those who control television.<sup>292</sup> As Ellen Mickiewicz, a long-time researcher of the Russian media points out, "all of the strong-arm techniques undermining the democratic free press . . . have been implemented with near-total incomprehension of how the public really does

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<sup>289</sup> Levada, "Chelovek nedovol'nyi?" 17.

<sup>290</sup> Dubin, "Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir," 33-37; Levada, "Chelovek nedovol'nyi?" 17.

<sup>291</sup> Marlène Laruelle, *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 185-191; Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, "Commemorating the Past/Performing the Present: Television Coverage of the Second World War Victory Celebrations and the (de)construction of Russian Nationhood," in *The Post-Soviet Russian Media*, Beumers, et al., 137-156; Dubin, "Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir," 38.

<sup>292</sup> Ellen Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20, and 32.

process the news and the likelihood that many of these coercive moves and homogenizing efforts will turn out to have been counter-productive.”<sup>293</sup>

Despite the considerable effort to distract the population from politics, news watching in Russia consumes an equal amount of time as entertainment. For the majority of the population the feeling of vulnerability drives them to news screens “to be better prepared for unexpected changes in the political and economic environment.”<sup>294</sup> As Mickiewicz found, the lack of diversity on state controlled television irritates the audience, because, as it turned out, Russians recognize the importance of a diversity of viewpoints, which, again, provides information for better survival strategies. Moreover, diversity of viewpoints is seen as a human right and an entitlement that should be implemented.<sup>295</sup> The government’s failure to do so on the state-controlled television causes rejection. Thus, Mickiewicz writes:

[T]he news is particularly badly presented and condescending, and its format is the least likely to be assimilated by viewers; the election stories are particularly disliked and are generally seen as confused and repellant. The younger generation has a very negative view of television on the Soviet model and, even though they didn’t see it, their assessments are harshly negative.<sup>296</sup>

In 2006, only 22 percent of the population believed that the Russian media, including print and radio, could be trusted, while 62 percent were skeptical of the media, or did not trust them at all.<sup>297</sup> These findings suggest that the communicative gap between the regime and the Russian citizens has increased, and that the growing discrepancy between people’s everyday experience and the rhetoric of the media produces effects opposite to those desired—because the unpleasant reality can be embellished only so far.

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<sup>293</sup> Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia*, 5-6.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-205.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>297</sup> Dubin, “Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir,” 34.



## The Internet in Russia and the Dynamics of the Political Process

The internet in Russia has been the country's most dynamically growing mass medium: between 2011 and 2012, the year of intense protest activity, the internet penetration in Russia grew from 45 percent to 57 percent of the population, most of whom (81 percent) are young and middle-aged people (18-44).<sup>298</sup> If in 2009 big cities, particularly Moscow and St. Petersburg, were dominating Russian cyberspace, with internet users almost twice as high as in the rest of the country, today the gap has significantly shrunk.<sup>299</sup> As for the main online activities, Russians mainly searched for information (75 percent) and entertainment (48 percent), and communicated (63 percent). Importantly, entertainment does not dominate internet use, as might be expected: it roughly equals the next most popular usage, that is "to follow the news," and the latter increased from 37 to 43 percent in one year. In addition, 23 percent explicitly say that they use the internet to "understand what is going on in the country and abroad."<sup>300</sup> Sociologists from the Levada Center created the following "portrait" of the Russians who follow the news and analysis online: they are managers, professionals, entrepreneurs, and students, mostly men, aged 25-40, have a college degree, live in Moscow, and have a high consumer status.<sup>301</sup>

The Russian blogosphere is a dynamic place for self-publishing, staying in touch with friends, and joining communities of interest. The Russian blogosphere is changing dynamically along with technological innovations in the computer industry, and if in 2009, for example,

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<sup>298</sup> For 2011, see FOM Media, *Rossiiia oflain*; for 2012, see Levada Center press release from November 12, 2012, <http://www.levada.ru/12-11-2012/57-rossiyan-polzuyutsya-internetom> (accessed March 5, 2013); for the age of internet users, see VTsIOM, *Internet segodnia* (Moscow: VTsIOM, 2012), [http://www.r-trends.ru/netcat\\_files/File/DUZhNIKOVA\\_VTsIOM.pdf](http://www.r-trends.ru/netcat_files/File/DUZhNIKOVA_VTsIOM.pdf) (accessed March 6, 2013).

<sup>299</sup> Alexanyan, "Social Networking on Runet," 2; FOM Media, *Internet v Rossii: Metodika i osnovnye rezul'taty issledovaniia*, publication no. 32 (Moscow: FOM Public Opinion Foundation, Winter 2010-2011), [http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/zima2010\\_11](http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/zima2010_11) (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>300</sup> Levada Center Press Release from 12 November 2012.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

*LiveJournal* was dominating the Russian blogosphere, with all popular bloggers using it,<sup>302</sup> now the most “populated” platforms are the social networking services *Vkontakte* (grew between 2011 and 2012 from 37 million to 45 million monthly users),<sup>303</sup> and *Odnoklassniki* (Classmates), while the most dynamically growing are *Facebook* and *Twitter*.<sup>304</sup> As of March 2013, among the top 50 blogs, 33 were Twitter accounts.<sup>305</sup>

As was discussed in Chapter 1, it is the people who, using technology, make a difference, not technology *per se*. Indeed, in Russia patterns of appropriation and the use of blogging and networking sites were quite different from, for example, those in the American blogosphere, which again confirms that national context matters. For example, Russian internet users spend almost twice as much time using social networking sites compared to the global average, 6.6 and 3.7 hours per month accordingly.<sup>306</sup> Russians also tend to read more blogs—70.8 percent of internet users, compared to, for example, 60.3 percent in the United States—and are more eager to join new social networks—71 percent, compared to 43 percent of Americans.<sup>307</sup> As a result, as of 2012, 82 percent of Russian internet users have joined social networks, with 62 percent of them having more than one profile on different networks.<sup>308</sup>

Quantitative analysis of linking behavior in the Russian blogosphere conducted by Harvard’s Berkman Center revealed more of its structural characteristics. There is a well defined

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<sup>302</sup> Alexanyan, “Social Networking on Runet,” 5.

<sup>303</sup> According to *LiveInternet.ru*.

<sup>304</sup> VTsIOM, “Internet segodnia.”

<sup>305</sup> Yandex, Poisk po blogam: Reiting blogov runeta. Top 50, <http://blogs.yandex.ru/top/rss/> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>306</sup> Alexanyan, “Social Networking on Runet,” 6.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>308</sup> VTsIOM, “Internet segodnia.”

Politics and Public Discourse cluster in the Russian blogosphere, which reflects a wide range of political viewpoints that are present in Russian society: there is a cluster of Nationalists, of Democratic Opposition, a Business/Economics/Finance cluster, Social and Environmental Activism cluster, and two Public Discourse clusters, one primarily linking to the Russian media and another to international sources.<sup>309</sup> Importantly, only bloggers from democratic and nationalistic clusters were affiliated with offline organizations, while most of the active Russian bloggers preferred “to declare an independent intellectual posture, and eschew group affiliation.” This is in contrast, for example, with U.S. bloggers who were “willing, if not proud to declare affiliation with a recognized collective political identity.”<sup>310</sup> Thus the popular distrust of politics in Russian society extends to the blogosphere, which confirms that national context and local political culture shape behavior, even on the Internet.

Another key finding of the study was that the two most popular services the politically engaged bloggers preferred to link to user-generated information sources, *YouTube* and Wikipedia, and independent professional media, such as *Lenta.ru*, *Kommersant*, and the BBC Russian Service, although the government-sponsored RIA Novosti, one of the most popular news websites in RuNet, was also popular. This finding is important for my discussion below of the liberal-networked public sphere and its connection to the liberal media: although government sources are present, the media mixture that bloggers link to is much “healthier” than anything offered by television.

Western scholars have been looking with hope at the dynamic social environment of the Russian blogosphere as a potential locus of mobilization and political change. But research

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<sup>309</sup> Bruce Etling et al., *Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization*, research publication no. 2010-11 (Cambridge: The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University), 19, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

findings were consistently ambivalent: there was indeed a lot going on in the blogosphere, but with no significant offline effects. One of the central arguments the literature on the Russian internet came up with was that “Russia is *shaping* the internet, rather than Russian society being *shaped by* the internet,”<sup>311</sup> which implies that the above mentioned ills of Russian political culture, particularly the inertia of the population, dominate the online behavior of the internet users.<sup>312</sup> The networks are not breaking the established communication patterns, but rather grow into them, thus representing a “centaur-like combination of ‘old’ and ‘new.’”<sup>313</sup> In addition, several studies found that the government is successfully able to control digital public space and the scandals that emanate from it.<sup>314</sup>

These findings lead some scholars to argue for two opposite, but equally extreme, points of view about the role of the Russian internet: a Soviet-style underground that represents a parallel cultural universe and allows individuals to adapt to the reality they dislike, but fail to act upon,<sup>315</sup> and that of a quasi-independent space that facilitates passive communication “within the framework of the existing ideology,” or “endless commenting without achieving even relative consensus and making real decisions.”<sup>316</sup> All authors seem to agree on the compensatory and escapist functions of the Russian internet.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Oates, “Comrades Online?”

<sup>312</sup> Fossato et al., *The Web that Failed*; Oates, “Comrades Online?”; Floriana Fossato, “Discussion: Is Runet the Last Adaptation Tool?” *Digital Icons* 1, no. 1 (2009); Dmitri Golyenko-Vol’fson, “Sotsial’nie seti v nesetevom sotsiume: o Biopolitike, istorizme i mifologii russkikh sotsial’nikh setei,” *Digital Icons* 1, no. 2 (2009): 101-113; Panchenko, “Integratsiia Internet-SMI”; Diana Schmidt, “Hard to Connect: Transnational networks, non-governmental organizations and the Internet in Russia,” in *The Internet and Politics*, Oates et al., 163-182.

<sup>313</sup> Dubin, “Instituty, seti, ritualy,” 31-32.

<sup>314</sup> Toepfl, “Managing Public Outrage”; Robert Ortung, “Russian Blogs: Tool for Opposition and State,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 28, October 2, 2007; Fossato et al., *The Web that Failed*.

<sup>315</sup> Fossato, “Discussion”; Gudkov et al., “‘Srednii klass’ as if?”; Dubin, “Instituty, seti, ritualy,” 31-32.

<sup>316</sup> Panchenko, “Integratsiia Internet-SMI,” 111-112; Dubin, “Instituty, seti, ritualy,” 33.

These arguments, however, do not allow for even the theoretical possibility of the political events that took place in 2011-2012. They are also not supported by the quantitative analysis of linking behavior on the Russian internet that was outlined above. As I will try to demonstrate in this research project, the Russian internet functions more like a public sphere, particularly since almost a quarter of the population follows the news there. It is not a Habermasian space, with “rationality, seriousness, and following the rules of public discussion.”<sup>318</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, this kind of space hardly exists even in most democratic countries, not to mention the Russian state-controlled public space. Rather, it is a space where different counter-publics encounter each other and the regime, and where the power and counter-power clash and enact social transformation. This transformation may be very slow—certainly not along the logic of *networks to institutions*—and not in the most desired direction, but transformation does happen, and below I will outline some of its directions.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, every society has counter-power forces in it, which resist the order that tries to dominate people. They may not be well organized, or have a distinct alternative ideology, but they resist domination on an everyday basis, because both domination and resistance are constitutive of human societies. The example with people’s attitudes to state-controlled television is illustrative here. Information, and control of information, has become the main power-sustaining tool of the regime, which renders any unsanctioned discourse potentially harmful, and, therefore, counter-systematic. The Russian internet is the only truly mass public space where the regime cannot unanimously define the discourse in a top-down manner—the architecture of the network does not allow for that—which, as will be demonstrated in Chapters

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<sup>317</sup> Gudkov et al., “‘Srednii klass’ as if.”

<sup>318</sup> Panchenko, “Integratsiia Internet-SMI,” 111.

5-7, makes the Russian internet probably the most contested public space, where power and counter-power clash regularly. The ultimate goal of this clash is influence on people's minds, since more law-based and orderly state-society relations are rendered problematic. I will talk more about the scope, nature, and functions of what I call the liberal-networked public sphere in Chapter 5, but here I would like to elaborate on the processual nature of changes in the Russian socio-political system that factored in to the protests.

The Russian hybrid regime as discussed in the previous section was not a monolithic and immutable entity that, once created, remains unchanged. On the contrary, the regime has been constantly changing and solidifying, which affected both its human capital and performance. For example, scholars and journalists have been pointing out the “negative selection” and diminishing quality of professionals that serve the regime, because the main criteria of selection in the government have been loyalty and a thick skin, rather than professionalism.<sup>319</sup> Outstanding personalities are certainly not welcome, with a preference given to unassuming and mediocre executors of the will of others. Combined with the growing informational isolation, which has also been gradually increasing, this contributes to the decreasing quality of the regime's decisions and its alienation from the wants and needs of the society, which does not contribute to popularity.

Thus, starting from 2009, the Levada Center registered a downward trend of mass attitudes: between 2009 and 2011 the number of those who characterized the situation in the country as “establishment of order” reduced from 42 to 29 percent of the population, while more people in 2011 believed that the disorder and chaos around them were increasing, 26 percent, compared to 14 percent in 2009. Popular evaluation of the economic situation has changed from

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<sup>319</sup> Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma,’” 12; Anton Oleinik, “Negativnyi otbor vlast'iu,” *Vedomosti*, August 6, 2012, [http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/2537741/negativnyi\\_otbor\\_vlastyu](http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/2537741/negativnyi_otbor_vlastyu) (accessed February 2, 2013).

“growth and development” in 2007 to “stagnation” in 2011.<sup>320</sup> In 2011, ratings of the Putin-Medvedev tandem remained relatively high, 64 percent and 57 percent accordingly, but were at a historically low mark—Putin’s approval rating was 61 percent at the beginning of his presidency.<sup>321</sup> As for the support of the “party of power,” United Russia, the administrative mechanisms of opinion management in 2011 failed to produce the same spike in attitudes and expectations as they did in four previous campaigns, which, as sociologists concluded, can mean that many Russians lost their trust in the ability of the country’s leadership to improve the socio-economic situation.<sup>322</sup>

The social base of the regime has also changed: in the early years of Putin’s presidency people supporting him represented an “all but perfect cross-section of the electorate as a whole”<sup>323</sup>; in 2011-2012 the “portrait” of a typical supporter of Putin was a 50+ woman with a low level of education, who lives in a small town, or in the countryside.<sup>324</sup> Putin and his regime lost the support of the active and educated minority, and the regime’s base moved to the economically depressed countryside.<sup>325</sup> This alienation did not necessarily guarantee the mobilization of educated people, but provided a fertile ground for social unrest.

In terms of grassroots organizing, the situation has also changed. Starting from the 2005 protests of pensioners against the monetization of their benefits, the number of protests that were a form of self-defense against the government for not obeying its own laws or reforms, had

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<sup>320</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 5.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-8.

<sup>323</sup> White and McAllister, “Putin and His Supporters,” 396.

<sup>324</sup> Mikhail Zakharov, “Passivy Putina,” *Polit.ru*, September 11, 2012, <http://www.polit.ru/article/2012/09/11/putin-rating/> (accessed February 2, 2013).

<sup>325</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 9.

increased. Protesters were the people who ran the risk of suddenly losing their homes, like deceived shareholders, or soldiers' mothers, who defended their children's right to live.<sup>326</sup> The novelty of these protests was that people were representing their own interests, and were asserting their rights in the framework of traditional democratic procedures, by appealing to the law and demanding that government and its bureaucrats observe it.<sup>327</sup> At first these movements were known mainly to internet users, but several years later they became the main subject of bottom-up agenda-setting from the internet to the traditional media. This was due first to the constant growth and expansion of the internet itself, as well as the increased convergence of traditional media with the digital space. The influence of the blogosphere particularly grew between 2009-2011, when it became a newsmaker in its own right (see Figure 2).

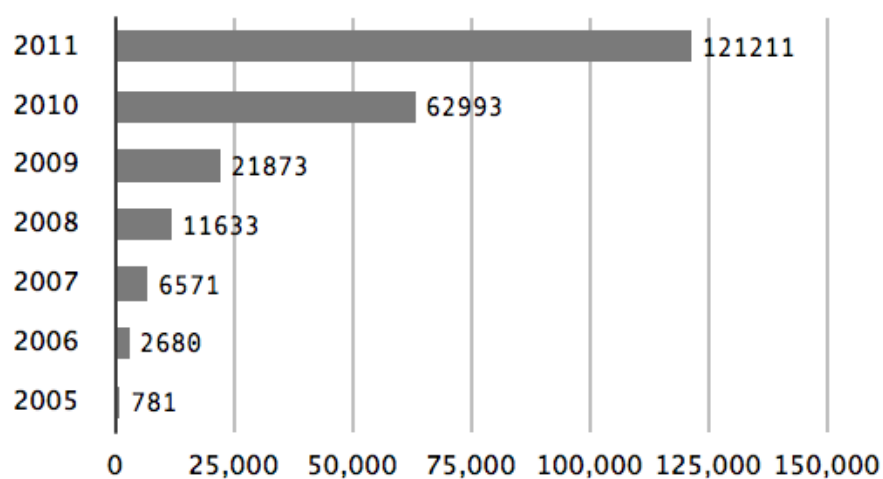


Figure 2. The dynamics of citing blogosphere materials in the mainstream media. Source: The Public.ru Library

More importantly, many movements that sprung up in recent years in terms of organization and goals represented what Manuel Castells called “new social movements,” internet-based social networks of activists organizing around specific issues that needed

<sup>326</sup> Vorozheikina, “Samozashchita,” 18.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 19.



immediate resolution.<sup>328</sup> For example, there are groups organized around healthcare related issues;<sup>329</sup> there are groups that emerged in reaction to specific natural disasters and tragedies, such as the 2010 fires and missing persons;<sup>330</sup> there are ecological movements and initiatives, most famously, the movement against an oil pipe next to Lake Baikal and for the protection of the “Khimki Forest”<sup>331</sup>—both resisted government construction projects—and “No Garbage Anymore,” a movement that was organized to make Russia cleaner and to promote a “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” approach to garbage disposal.<sup>332</sup> There are also movements organized in support of drivers’ rights, most popular among them is the “Blue Buckets” movement, which fights police corruption and the abuse of emergency rotating flashers by Russian public servants and people close to the Kremlin.<sup>333</sup> Most of these movements were self-defensive in a way that citizens organized to protect themselves, or their children, or their cities from the administrative arbitrariness and lawlessness of the state, or powerful commercial interests (which in Russia often coincide), and most claimed they were civic, issue-oriented organizations of activists, outside of “politics.”

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<sup>328</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 15; Volkov, *Perspektivy Grazhdanskogo Obshchestva v Rossii*.

<sup>329</sup> Sarah Oates, “From Parent to Protestor on the Post-Soviet Internet: Locating and Evaluating Political Web Spaces for Families of Children with Genetic Disabilities in Russia,” APSA 2010 Meeting Paper, [www.media-politics.com](http://www.media-politics.com) (accessed May 1, 2013); Elena Maltseva, “Health Care Crisis and Grassroots Social Initiative in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Review of European and Russian Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2011): 1-15; Just Help Foundation organized by doctor Elizaveta Glinka, <http://doctor-liza.LiveJournal.com/> (accessed May 2, 2013).

<sup>330</sup> Liza Alert, <http://lizaalert.org/>; Richard Boudreaux, “Anger Rages Amid Russian Fires,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704268004575417620623903874.html> (accessed August 5, 2012); *LiveJournal* community that was organized during the fires, <http://pozar-ru.LiveJournal.com/>; photographs by Alexander Chernavskiy, August 19, 2010, <http://www.demotix.com/news/415952/volunteers-fight-forest-fires-moscow-province#slide-1> (accessed August 5, 2012).

<sup>331</sup> Tatiana Klimova, “Damoklova truba,” Baikal TV, March 19, 2006, <http://as.baikal.tv/pages/programms/povorot/one.php?mat=524> (accessed February 2, 2013); Michael Schwartz, “Russia Approves Road That Will Run Through Forest,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2010.

<sup>332</sup> Website of the movement: <http://musora.bolshe.net/page/about.html> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>333</sup> Website of the movement: <http://ru-vederko.LiveJournal.com/492921.html> (accessed March 5, 2013).

In 2011 these grassroots initiatives were the most-covered events from the blogosphere in the traditional media (see Figure 3). This popularity with the media was partially because the two most visible movements, the ecological movement in defense of the Khimki Forest, and the Blue Buckets, along with their civic activism, used creative forms of symbolic street protest: Khimki Forest activists collaborated with musicians and organized concerts (Chapter 6), while the Blue Buckets organized flash-mobs and came up with other witty and humorous ways of expressing civic position (see Figure 4). In the short period of their existence, both movements commanded wide support among the population: 66 percent of Russians sympathized with the ecologists, and 60 percent of those familiar with the Blue Buckets movement sympathized with it.<sup>334</sup> These numbers are two to three times higher than support for the existing political parties.<sup>335</sup>

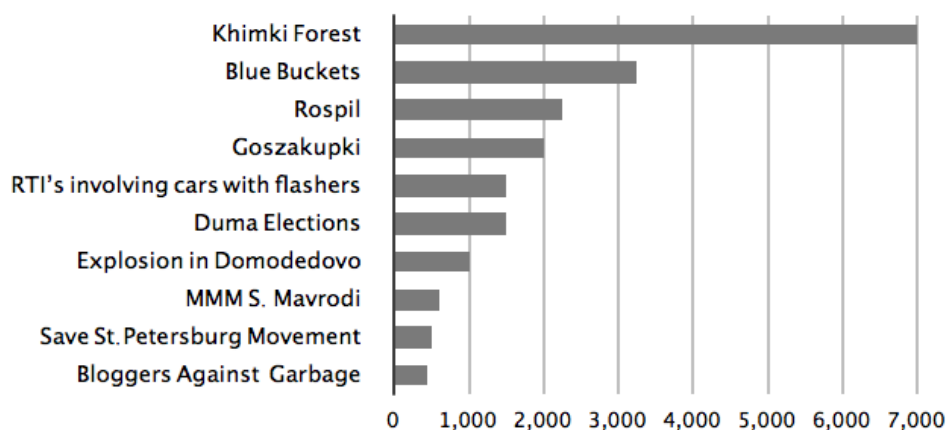


Figure 3. The biggest events of the Russian blogosphere in 2011 covered by traditional media.  
Source: The Public.ru Library

<sup>334</sup> Denis Volkov, *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie kak shans vykhoda iz politicheskogo krizisa* (Moscow: Levada Center, March 2, 2012), <http://www.levada.ru/02-03-2012/obshchestvennoe-dvizhenie-kak-shans-vykhoda-iz-politicheskogo-krizisa> (accessed March 5, 2013); Levada Center press release from July 28, 2010, <http://www.levada.ru/28-07-2010/moskovskaya-molodezh-ob-obshchestvennykh-initsiativakh-i-protestnykh-dvizheniyakh> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>335</sup> Denis Volkov, *Rossiiane ne gotovy golosovat' za oppozitsiiu* (Moscow: Levada Center, September 21, 2011), <http://www.levada.ru/21-09-2011/rossiyane-ne-gotovy-golosovat-za-oppozitsiyu> (accessed May 2, 2013).



Figure 4. Activists from the Blue Buckets movement, symbolic forms of protest. Activists organized flash-mobs using plastic blue buckets that look like emergency rotating flashers to express protest and stand for their rights to drive around cities on equal terms with “privileged” bureaucrats. Source: [http://banana.by/uploads/posts/2010-05/1272959403\\_34.jpg](http://banana.by/uploads/posts/2010-05/1272959403_34.jpg) and [http://loveopium.ru/content/2010/12/25\\_D6B5/20.jpg](http://loveopium.ru/content/2010/12/25_D6B5/20.jpg)

To sum up, if we look at the social and political developments in Russia in the last 15 years from the point of view of processes, we can see that on the macro-level of the Russian state there has been a pronounced trend of increasing consolidation of the power vertical and isolation of the regime from the population. The regime allocated considerable resources to the preservation of the status quo and elimination of the political opposition, including control over the mass media and simulation of political life. One example that illustrates the increased isolation is the Kremlin’s reaction to the pensioners’ protests and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine: the establishment of ersatz youth movements, whose activities were aimed at the protection of the regime from society.

The Russian population, just like its political elites, carried many characteristics of Soviet people into the post-Soviet period, for example, distrust of and aversion to “politics,” lack of social demand for properly working institutions, habitual use of informal methods, low political culture, and a willingness to constantly adapt to the existing situation. Russians tend not to believe that their participation can result in significant changes in the country. At the same time,

Russia is certainly not a closed country, and it is a market economy, so Russians have been adjusting to the rules of life in a competitive world, and some have even succeeded. In addition, as incomes have grown, people began traveling and studying abroad, gaining the idea of a Western lifestyle and post-material values.

The growing demand for the rule of law and for the protection of emerging private interests among the population often met with failing institutions and the growing appetites of corrupt bureaucrats, thus contributing to the increasing feeling of vulnerability and insecurity. Although there was no major public mobilization in the 2000s, public opinion about the economic and political situation in the country has been changing, and this change was not in favor of the regime. Civic activism during this time had a statistically negligible effect on society at large, so that to register the new trends in grassroots organizing, sociologists were conducting qualitative studies, interviewing the newly emerging civil society leaders.<sup>336</sup> Most of these social entrepreneurs, through personal experience, came to an understanding about the need for structural and political change to the system, which proved to be unresponsive to their needs.

Throughout the 2000s, the internet had become an essential tool of social and professional life for millions of individuals. Technologically the internet had undergone a series of transformations, starting from the technical characteristics of the connection that has greatly improved, to the greater availability to the population with lower income levels, to the matured “infrastructure” of cyberspace itself, with established online media outlets, social networks, and online payment systems, which meant that it could facilitate complex collaborative projects.

For many, the internet had become an alternative source of information about the political and economic situation in the country—by far the most popular online news resource, rbc.ru, specializes in business information (Appendix B). These small, micro-level changes should not

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<sup>336</sup> Vorozheikina, “Samozashchita,” 7; Volkov, *Perspektivy Grazhdanskogo Obshchestva v Rossii*.

be underestimated: the internet allowed more individuals to expand their life strategies: find jobs, run businesses, organize collaborative projects, self-publish creative work, donate to charity, travel, and participate in social activism. All these social and political changes were enough to provide the first protest for Fair Elections with leaders—people who had accumulated the experience of civic organizing and in 2011-2012 became active members of the opposition.<sup>337</sup>

Thus both the people and the regime had undergone change in the last decade, and this change has not been very harmonious: the regime has ossified and become almost completely impermeable to peoples' needs, while among the population there emerged a genuine demand for liberalization of the political system and for economic reforms (see Figure 5). This contradiction between the system and the people, an old Russian problem in the new socio-economic and technological context, pre-conditioned the protests, although it did not render them unavoidable.



*Figure 5.* Many protest banners expressed alienation between the regime and active parts of the population. Left: “You Do Not Even Imagine Us” Right: “Putin, WE ARE THE WAY WE ARE not because of you, but IN SPITE OF YOU!” Source: galumov.livejournal.com and <http://ucrazy.ru/foto/1324867283-luchshie-plakaty-s-mitinga-na-prospekte-saharova-24-dekabrya.html>

<sup>337</sup> Denis Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v kontse 2011-2012: istoki, dinamika, rezul'taty* (Moscow: Levada Center, September, 2012), <http://www.levada.ru/books/protestnoe-dvizhenie-v-rossii-v-kontse-2011-2012-gg> (accessed February 2, 2013).

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Most of the events covered in this study took place between February and December 5, 2011, the day of the first big protest in Moscow. The focus is on this early time frame because the goal of this project is to demonstrate the role of the internet in generating the public mobilization. Once the mobilization happened, the protests themselves lasted for over a year and are outside the scope of this study. In the meantime, some of the key aspects of mobilization related to the internet were not covered elsewhere, and, I believe, are important for our understanding the role of networked technologies. February 2011 was chosen because some events related to the public mobilization of 2011-2012 date back to then; an example of this is Alexei Navalny's internet campaign "crooks and thieves." It should be noted, however, that this date is also somewhat relative, because many other political and social events, regime failures, and grassroots campaigns with strong networking components took place earlier, shaped future protest leaders, and defined public reactions. February 2011 was chosen to limit the scope of the study on the one hand, but on the other to examine a period long enough to demonstrate the processual nature of mobilization.

The subject of this analysis is mediated public communication. In order to access the role of the internet in the 2011-2012 protest movement, I analyzed concrete events, phenomena, the behavior of individuals and groups of people, as they were reflected in their online communication behavior and in the mainstream media. In order to structure the research and choose the events, individuals, and groups to study, I used a number of primary and secondary sources, the most important among them being sociological, qualitative and quantitative, studies conducted by two independent groups of sociologists at the rallies and afterwards: studies by the

Levada Center<sup>338</sup> and by a group of independent scholars called *NII Mitingov* (Rallies Research Institute), headed by Alexandr Bikbov of Moscow State University and the Maurice Halbwachs Centre, École Normale Supérieure.<sup>339</sup> Because none of these studies explicitly concentrated on the role of the internet, I also used publications from the liberal media, for example *Kommersant*, *Echo of Moscow*, *Lenta.ru*, *Gazeta.ru*, and TVRain that covered and analyzed the movement online. And finally, I referred to the Russian version of the international selection of the “word of the year” organized by Mikhail Epstein, a linguist and philosopher from Emory University. This year a panel of linguists, writers, and cultural scholars selected the most important words and phrases in the Russian public sphere. The reference to the words of the year is important for the study of the public sphere and communications, because words are the main communication tool, and they give us an idea about the “emotional and intellectual state of the society” and its “symbolic capital.”<sup>340</sup>

The words were selected in several categories: individual words, colloquialisms, and the borrowed word of the year. For example, a pun invented by Alexei Navalny, “*RosPil*,” which means the Russian misappropriation of budget money, or “*Rokirovka*” (Swap) referring to the Medvedev-Putin swap, “*Partiia Zhulikov i Vorov*” (The Party of Crooks and Thieves), also coined by Navalny; “*Grazhdanin Poët*” (Citizen-Poet), a satirical project that gained popularity online; “*Nash durdom golosuet za Putina*” (Our Madhouse Votes For Putin), the title of the song that won Navalny’s competition—all of these words and phrases were selected as important in 2011. The “borrowed words” category was filled with communications-related terms:

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<sup>338</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*.

<sup>339</sup> Alexander Bikbov, “Metodologiya issledovaniia ‘vnezapnogo’ ulichnogo aktivizma (Rossiiskie mitingi i ulichnye lageria, dekabr’ 2011-uiaun’ 2012),” *Laboratorium* 4, no. 2 (2012): 130-163; other studies of the group can be found at <http://a.bikbov.ru/2012/11/nii-mitingov-vse-o-protest/> (accessed February 2, 2013).

<sup>340</sup> See Mikhail Epstein’s blog, <http://mikhail-epstein.livejournal.com/101049.html> (accessed March 5, 2013).

“*Tvitter*” (Twitter), “*Feisbuk*” (Facebook), “*Aifon*” (iPhone), “*Gadzhet*” (Gadget), “*Laikat*” (to “Like” something) and “*Aipad*” (iPad), all of which are now commonly used by Russians. The expression “*Vertikal’ Vlasti*” (Power Vertical) was chosen as the expression of the decade, followed by “*Sotsial’nye Seti*” (Social Networks). Interestingly, the judging took place in November 2011,<sup>341</sup> a month before the protests, but the winning words perfectly reflect the phenomena that were important for the mobilization and will be discussed in this thesis.

The task of analyzing the flow of communications and meanings in the modern information-rich and outlet-rich public sphere is somewhat daunting. Therefore, the question of the strategy of content selection is the key to a successful analysis. The majority of the existing studies of the Russian internet can be divided into two broad categories: the first consists of quantitative studies that paint a picture in broad brushstrokes and usually involve a large number of cases.<sup>342</sup> The second consists of studies that concentrate on one or several particular websites of political parties, prominent bloggers, civil society groups, or popular online news media, and either compare them with the traditional media, or with similar sites in different countries in order to assess the role of the Internet in the Russian political process.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Will Englund, “In Russia, Words Then Deeds,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 2011.

<sup>342</sup> See, for example, multiple studies conducted by The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University that are available online at <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications>; also, see Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski, “Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace,” in *Access Controlled*, Deibert et al.; Alexanyan, “Social Networking on Runet.”

<sup>343</sup> See, for example, March, “Virtual Parties in a Virtual World,” and Natalya Krasnoboka and Holli A. Semetko, “Murder, Journalism and the Web: How the Gongadze case launched the Internet News Era in Ukraine,” in *The Internet and Politics*, Oates et al.; Olena I. Goroshko and Elena Zhigalina, “Quo Vadis? Politicheskie kommunikatsii v blogosfere Runeta,” *Russian Cyberspace (Digital Icons)* 1, no. 1 (2009): 81-100; Panchenko, “Integratsiia Internet-SMI”; Oates, “From Parent to Protestor”; Vera Zvereva, “Kto-nibud’ etomu verit??”: Praktika chteniia i obsuzhdeniia novostei v Runete,” (guest lecture at the University of Bergen in the framework of the project, The Future of Russian Language Culture in the Era of New Technology, September 3, 2009), podcast and ppt presentation [in Russian] are available from [https://www.uib.no/rg/future\\_r/publications/podcasts](https://www.uib.no/rg/future_r/publications/podcasts) (accessed July 3, 2012).





Figure 6. Words of 2011. Source: Ogonek

The studies of both types have greatly informed this research project and contributed to my understanding of the Russian media environment and its peculiarities. For the purposes of my research, however, a large number of quantitative studies missed necessary details and information about where the protest discourse and protest behavior were located and how they became public, and if they did, what the scope of this publicness was. On the other hand, studies of individual websites, even if they were the websites of political parties or prominent bloggers, can hardly be sufficient for grasping the nature of the networked public sphere. As Oates rightfully noted, “[p]olitical discussion is not confined to any particular website or forum; rather political issues spread across the internet in a variety of locations and forms.”<sup>344</sup> Thus, people can be at the same time watching Citizen Poet, reading the oppositional *Kommersant*, or listening to the oppositional Echo of Moscow, encounter a piece of news on Lenta.ru about the debate

<sup>344</sup> Oates, “From Parent to Protestor,” 24.

between Novalny and deputy Evgenii Fedorov that took place on FinamFM, or encounter a video that has been reposted by some *Facebook* friend that records electoral fraud during the December 4 elections, and does it very vividly.

Instead of selecting individual websites, I selected concrete events and phenomena that, according to journalists and sociologists, affected the mobilization, or were signs of growing public tension. I used them as focal points to analyze the new information environment in which the social mobilization of 2011-2012 took place and the role of the internet and social networks in this environment. The approach I took in my analysis was to identify the origin, or the starting point of an event, and then trace the communication channels through which information about the event spread. For example, the slogan “the party of crooks and thieves” technically was born on a radio show, but turned into a meme on the internet, after a series of other offline and online events.

In order to trace events in the Russian media environment, I ran queries in *Yandex Blogs* (*blogs.yandex.ru*) and the Integrum database, two of the most complete sources of Russian-language media content to date. The *Yandex Blogs* search engine allows searches of Russian language user-generated content from the most popular Russian blogging platforms and social networks, including *Vkontakte* (37 million users monthly as of December 2011), and *LiveJournal* (19 million as of December 2011),<sup>345</sup> as well as microblogs, *Twitter*, forum postings, and commentaries posted to online media materials.<sup>346</sup> The only popular social network that *Yandex Blogs* does not cover for now is *Facebook*, but it seems that the available data is

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<sup>345</sup> TNS Media Research, “Web Index,” December 2011, <http://www.tns-global.ru/rus/data/ratings/index/> (accessed February 2, 2013).

<sup>346</sup> *blogs.yandex.ru* (accessed February 2, 2013).

sufficiently representative. *Yandex Blogs* also allows the user to set particular timeframes for queries, which was helpful for the purposes of this study.

For traditional media I used Integrum, a database that contains a body of texts produced by most contemporary Russian-language traditional media outlets, which includes print, broadcast, and online media. The database conveniently splits all materials into groups, depending on the type of media outlet in which they were published. For example, central print media are separated from regional news media; materials available on the websites of TV channels and radio stations are separated from those that were broadcast. Online media are also divided into those that are purely online-based and websites of central media outlets, usually containing digital copies of print materials and broadcast shows. The database allows the user to find out what media outlets were covering selected incidents, and in what format.

All searches were conducted in Russian with the use of keywords that are identified individually. In some cases, like in the case of *Twitter* comments, a representative random sample was selected to provide a feeling for the communication that took place on that day. In other cases, when reading the entire body of comments or publications was feasible, as in cases of leaked videos, or in the analysis of media channels through which the meme “the party of crooks and thieves” was diffused and popularized, I read the entire body of texts and provided a qualitative analysis of the communication data. Yet in other instances, when the corpus of data was large, for example, in the case of *LiveJournal* posts about alternative voting (over 70,000 pages), or discussions about observing elections (7,000 blog posts), I looked through a random sample of these posts, and provided a qualitative summary. In many cases the number of postings itself was illustrative enough of the phenomena being discussed.

The qualitative, or interpretive, approach to content analysis used in this study was informed by Klaus Krippendorff's text, which involves a close reading of the selected materials, and their rearticulation into new analytical narratives that will allow drawing conclusions "from available data to unobserved phenomena," and making specific inferences "from a body of texts to their chosen context."<sup>347</sup>

In his study of political scandals emanating from the internet in Russia, Florian Toepfl argues that "we should look at new media more as they function in tandem with other spheres of traditional mass media rather than as isolated forms of communication."<sup>348</sup> Indeed, this study also confirmed that a networked public sphere is tightly connected to the sphere of the liberal media: newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and TV channels, which provide coverage and analysis of those political events, that state-controlled television and other loyal media outlets do not cover, or report on with a strong bias in the regime's favor. Liberal media cover the events that emanate from the networked public sphere, while state-controlled media cover them only when they turn into a big media scandal that is hard, or impossible, to silence. The main function of the state media, particularly television, is the regime's promotion and construction in the public mind of an image of reality convenient for the regime. For this reason the hybrid liberal-networked public sphere and the public sphere of the state-controlled media greatly differ in quality and in substance of discourses that circulate in both of these spheres. In 2011, the liberal-networked public sphere was the place where public reflection and critical assessment of the political, social, and economic situation was taking place, where the new words and phrases of the year were coined and circulated, and where most of the events that ignited protests took

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<sup>347</sup> Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 2nd ed. (Sage Publications: London, 2004), 17 and 24.

<sup>348</sup> Toepfl, "Managing Public Outrage," 1315.

place, while the mainstream public sphere of the state TV served as a huge filter that ensured that these ideas and events did not reach the national audience. For this reason, using the example of one of the memes, “the party of crooks and thieves,” coined and spread in this hybrid space of the liberal-networked public sphere, I tried to outline the scope and size of this “creative” part of the Russian public sphere and highlight the role of the internet in it.

All events and phenomena selected for the study, like political satire, or the politicization of popular music, or mobilization to observe elections were expressions of counter-publicity taking different forms. In order to analyze them, and the reactions of power on them, in a consistent way and within the framework outlined in Chapter 1, I use a set of factors to consider when examining the political role of the Internet suggested by Sarah Oates as “5C”<sup>349</sup>:

- Catalysts—the role of particular individuals and the real world events that spark communication in traditional and online media;
- Content production—“a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter”<sup>350</sup> that are produced in the process of communication and often are particular to internet forms of political self-expression;
- Community—the nature and behavior of the online users and their off-line activities;
- Control—the attempts of the government to control Internet communications, especially in critical moments;
- Co-optation—the attempts of the ruling elite to co-opt popular personalities;

Along with these five factors, I will add two more that are pertinent to my framework:

- Entertainment—as Sarah Oates noted, “[a] classic mistake made by internet researchers . . . is the assumption that there are clearly separate domains for entertainment and politics.”
- Autonomy—the improved capacity of individuals to do more things for and by themselves; to do more in loose commonality with others, outside the existing institutions; and improved

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<sup>349</sup> Oates, “From Parent to Protestor,” 6.

<sup>350</sup> Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, 3.

capacity of individuals to do more in formal organizations that operate outside the mainstream sphere.<sup>351</sup>

I use the above methods of analysis in the following three chapters to interpret data on the way that internet users reconfigured public space and political discourse in Russia in the months before the protests of 2011-2012. In Chapter 5 I will explore the phenomenon of political satire produced by Russian internet users and show how the variety of forms it takes in the digital environment contributes to our understanding of the liberal-networked public sphere as a locus of symbolic, self-expressive micro-level politics, where the power of the regime encounters the creative and dispersed counter-power of internet users and has to compete for popularity. The goal of this chapter is to illustrate how a digital networked environment that encourages reciprocity and participation in content production, even if as a form of entertainment, reconfigures the allocation of the political in the Russian public sphere, allowing the public to communicate back and by doing so affect the formation of public opinion.

In Chapter 6, I use qualitative analysis of media content to illustrate how newsworthy information produced in the blogosphere spreads to the liberal media, thus illustrating my argument about the liberal-networked public sphere and the hybrid nature of this space and the bottom-up agenda setting capabilities of this sphere. By analyzing creative content production organized by Alexei Navalny in his blog, I also show how the internet contributes to enhanced individual autonomy, enabling individuals to expand their life strategies.

The content analyzed in Chapter 7 demonstrates how the liberal-networked public sphere undermines the gatekeeping status of the state-controlled media and facilitates the leakage of unwanted information, allowing individuals to perform a watchdog function, which produces the effect of media scandal and attracts unwanted public attention to elections. In this chapter I also

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<sup>351</sup> Benkler, *Wealth of Networks*, 8.

demonstrate how networks have facilitated public self-organization and collective action, and how the previous organizational experience of opinion leaders contributed to the peaceful and civil nature of the protest. Throughout my analysis I demonstrate how the regime attempted to adjust to the new volatile media environment, to control it, and to co-opt individual actors, thus elucidating the power struggle for control over the public mind.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ALTERNATIVE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT, AND CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATIVE SPACE

In Chapter 3, I showed that the Russian blogosphere is a vibrant social space that by 2011 had become sufficiently “populated” and developed to facilitate a fully-fledged protest movement. I have also shown that Russian cyberspace has been in flux throughout the 2000s, improving in terms of its technical characteristics, interactive tools, and in its availability. It has also been diversifying rapidly, providing a variety of communication platforms and opportunities for autonomous individual and collective action.

As the number of internet users has increased to include half of the country’s population, I am arguing that Russian cyberspace has acquired many characteristics of the public sphere, such as bottom-up agenda-setting, a watchdog function, collective action, and public opinion formation outside of the sphere of the state-controlled media. At the same time, along with the traditional functions of the public space that are aimed at the discussion of public affairs, the liberal-networked public sphere is also a space of entertainment and cultural production—practices that are not necessarily separated from political discourse and political action. In this chapter I will theorize the Russian liberal-networked public sphere as a hybrid space tightly connected to the offline liberal media. Using the example of political satire, I will demonstrate that the liberal-networked public sphere was more reflective of the changing attitudes and growing dissatisfaction with the existing political situation, than the controlled mass media could afford to be. Throughout this study I will also demonstrate the techniques that the government used to control the liberal-networked public sphere and to limit its influence on the government-controlled public space.



### Liberal-Networked Public Sphere

I showed in Chapter 3 that state control of the media does not spread evenly over all Russian mass media: it is tight on television and weaker on other media, while almost absent on the internet and in several offline media that also have a strong online presence. Most of the offline media outlets that publish, or broadcast, critical materials, such as *Novaia Gazeta*, *Vedomosti*, *The New Times*, the publications of the Kommersant Publishing House, such as *Kommersant* and *Kommersant Vlast*, and the Echo of Moscow radio station have traditionally been oppositional and, as sociologists argue, were permitted to exist, serving as outlets for internal elite communication and performing the function of a release valve for the opposition.<sup>352</sup> It has been traditionally argued that these oppositional media occupy a marginal role in the overall Russian media space because they reach only a small proportion of the population and are insufficient “to create a ‘free media space’ distinct from the overall Russian media space.”<sup>353</sup>

It should be remembered, however, that precisely because they were marginal in the mainstream public sphere, these media outlets had greatly benefited from expanding internet usage in the country. Each of these media outlets has a website, and some of them, for example, the websites of *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, and Echo of Moscow are in the top twenty-five most popular online news sources with a monthly audience of two million and more (see Appendix B). In addition, many other top twenty-five online news outlets, like *Lenta.ru*, *Gazeta.ru*, *Utro.ru*, *NEWSru.com*, and news agencies, such as *Interfax.ru*, *Regnum.ru*, and *Rosbalt.ru* are all sources of independent information and analytical materials. There are also a number of high quality, relatively uncensored publications based in Moscow, with online audiences between one and two

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<sup>352</sup> Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma,’” 10.

<sup>353</sup> Samuel A. Greene, “Shifting media and the failure of political communication in Russia,” in *The Post-Soviet Russian Media*, Beumers et al., 61; Koltsova, “Media, State, and Responses to Globalization,” 62-63; Gudkov, “Priroda ‘Putinizma,’” 10; Masha Lipman, “Constrained or Irrelevant: The Media in Putin’s Russia,” *Current History* (October 2005): 319-324, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CurHistLipman.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2013).

million (see Appendix B), and dozens of independent regional and local news sites that serve as important alternative news sources for the regions, such as *polit-nn.ru* and *apn-nn.ru* in Nizhniy Novgorod.<sup>354</sup> Given popular attitudes to TV news and the growing importance of the internet as an alternative source of news, the only obstacle that currently separates average Russians from independent information is the lack of an internet connection, or lack of interest.

In this study I will refer to the independent media outlets as “liberal” in the sense that their content is uncensored, for the most part, and they are publishing critical materials and analyses of current affairs. This sphere is distinct from state-controlled media space, and is not as homogenous: there may be more left-wing, social democratic points of view, more right-wing, free market attitudes, as well as moderate nationalist attitudes, or a mixture of the three in different proportions.<sup>355</sup> Journalists who work for these media are often the ones who were pushed out of more mainstream outlets, because they were unwilling to accept the unwritten rules of self-censorship.<sup>356</sup> The liberal media tend to cover newsworthy events of the blogosphere, so that news, ideas, and jokes circulate freely between the blogosphere and the liberal media.

Together, the blogosphere and liberal online and offline media outlets constitute what I call the liberal-networked public sphere, which is hybrid in nature: it exists offline in the form of print media, radio programs, and television broadcasts, but all of these materials are also available online. It is also connected to the offline public sphere of face-to-face daily

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<sup>354</sup> Baranovskii, “Zapiski Kandidata.”

<sup>355</sup> I am not including the nationalist-extremist media here, which does exist, but represents a cluster of its own, like the pro-government media.

<sup>356</sup> Natalya Krasnoboka, “Real Journalism Goes Underground: the Internet Underground,” *International Communication Gazette* 64, no. 5 (2002): 479-499; Dubin, “Mass media i kommunikativnyi mir,” 40-42; Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, “Kremlevskii otvet bloggeram,” *Ezhednevnyi Zhurnal*, March 28, 2012, <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=12014> (accessed February 6, 2013).

interactions, for communications are very fluid and move freely from the offline world to online and back, resulting in publications, or concrete actions. Furthermore, the liberal-networked public sphere coexists, interacts, and clashes with the public sphere of the mainstream media, producing and disseminating its own interpretations of the news and events—hence its bottom-up agenda-setting function.

The liberal-networked public sphere is the locus of the alternative information environment in Russia, which is distinct from the overall Russian media space. The hybrid nature of the space allows its audience not only to have access to alternative information, but also to co-produce it, to share, to discuss, and to act upon it. The liberal-networked public sphere does not include all internet users, but anybody who was exposed to its content, even if by accident, can potentially be affected by it. As I will show throughout this study, the existence of the liberal-networked public sphere was essential for the formation of the protest movement as a source of alternative information, and a space of communication and organizing social action.

#### The Return of Political Satire and Self-Expressive Politics

Given its diversity of voices and interactive capabilities, the liberal-networked public sphere has acquired a character of its own, which in 2011 was quite different from that of the public space of the state-controlled mass media. In this section I will discuss in more detail some of the characteristics that distinguished the liberal-networked public sphere from the controlled public space, namely, the return of political satire to the public discourse in the form of peer-produced online content, and the meaning of this phenomenon in the Russian media and sociopolitical context.

The phenomenon of political ridicule is probably as old as politics itself. Political humor, or political satire, is known to be one of the tools that “the powerless” resort to in order to resist

oppressive power.<sup>357</sup> In the Soviet Union political humor was omnipresent in society despite the censorship of the traditional media: it circulated in the form of *anekdoty* (anecdotes), short funny stories that were commonly told in narrow circles of friends and constituted an integral part of informal daily communications. According to Alexei Yurchak, a cultural anthropologist, anecdote reeling in the Soviet Union played a crucial adaptive function, allowing people to stay uninvolved with the ideology they did not take at face value, while formally to keep simulating their support for it. The informal daily ritual of anecdote reeling was a practice that helped to expose the incongruities between reality as people experienced it, and officialdom.<sup>358</sup>

The power of the political humor that has been spreading informally in the Soviet Union was not that it was consciously and openly resisting the oppressive regime, which it was not, but that it was covertly *undermining* the very ground on which the system was constructed and which the Soviet propaganda machine was meant to reinforce.<sup>359</sup> Anecdotes started to emerge after Stalin's death, and by the time Brezhnev came to power had "become a ubiquitous feature of daily life," so that Brezhnev's era in Soviet history became known as "the Golden age of Soviet anecdote [sic]."<sup>360</sup> One explanation of this phenomenon is that in the period of late socialism the system was entering what we would now call "the crisis of legitimacy," when Soviet ideology stopped "providing a 'believable' representation of reality."<sup>361</sup> Political ridicule in people's informal communications served as a coping mechanism, a cultural universe that people produced parallel to the official public sphere. This was a *symptom* of an ongoing "inner

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<sup>357</sup> Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism," 161-162.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-181.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>360</sup> A. Zand, *Political Jokes from Leningrad* (Austin: Silvergirl, 1982), quoted in Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism," 175-176.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

‘silent’ crisis and erosion” of the ideological ground on which the imagined community of the Soviet Union was erected.<sup>362</sup>

In Yeltsin’s Russia political satire became a part of the public discourse and moved to the realm of the mainstream public sphere, where it was produced by professionals—the practice that exists in most democratic countries. Despite all the shortcomings of the oligarchic media of the 1990s, political satire flourished on TV and in print, and was not limited by the Kremlin even in the last years of Yeltsin’s presidency, when his popularity plummeted and he became a regular subject of ridicule.<sup>363</sup> As was discussed in Chapter 3, Putin quickly curbed the unrestrained media criticism of the government, and political satire, particularly aimed at him personally, became one of the primary targets of state control. For example, state officials demanded that a puppet of Putin be removed from the notorious satirical puppet-show *Kukly* (Puppets) that was broadcast by the independent NTV for years with undiminished success. After a split among journalists on whether they should accommodate this and other demands of the government, the channel was re-nationalized and the show was cancelled.<sup>364</sup> Soon Russian TV programming was filled with extraordinary amounts of entertaining, consumer-driven, and utterly toothless humor. A similar tendency followed in the print media, where the practice of self-censorship was gradually reinstated. Russian political cartoonist, Mikhail Zlatkovsky, recalls,

When he [Putin] was an acting president, I drew something like 12 very harsh drawings against him that were published on the front page of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. There was no reaction from the Kremlin, but on May 7 the editor-in-chief was invited to the inauguration ceremony, and when he came back, the first thing he did was he invited me to his office and said: “That’s it. Stop

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<sup>362</sup> Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism,” 185-186.

<sup>363</sup> Lipman, “Constrained or Irrelevant,” 321; Shaun Walker, “No laughing matter: Cartoons and the Kremlin,” *The Independent*, April 30, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/no-laughing-matter-cartoons-and-the-kremlin-818063.html> (accessed May 27, 2013).

<sup>364</sup> The show featured satirical sketches performed by the puppets, politicians’ lookalikes. According to the program’s producers, removing Putin’s puppet from the show was part of the deal that Putin’s administration offered to NTV journalists before re-nationalizing the channel. See footnote 260 in Chapter 3.

it.” When I asked “Why?” he answered: “The boy turned out to be easily offended and rancorous.”<sup>365</sup>

It was only natural that political anecdotes and cartoons migrated to cyberspace, where they could be instantly shared and disseminated. Since the early days, Russian internet users showed a particular affinity for Soviet-style anecdotes: in the late 1990s the website, *anekdot.ru*, was rated second in international rankings, losing only to a web service that featured pictures of nude celebrities.<sup>366</sup> President Vladimir Putin was a popular personage of these anecdotes. Curiously, however, most of the jokes about him that had accumulated on the service by 2007 stressed his positive traits, such as his sharpness and quick-wittedness, and played around with his past as an intelligence officer. Whether they were deliberately planted by Putin’s image-makers, as some alleged,<sup>367</sup> or were created by internet users, they reflected the high popularity ratings that Putin had at the time, and a general lack of popular interest in politics.

In 2011, however, the situation was markedly different. Throughout the year, when the entire country was following the development of relationships in the “tandem” and guessing whether Medvedev would run for a second term, and especially after Putin’s candidacy was officially announced, the Russian internet was swarming with scathing, almost overboard, satire. Political commentary in the liberal media had visibly radicalized<sup>368</sup>—a fact that caused

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<sup>365</sup> Elena Vlasenko, “Khudozhnik Mikhail Zlatkovskii: ‘Vlast’ ne vyderzhit nasmeshki,” Radio Svoboda, May 6, 2011, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/24092802.html> (accessed February 7, 2013).

<sup>366</sup> Eugene Gorny, “A Creative History of the Russian Internet” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2006), 292.

<sup>367</sup> Krasilova, “Ne speshite ee khoronit’.”

<sup>368</sup> Dmitry Gubin, “Bestsenzurschchina,” *Ogonek*, no. 45 (5204), November 14, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1810916> (accessed February 7, 2013); Semen Novoprudskii, “Liudi iz manekenov,” *Gazeta.ru*, October 28, 2011, <http://www.gazeta.ru/column/novoprudsky/3815230.shtml> (accessed February 7, 2013); Mikhail Dmitriev, “Voshli v stadiu samorazrusheniia,” *Politcom.ru*, October 20, 2011, <http://www.politcom.ru/12743.html> (accessed February 7, 2013); Alexey Kovalev, “Russians Express Their Frustration With Explosion in Political Satire,” *Guardian*, December 22, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/22/russia-frustration-leadership-political-satire> (accessed February 7, 2013).

discontent among some observers.<sup>369</sup> Internet users, proficient in Photoshop, video editing, and performing arts erupted with a flow of satirical commentary in the form of cartoons, videos, images, poetry, and musical performances—humor of the Internet 2.0 era.

It is no accident that the neologisms *Brezhnevizatsiia* (Brezhnevization) and *Novyi Zastoi* (New Stagnation) became the words of 2011 (see Figure 6). As was argued in Chapter 3, Putin substantially limited the public discourse, while the regime he helped establish simulated most of the democratic procedures. Similar to Brezhnev's Soviet Union, Putin's regime has been gradually losing public support, as people saw the increasing incongruity between the official presentation of reality and their everyday life experience. A key difference, however, between Brezhnev's Soviet Union and Putin-Medvedev's Russia, is that a certain amount of free communicative public space for the reading and writing public does exist in the liberal-networked public sphere, and has been expanding with the wider diffusion of the internet.

The quality of online political satire has also varied: there are pieces produced by professional artists which are widely circulated in social networks (see Figures 7 and 10); more “democratic” and participatory forms of content-production have allowed anyone to add pictures and texts into ready-made standard templates. For example, a search for so-called *demotivatory* (demotivators, from “de-motivate”)—black frames with a space for text and a picture (see Figures 8 and 9)—in *Yandex* using a key search phrase *politicheskie demotivatory* (political demotivators) shows over 160,000 images.

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<sup>369</sup> Dmitry Galkin, “Pochemu izium poshel protiv bulki? Protivoreciia zimnikh politicheskikh gulianii,” *Digital Icons* 7 (2012): 144.



Figure 7. Political satire on the internet. Left: Political art by Andrey Budaev Source: <http://www.budaev.ru/> Right: A cartoon by Sergey Elkin, “We are responsible for those whom we tamed” Exupery. Source: <http://illustrator.livejournal.com/>

Creative commentaries in the form of short, 2-3 minute cartoons produced by professional designers received millions of views on *YouTube* and offered a form of creative commentary on the political events of 2011. For example, a cartoon made by SA Studio presents Russian politics in the bright rainbow colors of a circus, with two main “clowns” dancing and swapping places with the music, while a character with the Russian Constitution tries to appeal to the country’s law. The black-and-white Mr. Freeman, a popular online personage of a series of *YouTube* cartoons by an anonymous author, makes a desperate appeal on behalf of the country to President Medvedev to fire his Prime Minister so that he could not return. And, finally, a video cartoon by a graphic designer, Egor Zhgun, shows in two minutes the “story” of Putin’s 12 years in a form inspired, quite obviously, by “The Simpsons” and by the work of the now famous American photographer, Noah Kalina, who photographed himself every day for six years and assembled a video that records his aging (see Figure 10).<sup>370</sup>

<sup>370</sup> Noah Kalina, “Noah takes a photo of himself every day for 6 years,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B26asyGKDo> (accessed March 7, 2013).





*Figure 8. Political Demotivators. Top row: “Modernization Russian style” (one police car has the word “police” another “militia” written on it, a satire on Medvedev’s law that changes the name of Russian law enforcement from “militia” to “police”); “And I am telling them from the tribune: ‘We are starting an anti-corruption campaign;’” “Putin came here recently” (an allusion to the Potemkin villages that local authorities erect when Putin comes to their region). Middle row: “I want thiiiiis big of a flasher!” (movie director, Nikita Mikhalkov, big supporter of Putin, is famous for riding around Moscow with a flashing light and breaking traffic rules); “Should we switch our chicks too?”; “Deputies Horkina and Kabaeva are mastering lawmaking.” Bottom row: “President’s address”; Red background: “Glory to the Russian Constitution,” Black frame: “Deja vu”; “Love your motherland!” *Source: Demotivation.me**



Figure 9. Demotivators reflecting popular attitudes to the members of the tandem. Top row: “Again he is doing puzzles!” “Vova, did I say everything correctly?” “When I grow up, I will become Putin.” Middle row: “Stupid. How little one needs for happiness”; “Soon.” Bottom row: “2024”; “Power changes people beyond recognition”; “The choice of 2012” Source: *Demotivation.me*; [vk.com/PutiMed](http://vk.com/PutiMed); <http://korsakov.sakh.com/photos/main/list328/208658>

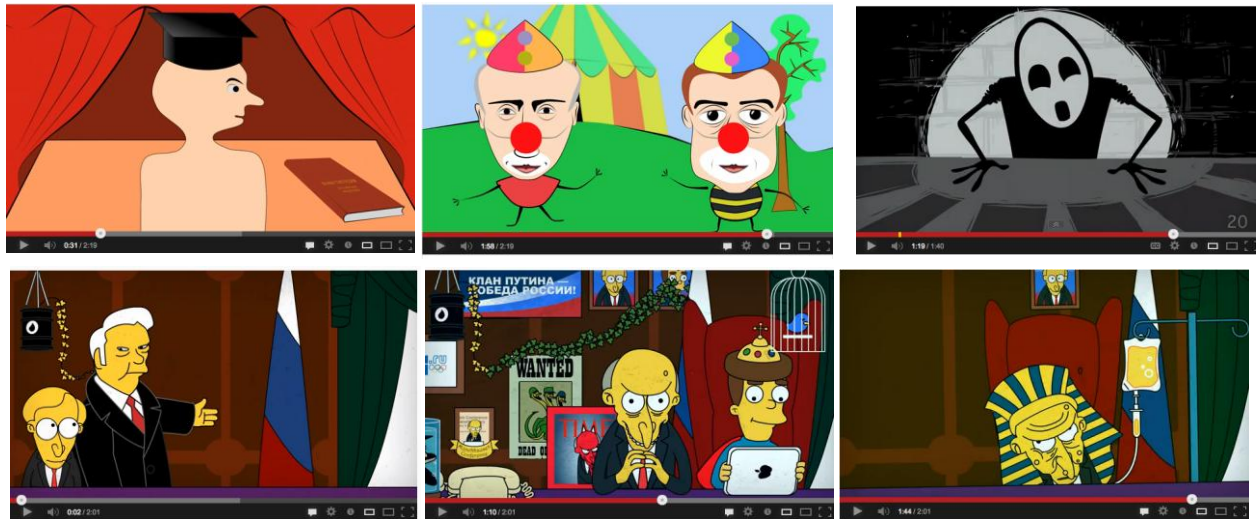


Figure 10. YouTube political animations and satire. Top left and middle: A cartoon by SA Studio, “Not in a Row.” Source: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=AsHrz87dV8o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=AsHrz87dV8o) Top right: An open letter from Mr. Freeman to the President. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10IUI-KMOtQ> Bottom row: A cartoon by Egor Zhgun, “Twelve years of Putin in 2 Minutes.” Source: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=JzGo4\\_c6U8os](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=JzGo4_c6U8os)

There is a lot to be analyzed here in terms of cultural hybridity, but I would like to stress the socio-political meaning of the cultural production on the internet in Putin-Medvedev’s Russia. Similar to the Soviet practice of anecdote reeling, the proliferation of user-generated satire in the liberal-networked public sphere is a *symptom* of a lack of genuine channels of communication between the two public spaces, i.e., one controlled and the other relatively free, and the incipient crisis of “believability” in the state-controlled version of reality. Internet users ridiculed precisely those aspects of Russian politics that were either glossed over or embellished on the major TV channels, and this laughter was growing more sharp and unrestrained. This was particularly the case when popular satire was aimed at the individuals associated with power, first of all, the “tandem” and other individuals associated with the regime. Here, internet satire grew particularly abrasive and pitiless, aiming at what Estonian-Canadian author, Kalle Lasn,

called “uncooling”<sup>371</sup>—neutralizing the gloss of popularity and status that the controlled media were consistently covering them with.

For example, if in the state-controlled media the image of Prime Minister Putin was consistently constructed as one of masculinity, strength, and “coolness”—he is depicted taking a horseback ride, diving for “antique” amphoras, or protecting Siberian tigers—the image of him in popular art circulating on the internet is that of an aging power-hungry man who will do everything to preserve his power. As for Putin’s tandem partner, Dmitri Medvedev, a tech-savvy “modernizer” of the country, the prevailing image of him is that of a weak, dependent person, even a child, who still likes to play with toys (*Twitter*, iPhone), and has no real say in the country’s affairs (see Figures 9 and 10).

This is in stark contrast to the 3D cartoon called *Mult Lichnosti* (Cartoon Personalities),<sup>372</sup> produced by the state Channel One that uses expensive computer technology, motion capture, to animate characters that look like famous Russian show-business celebrities, as well as Russian and foreign politicians. The emergence of the characters of Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev did not go unnoticed by the English-language media.<sup>373</sup> This cartoon is advertised as “3D humor,”<sup>374</sup> but the episodes in which Putin and Medvedev were featured are essentially complementary. In one they demonstrate athleticism and cover Russian athletes in Vancouver, in another they break into vaults in the style of “Mission Impossible,” and yet in others they sing couplets for the New Year holidays, which depict the tandem as capable of

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<sup>371</sup> Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999).

<sup>372</sup> In Russian the name of the cartoon, *Mult Lichnosti*, is a word play for “personality cult.”

<sup>373</sup> Ellen Barry, “Making a Little Fun of Russia’s Powerful,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2009.

<sup>374</sup> For details, see [http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects\\_in\\_detail/si=5775](http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects_in_detail/si=5775) (accessed February 3, 2013).

holding things in check, responsible, but fun loving and “cool,” with Putin always a bit cooler and more capable than Medvedev (see Figure 11).<sup>375</sup>



Figure 11. Channel One, “Cartoon Personalities.” Episodes at the Olympics and “Mission Impossible”-style vault breaking. Source: YouTube

Interestingly, there are signs that the cartoon’s authors have tried to attract young internet-savvy audiences: the singing characters of Putin and Medvedev are using counter-cultural internet slang. The model of satire these cartoons reveal, however, is similar to the one that existed in the Soviet Union: it was allowed to lampoon rank-and-file party officials, but not top-level members of nomenclature. In Russia the personality of Vladimir Putin is certainly untouchable—even the character of Medvedev is briefly depicted as forgetting his duty while surfing the internet.<sup>376</sup> The one show on Russian television that is meant to satirize politics only confirms this fact. Quite unsurprisingly, Putin’s character disappears from the show for the entire pre-electoral year of 2011.

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<sup>375</sup> The stories mentioned in the text appear in episode #6 (aired February 28, 2010); episode #9 (aired April 4, 2010); New Year episode, the last episode with Putin (aired 31 December 2010), see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDux7aCLqsI&list=PLI99JyIvOvr2zvK18cFkhE84kNKGQjsB1&index=5>; [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=5f\\_uKLN\\_Oaw#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=5f_uKLN_Oaw#!); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdEq7VgqfV4> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>376</sup> See episode #9.

Internet humor 2.0 in post-Soviet Russia resembles the Soviet era practice of anecdote reeling, and it performs the same psychological “joke work”<sup>377</sup> of social commentary, but the tools and the social space where modern-day humor circulates are markedly different. In the digital age symbolic subversion has taken new forms and became visually persuasive—computer software allows for quick and high quality manipulation with any kind of photo and video materials, which opens new avenues for creative self-expression. In addition, given the availability of visual materials, artists and designers can borrow from a variety of cultural contexts, including Soviet and Western pop-culture, or use the materials of the controlled mass media to create satirical effects by tempering them in ways that reveal incongruity between what is being presented and reality as they perceive it. Digital tools break the monopoly of powerful agents on effective tools of communication and cultural production.

What makes the post-Soviet situation principally different from the Soviet informal anecdote reeling, however, is the type of social space in which subversive practices take place. The social space where Soviet anecdotes were reeled was a private space of face-to-face interactions—narrow circles of friends and family members gathered around kitchen tables, while the social space of the internet is public, encompassing millions of users, where jokes are shared instantly and spread like viruses, living a life of their own, independent from their authors. For example, demotivators presented so far in the study have been reposted over 2,700 times, and the most popular anecdote about Putin—“the Russian paradox: Putin’s friends are stealing, but searches are targeting Navalny’s friends”—over 4,900 times. When a hundred people make critical satirical pictures that thousands like and repost, it changes the “atmosphere” of the public space where this content circulates.

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<sup>377</sup> Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism,” 180.

Thus, by 2011 digital political satire became part of the everyday experience of the internet users, and was one of the attributes that distinguished the liberal-networked public sphere from the mainstream controlled media and rendered it an alternative cultural environment, co-produced by millions of its participants. Observing the diversity of forms of satire on the internet, many liberal journalists began interpreting the phenomenon as socially significant, noting that it was returning to the public space “for a reason,” that it reflected degrading public attitudes toward the regime, and could even potentially result in a full-scale social movement.<sup>378</sup> As I will demonstrate throughout this study, these were quite prescient judgments, made by observers who were clearly in sync with the “mood” of the liberal-networked public sphere.

#### Mocking State-Controlled News: Production of Video Content

The state’s aggressive policy of dis-informing society urged many to actively search for information and interpretations of political events in the liberal-networked public sphere. The more staged and manipulative televised public appearances of the leadership grew, the more inadequate TV news stories became, the more radical and ‘disdaining’ grew the coverage of the liberal journalists, and the reaction of the liberal-networked public sphere, where television was commonly referred to as *zomboiashchik* (zombie-box), the Russian analog for an “idiot box.”

By February 2011, *YouTube*, one of the most popular self-publishing services in the world,<sup>379</sup> had also gained popularity in Russia, and the videos uploaded there had already led to several high-profile scandals.<sup>380</sup> In only two or three years, *YouTube* had become a venue where

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<sup>378</sup> Evgeniya Pishchikova, “Obostrenie Bor’by s Ravnodushiem. Uzhe na Slovakh!” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 19, 2011, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/49018.html>; Darya Zhelezniakova, “Runet—oruzhie srednego klassa,” *Politcom.ru*, March 11, 2011, <http://www.politcom.ru/11570.html>; “Khity protesta,” *Gazeta.ru*, October 13, 2011; [http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/10/13\\_e\\_3800238.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/10/13_e_3800238.shtml) (accessed May 6, 2013).

<sup>379</sup> See [www.alexa.com/topsites](http://www.alexa.com/topsites) (accessed May 2, 2013).

<sup>380</sup> Toepfl, “Managing Public Outrage.”



Figure 12. Demotivators mocking state-controlled TV. Left: Image, Ekaterina Andreeva, the anchor of Vremya (Time) news program on the state Channel One. On the black frame: “My job is to lie. Nothing personal.” Middle: “CHANNEL ONE Dmitry Medvedev’s video blog” Right: Image, top figure—“Power,” bottom figure— “People,” black frame—“Russia in a single picture.” Source: *Demotivation.me*

people began sharing video materials that exposed social injustices and abuses of power. Among the 10 most viewed *YouTube* videos of 2010 in Russian, seven contained some kind of social critique. For example, one showed the arrest of Khimki Forest defenders who were peacefully trying to deliver a letter to the authorities (over 2 million views). Another featured a spontaneous flash mob of Moscow drivers who were honking at President Medvedev’s motorcade while standing in traffic and were unhappy that police had sealed off the streets of the city (over 3 million views).<sup>381</sup>

In addition to just recording events, some individuals began producing and posting satirical sketches on their *YouTube* channels as a form of commentary on current news. They used video materials of newsreels, but edited them in a way to add new critical meanings, mocking them and offering a verbal sarcastic commentary, which resembled amateur versions of the “Daily Show.” For example, two young ladies from Saratov started a *YouTube* channel called *GoodByEdRo* (EdRo stands for Edinaia Rossiia, United Russia), and began producing a show,

<sup>381</sup> “Samye populiarnye rossiiskie video na YouTube v 2010 godu,” *Gazeta.ru*, December 13, 2010, [http://www.gazeta.ru/corp-connection/2010/12/13\\_n\\_3464721.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/corp-connection/2010/12/13_n_3464721.shtml) (accessed May 2, 2013). The videos mentioned in the text are available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXutOnBquvg> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvwMjvTDwUI> (accessed May 2, 2013).



*GlumNovosti* (MockNews), first based on local news, but very soon they upgraded to Federal. They also created groups in social networks, where people were discussing upcoming elections. Similarly, two performers and comic writers from Moscow also switched to the subject of news, calling their show *Politicheskii tsyrk s koniami* (Political Circus with Horses). Their show included more references to the Soviet past, particularly to Brezhnev’s stagnation—both authors were in their 40s—and was geared to an audience of this age group (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Video blogs parodying state-controlled TV news. Left: “MockNews.” Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gizuSaUXMfw>; Middle “Political Circus With Horses.” Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R167VCio-2s>; Right: “This is Simply Ridiculous” channel by Kamikadze\_d. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITxtdese5xI&list=PL5B292DAA578EAB91&index=83>

The sheer diversity of vlogs (video blogs) about current news in Russia, where this genre was relatively new in the time before the elections, was characteristic of the heightened popular interest in current affairs regarding the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. Some of these shows gained particularly high viewership as the electoral campaign proceeded. For example, the *YouTube* show of a former lawyer from Moscow, who produced it under the nickname kamikadze\_d stands out, because two of his comic sketches received over one million views and international coverage outside the liberal-networked public sphere.<sup>382</sup> One of the popular parodies was dedicated to the televised election debates among parliamentary

<sup>382</sup> Stephen Ennis, “Russian satirists use YouTube to challenge Kremlin,” BBC News Europe, November 3, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15553373> (accessed May 5, 2013).

candidates, which in the Russian political situation strongly resembled an entertainment show; another one featured a mock story about a gradual transformation of Medvedev, as well as many other politicians and public personalities in Russia, into Putin's clones, because they were picking up his words, and acquiring his mannerisms and intonations.<sup>383</sup> Both shows were satirical in form and effectively depicted the essence of personalized power and simulated political processes, which explains their popularity with an online audience. Thus, if the state-controlled media kept ignoring the social demand for genuine political news, the new media tools allowed individuals to produce content of their own and share what they had to say about a "story" presented by the regime. These examples demonstrate that the internet and other digital tools facilitated new ways that people could interact with the information they received, allowing for active, rather than passive, engagement.

If amateur satirical sketches attracted thousands of viewers, then a professionally produced project that built on Russian literature-centrism and increasing demand for news-related content turned in 2011 into a popular show on a national scale. The project, titled Citizen Poet, was born spontaneously, when three friends, poet, writer, and journalist, Dmitry Bykov; distinguished theatrical actor, Mikhail Efremov; and multimedia producer, Andrei Vasilyev (see Figure 14), decided to do something that would help raise the popularity of a new liberal internet and cable television channel, TV Rain.<sup>384</sup> The idea was that Bykov, who is a prolific author, would write a piece of poetry once a week commenting on current political events, and Mikhail Efremov would recite it. Rhythmically and stylistically, every poem was written with a particular

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<sup>383</sup> Kamikadze\_d, "Pustite krov' Edinoi Rossii," uploaded September 9, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITxtde5xl&list=PL5B292DAA578EAB91&index=89>; "Strashnaia taina Putina," uploaded October 21, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=QIHWd65\\_qUs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=QIHWd65_qUs) (accessed May 4, 2013).

<sup>384</sup> Anastasia Zhokhova, "'Grazhdanin poet': istoriia sluchainogo biznesa na \$3 mln.," *Forbes*, August 6, 2012, <http://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya/lyudi/84882-grazhdanin-poet-istoriya-sluchainogo-biznesa-na-3-mln> (accessed February 5, 2013).

poet in mind from the Russian and European classic legacy, from Alexander Pushkin, to Evgeny Evtushenko, to Rudyard Kipling, but the content was acutely political, and hysterically funny. Efremov dressed in period costumes, changing them, as well as his makeup and manner of recitation, to fit a chosen poet's time and esthetic. Vasilyev called the new genre a “*newsical*.”



Figure 14. The Citizen Poet team. Left: Andrei Vasilyev. Right: Dmitry Bykov and Mikhail Efremov. Source: <http://ru-bykov.livejournal.com/1094522.html> and <http://lenta.ru/news/2012/01/27/poet/>

To be interesting and worth the time for its authors, the idea of news commentary, even if in a poetic form, had to be edgy and sincere, which almost automatically rendered it politically incorrect in the Russian media environment. The very first poem touched upon a sensitive issue that was not covered by Russian state television—the revelations made to the press by Natalya Vasilyeva, the press secretary of a Moscow court, about the pressure exerted on the judge in the case of a persecuted oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Although originally the group was not planning the project as a political statement, it quickly gained popularity and the aura of “dissidence” on the internet, precisely for the contents of its texts: in the format of satirical poems, Bykov was touching upon serious issues, such as the dependency of the Russian judicial system, or making dangerous parallels between the Arab Spring and the Russian regime, and was

ridiculing the exigencies of the endless televised public relations campaign of the tandem. The format—a 2-3 minute video—was ideal for the internet, and through multiple reposts the videos quickly gained popularity, receiving millions of views instead of the expected 10,000.<sup>385</sup>



Figure 15. Citizen Poet. Left: episode #2, “The Arab Variant,” poet Mikhail Lermontov. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoSbhVHu73Q> Right: episode #41, “The New Law of Jungle,” poet Rudyard Kipling. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GcOYh-FvR4>

Soon, however, the management of TV Rain, the main “beneficiary” of the project, probably started to have second thoughts, or decided not to risk the business, and refused to air issue #5 of Citizen Poet titled “The Tandem in Russia is More than a Tandem,” which Bykov explained as an act of self-censorship, pervasive in Russian media circles.<sup>386</sup> The poem that caused so much commotion commented on an incident of publicly expressed disagreement, when Prime Minister Putin, following Gaddafi, compared the UN-sanctioned military campaign in Libya with a “crusade,” while Medvedev noted that words like “crusade” were inappropriate in the situation. Given that at the time some were still hoping for Medvedev to become a more

<sup>385</sup> Sergey Gurkin, “Andrei Vasil’ev: Na takoe obshchestvo luchshe ne rabotat’,” *Delovoi Peterburg*, September 24, 2012, [http://www.dp.ru/a/2012/09/19/Andrej\\_Vasilev\\_Esli\\_obshh/](http://www.dp.ru/a/2012/09/19/Andrej_Vasilev_Esli_obshh/) (accessed February 4, 2013).

<sup>386</sup> “Telekanal ‘Dozhd’” snial s efira stikhi Bykova o tandeme,” BBC Russian Service, March 29, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/03/110329\\_bykov\\_TV\\_Rain.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/03/110329_bykov_TV_Rain.shtml) (accessed May 5, 2013).

independent politician, his words sounded like an open rebellion. The lyrical hero of the poem lamented the loss of his modest friend:

Here is what's befallen me:  
My old friend does not come to me,  
He even dares to feel free,  
To open his mouth and disagree!  
I've been taking him out to ski,  
Taught him how to retain Kurils,  
Back then he was not nearly as loud,  
In fact, he hardly made a sound.  
He was not getting in my way,  
He was content with his humble living.  
Like a shadow he was unassuming,  
And knew his place in the vertical.  
In the lively circus of our life,  
I'd made it so that a shadow had become a tsar.  
No one, however, even if he tried,  
Could tell the difference between my shadow and I . . .

One day the shadow forgets that it was only a shadow and starts to disagree, first timidly, but then more boldly, and the lyrical hero admonishes his "friend" and then openly laughs and mocks him: "Even TV Rain does not believe this guy can reign," and finally:

He may at times cast glares of ire,  
And huff and strain to look a tsar,  
The shadow lies as I request,  
And we'll be friends as in the past.<sup>387</sup>

The poem gave a clear characteristic as to how independent Medvedev was as a politician, and turned out to be prescient about future political events. The fact that a liberal media outlet censored it had only contributed to the popularity of the project: the media in the liberal-networked public sphere had widely covered the incident, which, as Vasilyev later admitted, persuaded him to continue with the project. As a prudent producer he realized that

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<sup>387</sup> Ellen Barry, "Satirizing Putin With Boldly Poetic Flair," *New York Times*, November 18, 2011.

there was a real demand in society for news-based political shows, and that Citizen Poet could turn out to be even profitable.<sup>388</sup>

It was not only Vasilyev who sensed the demand; the team found several new hosts and collaborated with all of them. The project remained active in the liberal-networked public sphere: the audio version was broadcast by the oppositional radio station, Echo of Moscow, and videos were posted on the F5 web service, which belonged to the “Zhivi!” media group owned by a billionaire, Mikhail Prokhorov, who agreed to sponsor the project, and who also emerged as an aspiring politician in the Russian political landscape. Very soon Bykov’s poetry put the same kind of dilemma in front of the editor of the F5 portal: to publish or not to publish. The poem was dedicated to Prokhorov and ridiculed the unflattering (but widely known) facts of the billionaire’s biography. By then, however, Citizen Poet had attracted too much attention, and the “Zhivi!” editors bravely published the poem without serious repercussions: Prokhorov laughed, and later even agreed to sponsor the project’s regional tour.<sup>389</sup>

The tour started in the fall of 2011, right before the Duma elections. Earlier that year, in May 2011, the trio had accepted the invitation of a theatrical producer, and a great fan of their work, who suggested de-virtualizing the project and creating a theatrical staging. Thus, in addition to 51 videos, with an average viewership of 200,000-400,000, and more popular ones getting up to a million views, and a book of poetry, which sold 100,000 copies in four months, the group gave more than 40 live concerts in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Kazan, Krasnoyarsk, and other regions.<sup>390</sup> The last concert took place on March 5, 2012, the next day

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<sup>388</sup> Zhokhova, “‘Grazhdanin poet.’”

<sup>389</sup> “Prokhorov oplatit gastroli proekta ‘Grazhdanin poet’,” *Lenta.ru*, October 14, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/10/14/projects/> (accessed February 3, 2013).

<sup>390</sup> Zhokhova, “‘Grazhdanin poet.’”

after Putin's reelection, and was staged in the form a mock memorial service in commemoration of the "deceased" poet.<sup>391</sup> In addition to audience recognition, the team received professional awards: Russian television critics named Citizen Poet the event of the 2010/2011 television season, "For the opportunity to preserve a Poet in oneself and to remain a real Citizen without 'big television,'"<sup>392</sup> and another award called *PolitProsvet* (Political Education), which was established earlier that year by the independent charity fund<sup>393</sup> in order to honor bloggers, journalists, and writers who make a significant contribution in the sphere of the political education of the Russian population.<sup>394</sup>

The popularity and ubiquity of the news-related content, particularly the wide recognition of Citizen Poet by the public and the professional community,<sup>395</sup> implies that the practice of content production, even if in formats that integrated news and entertainment, was a result of the social self-reflection that was taking place in the liberal-networked public sphere. By impoverishing the political discourse in the mainstream media, the regime had pushed the

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<sup>391</sup> "'Grazhdanin poet' zakrylsia 'grazhdanskoi panikhidoi' v Moskve," RIA Novosti, March 6, 2012, <http://ria.ru/culture/20120306/585698702.html> (accessed February 5, 2013).

<sup>392</sup> Arina Borodina, "Telepressa nazvala sobytiia i antisobytiie telesezona 2010/2011," *Kommersant*, November 14, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1793883> (accessed February 5, 2013).

<sup>393</sup> The award was established by a Russian communications scholar, businessman, and philanthropist, Dmitry Zimin, the founder of one of Russia's leading communications providers, who in 2011 became a vocal supporter of the opposition, see: <http://khodorkovsky.ru/publicsupport/news/2012/02/03/16959.html?mode=print> (accessed May 6, 2013).

<sup>394</sup> "'Grazhdanin poet' Bykova I Efremova poluchil premiiu 'PolitProsvet'," RIA Novosti, December 12, 2011, <http://ria.ru/culture/20111212/515169218.html> (accessed May 6, 2013).

<sup>395</sup> The Levada Center even did a study of how many people were familiar with Citizen Poet after a year of the project's existence. They found that 9 percent of the population was familiar with it and followed it regularly, or from time to time, while another 20 percent had heard something about it, but were not following. These numbers at first may seem low, but if we remember that Citizen Poet was not covered on TV and existed mainly online and on the stages of theaters, and also take into account that only 30-40 percent of Russian internet users follow the news online, we can see that the project, to various degrees, had reached almost everybody who used the internet and was at least slightly interested in the news. See Levada Center press release from February 6, 2012, <http://www.levada.ru/06-02-2012/rossiyane-o-lige-izbiratelei-proekte-grazhdanin-poet-narodnom-fronte-i-edinoi-rossii> (accessed May 6, 2013).

thinking and reading public into seeking alternative interpretations of political life; using the new communication media, this audience began filling the vacuum, producing and spreading content of its own.

This is not to argue, however, that the internet had automatically enabled civically conscious audiences who were eager to resist the regime and raise political awareness among other, passive and less responsible, members of society. In her article dedicated to the Russian internet and the role it plays in the nascent Russian civil society, Floriana Fossato sites a popular opinion among Russian scholars, who argued that their Western colleagues were wrong to believe that the Soviet underground constituted some kind of united political opposition to Soviet totalitarianism. “The vast majority of the Soviet underground,” they argued, “was motivated by the very natural urge to express various personal, artistic and cultural views publicly, and ultimately to have fun amid the grim Soviet reality.” This, I believe, remains true for most internet content producers and consumers. For example, consider Citizen Poet and its participants. The idea of the project emerged as a spontaneous endeavor, not for financial gain, or popularity, but “for the soul”—no one expected that Citizen Poet would turn out to be so popular.<sup>396</sup> When asked what the project meant for him, the author of the texts, Dmitry Bykov, said that for him it was “an interesting stylistic challenge,” because stylizing “after a big classic poet is an interesting and smart way to reach people’s sub-consciousness,” which also allows writers to “quickly react to what is going on today, and expand the audience, because the audience of an online television channel is theoretically bigger than the audience of a newspaper . . .”<sup>397</sup> Thus,

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<sup>396</sup> Zhokhova, ““Grazhdanin poet””; Anton Zakharov, “Dmitry Bykov: Oshibki v ‘tsia’ i ‘t’sia’ ushli, potomu chto zhizn’ otverdela,” *Altapress.ru*, April 28, 2011, <http://altapress.ru/story/66306> (accessed May 6, 2013); Dmitry Tsilikin, “Mikhail Efremov: ‘My bypendrivaemsia I eshche za eto den’gi poluchaem,’” *Neva 24*, February 6, 2012, [http://www.neva24.ru/a/2012/02/06/Mihail\\_Efremov/](http://www.neva24.ru/a/2012/02/06/Mihail_Efremov/) (accessed May 6, 2013).

<sup>397</sup> Vladimir Liashchenko, ““Obshchestvo sil’no istoskovalos’ po satire,”” *Gazeta.ru*, April 14, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2011/04/12/a\\_3582177.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2011/04/12/a_3582177.shtml) (accessed May 6, 2013).



Bykov, who, in addition to his writing career, also teaches literature in high school, had a number of personal and professional reasons why the project was interesting to him, one of which was to effectively share his views about current affairs with wider audiences. As to the political meaning of his actions, he noted,

I don't think literature can affect politics. It can console those people who feel certain cognitive dissonance and understand that everything is going in the wrong direction; it helps them to see that they are not the only ones. As for the influence, it is always negligibly small . . .<sup>398</sup>

The other two members of the trio also insisted that they were completely outside of politics. When a journalist asked Mikhail Efremov, if he could answer a political question, he asked suspiciously, “Political? I am not doing politics.” In his interviews Efremov kept insisting that he was involved in the project as a professional.<sup>399</sup> Citizen Poet’s producer, Andrei Vasilyev, was the most pessimistic and bluntly cynical: “there was euphoria in the society that something will change. And we speculated on this euphoria. I knew for myself that nothing would change.” Yet in the same interview Vasilyev states that his concern was to produce a high quality, “first rate” product, and his creative partners in the trio confirmed that he was a very demanding producer.<sup>400</sup>

The attitudes to politics expressed by the Citizen Poet team were very common in Russia, as was discussed in Chapter 3, even among successful and well-established Russians, whose social imagination was paralyzed with the feeling that they personally can't do anything and should stay away from politics. Indeed, political resistance was not a primary factor that motivated the authors of Citizen Poet; rather, it was professional interest, and a very natural desire to share something they could do well with many others, to be recognized and appreciated.

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<sup>398</sup> Liashchenko, “‘Obshchestvo sil’no istoskovalos’ po satire.”

<sup>399</sup> Yulia Galkina, “Mikhail Efremov: ‘Gosudarstvo—eto nasilie,’” *Neva 24*, November 22, 2011, [http://www.neva24.ru/a/2011/11/22/Mihail\\_Efremov\\_Gosudarst/](http://www.neva24.ru/a/2011/11/22/Mihail_Efremov_Gosudarst/) (accessed May 6, 2013); Tsilikin, “Mikhail Efremov.”

<sup>400</sup> Gurkin, “Andrei Vasil’ev”; Zhokhova, “‘Grazhdanin poet.’”

“It was pleasant,” admits Dmitry Bykov, “to write and then watch the quickly growing number of views.”<sup>401</sup> The same was most probably true for other content producers: for example, blogger kamikadze\_d also became quite prominent on the internet, and was invited as an expert to the shows dedicated to blogging and the new media. The internet facilitated the realization of these individuals’ ambitions, provided publication tools and access to the public, and thus paved the way to success and popularity.

While agreeing with the Russian commentators, whom Fossato quoted in her article, as to the nature of motives that prompted individuals to create art or internet content that was critical of politics in Russia, I cannot agree with what seems to be implicit in their argument that the natural need for creative self-expression somehow diminishes the political significance of their message. I argue that these activities were highly political, even if on the micro-level of everyday life: back in Soviet times, as well as in post-Soviet Russia, many talented and creative individuals, through their work and art, which is always self-expressive, have been resisting, even if unconsciously, the monopoly of forms and discourses that the regime, whether Soviet or “Putinism,” was so keen to preserve. Incidentally, Citizen Poet was seen both by its audiences and the journalists as a political gesture, even though its authors kept insisting otherwise, because in a witty and entertaining form it was touching upon current issues of public interest, getting through to the audiences that otherwise might be disengaged from political news.<sup>402</sup>

Thus, new technologies allowed many Russians to carve a space for themselves out of the state-controlled public sphere, where, through discourses and practices that integrated news and entertainment, they could communicate about issues of public interest that were otherwise

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<sup>401</sup> Zhokhova, ““Grazhdanin poet.””

<sup>402</sup> “Kul’turnyi geroi goda,” *Vedomosti* 248 (3014), December 30, 2011, [http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article/273810/kulturnyj\\_geroj\\_goda](http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article/273810/kulturnyj_geroj_goda) (accessed May 7, 2013).

undiscussed or misrepresented in the state-controlled media space. No one was “doing politics,” but everyone was acting politically, both as producers and as interpreters of alternative meanings to those disseminated by the regime. The cumulative effect from this process of co-production was a cultural public environment of the liberal-networked public sphere quite hostile to the regime—one that reflected popular attitudes and acted as a locus of counter-power, shaping public opinion among its participants about the state of affairs in the country in general and about the upcoming elections in particular.

### Kremlin Intervenes: Internet Controls

As independent and uncensored as the liberal-networked public sphere in Russia is, it is not a space that exists completely outside state control. Indeed, even in the more democratic countries, where the state and other powerful actors control cyberspace to a certain extent, it is a contested terrain.<sup>403</sup> Throughout the 2000s Russian authorities have been trying to control the internet, particularly around the time of elections. Originally, according to Russian journalists and internet experts, the Kremlin planned to pressure editors and owners of the registered online media outlets, on the one hand, and to create and popularize pro-Kremlin news services that would form public opinion on the internet, on the other.<sup>404</sup> The services, such as *Vesti.ru* and *Vzgliad.ru*, were created and joined established loyal outlets such as RIA Novosti, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenty i Fakty*, and *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*.

Starting from 2007, the Kremlin directed its attention to the blogosphere. One of the main approaches was to use paid and “loyal” bloggers to spread pro-government messages, post politically correct materials, and comment negatively on all materials that involved oppositional

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<sup>403</sup> Deibert et al., *Access Controlled*, xvi.

<sup>404</sup> Soldatov and Borogan, “Kremlevskii otvet bloggeram.”

judgments.<sup>405</sup> Some of these bloggers were public personalities who did not hide their pro-government views, or who were directly associated with United Russia, but through the initiatives like “The school of Kremlin bloggers” and lectures at the Seliger summer camp, attempts were made to expand the pool, and the “professionalism” of loyal bloggers, and to teach the Kremlin youth the methods of agenda promotion on the internet.<sup>406</sup>

The 2011 election campaign had demonstrated that the Kremlin’s strategists, primarily Vladislav Surkov, the regime’s chief ideologist and the person in charge of the Kremlin’s online strategy, attempted to further adjust to the new media environment and engage youth online using informal, self-expressive methods of promotion that would go beyond pro-regime blogging. For example, during the summer an online community emerged of the so-called “Putin’s Army” consisting of young girls who were supporting Prime Minister Putin. They published a promo video, in which they praised Vladimir Putin as a politician and a strong man, and announced a competition, calling internet users to send them videos of how they “tear something for Putin.” The group also organized street events posing for journalists in tightly fitted shirts and giving interviews, in which they tried to explain why they liked Putin so much. The movement was promoted as a genuine “grassroots” organization of Putin’s fans.<sup>407</sup> Another initiative was a city game quest incidentally called “V.V. Will Cover You,” which included the organization of street flash mobs, where participants dressed like secret agents, and the dissemination of posters in the center of Moscow that depicted Prime Minister Putin as James

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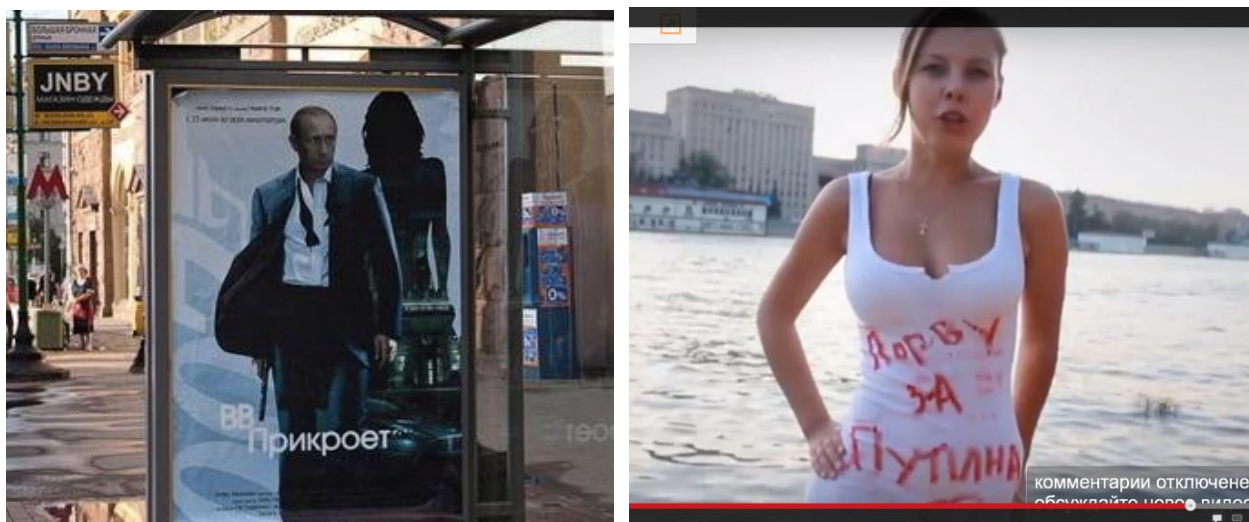
<sup>405</sup> Soldatov and Borogan, “Kremlevskii otvet bloggeram”; Anton Troianovski and Peter Finn, “Kremlin Seeks To Extend Its Reach in Cyberspace,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2007.

<sup>406</sup> Dmitry Shusharin, “Muzyka vysshikh blogosfer,” *Slon*, December 30, 2009, [http://slon.ru/world/muzyka\\_vysshih\\_blogosfer-234674.xhtml](http://slon.ru/world/muzyka_vysshih_blogosfer-234674.xhtml) (accessed May 10, 2013); Olga Tropkina and Anastasia Novikova, “‘Nashi’ osvoili trolling i sms-spam,” *Izvestiia*, August 28, 2011, <http://izvestia.ru/news/498757> (accessed May 13, 2013).

<sup>407</sup> “‘Nashi’ i MGER zaiavliaiut, chto ne sviazany s fleshmobami v podderzhku Putina,” RIA Novosti, July 18, 2011, <http://ria.ru/society/20110718/403646338.html> (accessed May 10, 2013).

Bond (see Figure 16). Organizers of the quest also claimed to have no connections to the government and that the posters were a work of unknown enthusiasts produced in the framework of the game.<sup>408</sup>

New technologies required new, imaginative approaches to the audience, and the Kremlin indeed made a substantial effort to adjust to the new media environment and to dominate it. The term “networked Putinism” introduced by Vlad Strukov, a scholar of modern Russian culture, seems quite reflective of what has been achieved. Yet, my reading of blogs for this study revealed that Russian internet users, for the most part, are aware of the existence of paid bloggers and of the Kremlin youth’s involvement with the internet, and they tend to mistrust messages that speak too positively of the government. There was considerable resentment among internet users to the regime’s covert encroachment on their territory, and they were eager to give a rebuff.



*Figure 16.* Vladimir Putin’s PR campaign. Left: Posters that emerged in the streets of Moscow in the summer of 2011 featured a man looking like Putin, on a poster made after a promo poster for the James Bond movie *Casino Royale*. Right: the “Putin’s Army” video. The words on the activist’s shirt are “I will tear for Putin.” *Source:* <http://ridus-news.livejournal.com/285079.html> and <http://armia-putina.livejournal.com/>

<sup>408</sup> Oleg Savin, “Pressa Rossii: Putin stal uchastnikom kvesta,” BBC Russian Service, July 15, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/07/110715\\_russ\\_press.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/07/110715_russ_press.shtml) (accessed May 10, 2013).

An informal competition of sorts was established between pro-government activists and regular internet users, where both camps used new technologies to engage internet audiences, neutralize the efforts of the other side, and ultimately to influence public opinion. For example, as soon as “Putin’s Army” registered in the social networks and began promoting itself, liberal journalists and bloggers infiltrated the group and disclosed information about its organizers, proving that the whole project was a public relations campaign presented to look like a genuine movement.<sup>409</sup> In response to “Putin’s Army,” multiple online videos emerged that mirrored the group’s promo video, but ridiculed the crude public relations attempt and had an oppositional meaning (see Figure 17). Finally, it is enough to read comments posted to both projects’ online groups to see what internet users thought of them.<sup>410</sup>



Figure 17. YouTube video: “Putin’s Army Defeated.” “Young and successful” ladies in the video, dressed in black, say they “have made up their mind” about Putin’s regime, and shoot at targets made in the form of bears, the symbol of United Russia, with “The Party of Crooks and Thieves” written on them. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VviBzQ9VVhc>

<sup>409</sup> Investigation by Kamikadze\_d, uploaded July 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=smgV\\_XIya3c#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=smgV_XIya3c#!) (accessed May 13, 2013); Diana Khachatryan, “Po grud’ v politike,” *The New Times* 25 (210), 15 August 2011, <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/42289/> (accessed June 20, 2013). Even though “Putin’s Army” emerged well before Putin announced that he would run in the upcoming elections, this campaign alone was a clear sign that the “swap” was already decided upon.

<sup>410</sup> “Putin’s army defeated” video, uploaded August 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VviBzQ9VVhc>; “Putin’s Army” group in LiveJournal: <http://armia-putina.livejournal.com/>; Photo reports about the quest: <http://moya-moskva.livejournal.com/2855631.html> and <http://ridus-news.livejournal.com/285079.html> (accessed May 13, 2013).

This competition rendered the task of regime promotion problematic and somewhat unpredictable: at times, the meaning promoted by the regime’s enthusiasts was reinterpreted in the liberal-networked public sphere and backfired with opposite connotations. A good example of such competitive reinterpretation was the first political flash mob that took place on *Twitter* on Putin’s birthday, October 7, 2011. It started with a rhyme that one enthusiastic United Russia member posted on his *Twitter* account in the morning: “It’s warm and sunny in Moscow, summer! #THANKPUTINFORTHAT.”<sup>411</sup> This ‘present’ in the form of thinly veiled flattery drew a wave of responses, transforming into a rhyme contest: pro-Putin users kept posting flattering rhymes, such as, “We have more of the Internet #THANKPUTINFORTHAT” (@maxbryansk), “Our rockets are stronger than their missile defense #THANK . . .” (@rybakoff), and “Our ballet is the coolest #THANK . . .” (@dneprovskiy); while others reacted, “This hashtag is paid for from the budget #THANK . . .” (RuslanUsachev), “Brezhnev is back from the underworld? #THANK . . .” (@galerist), “We have elections, but it’s as if we don’t #THANK . . .” (@biakoff); “Forests were on fire again this summer #THANK . . .” (@afields\_forever), “I give bribes to the road police #THANK . . .” (@mellowcall), and so on. Indeed, there were neutral and silly postings, but most of them were sarcastic, so that the original idea of a “present,” fell through, turning into a politically charged flash mob, and a newsworthy occasion for the liberal media, with opinion

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<sup>411</sup> In Russian this sentence rhymes and sounds like “V Moskve teplo i solntse. Leto. #SPASIBOPUTINUZAETO.” The original Soviet-time joke that ridiculed Soviet propaganda: “The winter is gone, summer has come—thank the Party for that!”—“Proshla zima, nastalo leto,—Spasibo Partii za eto!” meant that the Party should be thanked for everything, even for natural phenomena, so the idea with the rhyme was quite dubious from the start. The combination of a sign “#” with following letters is called a “hashtag” and is meant for tagging messages on *Twitter*, so that they can be organized thematically. Thus, hashtags are used with every *Twitter* statement, most often for the purposes of convenience, but sometimes they can acquire a meaning of their own.

leaders and public personalities joining regular *Twitter* users, and the Russian-language hashtag making it to the top of the most popular hashtags of the day on *Twitter* globally.<sup>412</sup>

What makes “networked Putinism” different from other authoritarian governments is that it attempted to compete with oppositional points of view and did not resort, at least for now, to Chinese-style filtering. As a result of this competition, as some Russian media specialists argue, government activists had failed to achieve one goal, that is, to build genuine authority and support among internet users.<sup>413</sup> Long-time top bloggers have included liberal journalists Anton Nosik and Andrei Malgin, liberal photographer, Rustem Adagamov, and oppositional bloggers *teh\_nomad* and Alexei Navalny. As was discussed in Chapter 3, pro-Kremlin bloggers were not able to crowd out independent and oppositional bloggers from social networks, and do not form a firm cluster in the blogosphere. Pro-government news portals by no means dominate the Russian internet, and, as I showed in Chapter 3, are not popular among bloggers as reference sources.

According to Marina Litvinovich, a political technologist who used to work for the Kremlin, the Kremlin’s bloggers may successfully disseminate their propaganda, but they fail to create “blog waves,” when information is picked up by thousands of users, or create content similar to the examples discussed above that would become popular because of its quality and creativity. The problem, she believes, is the quality of the staff that works on government online projects: “[t]he situation with smart people in the opposition is much better,” she argues.<sup>414</sup> Since the core of the Kremlin youth movements consists of poorly educated young individuals from the countryside, the tactic they resort to more often is aggressive intrusion into oppositional

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<sup>412</sup> Natalya Roibman, “Twitter pozdravliaet Putina sovetskoi Rifmoi,” *Vedomosti*, October 7, 2011, [http://www.vedomosti.ru/tech/news/1386257/twitter\\_pozdravlyat\\_putina\\_sovetskoi\\_rifmoi](http://www.vedomosti.ru/tech/news/1386257/twitter_pozdravlyat_putina_sovetskoi_rifmoi) (accessed February 3, 2013)

<sup>413</sup> Soldatov and Borogan, “Kremlevskii otvet bloggeram”; Shusharin, “Muzyka vysshikh blogosfer.”

<sup>414</sup> Soldatov and Borogan, “Kremlevskii otvet bloggeram.”



discussions and personal insults of the participants—so-called internet trolling—which does not contribute to building authority, although successfully annoys those participating.<sup>415</sup> For these reasons, as well as the morally reproachable motivation of their activities, the Kremlin’s bloggers were rendered anti-heroes of sorts in the liberal-networked public sphere. For example, consider this conversation that took place on one of the forums of professional programmers after the birthday flash mob:

Mithgol [wrote]

I hope you understand that this hashtag, the rhymes published under it, and its popularity in general are not an expression of love to Putin, but rather a political irony, that sometimes transgresses into satire, or everyday humor. (If you don’t—go read the hashtag.)

I have also participated in the flash mob [posts links to his contributions], but I don’t think my poetic experiments can be considered as a serious expression of “love for the future president.”

roman\_tik [in response]

What is interesting, the hashtag works for both sides. On the one hand, all kinds of Nashists,<sup>416</sup> Surkov’s for-profit internet-agitators, and other Putin-Jugend are promoting it precisely as an expression of “people’s love for the leader of the nation.” On the other, there are reasonable, adequate people, who perceive this hashtag as political irony, and advance it for this reason.

ChemAli [adds]

What’s symptomatic is that even after the essence of the incident was explained to them, and having received the news that unwillingly, and through stupidity, they associate Putin with Stalin, these Nashists and young bastards keep doing that :)<sup>417</sup>

Another problem with regime promotion in a competitive environment was that Russian political and social reality spoke for itself, and 25-30 percent of the Russian population was actively rejecting it, claiming that none of the parties represented their interests.<sup>418</sup> Online communications clearly reflected this attitude, and they would hardly be satisfied by the postings

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<sup>415</sup> Soldatov and Borogan, “Kremlevskii otvet bloggeram.”

<sup>416</sup> A popular colloquial form of referring to the members of Nashi movement.

<sup>417</sup> A popular blog that is dedicated primarily to the IT news, <http://habrahabr.ru/post/129935/>

<sup>418</sup> Volkov, *Rossiane ne gotovy golosovat’ za oppositsiiu*; Denis Volkov, *Protestnye elektoral’nye strategii* (Moscow: Levada Center, November 3, 2011), <http://www.levada.ru/03-11-2011/protestnye-elektoralnye-strategii> (accessed May 13, 2013).

of teenage pro-Kremlin bloggers. This is also the why, despite all attempts at online agenda setting, politics-related communications in the liberal-networked public sphere grew radicalized as the political events of the electoral year developed. For example, along with the biting sarcasm of Citizen Poet, *Twitter* users began assigning the humiliating hashtag “#zhalkii” (pitiful) to the tweets related to the president Medvedev. The term emerged on October 15, 2011, after the official announcement of Putin’s candidacy at the United Russia Party congress on September 24, 2011.

According to sociologists, this congress had become one of the central events that triggered future protests, because it undermined hope for the evolutionary transformation of the regime that some intellectuals had associated with Dmitry Medvedev, his rhetoric of modernization, the 2020 strategy, and the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights.<sup>419</sup> The most insulting was the manner in which the “swap” was announced: Putin plainly stated that he and Medvedev had agreed on everything a long time ago, which meant that all the “modernization” rhetoric of the lame duck president was just that—rhetoric. This development shortly before the elections affected the attitudes of many policy-makers, as well as the population at large. For example, Igor Yurgens, a scholar from a pro-Medvedev think-tank, said: “The feeling was, they can’t do this. Six, most likely 12 years with no discussions, no consultations . . . Here, in one day, two people—but most probably one person—decided the next decade without anyone else.”<sup>420</sup> Similarly, 42 percent of the participants in the Sakharov Avenue rally shared this disappointment, stating that the lack of modernization was one of the reasons they came to the rally (Appendix A).

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<sup>419</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, 7.

<sup>420</sup> Julia Ioffe, “The Decembrists,” *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2011.

The hashtag “#zhalkii” emerged on the day of the first televised meeting of Medvedev with his “supporters,” some of them being public personalities, scientists, and business people, on October 15,<sup>421</sup> and the first comments were posted on *Twitter* by those who watched the meeting on television. During the meeting, following the president’s own speech, the audience members could take turns asking the president a question, or making a remark. Several new tweets with the hashtag #pitiful were posted every minute, with 810 of them total by the end of the day. The analysis of a random sample<sup>422</sup> shows that in the beginning people were sharing links to the webcast of the meeting, then started commenting, often using quotes, as if responding to what had been said on screen. Sometimes they discussed individual “supporters”—those who were present in the studio. Most of the comments in the flow were very acerbic, indignant, and angry, exposing disrespect for the president; some participants were using curse words. People were re-tweeting comments they liked, agreeing with the speaker, or responding by making another statement (Appendix C). Only two commentators in my sample, who were associated with the Kremlin’s youth groups, tried to intervene, but they did not succeed in suppressing this communication wave. Once associated with Medvedev, the hashtag was commonly used ever since, and a year later also reached the *Twitter* tops, during a similar occasion of a televised interview with the politician.<sup>423</sup>

Thus, the regime’s attempts to control public opinion in the liberal-networked public sphere had encountered phenomena that are associated with the networked architecture of the online public space—communicating public, large scale, multiple sources of information input

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<sup>421</sup> Official site of the Russian President, “Dmitri Medvedev’s meeting with his supporters,” October 15, 2011, <http://президент.рф/news/13065> (accessed February 11, 2013).

<sup>422</sup> I analyzed 10% of tweets posted under hashtag #zhalkii on October 15, 2011, selecting every 10<sup>th</sup> tweet starting from the second one (posted on 14:37).

<sup>423</sup> “Heshteg ‘#zhalkii’ vyshel v lidery mirovykh trendov Twitter,” *Lenta.ru*, December 7, 2012, <http://lenta.ru/news/2012/12/07/jalky/> (accessed May 13, 2013).

and the spontaneity of communications. They also had to cope with the fact that in the digital space, internet users used essentially the same tools as those available to Kremlin's activists and used them imaginatively. Since traditional political participation was not an option for most participants in the liberal-networked public sphere, their resistance took a symbolic and cultural form at the nexus of entertainment, popular culture, and even classic culture. Later in the study I will demonstrate how creativity was effectively engaged by the opposition to promote alternative meanings; here, however, it will suffice to say that it was due to this collective creativity of the internet users that paid bloggers and Kremlin youth failed to win cyberspace for themselves and more often were resorting to forceful and guerilla-like covert methods.

Among these less subtle methods are the surveillance of the activities of specific users, their harassment in the form of spam attacks on their blogs, or hacking into their emails (or cell phones) and disclosing private information.<sup>424</sup> There also were reported instances of bribing and cooptation of established bloggers and authors, and attempts to undermine their authority.<sup>425</sup> For example, soon after Citizen Poet was launched, Bykov and Efremov were invited to the traditional meeting of the artistic elite with Prime Minister Putin, but both declined the offer under different pretexts.<sup>426</sup>

Regime activists artificially inflate the popularity of pro-government bloggers and promote pro-government posts to the top of *LiveJournal* and *Twitter* with the use of so-called

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<sup>424</sup> Deibert et al., *Access Controlled*, 27-28; Tropkina and Novikova, "'Nashi' osvoili trolling i sms-spam."

<sup>425</sup> Maxim Lobanov, "Kak vlast' verbuet izvestnykh bloggerov," Rosbalt, June 9, 2011, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2011/06/09/857548.html> (accessed May 13, 2013).

<sup>426</sup> "Bykov I Efremov otkazalis' ekhat' s Putinyem v Penzu," BBC Russian Service, April 29, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/04/110429\\_putin\\_bykov\\_efremov.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/04/110429_putin_bykov_efremov.shtml) (accessed May 13, 2013).

bots—computer-generated accounts.<sup>427</sup> For instance, well-known *Twitter* hashtags associated with Medvedev’s policy of modernization were popular only because they were promoted by bots.<sup>428</sup> And finally, there were multiple incidents of DDoS attacks, most often targeting the liberal media, which overwhelmed their web services, rendering them temporarily unavailable. These are particularly difficult to trace to the government, because they are usually executed by outside “contractors” and leave no trace of evidence as to who might have commissioned them, and only the profile of their victims allows one to infer the regime’s involvement.<sup>429</sup>

These covert, sophisticated, and multidimensional control schemes—everything short of Chinese-style filtering—constituted the toolbox that the Russian state used to hold cyberspace under its control. As will be demonstrated throughout this study, the electoral season of 2011 was particularly rich with cyber scandals, which can be attributed to the growing influence of the liberal-networked public sphere in the Russian media environment and the regime’s attempts to adjust to the new challenges in order to keep the upper hand.

### Growing Gap Between Official and Popular Discourses

Having faced an active audience and competition, the Kremlin resorted to the same methods that were used with all other media: it was trying to buy itself a simulation of popular support and ensure the visibility of its agenda in the new media, while resorting to subversive methods to pressure and discredit opposing views. The rhetoric of the Russian tandem has been that the mass media must be independent, that it is pointless to control the internet, that Russia

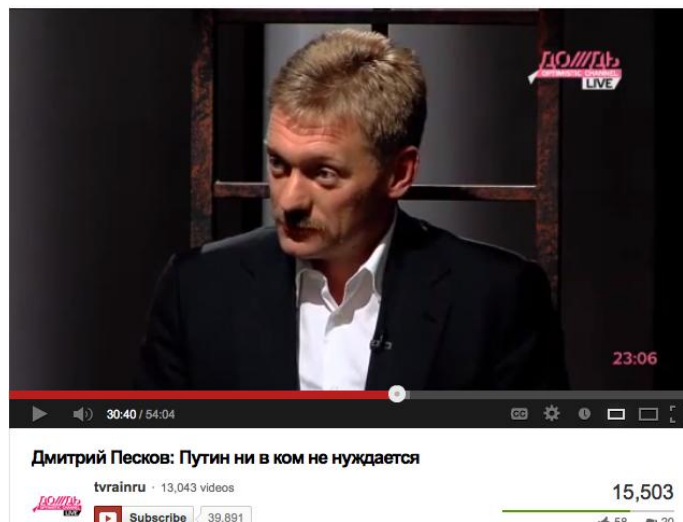
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<sup>427</sup> Nikita Girin, “Na poliakh ‘Zhivogo zhurnala’—vysokaia urozhainist’ BOTvy,” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 25, 2011, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/6070.html> (accessed May 13, 2013).

<sup>428</sup> Karina Alexanyan et al., *Exploring Russian Cyberspace: Digitally-Mediated Collective Action and the Networked Public Sphere*, research publication no. 2012-2 (Cambridge: The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University), 11; <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications> (accessed April 12, 2013).

<sup>429</sup> Deibert and Rohozinski, “Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace,” 26.

should become a “computer state,” and that it needs direct democracy.<sup>430</sup> In reality, as many internet users know too well, the new media environment has not become a space for a vertical public dialogue. Moreover, the regime’s bureaucrats and affiliates on different occasions have spoken in a dismissive manner about the political opinions, criticism, and political satire that appear on the internet, attempting to reframe them as insignificant and marginal (see Figure 18).<sup>431</sup>



*Figure 18.* An excerpt from an interview with Dmitry Peskov, Putin’s press secretary. A typical example of disregard for the criticism coming from liberal-networked public sphere: Journalist: There is a factor of public fatigue—12 years in the public is a lot. Do you feel that? Do you think about that? Does he understand that? Peskov: “True, many in Moscow often say now ‘Why does he return? True, many talk now about Putin’s Brezhnevization, and these are the people who know nothing about Brezhnev. You know, Brezhnev is not a “minus” for the history of our country, he was a big “plus” . . . Journalist: It was stagnation . . . Peskov: Later—stagnation, but the period of stagnation was shorter . . . We travel around Russia a lot, and in the regions problems are completely different from the problems of those who live inside Sadovoe Koltso and can afford to spend two or three hours a day blogging, or on social networks . . . Source: TVRain, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73Gn83vIGNI>

<sup>430</sup> Natal’ia Sokolova, “‘Komp’iuternyi patriotizm’ v predvybornykh debatakh,” *Digital Icons* 7 (2012): 155-169.

<sup>431</sup> Other examples: President, Dmitri Medvedev: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tj2WIUJTRAQ>; Putin’s representative at the electoral debates, Nikita Michalkov (in this interview journalist asks a direct question about political satire on the internet): [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=F3UTwVaTPM4#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=F3UTwVaTPM4#!), pro-regime journalist, Vladimir Solov’ev: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd8upRvdd44>.

As of 2011, however, the regime's methods of control and self-promotion in the networked interactive environment turned out to be insufficient to shape public opinion to the regime's liking and failed to prevent social mobilization. They could not preclude society's need for self-reflection and limit individual creativity and cultural production, which were the building blocks of the liberal-networked public sphere. The fact that the protests came as such a surprise to the government and president Medvedev<sup>432</sup> reveals the enormous informational and analytical gap between the regime and society, which has been increasing in recent years, and became obvious when the protests started. Whether due to the regime's confidence that it had firm control over the main channels of communication, or to its excessive reliance on the habitual passivity of those who would be unhappy with the "swap," the first big protests indeed perplexed Russian authorities and forced them to compromise with the opposition, even if for a short time.

This artificially-created divide between the mainstream and the liberal-networked public sphere has undoubtedly contributed to the excessive politicization of internet communications, infusing it with special significance that in developed democracies would be considered marginal to the main political process. With the scarcity of genuine public discussion, the interpretations of news and current affairs in the liberal-networked public sphere were increasingly taking the form of stinging political satire and radical political commentary, which reflected growing public frustration and the discrepancy between official discourse and attitudes that prevailed in the liberal-networked public sphere.

For the journalists and observers from the liberal-networked public sphere, who took online communications more seriously, the trends they observed there signified a change in public moods, which was hard to nail down. It was not an institutionalized expression of public

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<sup>432</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 284.

discontent, but it was present “in the air.” For example, a BBC journalist wrote, “anti-government or satirical clips on *YouTube* are unlikely to have a decisive effect on the outcome of the forthcoming elections. But they may already be changing perceptions . . .”<sup>433</sup>; investigative journalists, Irina Borogan and Andrey Soldatov, were surprised that their new book on Russian secret services suddenly became a bestseller:

I think that if our book came out a year ago, it would not be so popular. For example, consider the Bykov-Efremov phenomenon. A year ago all these corporate employees were not interested in politics at all . . . And all of a sudden they are ready to pay thousands of rubles to attend Bykov’s concert, and then discuss it for a long time. Why is that? Something is going on.<sup>434</sup>

Political observer Georgii Bovt put it the best:

So it turns out that the society influences the government, but this influence is not formalized—at least for now—in parliamentary, electoral, and other kinds of procedures and in civic political institutions. It is the specifics of Russian reality that opinions and attitudes can almost impalpably (particularly for side observers) be present in the air, showing themselves in nuances and particularities that in any other country would be quite secondary and even marginal: something there on the internet, something in the blogosphere, a dozen people with banners on a square, some Blue Buckets, some *YouTube* clips that momentarily become popular, Bykov’s poetry performed by Efremov in the series of *Citizen Poet*—nothing more.

But nothing less: it only seems that Russia is a country of extremes. It is also a country of nuances.

All this can “hang in the air” for a long time, until it bursts out with such a splash of indignation and action, that it becomes completely unclear (to everybody and all at once), how was it possible that all this—the regime, the government, the present seemingly immutable institutes, starting from police and ending with social security—was still holding up and did not turn to dust and ashes a long time ago.<sup>435</sup>

There were a number of such publications in the liberal-networked public sphere,<sup>436</sup> which implies that this was a space where alternative interpretations of the socio-political reality

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<sup>433</sup> Ennis, “Russian satirists use *YouTube* to challenge Kremlin”.

<sup>434</sup> Danilkin, “Andrei Soldatov i Irina Borogan”.

<sup>435</sup> Georgii Bovt, “Po zaiavkam nedovol’nykh,” *Gazeta.ru*, July 4, 2011, <http://www.gazeta.ru/column/bovt/3684569.shtml> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>436</sup> Novoprudskii, “Liudi iz manekenov”; *Gazeta.ru*, “Khity protesta”; Aleksandr Rubtsov, “Goluboi perevorot Surkova,” *Novaia Gazeta*, December 14, 2011, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/50051.html> (accessed May 18, 2013); “Zastriavshie v televizore,” *Gazeta.ru*, December 9, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/12/09\\_e\\_e\\_3920822.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/12/09_e_e_3920822.shtml) (accessed May 18, 2013); Zhelezniakova, “Runet—oruzhie srednego klassa”; Dmitriev, “Voshli v stadii samorazrusheniia”; Pavel Zhitniuk, “Maidan neizbezhen?” *Rosbalt*, March 9, 2011, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2011/03/09/826722.html> (accessed May 18, 2013).



in Russia were produced, and where a variety of opinions could aggregate and crystallize to affect the participants and be affected by them. Even the language used—and produced—in the liberal-networked public sphere was different. Mikhail Epstein, a linguist and philosopher, who runs the annual “words of the year” selection in Russian, told the *Washington Post* that by November 2011 the protest had been in the language and, therefore, “in the consciousness of the people.” He noted that,

The linguistic initiative is being taken away from the authorities . . . This is the first time that has happened since the era of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev—and then it was only intellectuals talking around their kitchen tables. Whenever there is a strong propagandistic pressure on the language from above, Russians will turn it into parody. The difference this time is that few shrink from voicing that parody in public.<sup>437</sup>

The new words, such as *Brezhnevization*, *Citizen Poet*, *ThankPutinForThat*, *New Stagnation*, *Khimki Forest*, *Blue Buckets*, *Prem'erZident* (Prime Minister + President), and many others were coined in the liberal-networked public sphere in order to describe the situation in the country and were selected by the committee as the “words of the year” (see Figure 6).

In the following chapters I will further discuss the mobilization mechanisms and the role of the liberal-networked public sphere in them, but here I want to note that the language and forms of the protests of 2011-2012 were clearly developed and practiced in the liberal-networked public sphere for some time: satire—sometimes gloomy, sometimes good-natured and funny—and symbolic forms of protest splashed out in the streets of Moscow and other cities (see Figure 19) and were noted by sociologists.<sup>438</sup> A good sense of humor, law-abiding politeness,<sup>439</sup> and cultural diversity were the main weapons protesters used against a regime that had all the means of coercion, but not the legitimacy to make protesters respect it.

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<sup>437</sup> Englund, “In Russia, Words Then Deeds.”

<sup>438</sup> Bikbov, “Metodologiya issledovaniya ‘vnezapnogo’ ulichnogo aktivizma.”

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

An important reason the protests remained peaceful is that the people who were mobilized in December 2011 represented those who had a professional education and access to the liberal-networked public sphere. Their participation in online communications and exposure to alternative discourses allowed for mobilization of the most civil and informed strata of the population, while the majority of Russian citizens was either unaware of, or indifferent to the country's political process.



Figure 19. Posters and costumes from the Russian protests of 2011-2012. From left to right 1: RosKosmos (Russian Federal Space Agency), help the Country, Send the Man to the Moon! 2: Anthropologists are for Fair Elections 3: An egg-man decisively condemns the conflict of form and contents 4: Father, don't leave us! Who, if not you will be diving for pots, riding combines, and pouring water from helicopters? (All references to Putin's PR campaigns on TV) 5: We don't need #pitiful government (the poster alludes to the *Twitter* hashtag assigned to Medvedev) 6: This is your finishing tape, Vova (Vladimir Putin). The white ribbon became the symbol of the protest) 7: They are not bears, they are rats (a bear is a symbol of United Russia); this person is also wearing a blue bucket, which reveals his/her association with the Blue Buckets movement. Source: <http://gastroscan.livejournal.com/136954.html>; <http://rblogger.ru/2012/02/21/ne-predstavlyae/>; <http://www.ridus.ru/news/20877/>

## CHAPTER 6

### BOTTOM-UP AGENDA SETTING AND ENHANCED INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

#### Alexei Navalny's Online Community as a Communication Hub

In the previous chapter I showed that the liberal-networked public sphere in Russia is a communicative and cultural environment that is co-produced by its participants, where discourses alternative to those controlled by the regime are produced and circulated along with other kinds of content on the nexus of politics, entertainment, and popular culture. This content defines the atmosphere or general mood of the liberal-networked public sphere and, in turn, shapes the public opinion of its participants. Although the number of contributors was high, certain trends and themes were clearly discernable, such as the proliferation of political satire, the “Brezhnevization” of the regime, its overboard self-promotion on television, and the relationships in the tandem.

In terms of the location of the content, communications in the liberal-networked public sphere had no single center, but were not completely anarchical. As was argued in Chapter 2, online communications have an informal validation system through which the sites that attract many visitors and develop substantial interlinking networks achieve high credibility and turn into particularly visible communication hubs. In this chapter I will consider one of such communication hubs, the blog of Alexei Navalny, and demonstrate how the interactions that took place there have contributed to redefining the public discourse about the 2011 elections.

Alexei Navalny is a lawyer from Moscow who exposed in his *LiveJournal* blog the practices of banks, oil companies, and government institutions. In 2008-2010 his popularity was growing, but he was primarily known in the narrow circle of those who followed his blog. In

October 2010 he had won alternative virtual elections for the position of mayor of Moscow.<sup>440</sup> He also established an online-based grassroots movement, *RosPil* (see Figure 3), with just a few staff members, most of them professional lawyers, who scrutinized suspicious government contracts.<sup>441</sup> In 2011 Navalny essentially transformed from a blogger into an aspiring politician and became one of the leaders of the opposition. His *LiveJournal* blog grew to become one of the biggest hubs on the Russian internet—some 150,000 daily readers as of 2011,<sup>442</sup> with his *Twitter* account followed by more than twice as many. He has been blacklisted by Russian television,<sup>443</sup> but his blog is by far the most-quoted in the traditional media—7,909 times—with the next most-quoted one mentioned only 950 times.<sup>444</sup>

In February 2011 Navalny launched a spontaneous campaign through his blog that was picked up by his readers and then by the media in the liberal-networked public sphere, and evolved to become a serious factor affecting the outcome of the 2011 Duma elections. He called United Russia “the party of crooks and thieves,” and asked his audience to spread the message that in the upcoming elections people should come out and vote for any party other than United Russia. As a result of this effort, by the end of the year thousands of people changed their minds about not coming out for the elections, and instead came and cast a protest vote. This “change of mind” was important in that it resulted in United Russia’s loss of a number of seats in the Duma, but, more importantly, it showed many people that if they come and vote *en masse*, they *can*

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<sup>440</sup> “Vybory mera Moskvyy: itogi golosovaniia,” *Kommersant-Online*, October 8 2010, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1512620> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>441</sup> See “Chto eto za sait?” *Rospil.ru*, <http://rospil.info/about> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>442</sup> Mikhail Fishman, “Blogger Navalny izoblichayet isteblishment,” *Die Welt*, April 20, 2011, <http://www.inopressa.ru/article/20apr2011/welt/russia3.html> (accessed May 24, 2013).

<sup>443</sup> *Nashe vremia*, Sovershenno Sekretno TV, interview with Vladimir Pozner, January 5, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7SzAKn-rEw> (accessed May 24, 2013).

<sup>444</sup> “Itogi 2011. Vlast’ ot bloga,” *Public.ru*, <http://public.ru/blogsmi2011#%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%8B> (accessed June 2, 2013).

affect the outcome of the elections. The campaign was also responsible for a large share of the online, political satire content that flooded the internet in 2011 and made journalists wonder about the change in attitudes and opinions which was discussed in Chapter 5.

In the following sections I will trace the development of this campaign in order to highlight the interaction of the blogosphere with the liberal media, and the bottom-up agenda setting function that these communications are able to perform. In the last section of this chapter, using the example of the professional community of musicians who responded to Navalny's call, I will also show how internet access allowed enhanced autonomy for professional musicians, who were able to freely express their opinion and support the opposition without risking too much in terms of access to the audience and popularity that the regime could potentially inhibit.

#### The Blogosphere and the Liberal Media: Co-production of Alternative Meanings

In this section I will explore the process by which a phrase once pronounced in passing by a blogger at a small radio station<sup>445</sup> transformed into a popular meme,<sup>446</sup> spreading in the liberal-networked public sphere and transforming into action. I will also demonstrate how the “crooks and thieves” campaign has become a site of vehement contestation between power and counter-power on the micro-level of everyday communications, where power demonstrated force and counter-power responded with creativity, and where public opinion was forged. In order to do so, I will use the Integrum database to trace publications that were using the phrase “the party of crooks and thieves” and analyze the context in which the phrase was used in the first two

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<sup>445</sup> According to TNS Radio index, in January-March of 2011 the audience of Finam FM was slightly over 100,000/day; statistics are available at [www.tns-global.ru](http://www.tns-global.ru) (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>446</sup> Internet memes are units of cultural information, an image, a video, a phrase, etc. that are passed electronically from one Internet user to another; the term originates from the book by Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). Indeed, memes existed before the Internet; in fact human culture, religion, and traditions can be considered consisting of memes—information that has been passed through centuries from generation to generation.

months after it was coined (see Appendix D). Such analysis is helpful for elucidating the new methods of networked cooperation (discussed in Chapter 2) that the internet enabled, and to which Navalny quite skillfully, even if intuitively, resorted. Exiled from the state-controlled mass media, the blogger used the internet's capabilities to their utmost: he was building on the “cognitive surplus” of his readers, engaging their talents and professional skills, and resorted to the loose network cooperation to keep his projects running.

On February 2, 2011, Navalny was invited to the independent radio station, Finam FM, to talk about corruption and his new project, *RosPil*. When asked about his attitude to United Russia, he said it was negative, because United Russia is “the party of corruption, it is the party of crooks and thieves” and that it should be destroyed with the use of legal methods.<sup>447</sup> As I mentioned earlier, by this time Navalny had achieved a certain prominence for his anti-corruption activism, and even though he was hardly known to many Russians, the government closely watched his activities.

Quite unsurprisingly, a couple of days after the radio show, on February 4, 2011, a lawyer named Shota Gorgadze posted in his blog that, although personally he was not a United Russia sympathizer, he condemned the sweeping statement that some blogger dared to make about average Russian people, teachers and engineers, who work hard and have nothing to do with corruption. Mr. Gorgadze announced that some of these rank-and-file members of United Russia had chosen him to protect their good name, and that he was preparing a legal analysis of Mr. Navalny's statement, and if necessary, would be willing to take it to court.<sup>448</sup> It is not unlikely that the statement was this lawyer's initiative, an attempt to get a job, but it resonated

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<sup>447</sup> *Sukhoi ostatok*, Finam FM, February 3, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=leHWbcmd74E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=leHWbcmd74E) (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>448</sup> Shota Gorgadze, personal blog, entry posted February 4, 2011, <http://blogs.mail.ru/mail/grant-pravo/8893D6E867A1D85.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).

with the readers of his blog and triggered a lively discussion, which amounted to thousands of posts and a whole range of opinions, in support of Gorgadze and in support of Navalny, accompanied by links to texts and videos relating to the subject.<sup>449</sup>

Navalny responded to Gorgadze's statement only a few days later: he posted a recording of his radio talk, Gorgadze's statement, and a link to his blog, noting sarcastically that he could imagine all these rank-and-file teachers and engineers who stopped all their work and rushed to court to defend their party.<sup>450</sup> In the same blog post Navalny set out an overview of cases, when opposition newspapers and individuals were trying to defend their name from unsubstantiated statements by high-ranking officials, and invariably lost their cases. Three members of the oppositional Solidarity movement, Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, and Vladimir Milov, had just lost their case to Putin, who had publicly accused them of stealing "millions together with Berezovsky," a Russian oligarch in exile, and the court had ruled that the statement was Putin's personal "value judgment." Navalny said that, if he was to be sued, he would repeat the same argumentation, and "crooks and thieves" would be his personal "value judgment." He set up a poll in his blog asking his readers to vote in order to determine if they supported his personal judgment. As Navalny was going to use the results in court, he noted that it would be good, for the representativeness of the sample, if at least 10,000 people voted. The poll ended up gathering 39,467 votes, and 96.6 percent of them confirmed Navalny's "value judgment."<sup>451</sup> There was something to discuss here: United Russia, the Russian court system, winning tactics, and so on, with another 8,851 commentaries to follow.

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<sup>449</sup> Gorgadze, personal blog, entry posted February 4, 2011.

<sup>450</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 15, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/553708.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.



The poll was set up on February 15, and as it progressed collecting votes, the blog came under bot attacks—a technique mentioned in the previous chapter. This time computer-generated messages—over 120,000 of them—contained obscenities and requested Navalny and his followers “to shut up!”<sup>452</sup> It is notoriously hard to attribute anonymous bot attacks to any particular party, but Navalny wrote that the attack had to do with the poll and was probably executed by the Kremlin’s online contractors.<sup>453</sup> *LiveJournal* removed all automated messages, leaving only genuine ones, and one of Navalny’s readers helped him to install a special program that could filter bot messages.<sup>454</sup>

As for the media coverage, for several days, from February 2-6, 2011, the exchange between the two remained in the blogosphere, but soon the first publications followed, and the story about the radio show and a potential lawsuit began spreading in the liberal-networked public sphere. From February 7-15, several publications emerged that were based on the texts available from the two blogs, that of Navalny and Gorgadze, and covered Putin’s lawsuit with the three oppositional politicians and the poll Navalny had started. In the context of the story with the “crooks and thieves,” an online news service, *Novyi Region (nr2.ru)*, followed the fundraising effort Navalny had just started for *RosPil* and quoted his opponent, Mr. Gorgadze, who began making allegations in his blog about the possible sources of money that had already been donated. The web portal *TelNews* provided a summary of the radio show, titling it, “Our Future President?”, while *Gazeta.ru* mentioned the lawsuit with an oil company, Transneft,

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<sup>452</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 19, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/554817.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>453</sup> Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 19, 2011.

<sup>454</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted March 2, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/560094.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).

which Navalny had just won, covered the poll, and even cited some comments from Navalny's blog. Finally, the Communist Party had posted *Gazeta.ru*'s story on its website (Appendix D).

Even looking at the first week of the online coverage we can see that there was a lot of communication happening on the level of blogs—as Georgii Bovt put it, “something in the blogosphere”<sup>455</sup>—precisely because the criticism of public affairs was not institutionalized, and a nationwide dialogue was lacking. Navalny's blog and the opinions expressed there attracted the attention of liberal journalists, and as soon as something newsworthy appeared there, it became a story for a top-25 liberal news site. The reaction of the regime was also quick and multi-dimensional: as was discussed in Chapter 3, there are many individuals in Russia who work in support of the regime, including self-interested and ideological supporters, so the reactions included a variety of openly expressed views against the opposition, covert discrediting, as well as technical attacks on web services that host oppositional content and discussions. These measures, however, as I will show below, did not prevent the discussion from going on and the information about it from spreading. In fact, one of the groups from the so-called “systematic opposition,” the Communist Party, was among the first to publish news coming from the blogosphere on its website.

In the next several days, February 16-20, a few more publications emerged, now in print and online radio. The liberal *Kommersant* published a small story covering the Navalny-Gorgadze exchange and mentioning Putin's lawsuit. The oppositional *Novaya Gazeta* also covered the story with the radio show, publishing Navalny's commentary about his previous lawsuit with the oil company and the potential suit with United Russia. The newspaper also interviewed one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit involving Putin, about the decision and argumentation that Putin's lawyers offered. This, by far, was the most exhaustive and substantial

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<sup>455</sup> See note 435 in Chapter 5.

article of all, showing the readers what to expect from a lawsuit with members of the country’s political elite. Other media outlets, such as Radio Svoboda, *Delovoi Peterburg* (Business St. Petersburg), and several regional publications offered an overview of the most discussed themes in the blogosphere and covered the most recent post in Navalny’s blog, where he demonstrated that the phrase he coined had already altered search results in two main search engines, *Yandex* and *Google*,<sup>456</sup> and the fact that small symbolic victories were important for the online oppositional community. Now those who searched for “United Russia” would be first offered the option “the party of crooks and thieves,” and only next would be the party’s official site. This has remained the case ever since, except that now the next most popular page is the Wikipedia page for United Russia (see Figure 20).

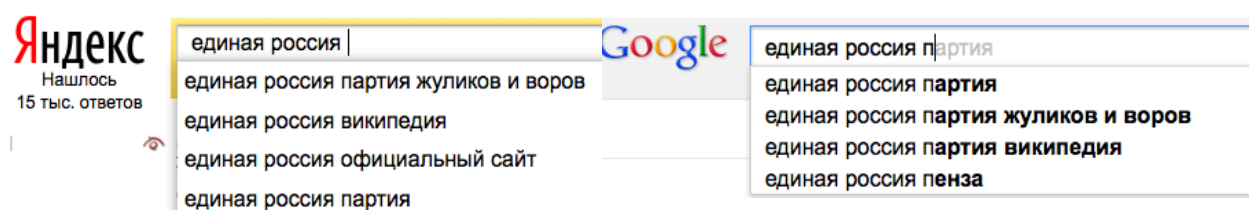


Figure 20. Search results for *Edinaia Rossiia* (United Russia) as they appeared in 2013 on two of the most popular search engines in Russia. *Yandex*: United Russia the Party of Crooks and Thieves; United Russia Wikipedia; United Russia official site. *Google*: United Russia Party; United Russia the Party of Crooks and Thieves; United Russia Wikipedia.

What came as a surprise was that a Duma deputy and United Russia member, Evgenii Fedorov, took it upon himself to represent United Russia and confront Navalny in a public discussion that took place in the studio of the same radio station.<sup>457</sup> The incident in itself was a rare occasion, which would not be repeated: after this debate regime representatives would be criticizing the opposition only in the state-controlled, or party media. It is not surprising that this

<sup>456</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 16, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/553859.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>457</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 21, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/555608.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).

debate drew attention from journalists in the liberal media, and the story with “crooks and thieves” was gaining momentum (see Figure 21).<sup>458</sup> The debate that took place on February 21 was not productive, however, and both participants spoke past each other, with Fedorov consecutively repeating all the same frames that the state-controlled television regularly advanced. Navalny summarized the results of the debate well in his blog:

The main argument of United Russia goes as follows:

- Evidence of corruption does not exist;
- If you don't like something, write to the public prosecutor's office; if the prosecutor's office does not respond, it means your argument is not grounded well enough;
- All of those who speak against United Russia are spies and agents of influence. They want to destroy Russia, and huge money is allocated for this purpose;
- United Russia saved the country from famine, war, breakdown, encephalitic tics, and “were-rats” from Venus;
- United Russia renovated the infrastructure, so soon we will be living like they do in Germany.<sup>459</sup>



Figure 21. Journalists observing the Navalny-Fedorov debate on Finam FM. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccE-zCR1ej4> and *Russkii Reporter*.

In the meantime, in the blogosphere the debate had become a “conversation of the day,”<sup>460</sup> and its video version was available online. There was a lot to discuss there, and bloggers

<sup>458</sup> Yulia Gutova, “Navalny, ty kto?!” *Russkii Reporter* 9, no. 187, March 9, 2011, <http://www.rusrep.ru/article/2011/03/09/navalnyi/> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>459</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 22, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/555856.html> (accessed May 24, 2013).

and the liberal media did. First, it was clear from the conversation that United Russia representatives were rhetorically conflating their party's interests with the interests of the country, which, by implication, meant that all Russian internet users who supported Navalny and his "value judgment" were rendered "the agents of the West"—a fact that the liberal-networked public sphere had ridiculed in the publications that followed between February 21-25 (Appendix D). Second, the debate demonstrated to many that the party of "power" had lost all the necessary skills of political debate—because there was no debate in the mainstream public sphere: in support of his rhetoric of the geopolitical threat that Russia faces, deputy Fedorov did not state a single concrete fact, was evasive, and provided no concrete counter-arguments to the instances of high-level corruption listed by Navalny.

Bloggers also conducted some fact checking. One concrete example in support of a global Western plot against Russia that Fedorov provided was a reference to a *WikiLeaks* cable, which contained the internal correspondence of U.S. diplomats, and according to which, as Fedorov alleged, U.S. diplomats were insisting on pressuring certain 'influential individuals' in Russia who should prevent passing an amendment to a certain Russian law. According to Fedorov, the law in question was the law that regulated Russia's payment system, which, as it was formulated at the moment, was playing into the U.S.'s hands, allowing American companies to reap benefits as high as \$4 billion a year. According to Fedorov, United Russia was trying to alter the law to protect the Russian national interest, while some unnamed 'influential individuals,' upon American instruction, were attempting to prevent this change. When asked by the host if those 'influential people' were members of United Russia, Fedorov answered "no,"

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<sup>460</sup> *LiveJournal* Themes, "Polnyi tekst: Navalny protiv Edinoi Rossii," February 22, 2011, <http://www.livejournal.ru/themes/id/25203> (accessed June 2, 2013); *LiveJournal* Themes, "Pod ch'iu dudku pliashet Edinaia Rossiia," February 24, 2011, <http://www.livejournal.ru/themes/id/25271> (accessed June 2, 2013).

but that they were extremely influential. When pressed for details, he responded, “read it yourself, everything is available in translation.”<sup>461</sup>

This example was, by far, the most concrete, so bloggers found the *WikiLeaks* cable and uncovered the contents of the email exchange. It turned out that the American embassy was “recommending” that “senior US government officials also take advantage of the meeting with their Russian counterparts, including the Bilateral Presidential Commission, to press the government of Russia to change the draft text to ensure U.S. payment companies are not adversely affected.” The “plot” scheme was falling apart, as the event was a standard official work meeting in the framework of the Russian-American Reset, with a normal agenda of interest representation, and the government officials who were to be “pressed” were all high-ranking United Russia officials, among them Vladislav Surkov, Sergey Shoigu, and Mikhail Shvydkoi. There were several other such “discrepancies” in the deputy’s argument, which were clarified and summarized in Navalny’s blog.<sup>462</sup>

This example illustrates how the active audience of the internet is a challenge to the regime’s bureaucrats; the type of rhetoric that deputy Fedorov resorted to—emotion-laden demagoguery with a few concrete examples taken out of context—would have probably worked on television, especially accompanied by an effective visual, but it did not work in the networked environment, where an interested and engaged audience was willing to check facts, especially because the sources were available online. This is also why, in order to preserve domination over the popular discourse, the preferred tactic of the regime has been that of deliberately ignoring the liberal-networked public sphere and the information that circulates there to render it illegitimate

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<sup>461</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 24, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/557047.html> (accessed June 2, 2013).

<sup>462</sup> Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 22, 2011; Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 24, 2011.

in the public eye.<sup>463</sup> The debate, indeed, was also ignored by the pro-government media. Deputy Fedorov wrote a piece, sharing his impressions, but this time published it in United Russia's official portal. He restated what he had said during the show, called Navalny and the like "agents of the West" and concluded that, "all these attempts of Navalny's to embroil and to split Russian society are ridiculous. They will lead to no avail. But we should be alert."<sup>464</sup>

In the meantime, the debate had caused a reaction among the internet users that went beyond commenting. Anonymous computer-savvy individuals created a website on February 22 with the web address *thepartyofcrooksandthieves.rf*,<sup>465</sup> that began retranslating the content of the official web page of United Russia.<sup>466</sup> The joke did not last too long: the very next day the official site went offline, collapsing the mirror site.<sup>467</sup> On December 25, however, unknown individuals announced on *Twitter* that a DDoS-attack had been prepared against the official site of the party, and that anybody willing to do so could join the attack. The mechanism worked as follows: the original *Twitter* announcement contained a link to a site where there was a red button; by pushing it, users automatically joined the attack—their computers began sending a special script, which put pressure on United Russia's site, threatening to overload it. The

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<sup>463</sup> Danilkin, "Andrei Soldatov i Irina Borogan."

<sup>464</sup> Evgeny Fedorov, "O chem 'kukarekal' Navalny?" *ER-Portal.ru*, February 21, 2011, <http://www.efedorov.ru/node/1310> (accessed June 2, 2013).

<sup>465</sup> *Partiiazhulikovivorov.rf* in Cyrillic letters.

<sup>466</sup> "Zapushchen sait partiiazhulikovivorov.rf," *Lenta.ru*, February 22, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/02/22/party> (accessed June 2, 2013).

<sup>467</sup> "Ofitsial'nyi sait 'Edinoi Rossii' ushel v oflain," *Lenta.ru*, February 23, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/02/23/tangodown/> (accessed June 2, 2013).

challenge was open and symbolic, and it turned out that many internet users were willing to participate: the party's website stopped functioning for a short time.<sup>468</sup>

Between February 21-25, the liberal media covered the debate, the reaction of the blogosphere, the creation of the mock site, and the attacks, connecting them into a cause-and-effect story that still remained circumscribed to the liberal-networked public sphere, but with more implications to follow. It was at this moment after the debate that Navalny had announced a poster competition on his blog. Despite the lack of coverage in the state-controlled mass media, the slogan "United Russia is the party of crooks and thieves" was becoming popular on the internet: it has changed the search options in two of the most popular search engines and was picked up by liberal journalists. The poster competition was a way to maintain this momentum, but it also had a clear strategic goal: in the time before the upcoming regional and Federal elections (March and December, 2011 accordingly) the posters were meant to spread an idea about an alternative way of action; instead of ignoring the upcoming elections, people should come and vote for any other party, except for United Russia. On February 24, Navalny wrote,

I have to admit that my favorite strategy of boycotting the elections fell through. It does not work. I mean, of course no one votes, but not because of boycotting, but because no one pays attention. I believe it is the time for all normal people in our country to change the strategy.

Our concept should be the following one: ***COME TO THE ELECTIONS AND VOTE AGAINST UNITED RUSSIA.***

That means for any other party—no matter what.

You don't have to explain me that Just Russia is no different from United Russia, Zhirinovskii is bad, and CPRF is ancient.

It does not matter. You are voting **against the Party of Crooks and Thieves.**

We have to break United Russia's monopoly on power.

***Why should we do that even if they will "draw" their 65%?***

Elections are a stress for this filthy regime anyway. Falsification is a complex process that involves tens of thousands of people (election committee members, etc.). Administrations in the

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<sup>468</sup> "Sait edinorosov atakovali s pomoshchiu 'nizkoorbital'noi ionnoi pushki'," Lenta.ru, February 25, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/02/25/loic/> (accessed June 2, 2013); "'Edinaia Rossiia'ablokirovala ssylki na svoi sait," Lenta.ru, March 2, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/03/02/forbidden/> (accessed June 2, 2013); "Sait 'Edinoy Rossii' rukhnul posle skreshchivaniia s adresom 'partii zhulikov'," *Delovoi Peterburg*, February 25, 2011, [http://www.dp.ru/a/2011/02/25/Sajt\\_Edinoj\\_Rossii\\_ruhn/](http://www.dp.ru/a/2011/02/25/Sajt_Edinoj_Rossii_ruhn/) (accessed June 2, 2013).



regions hardly do anything except for administering falsifications. It is hard to make 35% become 65 percent. It will be even harder to make 20 % become 65 percent. We have to increase this stress.

***Will we be able to create problems?***

Sure we will. Currently around 15-20% of the population actually votes. A big part of these votes are early (purely cooked) votes. To put it simply, United Russia's votes are 7-10% of the electorate. If we will bring 1% of the people who have never voted before to the elections, we will create a big problem. If 5%—a colossal problem . . . <sup>469</sup> (formatting as in the original)

Finally, he continued, his strategy was also sound because it potentially would unite different oppositional factions. The posters were meant to advance two ideas: “United Russia is the party of crooks and thieves,” and “Come to vote no matter what, and vote against United Russia, for any other party.”<sup>470</sup> They also had to be formatted for a home printer. Then he called for everyone to spread the posters everywhere in their offices and among relatives, particularly grandmothers, so that they knew how to vote. As an example of good catchy slogans he listed several ideas from *Twitter* that were already floating around. There were no strict deadlines, Navalny noted, everybody was “to entertain themselves and have some fun.”<sup>471</sup>

The next day another leading Russian blogger, Rustem Adagamov, whom I mentioned earlier in this study, sent Navalny a link to the artwork produced by yet another blogger, nicknamed *redstarcreative*, an anonymous designer, who suggested a new logotype for “the Party of Crooks and Thieves” (see Figure 22). His subscribers already appreciated his work, and were asking for a printable version of the file—some wanted a t-shirt with the picture.<sup>472</sup> By

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<sup>469</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 24, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/556796.html> (accessed June 2, 2013).

<sup>470</sup> Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 24, 2011.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> See original in the blog of *redstarcreative*, entry posted February 25, 2011, <http://redstarcreative.livejournal.com/79315.html>; Navalny reposted on his blog on the same day, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/558228.html> (accessed June 21, 2013).

March 3, Navalny had received almost 400 images.<sup>473</sup> With the help of other bloggers, he shortlisted 80 of them and launched the voting. The red poster in Figure 22 won, but there were others with more text and argumentation for voting in the upcoming elections, and all 400 were uploaded on the internet.<sup>474</sup> Soon various versions of the competition posters began emerging on the streets of Russian cities, and in December they flooded the streets of Moscow.



Figure 22. The original poster produced by the blogger, *redstarcreative*. The inscription says, “United Russia – the Party of Crooks and Thieves.” The image on the left is a view of the rally on Bolotnaya Square that took place on December 10, 2011. Source: <http://boshsoz.com/novosti/4176-zabavnye-plakaty-s-mitinga> and <http://redstarcreative.com/79315.html>

The competition was certainly a continuation of a political story that the regime tried to silence, but it was also a story of the collective action of the blog’s community: Navalny had accidentally found a verbal formula to what the blogosphere had accredited as relevant to the political situation in the country, and the blog’s community began functioning as an advertising agency, where there were people proficient at creating effective images, 3D animation, and

<sup>473</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted March 3, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/561173.html> (accessed June 3, 2013).

<sup>474</sup> Images are available on Picasa: <https://picasaweb.google.com/101244478068712463287/haYzUF#> (accessed June 3, 2013).

music. Thus, in addition to the posters, Navalny’s readers produced a scenario for a short animated promo video,<sup>475</sup> which they based on United Russia’s 2002 manifest, and then the video itself. By October 2011 the video collected over one million views and was covered by the BBC.<sup>476</sup>



Figure 23. Protesters in Moscow holding posters created by Alexei Navalny’s readers. Left: “Stop It!” Right: “We are not an Opposition, We are Your Employers! We Do Not Protest, We are Firing You!” The red stamp across the face: “Fired.” Source: <http://сайт-поганова.рф/blog/?p=2106> and Reuters.

### The Blogosphere and the Liberal Media: Bottom-up Agenda-Setting

In this section I will further analyze the diffusion of the message about “the party of crooks and thieves” in the liberal-networked public sphere with particular emphasis on regional media. By the end of February and beginning of March the central media<sup>477</sup> were covering everything that had to do with Navalny’s debate, Navalny’s *Twitter*, and the poster competition, while regional media began mentioning the newly coined meme in the context of events that

<sup>475</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted July 11, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/605439.html>; Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted October 18, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/631695.html> (accessed June 2, 2013).

<sup>476</sup> Ennis, “Russian satirists use YouTube to challenge Kremlin”; the video, “Pripomnim zhulikam I voram ih manifest-2002,” posted October 7, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-vkox2SHTo> (accessed June 2, 2013).

<sup>477</sup> By “central media” I mean large, national, media outlets based in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as opposed to smaller media outlets in the regions.

were taking place there. The images from Navalny's poster competition spread all over the internet and took on a life of their own, outside the blog's community, and even outside of the internet, which was particularly the case in the regions.

In Moscow micro-scandals around the debate and the newly born meme moved to other locations: first to *Twitter*, then to one of Moscow's clubs, where a face-to-face discussion continued. On *Twitter*, a businessman, Mikhail Dvorkovich, the brother of Arkady Dvorkovich, then Assistant to the President of the Russian Federation, had accused Navalny of extremism and of being a hired pawn of some unnamed patrons. The back-and-forth on *Twitter* lasted for several days, during which Navalny's *Twitter* feed became more popular than that of Dmitry Medvedev's—26,356 references compared to 24,772<sup>478</sup>—and the liberal media covered this fact with pleasure (the week of February 26 to March 3). Navalny had rejected the offer to argue with the brother of the famous bureaucrat, suggesting that he talk to his brother, but Mikhail Dvorkovich still attended Navalny's talk in one of Moscow's clubs, and had a chance to confront the blogger personally (see Figure 24).

The liberal media and the networked public sphere were watching these developments closely, discussing the regime's tactic of dispatching different individuals to confront Navalny and the awkwardness and abstractness of their argumentation. As one blogger summed it up, "by dispatching Mikhail Dvorkovich against Navalny, United Russia has admitted that Fedorov, who had lost badly in the recent debate, is the best it has. What does it look like? It looks like the country is being managed by idiots."<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> "Twitter Naval'nogo obognal mikroblog prezidenta Medvedeva," NEWSru.com, February 28, 2011, <http://hitech.newsru.com/article/28Feb2011/navalny> (accessed June 3, 2013).

<sup>479</sup> Zhivoi zhurnal Chistoserdechnogo, personal blog, entry posted February 26, 2011, <http://rusanalit.livejournal.com/1084533.html> (accessed June 3, 2013).

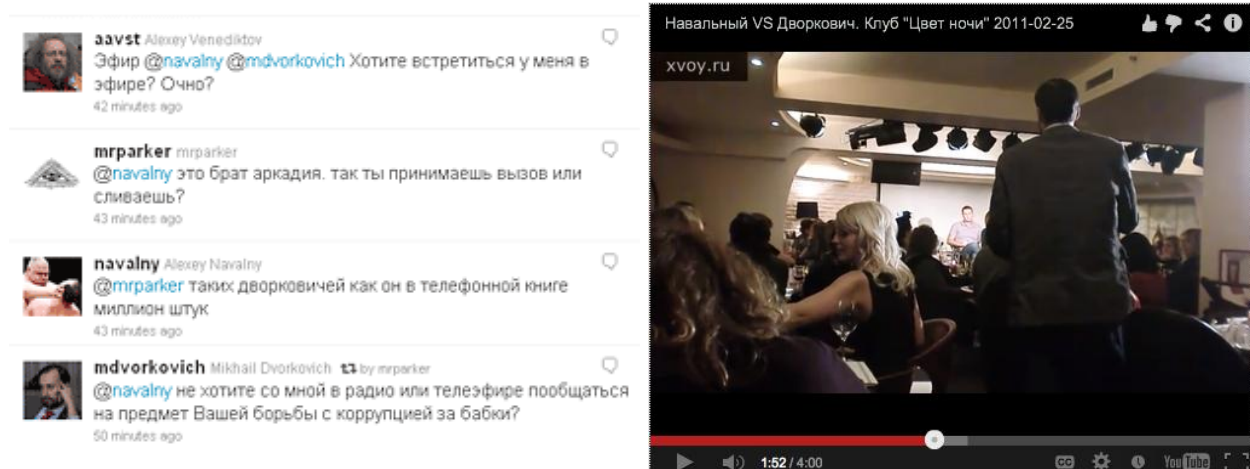


Figure 24. Fluid new media communications. Left: A Twitter “brawl” that took place after the Navalny/Fedorov debate. Bottom up: mdvorkovich: “want to discuss with me your paid-for fight with corruption in some tv or radio show?” navalny: “in the telephone book there are millions of Dvorkoviches” mvparker, a pro-government blogger: “this is Arkady’s brother. Do you accept the challenge, or retreat?” aavst, Alexei Venediktov, editor in-chief, Echo of Moscow: to @navalny @mdvorkovich “Do you want to meet on my program? In person?” Source: Twitter and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wRF1plThjc>

While the central media and the blogosphere were following *Twitter* communications and speculating about the regime’s tactics, regional papers began applying “the party of crooks and thieves” to the local bureaucrats and United Russia members. An Izhevsk newspaper, *Den’*, was reporting that Udmurt civic organizations were planning a rally in Izhevsk and calling for a ban on United Russia in the region. They wrote a mutual statement arguing that United Russia supports the oligarchic regime that has consolidated in the country and prevents its development. “The expression ‘United Russia is the Party of Crooks and Thieves has now become almost a universal catch phrase,”<sup>480</sup> wrote the newspaper. An online Bryansk newspaper covered a United Russia conference that was soon to take place in this city, and which was attended by high-ranking party officials and Putin himself. The newspaper sarcastically describes “Potemkin villages” that local officials were hurriedly erecting for the arrival of the high delegation:

<sup>480</sup> “Na massovuiu aktsiiu izhevchan ‘Zapretit’ ‘Ediniuu Rossiuu’! priglasheny federal’nye politiki,” *Den’* no. 8 (1020) March 3, 2011, <http://www.dayudm.ru/article/49158/> (accessed June 3, 2013).

The news about Putin's arrival had spread around Bryansk with the speed of light. The officials of such a high rank do not come to the ill-kept provinces too often, and they don't like to see the poverty-stricken life of the citizens of great Russia. But when they do come, we get a rare opportunity to watch the incredibly active, but habitually stupid, work of our local bureaucrats, public utility services, and law-enforcement agencies.<sup>481</sup>

The newspaper published pictures of buildings and fences that were falling apart, but were hastily covered with banner fabric, and the main picture under the heading featured the red poster from the competition and a caption "United Russia—the party of crooks and thieves" (see Figure 25). Every single region in Russia could have probably told a story like that, and the oppositional journalists in different parts of the country began using the phrase habitually when referring to United Russia, which means it turned into a meme in less than a month. The slogan also began emerging in local rallies where people protested the actions of local United Russia bureaucrats. Rallies took place in Ryazan, St. Petersburg, Krasnoyarsk, and Novosibirsk, where pensioners who protested the cancellation of their public transportation benefits, and were throwing eggs at the United Russia office shouting, "The Party of Crooks and Thieves!"<sup>482</sup>

In the Orenburg Region one of the candidates for the local legislature, Vitalii Kukushkin, used the slogan in his electoral campaign: he printed billboards that stated, "Let us Stop the Party of Crooks and Thieves! Come to the Elections!" The candidate soon became a center of media attention, because unknown individuals unlawfully removed his campaign billboards at night. Even though United Russia was not openly mentioned on the missing banners, Kukushkin

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<sup>481</sup> "Putin, priezhzhai chashche, ne boisia," *Briansk.ru*, March 3, 2011, <http://briansk.ru/politics/putin-priezzhaj-chashe-ne-bojsya.201133.246966.html> (accessed June 3, 2013).

<sup>482</sup> Sofia Kropotkina, "Partiia real'nykh zaderzhanii: Riazanskie politseiskie zashchitili 'Edinuiu Rossiiu,'" *Novaia Gazeta—Riazan'*, March 10, 2011, [http://novgaz-rzn.ru/nomer10032011\\_09/217.html](http://novgaz-rzn.ru/nomer10032011_09/217.html) (accessed June 3, 2013); "Peterburzhtsy, vyseliaemye iz kvartir, vyidut na miting 12 marta," *Rosbalt*, March 10, 2011, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/piter/2011/03/10/826991.html> (accessed June 3, 2013); "V Krasnoiarske na bykhodnykh mitingovali za dostupnyi benzin," *Gorod Novostei*, March 21, 2011, <http://www.city-n.ru/view/179498.html> (accessed June 3, 2013); "Novosibirskie pensioner, lishivshiesia l'got na proezd, zabrosali iaitsami ofis 'Edinoy Rossii,'" *Gazeta.ru*, April 1, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/news/blogs/2011/04/01/n\\_1773305.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/blogs/2011/04/01/n_1773305.shtml) (accessed June 3, 2013).

## Путин, приезжай чаще, не бойся

3 марта 2011, четверг, 15:52 – БРЯНСК.RU | Обсудить | Версия для печати

Поделиться...



Единая Россия - партия жуликов и воров

Глава правительства Владимир Путин, спикер Государственной Думы Борис Грызлов, руководители Минздравсоцразвития Татьяна Голикова, Минобрнауки Андрей Фурсенко и другие высокопоставленные чиновники приедут в Брянск для участия в межрегиональной конференции партии «Единая Россия», посвященной выработке стратегии социально-экономического развития областей ЦФО до 2020 года.

### А к нам цирк приехал

В съезде «партии жуликов и воров» из областей Центральной России, который пройдет в Брянске 3 и 4 марта, примут участие более 1500 человек. Среди них - руководители партии, исполнительной и законодательной власти регионов ЦФО, депутаты Государственной Думы и члены Совета Федерации, секретари региональных отделений партии, мэры городов, врачи, учителя, ученые, лидеры общественных и различных молодежных организаций.

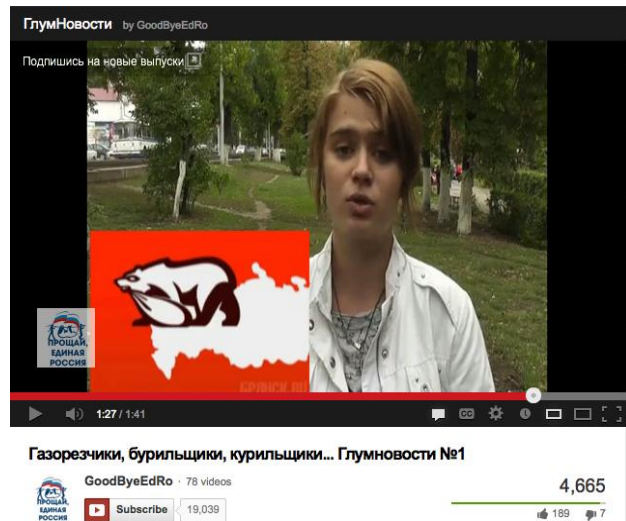


Figure 25. A Poster from Navalny's competition spreads online. Left: The Bryansk online newspaper uses the poster to announce the United Russia conference that took place in Bryansk on 3-4 March 2011. Right: MockNews from Saratov (Chapter 5) uses the poster in the very first episode of the show. Source: *Briansk.ru* and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me6YrPbij3E>

attributed the theft to the local authorities affiliated with the party.<sup>483</sup> He printed a new set of banners, where he announced that, “Wednesday night crooks and thieves have stolen banners aimed against their party,” and again called people to come to the elections (see Figure 26). The story was covered by local television and newspapers (see Appendix D), and quickly spread in the Russian-language internet, thanks to the local bloggers and the candidate himself, who published it in his *LiveJournal* blog. Navalny praised candidate Kukushkin, who received over 25 percent of votes and almost won the election, finishing second.<sup>484</sup>

<sup>483</sup> Olesia Gerasimenko, “Vместo ‘protiv vsekh,’” *Kommersant Vlast*’ no. 10 (914), March 14, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/1598177#lj> (accessed June 4, 2013).

<sup>484</sup> Dmitri Urbanovich, “Kto vystrelil na vyborah,” *Orenburgskaia nedelia—Online*, March 18, 2011, <http://www.onlineon.ru/2011-03-18/article/1315/>; Vitalii Kukushkin, personal blog, entry posted March 11, 2011, <http://kukushkinprotiv.livejournal.com/2011/03/11/>; Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted March 9, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/562648.html?page=2> (accessed June 4, 2013).



Figure 26. A political campaign that used “the party of crooks and thieves” slogan, Orenburg. Left: The first set of banners that was stolen, “Let us stop the party of crooks and thieves! Come to the elections! Vitalii Kukushkin” Right: The second set of banners used the image of the stolen ones, plus the image of the candidate and the phrase, “Wednesday night crooks and thieves have stolen banners aimed at their party. Come to the elections!” Source: <http://navalny.livejournal.com/562648.html?page=2> and <http://kukushkinprotiv.livejournal.com/2011/03/11/>

As these symbolic battles were unfolding in March 2011, for many journalists from the central liberal media Navalny had emerged as an aspiring politician, having demonstrated his debating skills, political thinking, and ability to act. Several publications in the central liberal media in March 2011 had titles such as “Navalny, Who are You?,” “The Phenomenon of Alexei Navalny,” “Navalny and Windmills,” and “Alexei Navalny: First Post-Soviet Generation Saves Russia.”<sup>485</sup> The competition and the 40,000 participants in the poll in Navalny’s blog made some analysts wonder about an emerging middle class that demands more rights and freedoms, uses humor as a weapon, and has already put forward its new leaders.<sup>486</sup> “Today’s posters against ‘the party of crooks and thieves’ tomorrow can turn into a protest vote, and the day after tomorrow into a full-fledged social movement,” one author writes surprisingly presciently.<sup>487</sup>

<sup>485</sup> Gutova, “Navalny, ty kto?!”; Alexei Makarkin, “Fenomen Alekseia Naval’nogo,” *Politcom.ru*, March 20, 2011, <http://www.politcom.ru/11615.html> (accessed June 7, 2013); Tatiana Chesnokova, “Navalny i vetrianye mel’nitsy,” *Rosbalt*, February 28, 2011; <http://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2011/02/28/823708.html> (accessed June 7, 2013); Dmitry Bykov, Valeriia Zharova, “Alexei Navalny: Pervoe postsovetskoe pokolenie spaset Rossiю,” *Sobesednik*, March 15, 2011, <http://sobesednik.ru/interview/aleksei-navalny-i-pervoe-postsovetskoe-pokolenie-spaset-rossiiu> (accessed June 7, 2013).

<sup>486</sup> Zhitniuk, “Maidan neizbezhen?”; Zhelezniakova, “Runet—oruzhie srednego klassa.”

<sup>487</sup> Zhelezniakova, “Runet—oruzhie srednego klassa.”



Thus, in two months, February and March 2011, the blogosphere was able to reframe the image of the dominating party on the Russian political scene and to advance the message about the alternative way of action. The incidents with banners and posters for “the Party of Crooks and Thieves” kept making news in various regional media throughout the year, causing sharp reactions from local party bureaucrats and more media publicity.<sup>488</sup> The slogan had resonated with a large share of the population, and liberal and oppositional journalists all over the country used the term in their publications, and in two months there were over 400 of them (Appendix D). Throughout the year the phrase and the events related to it kept attracting media attention to the upcoming elections, to the issues of electoral fraud, and the need to vote.

This kind of diffusion of frames and discourses outside the mainstream public sphere was a result of the so-called two-step flow of communication, when more socially active people retranslated their views to the more passive groups and even to people who do not use the internet. According to the Levada Center, by November 2011, 62 percent of the population had already heard about “the Party of Crooks and Thieves,” 46 percent were positive that the term was related to United Russia, and 36 percent agreed with the statement.<sup>489</sup> These results were achieved without the involvement of the state-controlled media.

The study of the coverage of Navalny’s blog and its creative outcome also shows that there are plenty of diverse media outlets in Russia, which I have included in the liberal-

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<sup>488</sup> For example, see: Ivan Gladilin, “V Rossii razvernulas’ bor’ba protiv ‘partii zhulikov I vorov,’” *KM.ru*, October 26, 2011, <http://www.km.ru/v-rossii/2011/10/26/vnutripoliticheskaya-situatsiya-v-rossii/storonniki-edinoi-rossii-priznali-ee-pa> (accessed June 7, 2013); “V Novosibirskie plakaty protiv ‘zhulikov I vorov snimaiut, zapodozriv agitatsiiu protiv ‘Edinoi Rossii,’” *Gazeta.ru*, November 14, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/news/blogs/2011/11/14/n\\_2094866.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/blogs/2011/11/14/n_2094866.shtml) (accessed June 7, 2013); Alina Grigor’eva, “Est’ takaia partiia...,” *Vecherniaia Kazan*, May 16, 2011, <http://www.evening-kazan.ru/articles/est-takaya-partiya.html> (accessed June 7, 2013); Marina Zavadskaiia, “Rebranding partii zhulikov I vorov,” *Arsen’evskie Vesti*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.arsvesti.ru/archive/issue948/politica/view21395.html> (accessed June 7, 2013).

<sup>489</sup> Levada Center press release from November 28, 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/28-11-2011/o-kachestvakh-deputatov-gd-i-otnoshenii-k-edinoi-rossii> (accessed June 7, 2013); Levada Center press release from December 6, 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/06-12-2011/vybory-v-gosdumu-chast-2-o-edinoi-rossii-narodnom-fronte-slovochetanii-partiya-zhulikov> (accessed June 7, 2013).

networked public sphere, that are publishing materials from the blogosphere and about the opposition, and themselves are usually unsympathetic toward the regime. Some of these outlets are local, others are Federal, with significant audiences and coverage. Importantly for the liberal media, for example, *Kommersant*, their online audiences are larger than their circulation in print, which allows for the expansion of their readership and facilitates easy circulation of materials in blogs and social networks. Appendix B of this study provides a list of the most popular central liberal and oppositional media and the size of their audiences, as of 2011.

The example with “the Party of Crooks and Thieves” also demonstrates that in Russia media politics comes down to a competition for popularity in the liberal-networked public sphere. As I have shown, the communications in Navalny’s blog related to the newly coined phrase were receiving a response from various representatives of the regime. Attempts followed at open competition and subversion of the newly coined slogan to render it complementary for United Russia. For example, a video and a series of posters were created to promote United Russia as a “Party Without Crooks and Thieves” (see Figure 27) but to little avail, and soon all the banners that emerged on the streets of the cities with the internet-slogan were treated as anti-United Russia propaganda, and were being removed.<sup>490</sup>

In addition to symbolic contestation, the “party of power” used other, more covert, control methods from the toolkit that was discussed in Chapter 5. For example, there followed technical attacks on Navalny’s blog, and as targeted bot attacks had little affect, soon the entire

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<sup>490</sup> “V Novosibirskie plakaty protiv ‘zhulikov I vorov snimaiut,’”; Gladilin, “V Rossii razvernulas’ bor’ba protiv ‘partii zhulikov I vorov.’”



Figure 27. United Russia’s attempts to counter the slogan “the party of crooks and thieves” promoted in the liberal-networked public sphere. Left: a YouTube video that used a subverted version of the slogan, “Vote for the party of crooks and thieves! For 10 years of economic growth, for the increased salaries and pensions, for the construction of roads . . .” etc. Right: A banner from the town of Vladimir stating, “United Russia is a Party Without Crooks and Thieves.” Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ywb\\_D8ERWhE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ywb_D8ERWhE) and <http://www.livejournal.ru/themes/id/25829>

*LiveJournal* was under a massive DDoS attack, rendering the service temporarily unavailable.<sup>491</sup>

There were several attacks in a row in March and April, and, according to experts from the Kaspersky Laboratory, Russia’s most successful producer of computer security software, the attacks were aimed at Navalny’s blog, his site, *RosPil*, and later at the blogs of other popular top bloggers, which, as experts believe, were made to divert attention from the primary target.<sup>492</sup>

Finally, there were attempts at organizing a covert discrediting campaign of Navalny and *RosPil*.<sup>493</sup> Starting from 2011, as Navalny entered into an open conflict with United Russia by launching “the Party of Crooks and Thieves” campaign, anti-Navalny campaigns became a permanent attribute of the Russian internet. Usually the implicit goal of these covert campaigns

<sup>491</sup> Jackie Kerr, The Open Net Initiative blog, entry posted on August 4, 2011, <https://opennet.net/blog/2011/08/yet-another-livejournal-outage-causes-concern-russian-blogging-community> (accessed June 7, 2013); Mikhail Fishman, “Ein Blogger mischt das russische Establishment auf,” *Die Welt*, April 19, 2011; Maria Antonova, “Russian bloggers accuse authorities of cyberwar,” AFP, April 6, 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5haQ7xYOW7niqLaPw6cEkFzO0Tozw> (accessed June 7, 2013).

<sup>492</sup> Maria Garnava, The Securelist Blog, “LiveJournal pod atakoi,” entry posted April 5, 2011, <http://www.securelist.com/ru/blog/40425/rss/blog> (accessed June 7, 2013).

<sup>493</sup> Irek Murtazin, “Zakaz na Navalnogo. Politicheskii detektiv,” *Novaya Gazeta*, October 17, 2011, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/48964.html> (accessed June 7, 2013); Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted September 6, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/618513.html> (accessed June 7, 2013).

was to render Navalny a dependent figure, who acts out of selfish motives and in the interest of some external forces—different in every campaign. Each of these publications, as soon as they emerged, were contested in the liberal-networked public sphere. The openly pro-Kremlin authors used similar frames, commenting on Navalny’s activities from the official government and party websites: for example, there were attitudes expressed about “cynical” and “loud” campaigns in the blogosphere, with claims that throwing around slogans was the best the opposition could do, that Navalny was a “showman” and a successful spin doctor, who capitalized on public disdain for corruption, and so on.<sup>494</sup>

This radicalization of the contest between power and counter-power was also an attribute of 2011, and most probably was related to the already discussed change in attitudes, on the one hand, and the determination of the regime to win the upcoming elections, on the other. The effectiveness of these campaigns is the subject of a separate study, but here it should be pointed out that Navalny, like many other social activists in Russia, has been working under considerable pressure, and his achievement and novelty for the Russian political environment was that he has actively drawn on the help, support, and participation of the community of his readers. Later in the year, and closer to the elections, Navalny announced a song competition, which attracted even more publicity to the elections and the idea of protest voting, and which I will discuss in the following section.

The creative output of the blogger and his community, multiplied by the effects of the network environment, has contributed to the popularization of the internet-produced slogan and

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<sup>494</sup> Mikhail Shevchuk, “V ‘Edinoi Rossii’ bol’she ne khotiat blizosti k vlasti,” *Delovoi Peterburg*, April 4, 2011, [http://www.dp.ru/a/2011/04/04/V\\_Edinoj\\_Rossii\\_bolshe/](http://www.dp.ru/a/2011/04/04/V_Edinoj_Rossii_bolshe/) (accessed June 7, 2013); Viktor Pilipenko, “Est’ li u ‘Edinoi Rossii’ politicheskaia monopoliia?” *Kreml.org*, March 15, 2011, <http://www.kreml.org/opinions/270693812> (accessed June 7, 2013); Viktor Krest’ianinov, “Kto raspilit predvybornye biudzhety,” *Argumenty Nedeli*, March 31, 2011, <http://argumenti.ru/politics/n282/99795> (accessed June 7, 2013); Maxim Kononenko, “Ya za kolkhozy,” *Vzgliad*, March 14, 2011, <http://vz.ru/columns/2011/3/14/475569.html> (accessed June 7, 2013).

the meaning attached to it, rendering it a significant factor in the upcoming Duma elections: as I will show in Chapter 7, the idea with protest voting was floating in the liberal-networked public sphere for the entire year, and when in the last few weeks before the elections social tension increased, many people picked up on it and transformed it into action.

### Music Competition as an Example of the Enhanced Individual Autonomy of Musicians

As discussed in Chapter 2, the internet contributes to the increased autonomy of individual and collective action vis-a-vis the institutions of the state. In Chapter 3 I showed that there is evidence that the network environment was helpful in many individual grassroots projects, allowing them to survive in the unfriendly social and political environment. This chapter has provided an example of how the liberal-networked public sphere contributed to the re-labeling in the public discourse of the political elite and to the shaping of public opinion in the months before the elections. In this section I provide a concrete example of how access to the networked communications allowed for an extension of the alternative political discourse into broader communities that were not initially considered “political” and, in so doing, increased their political relevance and professional autonomy. My example is the Russian community of professional musicians who participated in Navalny’s competition and contributed to the popularization of the idea of protest voting.

The idea of the competition came from the blog’s community, and was most probably from the musicians themselves. On September 28, Navalny announced a singing contest that would advance the same idea as the poster competition. Contestants were invited to produce a music video in any style they wished—rock, couplets, rap, or any other—that would urge citizens to vote against United Russia. Videos were to be uploaded on *YouTube* for everybody to see and vote on. “If the competition will be successful, a couple of million people will watch it.

But what's more important, not only will they watch it, they will remember it," wrote Navalny in his blog.<sup>495</sup> The competition was another experiment with participation and a way to have fun. This time, however, Navalny suggested a monetary reward: 150,000 rubles (around \$5,000) for the video that took first place by popular vote, and 50,000 rubles (around \$1,600) for second place.<sup>496</sup> The money, he explained, could be easily collected through *Yandex Money*, a Russian online payment system, but he was not willing to do so to avoid a potential excuse for fault-finding and allegations. Instead, he asked if anyone among his readers would be willing to openly donate the necessary sum. Very soon a former Russian businessman, Yevgeny Chichvarkin, who fled to London and has his own disagreements with current Russian authorities,<sup>497</sup> agreed to pay for both prizes and openly stated so on his blog on *LiveJournal*.<sup>498</sup>

The result of the collective effort was 116 videos, varying in quality and styles, but striking in their creativity and sincerity, and in the age of the participants: from little children to middle-aged men (see Figure 28). The winning video, "Our Madhouse Is Voting for Putin," was a song produced by professional musicians and songwriters, a punk-rock band, *Rabfak*, from Yekaterinburg. The video is controversial in the sense that it reflects the esthetic of punk, which is quite abrasive and direct. The text narrates all of Russia's "illnesses" on behalf of mentally ill people, who ask their doctor "Why are there holes in heads and in budgets? Why today do we have yesterday instead of tomorrow? . . . Why are there sluggishness, embezzlement, and division all around? No answer, only an injection in the ass." The refrain goes, "Everything is

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<sup>495</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted September 28, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/625374.html> (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> Katya Golubkova, "Russian ex-tycoon protests outside London forum," Reuters, June 1, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/01/idUSLDE7501VC20110601> (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>498</sup> Evgeny Chichvarkin, personal blog, entry posted September 28, 2011, <http://chich8.livejournal.com/70219.html> (accessed June 9, 2013).

very complicated and confusing, but there is no time, brother, for figuring it out. Our madhouse votes for Putin, Putin is the right candidate for us.” Towards the end of the song the creators of the video used real *YouTube* clips that were very familiar to internet users: riot police beating protestors and dragging them to the police busses (see Figure 29).

The 116 videos released in a short span of time, and right before the elections, had attracted a lot of media attention: another 178 publications followed in the liberal-networked public sphere featuring interviews with the winning band and with the songwriter. Ironically, the writer of the lyrics of “Our Madhouse Is Voting for Putin,” Alexandr Yelin, also wrote “A Man Like Putin” eight years ago,<sup>499</sup> which Western journalists immediately alleged to be part of the Kremlin’s public relations campaign.<sup>500</sup> Eight years later Yelin wrote “Our Madhouse Is Voting for Putin” and explained the change in an interview to TVRain:

Yelin: This song [A Man Like Putin] was written about the girl’s attitude to a man about whom everybody wondered, “Who is mister Putin?”

Journalist: So this was not your attitude to the man?

Yelin: I am a “photographer.” I take pictures of what is going on. I saw the attitudes among average girls, you know, those who leaf through lifestyle magazines. I saw their attitude to the president. He was cute. He came, nice and clean guy, in contrast to those shady characters that surrounded him. The song was a “cast” made from those attitudes. Now the attitudes have changed.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> See YouTube video, “One Like Putin, English Subs,” uploaded on December 6, 2008, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK\\_VszbZa\\_s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK_VszbZa_s) (accessed June 14, 2013).

<sup>500</sup> Sarah Rainsford, “Putin is Russia’s new pop idol,” BBC, August 23, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2212885.stm> (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>501</sup> *Kofe-Breik*, TV Rain, October 19, 2011, [http://tvrain.ru/articles/avtor\\_khita\\_nash\\_durdom\\_golosuet\\_za\\_putina\\_soglasen\\_podderzhat\\_lyubuyu\\_partiyu-51248/](http://tvrain.ru/articles/avtor_khita_nash_durdom_golosuet_za_putina_soglasen_podderzhat_lyubuyu_partiyu-51248/) (accessed June 9, 2013).



Figure 28. Participants in the singing contest announced by Alexei Navalny on his LiveJournal blog. Top Left: Evgeny Kudryakov, “A Song About Crooks and Thieves.” Top Right: Alexandr Shamov, “V.V. Putin’s Prospect.” Bottom Left: Djastila (feat. Cart...Man), “Cr-oo-ks.” Bottom Right: Snowwitje, “Kids Against Crooks.” Source: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL076597D3249D81B8>

The music community in Russia indeed became extremely politicized, expressing the popular moods that were already “in the air”—a fact that found a vivid expression in Navalny’s competition. This politicization, however, did not happen overnight, and was not a one-of-a-kind occasion, but rather a process, which was gradually gaining momentum in various nightclubs and on the internet. The role of the internet in this politicization was not so straightforward, as simply a technical opportunity to self-publish on *YouTube*: as with every technical innovation, the new opportunities brought about unexpected social and political effects in the peculiar Russian political environment.



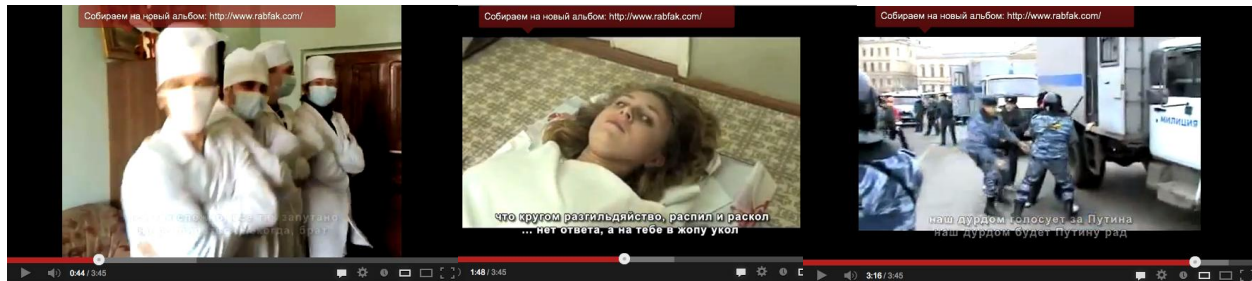


Figure 29. Frames from the music video by Rabfaq, “Our Madhouse Votes for Putin.” Source: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL076597D3249D81B8>

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, the relationships between the regime and the elites in Russia were regulated through a series of non-official contracts, so that many public personalities avoided commenting on politics, or expressing their criticism publicly; in fact, many members of the artistic elite were actively supporting the regime through participation in government-sponsored public events. The “contract” with the music community dates back to 2005, when popular Russian musicians were invited to meet with Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin’s chief public relations strategist. In exchange for loyalty, musicians were allowed access to television, which then meant popularity, concerts, and a good income. The agreement worked: Russian rock and Russian power lived separate lives, and musicians never touched upon hot political issues in their art.<sup>502</sup> There has always remained an opposition underground, but these musicians were confined to clubs and the periphery of the musical establishment.

<sup>502</sup> Arkhangel’skii, “Prognulsia pod nas”; about the dependency of the Russian artistic elite on the government, see also Artemy Troitsky’s interview to a Ukrainian portal, Delo.ua, December 16, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnNNKxWAv9k> (accessed June 14, 2013).



Figure 30. Artwork by Andrey Budaev that satirizes the Russian artistic elite. Source: <http://www.budaev.ru/>

With the wider spread of the internet, self-publishing has become much easier, and the dependency of musicians on television has reduced, together with the Kremlin's leverage. Attitudes also have been gradually changing. In 2010 several of the most watched videos of the year on the Russian internet were self-published songs.<sup>503</sup> According to Artemy Troitsky, a music critic and a vocal opposition member, the music community in Russia has split between those who use the internet and give concerts in clubs, and those who occupy television and corporate events.<sup>504</sup> Protest music is spreading in the former. A whole range of young musicians

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<sup>503</sup> For example, Vasia Oblomov, "Magadan" and Noize MS, "10 sutok 'Stalingrad'" from the list published by *Gazeta.ru*, "Samye populiarnye rossiiskie video na YouTube v 2010 godu."

<sup>504</sup> *Aktual'naiia Kamera*, ETV, March 30, 2012, <http://rus.err.ee/topnews/ea4a6db2-e12f-4a43-99ff-bff04e45589d> (accessed June 9, 2013).

has emerged who became popular independent of the big television screen, and who willingly resort to political themes and compose critical and satirical songs. As producer and composer of Rabfak, Alexander Semenov, put it,

[I]f nothing will change in the political life of the country (and nothing indeed will change, unless some aliens arrive, or a famine comes), we can give Vladimir Vladimirovich a big thank you for the rebirth of the best traditions of Russian rock . . . The fact is that the protest culture is being formed now, and satirical songs are being quoted and becoming popular—something to think about for those at the top. Think and even begin to worry—everything starts at the bottom. I think that the list of “politically charged bands” will keep growing in the nearest future.<sup>505</sup>

Political satire expressed in the lyrics of popular songs is only one of the ways musicians were reacting to the social and political reality in Putin/Medvedev’s Russia. Throughout 2010 and 2011 they have been organizing and participating in the concerts for causes: in support of the Khimki Forest and for the protection of the architectural legacy of St. Petersburg, against the Russian dependent judiciary system, and in support of freedom of speech and of individual people who have been confronting the government.<sup>506</sup> The above mentioned Troitsky is a good example of the changes in the moods and attitudes in the Russian artistic establishment: a journalist and a music critic, who has been talking primarily about his musical projects, has suddenly become vocal about environmental protection, police lawlessness, and the country’s political regime in general.

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<sup>505</sup> Alexei Semenov, “My shuty I skomorokhi,” *Gazeta.ru*, November 24, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2011/10/24/a\\_3811070.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2011/10/24/a_3811070.shtml) (accessed June 9, 2013).

<sup>506</sup> For example, see musicians participating in the concert in support of the Khimki Forest titled “We all live in the Khimki Forest,” August 22, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4\\_dKMLLo0hw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_dKMLLo0hw) (accessed June 14, 2013); musicians also participated in a series of concert-rallies, where civil society protested the construction of a Gazprom tower in St. Petersburg, see “Miting za sokhranenie Peterburga podderzhat Shevchuk I Skliar,” *Moi Raion*, October 9, 2010, <http://www.mr7.ru/articles/33889/> (accessed June 14, 2013) and *You Tube* video “GazPromBaiter,” uploaded on October 10, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7iA55f0KW8> (accessed June 14, 2013); also, see a video produced by Noize MS, “Mercedes S666 (Dorogu kolesnitse),” dedicated to the car accident involving Lukoil’s vice president, Anatolii Barkov, when investigation was swiftly closed, and the driver of the other car, a woman who had died in the accident, was accused of breaking traffic rules, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=XX5NPcg\\_FxE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=XX5NPcg_FxE) (accessed June 14, 2013); see also the concert in support of Matvey Krylov, who received two years of prison for splashing water at a prosecutor, “Delo prokurora,” *The New Times* 38 (223), November 14, 2011, <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/46248> (accessed June 14, 2013), and the announcement of the concert, Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted November 11, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/2011/11/22/> (accessed June 14, 2013).

In August 2010, he hosted a concert-rally in support of the Khimki Forest (see Chapter 3), and after a notorious car crash involving a high-ranking Lukoil official,<sup>507</sup> Troitsky jokingly awarded a police officer involved in the investigation with the title *Ment Poganyi* (“Shitty Cop”), which was done to raise awareness about the unfair investigation and to attract media attention (see Figure 31).<sup>508</sup> In addition to the lawsuit with the policemen to whom the title was addressed, Troitsky was embroiled in several other lawsuits—all for his public expression of straightforward opinions about the complicit behavior of certain individuals and political practices in the country. To support him, musicians organized a fundraising concert and published a CD to raise money and pay for the journalist’s court expenses.<sup>509</sup>

For some particularly active and outspoken musicians their concerts became an occasion for a short speech and for expressing political opinion. Thus the above mentioned mock award ceremony took place at the concert of another prominent and much-loved rock musician, Yurii Shevchuk, who also became outspoken on various social and political occasions. For example, before one of his Moscow concerts in March of 2010 Shevchuk gave a political speech, in which he called the established regime in Russia “brutal and inhumane,” and stressed that rock music had ceased to fight, like it used to in the Soviet Union, and turned into “pornography,” supporting in its complicity the police regime. Someone from the audience recorded the speech

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<sup>507</sup> See previous note on Noize MS.

<sup>508</sup> “Shevchuk I Troitskii v sude: eks-gaishnik iz dela o DTP na Leninskom otbivaetsia ot zvaniia ‘poganogo menta,’” NEWSru.com, March 24, 2011, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/24mar2011/troitskij.html> (accessed June 14, 2013).

<sup>509</sup> Yaroslav Zabaluev, “Za Artemiia nashego, za Troitskogo!” *Gazeta.ru*, June 11, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2011/06/11/a\\_3659789.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2011/06/11/a_3659789.shtml) (accessed June 14, 2013); see also the cite dedicated to Troitsky’s lawsuits and the musicians’ fundraising effort, <http://soderzhanie.com/concert4troitsky/> (accessed June 14, 2013).

and uploaded it on *YouTube*, where in two days it was viewed over 75,000 times, becoming one of the most viewed videos of the Russian blogosphere.<sup>510</sup>

The incident, however, that attracted the most attention and led to the firm association of the musician with the civic opposition took place in May 2010, at the traditional meeting of then Prime Minister Putin, with the intelligentsia. The meeting, which usually follows traditional official decorum, was interrupted from its usual neutral flow when Shevchuk stood up and asked a whole series of direct and uncomfortable questions in front of television cameras. In addition, Shevchuk noted that before the meeting someone from the administration called to caution him that he should not ask any “sharp” political questions (see Figure 31). What made the situation look even worse was that Putin “forgot” the name of the famous musician from his own city.<sup>511</sup> The broadcast version of the conversation was heavily edited, but the full version ended up on the internet, where it received almost four million views.<sup>512</sup>

The incidents discussed above illustrate the point made in Chapter 3 that in the years before the mass protests of 2011 there were multiple outbursts of civic activism that may not have attracted wide media attention, but that, nonetheless, happened on various occasions, and the members of the professional music community had taken an active civic position in some of them; moreover, Yurii Shevchuk and Artemy Troitsky had clearly emerged as informal leaders of the opposition even before the protests. This activism came with a price: for example, after the

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<sup>510</sup> Yurii Vasil'ev, “Grazhdanin Shevchuk poshel protiv vlasti,” Radio Svoboda, March 9, 2010, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/1978685.html> (accessed June 14, 2013); Etling et al., “Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere,” 31-32.

<sup>511</sup> “Putin i Shevchuk o ‘Marshakh nesoglasnykh’: dialoga ne poluchilos’,” NEWSru.com, May 30, 2010, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/30may2010/sk.html> (accessed June 14, 2013); Anastasiia Kirilenko and Aleksandr Kulygin, “Shevchuk i Putin prodolzili traditsiyu,” Radio Svoboda, August 30, 2010, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/feature/2141229.html> (accessed June 14, 2013).

<sup>512</sup> YouTube video, “Yurii Shevchuk i Putin (versiia bez tsenzury),” uploaded on October 11, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oaxf7txb-l4> (accessed June 14, 2013).



*Figure 31. The civic activism of Artemy Troitsky and Yury Shevchuk. Left: Artemy Troitsky (left) and Yury Shevchuk (front) on the way to court. Shevchuk joined Troitsky in the lawsuit, because the mock award “to the worst policeman” took place at his concert, and he was the co-creator of the idea. Right: Yury Shevchuk asks “inconvenient questions” at the meeting of intelligentsia with Vladimir Putin.*

*Source: <http://img15.nnm.ru/8/0/7/2/0/3d815ded8595d90ebaccedbe4af.jpg> and <http://www.gazeta.spb.ru/326246-0/>*

incident with Putin, Shevchuk was never invited to the meetings with the intelligentsia again, and his concerts could not be seen on television.<sup>513</sup> His musical career, however, was not greatly damaged; moreover, due to the publicity that every incident was receiving in the liberal-networked public sphere, he became a moral authority for many, showing an example of how it is quite possible to have a vocal civic position in Russia and remain popular, or, in fact, become even more popular.<sup>514</sup>

Interestingly, almost all of the individuals discussed in this section, during various interviews they gave to the liberal media, expressed the attitudes that are common to Russians and that were discussed in Chapter 3 and 5: they distanced themselves from traditional politics, even from the liberal opposition, arguing that what they were doing was outside of politics and was not done on behalf of any particular party. They liked their profession, which was music,

<sup>513</sup> *Nashe vremia*, Sovershenno Sekretno TV, interview with Yurii Shevchuk, January 10, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=lwNPkGy35nU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=lwNPkGy35nU) (accessed June 14, 2013).

<sup>514</sup> Some participants of that meeting with Putin, for example, Liia Akhedzhakova, felt embarrassed for not supporting Yurii Shevchuk, and admitted so to the liberal media: “Liia Akhedzhakova proklinaet sebja za to, chto ne podderzhala Shevchuka v besede s Putinyem,” NEWSru.com, June 1, 2010, <http://www.newsru.com/Russia/01jun2010/ahedzhakova.html> (accessed June 14, 2013).

and were not going to become politicians, even though, as Shevchuk admitted, he was approached many times with different political offers. At the same time, they supported various grassroots initiatives and participated in rallies, when they felt like they could not silently watch social injustice and abuses of power happening around them.<sup>515</sup>

Thus, as I have shown in this section, there was a complex social dynamic behind the successful song competition announced on Navalny's blog: a community of music professionals emerged that was using the internet to get direct access to their audiences, which allowed them to cut dependency ties with the state-controlled media outlets and be less complicit in expressing their civic position through art, interviews, and social action. As opinion leaders, these musicians, and music journalists, were spreading and popularizing critical discourses and drawing popular attention to issues of public interest. What's more important, by their own example they were demonstrating to their audiences the way of active, as opposed to passive, citizenship, and defied the apathy and indifference that were so common in Russian society, and they did so remaining within the framework of their profession. Yet, as I have been arguing throughout this study, there has been a strong political component in everything that socially active individuals have been undertaking in recent years, because, as I will show in the next chapter, all these activities prepared the ground for the massive and seemingly abrupt social mobilization that took place in December 2011 after the Duma elections.

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<sup>515</sup> *Novyi God s Mikhailom Kozyrevym*, TV Rain, uploaded on September 7, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=pZ5iwobeYKQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=pZ5iwobeYKQ) (accessed June 16, 2013); Semenov, "My shuty I skomorokhi"; *YouTube* video, "Yurii Shevchuk o svoem uchastii v politike," uploaded on October 24, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezcXE5G7ePE> (accessed June 14, 2013); *YouTube* video "Yuri Shevchuk, DDT, Brooklyn Public Library, 01.15.2013," uploaded on January 17, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9-4pdJN-0k> (accessed June 16, 2013).

## CHAPTER 7

### THE LIBERAL-NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

As I have argued in previous chapters, there has been a certain dynamic in state-society relations in Russia. The alienation between the regime and the active, better educated, better informed parts of the population has been growing. Although the connection between the political passivity of citizens and the country's social and political problems still has not been firmly established in the public perception—on the contrary, such a connection was actively discouraged by the regime—by 2011 diverse grassroots civic movements that were formed around local issues had gained a certain organizational experience and understanding of the regime's inability to evolve and accommodate their interests. They encountered a corrupt judicial system, local bureaucrats, and law enforcement, and realized that the problem was systematic, not local.<sup>516</sup>

Among the general public, the feelings of vulnerability to the arbitrary lawlessness of the government institutions and to the uncertainty regarding one's future have increased, while the feeling of economic stability, so much touted and promoted by the regime, disappeared, particularly after the 2010 economic crisis.<sup>517</sup> Importantly, a new emotion has emerged, namely that the government “holds the people for rabble” and that they are tired of this,<sup>518</sup> which may be one of the negative and unexpected side-effects of the excessively controlled television discourse, as discussed in Chapter 3. There were also traces of social polarization: if before, Putin had consistently high ratings regardless of the quality of his performance, the studies

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<sup>516</sup> Volkov, *Perspektivy grazhdanskogo obshchestva v Rossii*, 19 and 22-23.

<sup>517</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*; Sergei Belanovskii and Mikhail Dmitriev, *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii i vozmozhnye mekhanizmy ego razvitiia* (Moscow: Center for Strategic Research Foundation, 2011), <http://www.csr.ru/publikacii/52-2010-05-03-17-49-10/307-2011-03-28-16-38-10> (accessed June 17, 2013).

<sup>518</sup> Belanovskii and Dmitriev, *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii*, 10.



conducted between 2009 and 2010 revealed that Putin's anti-electorate had emerged. People, even those without college degrees, started to make a connection between the economic situation in the country and the government.<sup>519</sup>

Changing attitudes found their expression in the mass production of critical internet content, which was discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. People were weary of the regime, its hollow rhetoric, and blunt political manipulations. Yet no one, including sociologists, was able to foresee the protests, because traditionally the majority of those dissatisfied with the situation did not vote on election day, while the regime used its administrative and propaganda apparatus to mobilize the countryside, pensioners, and other dependent and politically indifferent groups.<sup>520</sup> As we know, however, mobilization did happen, and it happened due to the discussed social contradictions, the bold actions of the regime in preparation for the elections, as well as the volatile media environment that the liberal-networked public sphere grew to become, compared even to the previous electoral season of 2007-2008. In this chapter I will discuss the key mobilizing events, and consider the logic of mobilization and the role of the liberal-networked public sphere in it.

### Media Scandals, Building Social Tension

According to sociologists at the Levada Center, there were no more electoral violations in 2011 than in any previous year. What was new, however, was the unusually high level of public attention on the problem of electoral fraud and the proactive approach of a smaller, but more active part of the population.<sup>521</sup> In this section I will show how communications in the liberal-networked public sphere have contributed to the sustaining of popular attention on the issues

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<sup>519</sup> Belanovskii and Dmitriev, *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii*, 14.

<sup>520</sup> Volkov, *Protestnye elektoral'nye strategii*.

<sup>521</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, 9.

around the elections. The next section will consider how this attention had transformed into action and what the role of the liberal-networked public sphere was in this transformation.

The United Russia Party congress that convened in September 2011, when the “swap” was publicly announced, became the decisive catalyzing event that had an adverse affect on public opinion and attracted public attention to the upcoming elections: if in August 2011, only 40 percent of the population said they were interested in the elections, by November 2011 this number was already 60 percent.<sup>522</sup> The news about the upcoming “swap” had primarily mobilized the attention of educated, and successful city-dwellers, above all Muscovites. The share of people with a college degree who were unwilling to vote, decreased by half in 2011 and constituted only 13 percent of the educated population, compared, for example, to 25 percent in 2007. At the same time, the share of pensioners and low-income people who were not willing to vote in 2011 increased: from 13 percent to 22 percent for pensioners, and from 18 percent to 29 percent for the low-income population.<sup>523</sup>

At the same time the regime prepared to win the upcoming elections, and in order to do so made a stake on already traditional methods of election “management”—media control and the mobilization of regional administrative resources. This time, however, the regime’s straightforward power preservation methods were performed under the more attentive public scrutiny of the most active social demographic group and in the new volatile media environment enriched with the growing presence of the liberal-networked public sphere. As a result, the available information about the elections was more diverse, including discrediting information that people began uploading and sharing, and the 2011 campaign was riddled, like never before, with scandals emanating from the liberal-networked public sphere. These scandals attracted

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<sup>522</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 16-17.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

unwanted public attention and adversely affected public opinion in the months before the elections.

One of the novelties of the 2011 electoral year was that people started to record the instances of United Russia mobilizing its administrative resources, usually in the form of voter bribery and covert agitation, and to upload them on the internet. Several scandals in various regions followed as soon as the official electoral campaign had started. In the Volgograd Region, United Russia representatives gathered local clergy and asked them to “hint” to their parishes during sermons that they should vote for United Russia. One of the priests wrote a blog post about the meeting and announced that he would not let anybody pressure him like that. The story of the priest was quickly spread by the top bloggers, made it to *LiveJournal*’s highlights,<sup>524</sup> and was picked up by the liberal media—*Interfax*, *Gazeta.ru*, and *Kommersant*—and by local media outlets, so that local authorities had to offer explanations, while United Russia bureaucrats swiftly condemned the local initiative.<sup>525</sup>

Similar incidents happened in Izhevsk, but with even more vivid evidence. On October 28, 2011, Andrey Konoval, a Deputy Head of the Udmurt branch of a left-wing party, Patriots of Russia,<sup>526</sup> published a video on his *LiveJournal* blog with a subheading: “United Russia and its representatives in the government have grown so brazen that they openly describe how the system of total “bribery” of voters works in the Russian Federation, and make according offers to

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<sup>524</sup> Andrei Malgin, personal blog, entry posted November 17, 2011, <http://avmalgin.livejournal.com/2733350.html> (accessed June 17, 2013); *LiveJournal* Themes, “Sviashchennikov zastavliaiut agitirovat’ za ‘Edinuiu Rossiuu,’” November 17, 2011, <http://www.livejournal.ru/themes/id/40089?yearmonth=2011-03-01> (accessed June 17, 2013).

<sup>525</sup> Ekaterina Vinokurova, “I Bog s nimi,” *Gazeta.ru*, November 17, 2011, [http://wap.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2011/2011/11/17\\_a\\_3838690.shtml](http://wap.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2011/2011/11/17_a_3838690.shtml) (accessed June 17, 2013); Oleg Kotcherga, “ER osudila odnopartiitsev za privilechenie tserkvi k agitatsii v Volgograde,” *Volgograd-Times*, November 18, 2011, <http://volgograd-times.ru/stories/1209> (accessed June 17, 2013).

<sup>526</sup> The party is not represented in the Russian State Duma, and very modestly represented in the regions.

their listeners even with the video camera on.”<sup>527</sup> Then Konoval explains that the video posted on his blog was taken at a meeting of the mayor of the city of Izhevsk, Denis Agashin, a United Russia member, with the leaders of local veterans’ unions, where Agashin asks the leaders to urge their members to vote for United Russia, and in exchange promises financing for their organization: 500,000 rub. (\$17,000) for 51 percent to 54 percent of the votes, 700,000 (\$23,000) for 55 percent to 59 percent, and 1 million (\$33,000) for 60 percent or more delivered for United Russia. The mayor also explained that this is the usual practice in the entire sphere of budget financing: “United Russia is the party of power, and those who support it get increases in budget financing.”<sup>528</sup> Konoval provided the video (See Figure 32), the transcript of the mayor’s “appeal,” a reference to the law about voter bribery that the mayor was violating.



Figure 32. The leaked video from Izhevsk, titled “Denis Agashin Bribes Pensioners.”  
Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2B1r-iywco>

<sup>527</sup> Andrey Konoval, personal blog, entry posted October 28, 2011, <http://andrey-konoval.livejournal.com/2011/10/28/> (accessed June 17, 2013).

<sup>528</sup> Konoval, personal blog, entry posted October 28, 2011.

The incident was widely covered in the liberal-networked public sphere (739 mentions), because the leftist opposition in the region was demanding that the scandalous mayor resign. Andrey Konoval, the blogger who published the video, had appeared among the top ten most-cited bloggers of that week, right after Alexei Navalny (Chapter 6).<sup>529</sup> While the three main state channels remained silent, liberal TVRain and local UdmurtiaTV aired pieces about the incident. Importantly, as was stated on TVRain's website, the scandal around the mayor of Izhevsk started after the blog posting,<sup>530</sup> which means that without the internet this story, as well as the previous incident, would be on the local news at best, and would be too easy to hash up. In the meantime, apart from the coverage in the liberal media, the video uploaded on *YouTube* was viewed more than 300,000 times, with over 2,000 indignant comments, where, among other things, people were sharing similar incidents in their regions (xpatr1ot; dadas1211), stating that they were going to protest vote against United Russia (kuroiumineko; Golidsfs; Ospical; INoobinfoTV; tapochek479; DLocC327; Alejandro M; Roman Trofimov; EvgenyOskin), and encouraging people to become observers during the elections (slawastiki; Voronsvet). There were interesting suggestions, for example, to include subtitles so that an English-speaking audience would also see how United Russia bribes voters (edvardkim12), and, in general, commentators thanked the authors of the video for sharing (Roman Trofimov).<sup>531</sup> Most of the commentaries reveal high levels of outrage, indignation, and even hatred:

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<sup>529</sup> Medialogiia, "Most cited bloggers of the week from October 26 to November 2, 2011," <http://www.mlg.ru/company/pr/1973/> (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>530</sup> *Zdes' i Seichas*, TV Rain, October 31, 2011, [http://tvrain.ru/articles/kprf\\_trebuot\\_otstavki\\_mera\\_izhevskaja\\_za\\_agitatsiyu-61569/](http://tvrain.ru/articles/kprf_trebuot_otstavki_mera_izhevskaja_za_agitatsiyu-61569/) (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>531</sup> Comments to the YouTube video, "Denis Agashin podkupaet pensionerov," uploaded on October 27, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/all\\_comments?v=f2B1r-iywco](http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=f2B1r-iywco) (accessed June 18, 2013).

Judas!!! (Abel67100)

. . . If only my grandparents who perished in the war knew that they were giving away their young lives for this kind of scum that will be paying money on these conditions . . .  
(Sanesato2)

I would have hit him in the face! (chelpsix)

We will be f . . . for our own money (AdmInus)

You have heard it: he can do anything—he is from United Russia. (arklid)<sup>532</sup>

Clearly, eyewitness accounts, especially those supported by video recordings, had made a strong impression on the viewers, much stronger than if, for example, some journalist would have written about “violations that took place in Izhevsk.” The video was much more persuasive and appealed to emotions, because viewers could hear the tone, see the speaker’s unabashed self confidence, even when somebody in the room reminded him that he was breaking the law, which strongly suggested that the speaker knew that his actions were licensed from above and would remain unpunished. These campaign scandals were revealing the mechanisms of electoral transgressions, which have been in place for quite some time and ensured the regime’s perpetuation. In 2011, however the attitudes had changed, the media environment was different, but the approaches the regime was using remained the same. As one journalist from the *Kommersant* newspaper put it, “governors and mayors who were used to the system of manual control were completely unprepared for a situation in which their words and actions would be documented and published, because they haven’t received clear signals from above about the change of the approaches they were accustomed to.”<sup>533</sup>

Thus, having faced the new situation and being accustomed to familiar mechanisms of administrative pressure and bribery, local authorities were awkwardly responding to the new

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<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Ivan Makarov, “Razbuzhennye i oskorblennye,” *Kommersant Vlast*’ no. 50 (954), December 19, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/1840506> (accessed June 18, 2013).

challenge, attempting to silence the scandal in some cases, which was virtually impossible, or intimidate and punish the whistle-blowers. Thus another audio record titled “Yurevich in [Miass] Bribery and Coercion”<sup>534</sup> was a recording with the voice of a governor of the Chelyabinsk Region, Mikhail Yurevich, who gathered local businessmen from the town of Miass in the Chelyabinsk Region, and was urging them to organize compulsory voting in their companies. In the recording, the governor states that Miass should deliver 55 percent for United Russia in exchange for gas that the business community requested, and if they delivered 65 percent they would get an additional monetary reward. “But if you vote for LDPR—you will get no gas, nothing . . .” concludes the governor.<sup>535</sup> The recording was published by a local “amateur socio-political TV” broadcasting via *YouTube*, where the hosts were discussing local affairs.

It should be noted that in many of the published materials people expressed their outrage at the methods the party bureaucrats were using and the pressure that was being exerted on them with the expectation to comply. This feeling of outrage, of indignation was the core feeling that rose the wave of protests, first in Moscow, then all over the country, and importantly, people who published incriminating materials were from diverse backgrounds: veterans and pensioners, priests, local bureaucrats (in the case of a governor of the Chelyabinsk Region), and even teenagers, as was the case with 15-year-old Matvey Tsivinuk from Krasnoyarsk. Tsivinuk marked up United Russia posters that were placed in his high school by the school’s administration, later explaining his actions to journalists as an expression of “personal resentment” regarding the propaganda of United Russia in his school, because he believed it was

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<sup>534</sup> YouTube video, “Yurevich v Miasse Podkup i Prinuzhdenie 16.11.11 Miass,” uploaded on November 17, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF7Dw8q\\_X1U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF7Dw8q_X1U) (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>535</sup> *YouTube* video, “Yurevich v Miasse.”

“the party of crooks and thieves” (see Chapter 6).<sup>536</sup> The story ‘exploded’ the internet in late November, after the teenager recorded the disciplinary conversation the director of the school had with him in her office, and uploaded the video on his *Vkontakte* page (see Figure 33).



Figure 33. Left: A screen grab from the video posted by Matvey Tsivinuk on his *Vkontakte* page. Right: United Russia Posters in Matvey’s school. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufn7cyK-3aQ>

In case of Tsivinuk, his video attracted the attention of a journalist from the opposition radio station, Echo of Moscow, and he reposted it on his *LiveJournal* blog with the commentary: “Despite direct threats to turn him in to the police, appeals to his religious feelings, and a reminder of Vladimir Lenin’s expulsion from the university (for his revolutionary activities), the high school student remained confident, cited Federal Law, and even recorded the conversation.” The journalist provided the video and the picture of United Russia’s posters on the school’s wall (See Figure 33). The story immediately spread all over the internet, and Matvey had suddenly become famous. The incident was covered by the central liberal media, regional newspapers, and, among television stations, by TVRain, and RenTV. It triggered discussions in the liberal-networked public sphere of the Russian law regarding party propaganda, and the rights and

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<sup>536</sup> “Shkol’nik-dissident, pobediv ER, szhalilsia nad direktorom: ‘Ia ukhozhu iz bol’shoi politiki,” NEWSru.com, November 17, 2011, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/17nov2011/edro.html> (accessed June 18, 2013).



responsibilities of education workers: the original posting in the journalist's blog alone collected more than 2,000 comments.<sup>537</sup> TVRain provided expert opinions,<sup>538</sup> and Ren-TV covered the incident, together with those discussed above, in a weekly news show.<sup>539</sup>

Violations of the electoral law committed by the “party of power” and captured by the amateur camera were not the only kind of content that kept attracting public attention in the busy months before the elections. Popular sports and music events also became a contested place, where the public was openly and quite explicitly expressing its attitude to United Russia, and even Putin himself. As was discussed in Chapter 2, politicians often use mass events as an opportunity for additional publicity, which allows communicating with the audience directly. United Russia also seized this opportunity in November 2011, in the last month before the elections, when in several regions the party's bureaucrats appeared on stages during various concerts and sports events, and began advocating for United Russia.

The response of the audience, however, was not always very friendly: on the contrary, the public responded with loud whistling and booing, and amateur videos from such events quickly emerged on the internet resulting in public attention and publications in the liberal-networked public sphere and public attention. Thus United Russia officials came to the concerts of two established performers: pop singer, Valeria, and rock-singer, Andrei Makarevich, and his band. After the videos of the incidents had been leaked on the internet, both performers hastily

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<sup>537</sup> To see the original posting requires registration, but its copy is available at the IGEL\_68's blog, entry posted November 14, 2011, <http://igel-68.livejournal.com/104068.html> (accessed June 18, 2013); *LiveJournal* Themes, “Shkola za ‘Edinuiu Rossiyu,’ uchenik protiv,” November 17, 2011, <http://www.livejournal.ru/themes/id/39839> (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>538</sup> TV Rain, November 15, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=CI2Yg-mKtB0> (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>539</sup> *Nedelia*, Ren-TV, November 19, 2011.

distanced themselves from United Russia.<sup>540</sup> On the video from Makarevich's concert it is audible that the moment the government representatives appeared on the stage the audience began booing and whistling, shouts "shame on you!" could be heard, and some people started to demand money back for their tickets.<sup>541</sup> After the publications and discussions that followed in the liberal-networked public sphere, Makarevich preferred to explain himself to his audience and wrote a very harsh statement, calling on all government bureaucrats not to attempt political propaganda in front of his band, because, and he put it much harsher, the band's reputation was being tarnished.<sup>542</sup>

By far the most-discussed incident occurred on November 21, during a martial arts event in Moscow, which for the Kremlin was a public relations opportunity with patriotic tones. Putin was invited to enter the ring and congratulate a Russian martial artist, Fyodor Yemelyanenko, who had just beaten an American athlete, Jeff Monson. As soon as Putin took the microphone, the audience started to whistle and boo, and did so the whole time Putin was speaking. This openly negative reaction to his public appearance was a first in Putin's political career.<sup>543</sup> Television has changed the background sound so that whistles and shouts cannot be heard, but the recording from the audience immediately made it to the internet, where the sounds of discontent could be heard clearly.<sup>544</sup> Both videos were watched on *YouTube* over 5,000,000

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<sup>540</sup> Mumin Shakirov and Dinara Setdikova, "Iosif Prigozhin—o tom, kak 'Edinaia Rossiia' postavila pevitsu Valeriiu," *Radio Svoboda*, November 14, 2011, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/24390069.html> (accessed June 18, 2013); Andrei Makarevich, "Chto sluchilos' v Kemerovo," *Snob.ru*, November 6, 2011, [http://www.snob.ru/profile/5134/blog/42930#comment\\_424066](http://www.snob.ru/profile/5134/blog/42930#comment_424066) (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>541</sup> YouTube video, "Osvistannye edinorosy na kontserte Mashiny Vremeni," uploaded November 3, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=hQK2Isv0MFM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=hQK2Isv0MFM) (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>542</sup> Makarevich, "Chto sluchilos' v Kemerovo."

<sup>543</sup> Ekaterina Vinokurova, "Putina privetstvenno osvistali," *Gazeta.ru*, November 21, 2011, [http://wap.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2011/2011/11/21\\_a\\_3841382.shtml](http://wap.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2011/2011/11/21_a_3841382.shtml) (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*

times.<sup>545</sup> Kremlin representatives publicly denied the fact of booing, but a special press conference was organized, where Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, announced that the whistles and boos were meant for the losing athlete, Jeff Monson. This explanation and the press conference caused indignation in the liberal-networked public sphere, particularly among those who were present at the event. "Nothing confirms a version of events more than a refutation that no one asked about," wrote Stanislav Kucher of *Kommersant FM*.<sup>546</sup> Russian sports fans began writing to the American athlete on his *Facebook* page saying that he should not believe the official statements, that their whistles were not aimed for him, and that he was well respected and loved in Russia.<sup>547</sup> As a result of the social reaction and the negative publicity Putin's public appearance had received, all public appearances of both Putin and Medvedev were rescheduled for after the elections.<sup>548</sup>

Thus in 2011 the activation of the bureaucrats of all levels, who were reassuring the "delivery" of votes to United Russia, was accompanied with an unexpected reaction of the population, which began voicing its discontent with how it was being treated. The regime's reaction to this discontent was the mobilization of its public relations services, and administrative and law enforcement apparatuses, which was aimed at winning the information war in the

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<sup>545</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted November 20, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/648199.html?thread=275492103> (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>546</sup> Stanislav Kucher, "Nichto tak ne podtverzhaet versiiu sobytii, kak oproverzhenie, o kotorom ne prosili," *Kommersant FM*, November 22, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1821462> (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>547</sup> "Rossiiane pishut Monsonu na Facebook: ne ver'te Peskovu, chto osvistali vas, v Rossii vas uvazhaiut," *Gazeta.ru*, November 22, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/news/blogs/2011/11/22/n\\_2105602.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/blogs/2011/11/22/n_2105602.shtml) (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>548</sup> Jeffrey Tayler, "Putin Gets Booed as Russian Elections Loom: Jeffrey Tayler," *Bloomberg*, November 23, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-11-23/putin-gets-booed-as-russian-elections-loom-jeffrey-tayler.html> (accessed June 18, 2013).



Figure 34. A satirical animation made by the artist Egor Zhgun, dedicated to the scandal of the public heckling of Prime Minister Putin. The cartoon was made to look like a poster of a 3D animation cartoon, “The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn.” The poster says “The Adventures of Putintin: The Secret of Edinoros.” In Russian Edinorog (Unicorn) and Edinoros (United Russia member) differ in just one letter. In the background the artist showed the audience that shouts “Boooo...” and “Go away!” Source: <http://www.livejournal.ru/themes/id/40433>

new and unknown volatile information environment. This reaction was the complete opposite of the social dialogue, which some observers and think tanks had been calling for and which was necessary to assuage social tension. In the months approaching the elections, the Russian media space turned into a battlefield where the regime was waging an information war with the liberal media, the opposition and the informed and engaged part of the population. Bureaucrats kept doing their job, only more aggressively, which contributed to the already common feeling—that the government “holds the people for rabble,” or “for children,” and treats its own citizens with disregard.<sup>549</sup>

<sup>549</sup> Belanovskii and Dmitriev, *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii*; “Mashinu Vremeni’ osvistali v Kemerove,” BusinessFM, November 6, 2011, <http://radio.bfm.ru/news/2011/11/06/new-1.html> (accessed June 18, 2013).

The scandals discussed in this section do not exhaust the entire spectrum of scandalous political events, which were frequent in the Fall of 2011, but they illustrate that the liberal-networked public sphere in Russia became that communicative public space, through which certain groups in Russian society were communicating, however informally, with the regime, exerting bottom-up pressure. Scandal as a form of political communication is far from perfect, as was discussed in Chapter 2, but in the Russian political and media reality frequent scandals in the time before the elections were beneficial, because they attracted the attention of a previously apathetic and detached audience and helped to raise the feeling of outrage that overpowered social apathy. None of these scandals was properly covered in the state-controlled media, so it can be argued with confidence that only those who followed the news in the liberal-networked public sphere could share this feeling of outrage and sympathy with the protests, not to speak of participating in them.

### The Logic of Social Mobilization

With the advantage of hindsight, sociologists concluded that the social mobilization occurred in the last two to three weeks before the elections, when social tension fermented into social agitation and excitement. Several new trends emerged in 2011 that involved the erosion of public opinion and the new media environment. One of these trends was the politicization of respected and much loved non-political public personalities, who became increasingly vocal about the political situation in the country, the upcoming elections, and the “swap.”<sup>550</sup> Some of them had never spoken or written about public affairs before. Another trend, which I have touched upon in the previous section, was the heightened public attention toward the elections and the possibility of electoral fraud. In November 2011 this attention transformed into action:

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<sup>550</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*; Nikolai Silaev, “Plody Umolchanii,” *Ekspert* no. 16 (799), April 23, 2012, <http://expert.ru/expert/2012/16/plodyi-umolchanij/> (accessed June 18, 2013).

regular people started to sign up as volunteers to observe the upcoming elections and came to the voting booths to cast a protest vote for other parties from the “systemic opposition,” but against United Russia. In the following two sections I will discuss these new trends of the 2011 electoral campaign with particular attention to the role of new media and the liberal-networked public sphere.

For the majority of Russians the word “opposition” has been associated primarily with the names of a few professional politicians, such as Boris Nemtsov, Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, and Ilya Yashin, but opinion polls were consistently showing that Russians, even informed city dwellers, were not ready to vote for opposition politicians, arguing that these politicians “have no influence on the situation,” “fail to unite,” and “do not represent my interests.”<sup>551</sup> Russian liberal-democratic opposition is consistently discredited on television, and, indeed, divided internally. For these reasons it failed to command significant public support.

By 2011, however, public personalities that were not associated with politics or with the opposition began commenting on current affairs and voicing their discontent with the political situation in the country. This politicization was occurring gradually, like other processes discussed in this study. For example, an established writer, Vladimir Sorokin, said in 2007 in an interview with *Spiegel*,

In the days of Brezhnev, Andropov, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, I was constantly trying to suppress the responsible citizen in me. I told myself that I was, after all, an artist. As a storyteller, I was influenced by the Moscow underground, where it was common to be apolitical. This was one of our favorite anecdotes: As German troops marched into Paris, Picasso sat there and drew an apple. That was our attitude—you must sit there and draw your apple, no matter what happens around you. I held fast to that principle until I was 50. Now the citizen in me has come to life.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> Volkov, *Rossiiane ne gotovy golosovat' za oppositsiiu*; Volkov, *Protestnye elektoral'nye strategii*.

<sup>552</sup> “Spiegel Interview with Author Vladimir Sorokin: ‘Russia Is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire,’” Spiegel Online, February 2, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-author-vladimir-sorokin-russia-is-slipping-back-into-an-authoritarian-empire-a-463860.html> (accessed June 18, 2013).

Journalist and music critic, Artemy Troitsky, whose involvement with the Khimki Forest movement and lawsuits were discussed in Chapter 6, admitted that the understanding of the importance of civic activism came to him late, at the age of 56, which he regretted.<sup>553</sup> Writers Liudmila Ulitskaia and Boris Akunin became vocal about the issue of political prisoners in Russia, and both published their conversations with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former oligarch and the most famous Russian political prisoner, whom Akunin interviewed in 2008, and with whom Ulitskaia had a written exchange in 2009.<sup>554</sup> After the second lawsuit, in December 2010, Akunin condemned the court's decision—14 years in prison—and came up with an online campaign in support of Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev, calling for the “amputation” (a combination of “amputation” and “Putin”) of the country: “The sooner the country will perform this historically unavoidable surgery,” he wrote in his blog, “the sooner the resolution of many complex issues will move forward.” He also noted that he was simply translating the ideas that were “in the air” and were often expressed by the readers of his blog.<sup>555</sup>

A popular Soviet and Russian actress, Liya Akhedzhakova, publicly stated that she could not forgive herself for not supporting rock singer, Yuri Shevchuk, when he openly spoke with Prime Minister Putin at the meeting with the intelligentsia (see Chapter 6). “I cannot forgive myself,” she stated to the media, “I was not afraid of anybody, but for some reason I remained

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<sup>553</sup> *Muzy*, TV Rain, uploaded on May 5, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=aLjvAaiLxQU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=aLjvAaiLxQU) (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>554</sup> “Razgovor pisatelii Grigoriia Chkhartishvili (B. Akunina) s Mikhailom Khodorkovskim,” *Esquire*, October 2008, [http://khodorkovsky.ru/mbk/articles\\_and\\_interview/2008/10/03/11902.html](http://khodorkovsky.ru/mbk/articles_and_interview/2008/10/03/11902.html) (accessed June 18, 2013); “Ulitskaia—Khodorkovskii. Bez protokola,” *Novaya Gazeta* no. 100, September 11, 2009, <http://www.novaya-gazeta.ru/society/43627.html> (accessed June 18, 2013).

<sup>555</sup> Boris Akunin, personal blog, entry posted January 7, 2011, <http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/9413.html> (accessed June 18, 2013).

silent, and now I feel ashamed.”<sup>556</sup> Akhedzhakova indeed became more vocal about political issues, and gave a very critical interview to one of the online opposition political portals, where she discussed the current political situation and the upcoming elections, and supported public personalities, among them Shevchuk, Troitsky, and the authors from Citizen Poet, who were vocal about public issues. Akhedzhakova also showed that she was familiar with the recent civic initiatives, particularly the ecological movement in defense of the Khimki Forest, with Navalny’s activities, and with the Blue Buckets movement, which she, as a driver, particularly appreciated (see Figure 35). The video was copied by many news portals, and its *YouTube* versions alone were viewed more than 500,000 times.<sup>557</sup>



Figure 35. Liya Akhedzhakova on the situation in the country. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjZVnhl4NwA>

<sup>556</sup> “Liia Akhedzhakova proklinaet sebja za to, chto ne podderzhala Shevchuka v besede s Putinyem,” NEWSru.com, June 1, 2010, [http://www.newsru.com/Russia/01jun20\\_10/ahedzhakova.html](http://www.newsru.com/Russia/01jun20_10/ahedzhakova.html) (accessed June 14, 2013).

<sup>557</sup> YouTube video, “Gosudarstvo znaet, kogo možno kupit’ I kto kupitsia,” uploaded November 17, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjZVnhl4NwA&list=PLB2ACE12A6AB03B77>; “Liia Akhedzhakova o situatsii v strane,” uploaded November 19, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=3pXnk9GgI0k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=3pXnk9GgI0k) (accessed June 18, 2013);



The list of public personalities and members of the artistic elite who became more vocal in expressing their civic position is not limited to the individuals mentioned, but the examples illustrate the phenomenon well: by 2011 there were more public personalities whose professional background was outside of politics, but who became willing to speak about domestic politics publicly and critically. This expansion of the social base of the popular opposition beyond professional politicians turned out to be critical, because it helped overcome the deeply entrenched popular distrust Russians have of politics and politicians. As one of the protest participants later noted, “politics has not been looking as dirty since Akunin and Ulitskaia began participating in it.”<sup>558</sup> Needless to say, the liberal-networked public sphere became the main public space where these people could communicate their views, mainly through interviews with the liberal media, but some also through their blogs.

The socio-political situation in the country, the regime’s own actions, the building social tension, scandals and discourses in the liberal-networked public sphere persuaded enough people to seriously consider the upcoming elections. By October-November 2011, there were two options worked out in the liberal-networked public sphere: one was formulated by Navalny in his poster competition—to come and vote for any party except for United Russia; the other was suggested by an opposition group of Moscow intellectuals and politicians, among them the politician Boris Nemtsov, and the poet and the author of the texts for Citizen Poet, Dmitry Bykov (see Chapter 5). The group promoted the idea of rendering one’s ballot illegal by writing something on it, a protest gesture that meant voting against all.<sup>559</sup> They called their approach the

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<sup>558</sup> Belanovskii and Dmitriev, *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii*, 13.

<sup>559</sup> “S energichnym posyloom: oppozitsyonery sozdaiut dvizhenie ‘nakh-nakh,’” *Grani.ru*, August 22, 2011, <http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/Election/m.190834.html> (accessed June 19, 2013).

“Nakh-Nakh” movement and began promoting it in the liberal-networked public sphere in the summer of 2011.<sup>560</sup>

The discussion of the alternative voting strategy in the upcoming elections was not very obvious in the liberal-networked public sphere, because it was de-centralized and dispersed, but the key search phrase *al’ternativnoe golosovanie Nakh-Nakh*<sup>561</sup> in *Yandex* lists more than 40,000 pages, among them blog posts and publications in online media, where people were discussing and comparing the two suggested alternative strategies. These were websites from all over the country: Krasnoyarsk, Cherepovets, Ulyanovsk, Tolyatti, and many other towns and cities.<sup>562</sup> In addition to the hundreds of dispersed publications, many opinion leaders in Moscow, following the wave of social politicization that grew only more intense as Election Day approached, began posting in their blogs reminders to their readers about the need to vote; most of them preferred Navalny’s option. For example, an actress and television host, Tatiana Lazareva, wrote in the early morning on December 4:

Let’s make a deal: those of you who go vote will become my [LiveJournal] friends in a second. I swear I don’t care whom you vote for. Simply those who get off their ass with their civic position and make it to the voting booth will become my friend for sure.<sup>563</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> The name of the movement was a malapropism, a combination of the name of a piglet from the fairy tale about the Three little Piglets (in Russian translated is Nif Nif, Nouf Nouf, and Naf Naf), and a Russian obscenity, so that to Russians the movement’s name sounded like a curse word.

<sup>561</sup> The phrase can be translated as “alternative voting f. . . off”—this is what this opposition group suggested to write on a ballot, which is consistent with a general atmosphere of radicalization of political commentary that was discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>562</sup> For example, see, Krasnoyarsk website *Vybory-24*, “‘Nakh-Nakh’ proigral,” October 3, 2011, <http://www.vybory-24.ru/news/2011/10/161>; Cherepovets message board, “Oppozitsiia skazala ‘NAKH-NAKH,’” posted September 6, 2011, <http://forum.cherepovets.net/index.php?showtopic=202169&mode=threaded>; Sergei Polenov, “Nakh-Nakhom nedovol’ny,” *Simbirskii Kur’er*, October 20, 2011, <http://sim-k.ru/2011/10/20/nax-naxom-nedovolny/>; Tolyatti message board, “naKH-naKH: Golosui protiv vsekh!” posted August 23, 2011, <http://www.tltti.mes.ru/blog/8729.html> (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>563</sup> Tatiana Lazareva, personal blog, entry posted December 4, 2011, <http://lazareva-tatka.livejournal.com/2011/12/04/> (accessed June 20, 2013).

Bozhena Rynska, a high-society columnist, wrote on November 24:

Dear friends, I am agitating everybody here to go and vote. I will be periodically reminding you before the elections of the duty of every human being and citizen to vote for any party, except for United Russia. I will tell those of you who do not give a damn about politics, those indifferent, yawning, and apolitical, it is time to get off your ass, make it to your voting place, and vote for ANY party. I will be voting for the Communists.<sup>564</sup>

Photographer and top blogger, Rustem Adagamov, wrote on December 2:

On December 4, Duma elections will be held in Russia. To be precise, they call it so. In reality these elections are an empty formality, to render the current regime respectable, or, how do they put it now, legitimate . . .

It happened so that instead of consistently developing a genuine democratic system in the country (which is complicated and boring), the incumbent powers now are busy restoring the old order and . . . arrangement of the well being for themselves and their relatives.

In other words, there has been established a model of a police state that runs on oil . . . I have been watching this for several years now, and a good moment has come now to at least somehow express our attitude to what the ruling regime has made with the country.

For this reason I will go and vote. Not “for,” but “against,” meaning I will give my vote to any other party, except for United Russia. I have no other choice left. To stay at home, or to blemish the ballot would mean to play into the crooks’ and thieves’ hands and lose any future chance to judge what is going on in the country. This is my small right, and my big civic duty. Join!<sup>565</sup>

Writer Boris Akunin wrote on November 22:

Just like many of you, I’ve been long thinking about whether I should participate in the elections, or join the “Nakh-Nakh” movement. My doubts were terminated by a wise electoral campaign strategy of the ruling party.

Then the writer explained that, since he would not be in Moscow on December 4, he decided to get an absentee ballot. Akunin had encountered serious difficulties, first, when he was trying to get the ballot, and then in trying to find the voting site itself. When he came to vote in advance, people at the electoral commission looked very surprised:

When I asked, “Don’t you want a lot of people to come and vote?” they—remained silent. “This is a paradox,” I thought. “They bring thousands of Nashists in the capital to raise the turnout, but hide from the local voters.

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<sup>564</sup> Bozhena Rynska, personal blog, entry posted November 24, 2011, <http://becky-sharpe.livejournal.com/2011/11/24/> (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>565</sup> Rustem Adagamov, entry posted December 2, 2011, <http://drugoi.livejournal.com/2011/12/02/> (accessed June 20, 2013).

And then it dawned upon me . . . The party of Crooks and Thieves does not want Muscovites to vote. They are afraid of us. If Muscovites come and vote, the results will be greatly disappointing for the Kremlin. It will turn out that their own capital can't bear them . . .

And here I decided that I am definitely going to use my ballot . . .

Listen, ladies and gentlemen, let us disappoint the “crooks.” Let us not be lazy, go and use “our chance to affect the country’s politics,” if they do not want to insist on our coming. I, for example, grudgingly, will give my voice for the “sour” *Yabloko* (Apple, the name of the Russian Democratic party).

Dear friends from the Nakh-Nakh movement, grow up, please! You should understand: your childish initiative plays into the “crooks” hands.<sup>566</sup>

Each of these authors has hundreds of followers, and the posts cited here were clearly written for their audience. All these dispersed, “invisible” communications and the general atmosphere of social tension contributed to the mobilization of many individuals who had not voted before, most noticeably in Moscow: in 2011, the election turnout was very high, 61.4 percent, compared, for example, with 53.84 percent in the 2007 elections, and with the nationwide turnout of 60.21 percent.<sup>567</sup> According to the Levada Center, traditionally the proportion of those voting in Moscow compared to the countryside was 47 to 70 percent, but the situation had changed by the end of November 2011, when more than 50 percent of Muscovites told sociologists that they were going to vote.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>566</sup> Boris Akunin, personal blog, entry posted November 22, 2011, <http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2011/11/22/> (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>567</sup> “Iavka na vybory v GD po Moskve sostavila 61.4%—predvaritel’nye dannye,” RIA Novosti, December 5, 2011, <http://ria.ru/politics/20111205/506989511.html>; “Iavka v Moskve na vyborakh v GD sostavila 60.1%—Mosgorizbirkom,” December 4, 2011, <http://ria.ru/moscow/20111204/506729597.html>; “Iavka na vyborakh v Dumu sostavila 60.21%—okonchatel’nye dannye TSIK RF,” <http://ria.ru/politics/20111209/511599143-print.html?ria=1dmts5pd9kloq00ep9gv0okn5o02nc8r> (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>568</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 10.

Sociologists do not explain this change, which took place in the month before the elections, but they do show that, without knowing who Navalny was,<sup>569</sup> two-thirds of the population had heard the expression “the party of crooks and thieves,” and to various degrees could be exposed to the alternative way of action.<sup>570</sup> Indeed, there was no discourse in the state-controlled media that could urge people to cast a protest vote, or otherwise adversely affect their attitudes to the ruling party, which suggests that the influence of the liberal-networked public sphere indeed was a serious factor in the electoral process. This happened for the first time in the history of the Russian internet.<sup>571</sup>

As a result of the increased turnout in the cities and the changed voter composition, United Russia lost 77 seats in the Duma, from 315 to 238, notwithstanding the electoral violations.<sup>572</sup> The parties of the “systematic opposition,” on the contrary, gained due to the protest vote: the Communists gained 35 seats, from 57 to 92 seats; the Liberal Democratic Party gained 16 seats, from 40 to 56 seats; and Just Russia gained 24, from 38 to 62 seats. The improved position of Just Russia had actually benefitted the protest movement: several of its deputies began insisting on changing the party’s strategy to “meet the demands of politically active citizens from Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Avenue (the locations of the two biggest

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<sup>569</sup> According to Levada Center, only 6% of Russians knew in May of 2011 who Navalny was, see Levada Center press release from May 6, 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/06-05-2011/alekseya-navalnogo-znayut-6-rossiyan> (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>570</sup> Levada Center press release from December 6, 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/06-12-2011/vybory-v-gosdumu-chast-2-o-edinoi-rossii-narodnom-fronte-slovochetanii-partiya-zhulikov> (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>571</sup> Gudkov et al., *Rossiiskie parlamentskie vybory*, 7.

<sup>572</sup> “Podschitan nizhnii porog fal’sifikatsyi na vyborakh v Dumu,” BBC Russian Service, December 25, 2012, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2012/12/121225\\_duma\\_elections\\_study\\_observers.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2012/12/121225_duma_elections_study_observers.shtml) (accessed June 20, 2013).

winter protests),” and other deputies, such as the Gudkov’s, a father and son, joined the protest.<sup>573</sup>

### Volunteer Observing of the Elections

Another phenomenon new to the 2011 electoral campaign and unprecedented in the entire history of elections in Russia was the mass registration and training of everyday people to become election observers. By sharing their eyewitness evidence online, they have made the single most decisive contribution to the wave of social indignation that triggered the first protest. Another media scandal that was provoked by the regime’s approaches to securing an electoral majority contributed to the popularization of election observing and summoned public attention to the issue of electoral violations.<sup>574</sup> The scandal involved a non-profit association *Golos* (Vote) that was a long-time independent observer of the Russian electoral process and has long been documenting the tactics the Kremlin has used to rig the electoral process.<sup>575</sup>

For the 2011 Duma elections, *Golos* had come up with the idea of an interactive “map of violations,”<sup>576</sup> a crowdsourcing project where anyone could report violations and add photo and video files in the interactive website. Soon the map was chosen as one of the 20 best web services of the “RuNet 2011” awards in the “State and Society” category.<sup>577</sup> Journalists from the NTV channel came to interview the executive director of *Golos*, Grigory Melkonyants. According to Melkonyants, during the interview he realized, by the nature of the questions he

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<sup>573</sup> Ekaterina Vinokurova, “Diskussii o spravedlivosti,” *Gazeta.ru*, March 29, 2012, [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/03/29\\_a\\_4111157.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/03/29_a_4111157.shtml) (accessed June 20, 2013).

<sup>574</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, 9.

<sup>575</sup> Stephen White, “Elections Russian-Style.”

<sup>576</sup> *Karta narushenii na vyborakh*, <http://www.kartanarusheniy.org/2011-12-04> (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>577</sup> Daniil Turovskii, “‘Vy—surkovskaia propaganda.’ Grigorii Mel’kon’iants o novykh sposobakh obshcheniia s zhurnalistami,” *Afisha*, November 29, 2011, <http://www.afisha.ru/article/vi-surkovskaya-propaganda/> (accessed June 21, 2013).

was asked, that the journalists were attempting to collect materials for a “compromising” documentary—NTV’s signature tool for discrediting the regime’s opposition—to discredit the organization and the work of the independent election observers.<sup>578</sup> His suspicions began to be confirmed on the next day when the journalists came to the organization’s office secretly: first they planted their people in *Golos*’s internal educational session, then broke into the room with video cameras and microphones. “I am positive that they had hidden cameras as well. They behaved insolently, walked around in circles. They did not show us their badges and asked everybody: ‘Are you a CIA agent? Are you a CIA agent?’” By then Melkonyants was positive that there would be some kind of material, and that the plants, who disappeared after the “invasion,” would give interviews on behalf of the organization.

When the door opened and a journalist and a cameraman broke in for the third time, Melkonyants took his phone and began videotaping the invasion. He believed journalists needed additional material to complete the story.<sup>579</sup> “I broke into your office to ask you some questions about your organization! . . . Who finances you? Who finances you?” a young journalist on the video shouts (see Figure 36). Not willing to provide any further material, Melkonyants began repeating one phrase that he knew journalists would not be able to cut out or broadcast: “You are Surkov’s propaganda!”<sup>580</sup> He kept repeating this to the shouting journalist. “NTV is Surkov’s propaganda.” Later Melkonyants admitted that the phrase came to his mind as a self-defense

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid.; Online interview of Grigirii Mel’kon’iants to *Novaia Gazeta*, “Pochemu ‘Golos’ chestnee NTV,” uploaded on December 1, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDTxuP9IW5o> (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>579</sup> Turovskii, “‘Vy—surkovskaia propaganda.’”

<sup>580</sup> Vladislav Surkov is Kremlin’s chief public relations strategist.



Figure 36. NTV’s attack on the office of Golos. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tr983sORe3M>

mechanism, like in a war,<sup>581</sup> or more precisely an information war. In about six minutes the journalists, unable to get what they wanted, had to leave.

When the video spread on the internet—Melkonyants uploaded it himself—somebody counted that the executive director of *Golos* had repeated the phrase “NTV is Surkov’s propaganda” 84 times. The story provided publicity to the organization, which otherwise lacks resources for self-promotion, and, as Melkonyants admitted, he began receiving calls and emails from people who were offering help.<sup>582</sup> Publications and interviews with Melkonyants that followed in the liberal-networked public sphere attracted additional attention to the work of observers and the opportunities to volunteer as an observer. In addition, in Moscow a group of scholars and social activists had organized an initiative titled Citizen Observer,<sup>583</sup> which in collaboration with *Golos* and *Novaya Gazeta* took it upon themselves to train and organize

<sup>581</sup> Online interview of Grigirii Mel’kon’iants to *Novaia Gazeta*.

<sup>582</sup> Turovskii, “Vy—surkovskaia propaganda.”

<sup>583</sup> The word “citizen” by then became popular thanks to Citizen Poet—see Chapter 5.



incoming volunteers and to select a random sample of voting locations in order to be able to make a scientifically justified conclusion about the scope of the electoral fraud. Information about how to become an observer and all subscription forms and contacts were available online only, on Citizen Observer's website and in social networks.<sup>584</sup> Navalny and many other bloggers had also contributed by making summary posts of all organizations that were training observers.<sup>585</sup>

According to Andrei Buzin of *Golos*, the phenomenon of ideological observation, when regular people decided to become observers because they did not trust the personnel of the election commissions, is completely new to Russia. Before 2011, the parties that participated in the elections administered observation, and people who worked as observers were motivated only financially.<sup>586</sup> In 2011, parties such as Yabloko, Democratic Choice, and the Communist Party, also played the role of organizers and trainers, but many volunteers signed up with them not because of any particular sympathy toward the party, but to be eligible to observe the elections. According to *Yandex Blogs*,<sup>587</sup> in the month before the elections, from November 4 to December 3, 2011, there were almost 7,000 postings in blogs, microblogs, and social networks with the keyword *nabliudatelem na vyborakh* (to become an election observer) that contained information related to the upcoming elections and observations. There were several job postings among these messages that suggested observing elections for money, which indicates that the internet was used for recruiting traditional paid observers as well. Most messages under this

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<sup>584</sup> See the website of Citizen Observer, <http://nabludatel.org/stat-nablyudatelem/>; in the top right corner there are links to all groups in social networks where Citizen Observer is represented (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>585</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted November 8, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/641950.html> (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>586</sup> *Ugol Zreniia*, Expert TV, interview with Andrei Buzin, uploaded February 3, 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLc\\_cWYC1GY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLc_cWYC1GY) (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>587</sup> See <http://blogs.yandex.ru/> (accessed June 22, 2013).

search term, however, contained information sharing and discussions related to the volunteer observation of the upcoming elections. Some bloggers reported their impressions of the new experience. The following blog post of a would-be observer who encountered the “routine” of the Russian electoral process is very illustrative of the kind of discussions that took place in blogs:

This year I decided to participate in the elections not as I usually do, but, at a minimum, to become an observer to try to at least a little bit limit the lawlessness of the Party of Crooks and Thieves . . . Today I have attended a party gathering (I don’t want to give the name of the party because it does not matter. My goal is simply to try to limit falsifications.) It was a nightmare! The organization . . . was horrible . . . I had a feeling that this party participates in elections formally, even though they pass the 7 percent barrier. I am not sure if this is laziness, or imitation.

Second, I was impressed with the kind of people who were to be observers and members of the electoral commissions—95 percent of them were students, and it looked like they were just recruited from several classes, because many knew each other, and no one cared—they just wanted their 2,000 rubles . . . These kind of observers are convenient only for one party—the Party of Crooks and Thieves. They need those who won’t do anything, and won’t see any falsifications . . .” (Kovu)<sup>588</sup>

This author’s description implies that he was participating in an observation for one of the parties of the “systemic opposition,” most probably the Communist Party. This description contrasts with the materials uploaded by the participants of the training sessions organized by the democratic and opposition parties, Yabloko and Democratic Choice, as well as by the civic Citizen Observer, where we can see people of all ages, who were attentively listening and taking notes—this is especially clear on the video made by Yabloko (see Figure 37). As a result of this collective effort, Democratic Choice, for example, reported recruiting and training

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<sup>588</sup> Blog Kovu, entry posted November 30, 2011, <http://kovuru.livejournal.com/134899.html> (accessed June 21, 2013).

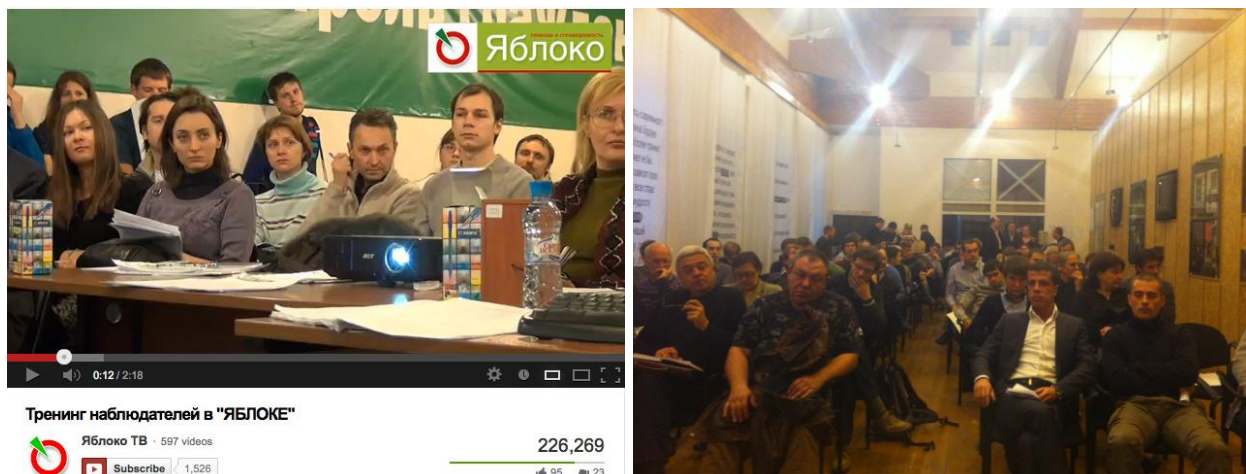


Figure 37. Training sessions of volunteer observers Left: Organized by the Yabloko party. Source: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=oHdQOP53HAU#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=oHdQOP53HAU#!) Right: Organized by the Right Cause party. Source: <https://twitter.com/drandin/status/132399419495694336/photo/1>

1,000 volunteers in 63 regions,<sup>589</sup> while in Moscow alone Citizen Observer prepared 1,000 volunteers for the Duma election, and 10,000 by the March 4, 2012, presidential elections.<sup>590</sup>

Independent observers rendered the electoral violations public, which became the final catalyzing event that raised the level of public indignation and frustration to the brink. On December 4, the day of the elections, and on the next day, the blogosphere was bubbling, “digesting” the experience and the evidence of electoral fraud that volunteer observers were uploading on the internet. The key phrase *nabliudatelem na vyborakh* in *Yandex Blogs* returns 3,426 posts made in these two days alone, most of them eye-witness accounts of violations that the observers were sharing, while the interactive map of violations contained materials about 7,801 instances.<sup>591</sup>

<sup>589</sup> Vladimir Milov, personal microblog, entry posted November 22, 2011, [https://twitter.com/v\\_milov/statuses/139247202722791425](https://twitter.com/v_milov/statuses/139247202722791425) (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>590</sup> Website of Citizen Observer, <http://nabludatel.org/about/> (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>591</sup> See <http://www.kartanarusheniy.org/2011-12-04> (accessed June 22, 2013).

Importantly, the liberal media made a decisive contribution to the coverage of the observations and publishing of violations, which also supports one of the main arguments of this study, namely that the liberal media have grown to become an essential part of what was termed the liberal-networked public sphere: not only were liberal journalists covering the independent observations, but many themselves became observers and wrote about their personal experience. Journalists from *Forbes*, *Kommersant*, *Gazeta.ru*, *TVRain*, and *Vokrug Sveta* were reporting live the violations they observed, covered scandals with electoral commission members who were attempting to hinder independent observation, and published photo and video materials on the websites of their media outlets as evidence.<sup>592</sup> Journalists infiltrated organized groups that participated in so-called *karusel's* (roundabouts), when one person travels around the city and votes several times, committing a criminal offense.<sup>593</sup> *TVRain* was broadcasting videos uploaded on the internet, explaining the workings of the *karusel*.<sup>594</sup> Olga Romanova, a journalist, social activist, and opposition leader wrote:

My horror has been growing. From the early morning to the late night of December 4 we were watching how one part of the socially active citizenry was preventing the other part of active citizens from cheating and doing sordid things. The process was accompanied with scandals, fights, and mutual denouncing, and if at first it reminded us of a cops and robbers game for adults, by the end of the day it looked more like civil war.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>592</sup> “Khronika vyborov—2011. Onlain-transliatsiia Forbes,” *Forbes*, December 4, 2011, <http://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya/vlast/77127-hronika-vyborov-2011#comments>; “Khronika golosovaniia: Vse sobytiia, narusheniia i kur’ezy vyborov,” *Lenta.ru*, December 5, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/12/04/chrono/>; “Na uchastke v Moskve nabludatelei, prepiatstvuiushchikh vbrosu biulletenei za ER, vytalkivaet politsiia,” *Gazeta. Ru*, December 5, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/12/05/n\\_2122790.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/12/05/n_2122790.shtml) (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>593</sup> “Karusel’ slomalas’,” *Lenta.ru*, December 4, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/12/04/carousel/> (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>594</sup> *Zdes’ I seichas*, TV Rain, December 4, 2011, [http://tvrain.ru/articles/nastoyashchaya\\_karusel\\_kak\\_eto\\_ustroeno-106784/](http://tvrain.ru/articles/nastoyashchaya_karusel_kak_eto_ustroeno-106784/) (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>595</sup> Olga Romanova, “Boi vybornogo znacheniia,” *Gazeta.ru*, December 5, 2011, [http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/12/05\\_a\\_3858550.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/12/05_a_3858550.shtml) (accessed June 21, 2013).

For many of those who were following the elections online, and then watched the news reports on state television channels, the letter appeared to be nothing other than an insult to their common sense: the cumulative percentage reported for some regions exceeded 100 percent, the most famous being Rostov Region, with 146 percent; the reported vote for United Russia in the Chechen Republic was 99.47 percent, in the best tradition of Soviet-era elections (see Figure 38). The print screens from the television reports soon filled internet forums and social networks, where emotions were already running high.<sup>596</sup> People were watching state-controlled television and discussing the now obvious electoral irregularities online. These communications soon turned to the subject of the planned protest, its time and location.<sup>597</sup>

The mobilization happened quickly and unexpectedly for the regime, as well as for the organizers of the rally that had been conveniently planned for December 5 well in advance, and was cleared with the authorities for 300 prospective attendants.<sup>598</sup> The organizers were “professional” political activists from the non-systematic opposition movement *Solidarnost’* (Solidarity), but the people who attended the first rally were not this movement’s supporters, they were “angry urbanites” who felt humiliated and frustrated with the cynical fraud they witnessed, and were ready to turn their anger into action. Most of them did so for the first time in their lives. As sociologists and journalists unanimously concluded, the December 5

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<sup>596</sup> See, for example, the communications flow that took place on *Pikabu.ru*, one of the leading entertainment communication boards in Russia where politics is usually a minor discussion topic: <http://pikabu.ru/search.php?q=%CF%E6%E8%E2&page=3> (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>597</sup> See communications on *Pikabu.ru* previous footnote; Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*, 273-274.

<sup>598</sup> Yevgenia Albats, et. al., “Dekabr’ 2011-go,” *The New Times* 40 (266), December 3, 2012, <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/60591?grom> (accessed June 21, 2013).



Figure 38. Screen grabs from the state Rossiia 24 TV station with live coverage of the Duma elections on December 4, 2011. Top left depicts the results for the Rostov Region, with a cumulative total of 146.47 percent. Top right: Sverdlovskaiia Region, with 115.35 percent. Bottom left: Chechen Republic, with 99.47 percent for the United Russia, Bottom right: Voronezh Region, with 128.96 percent.

witnessed, and were ready to turn their anger into action. Most of them did so for the first time in their lives. As sociologists and journalists unanimously concluded, the December 5 protest was the first large-scale rally in Russia that took place since the early 1990s, and the first arranged through social networks.<sup>599</sup> It was also the first in a long succession of other rallies that were to follow in 2011-2012.<sup>600</sup>

<sup>599</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, 13-14; Albats, et. al., "Dekabr' 2011-go," Ul'iana Malashenko, et. al., "Takogo ia v Moskve ne videl goda s 93-go," *Kommersant-Online*, December 5, 2011, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1831691> (accessed June 23, 2013).

<sup>600</sup> Alexandr Bychkov, "Bolotnyi god," *Gazeta.ru*, May 6, 2013, [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/05/06\\_a\\_5313513.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/05/06_a_5313513.shtml) (accessed June 23, 2013).

Thus, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, the liberal-networked public sphere has played a crucial role of *facilitator* of uncontrolled horizontal communications and information flows that contributed to the growing public outrage and led to spontaneous mobilization. Citizen journalism that sparked micro-media scandals around the regime's campaign practices, non-political public figures who became outspoken about politics and publicly condemned the regime, and grassroots self-organizing to observe the elections—all of these communications and actions were possible due to the availability of efficient horizontal communications system, the internet, and relatively uncontrolled public space of the liberal-networked public sphere that it facilitated. In the following chapter I will further discuss the implications of this public space for the protest and, in a wider perspective, the role of the protest for the democratization of the Russian political system.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

This study has explored the impact of the internet on Russian society, particularly on its public sphere and popular political opposition, and more broadly, on the relationship between technology, communication, and power relations in a modern society. The main argument this study makes is that new communication technologies have enabled the formation of a new communicative space in Russia, the liberal-networked public sphere, which is hybrid in nature and functions like a public sphere, an alternative to the government-controlled traditional media. This space facilitates a wide range of human interactions, such as private interaction, self-publishing, public interaction, collaboration, and organizing, and it has allowed many Russians to form and act politically as counter-publics.

In this chapter I discuss the main findings of the study and assess the role that new information and social media networks play in the creation of a new public sphere for social mobilization of political opposition in Russia. In the first section, I review the role of networked communications as powerful catalysts of social protest. Furthermore, I will discuss how autonomous communication and collaboration facilitated by the liberal-networked public sphere helped to establish new communication ties among individual opinion leaders and groups of citizens and how these connections contributed to the organizational capacity of the protesters. In addition, I will highlight the first reaction of the regime to the spontaneous social mobilization that took place. In the second section, I will consider how the protests of 2011-2012 affected and altered civil society, the regime, and state-society relations in Russia. Particularly, I will highlight how the experience of participating in the movement contributed to a shift in Russian civil society's collective understanding of the existing political order and of civil society's own role in this order. In the third section, I assess the theoretical significance of my findings in



relation to the academic literature and their political significance compared to social movements in other countries. Finally, I conclude with commentary on the practical meaning of an emerging networked public for Russia's future.

### Communication Technologies and Social Mobilization

The first mobilization that took place, on December 5 of 2011, opened probably the most eventful year in recent Russian political history, when mass, peaceful, and nation-wide protests became a constant story in the news. At the same time, this year of heightened protest activity did not result in any structural changes to the Russian political system, or concessions from the government, and none of the protesters' demands were satisfied. Moreover, the protest activity and support of the movement among the population at large began to decline,<sup>601</sup> and a year later both pro-government and liberal commentators agreed that the protest had exhausted itself.<sup>602</sup> In this respect a year of heightened political activity and hope had also become a year of disappointment for some, and for others—a sobering realization of just how complex and challenging the task of *peaceful* restructuring of the Russian political system is.

Although objectively the 2011-2012 protests in Russia had very limited *structural* effects on the authoritarian, personalized, and non-transparent political regime, they still affected civic political opposition and state-society relations in very important ways. Furthermore, as I have shown in the preceding chapters, the protests themselves were the result of multiple micro-level social changes, of which networked communications have been an essential part.

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<sup>601</sup> “Aktsiia razocharovaniia,” *Gazeta.ru*, December 13, 2012, [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/12/13\\_a\\_4889485.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/12/13_a_4889485.shtml); “Oppozitsiia teriaet storonnikov i protivnikov,” *Gazeta.ru*, June 13, 2013, [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/06/13\\_a\\_5378413.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/06/13_a_5378413.shtml) (accessed June 28, 2013).

<sup>602</sup> Irina Nagornyykh, Sergei Goriashko, “Novaia protestnaia volna zakonchilas,” *Kommersant*, no. 220 (5005), November 21, 2012, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2071919>; Denis Volkov, “Zhertva biurokratii: pochemu idet na spad protestnaia volna,” *Forbes*, April 4, 2013, <http://www.forbes.ru/print/node/236830>; Yuri Saprykin, “God protesta: Saprykin o tom, gde my okazalis,” *Afisha*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.afisha.ru/article/sapr-god-protesta/> (accessed June 28, 2013).

Consequently, in order to better understand the role of the internet and other horizontal communications in Russian society, it is essential to consider both the changes leading to the protests and the effects of the protests on society, which were, to a considerable extent, a consequence of the new media environment. In this chapter I will discuss the findings of the previous three chapters and consider them from the broader perspective of the social change to which the protests contributed. In order to structure my discussion, I will conceptually separate the immediate effects of the new media environment and horizontal communications from mid-term and long-term effects.

In his latest study of contemporary social movements, Manuel Castells argues that for a social movement to form there should be a “cognitive consonance between senders and receivers of the message, and an effective communication channel.”<sup>603</sup> On December 5, social networks in Russia served as a communication channel that allowed “senders” to quickly spread information about the planned protest to the “receivers,” but fast information dissemination alone was not the reason so many people responded. An important factor was the consonance, or empathy that was in place among certain groups in Moscow and in other cities, and this played a key role in triggering the first rally on December 5, 2011. If the immediate outcome of the horizontal internet communications had been only to effectively and quickly inform, they could not produce the necessary social consonance that quickly, the roots of which should be sought elsewhere.

Reports of sociologists about the heightened attention to the elections and the willingness of better educated groups to vote, discussed in Chapter 7, should not be taken for granted, particularly in Russia, where the passivity of the population has been one of the building blocks of the regime. The consonance that Castells talks about could only be achieved in the mid-term perspective, when, throughout 2011, people were exposed to the volatile information

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<sup>603</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 14.

environment of the liberal-networked public sphere with its scandals and alternative discourses. This, in turn, contributed to the transformation of social apathy into attention and later into the reaction of outrage at state-controlled media reports about the results of the elections. Without this purely emotional response, the protests of 2011-2012 could hardly take place: the two most popular explanations that participants offered to sociologists for why they attended the rally were “I sought to express my resentment over the falsification of the elections,” and “accumulated discontent with the state of affairs in the country/with politics” (see Appendix A). State-controlled media alone could hardly have produced a similar reaction because all their work is directed at the containment of any potential discontent.

Moreover, in the mid- to long-term perspective, there emerged a small and dispersed group of popular opposition leaders and social activists who, by the time the protests began, had already become outspoken about their civic position, or had organized or participated in some grassroots projects. As one of the organizers told sociologists, he simply sent out several dozen emails to famous people on the night of December 4-5, 2011, asking them to popularize the upcoming rally through their blogs, which they did.<sup>604</sup> Some of them became speakers at the very first rally on December 5: for example, music critic Artemiy Troitsky (see Chapter 6), Evgeniia Chirikova, an environmental activist and a leader of the Khimki Forest movement; Dmitry Bykov, who became very popular and extremely politicized through Citizen Poet (see Chapter 5), and Alexei Navalny, who by December had transformed from a popular blogger into an opposition politician (see Chapter 6). As the protests were gaining momentum, they were joined

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<sup>604</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 10.

by many more, among them journalists Leonid Parfenov and Olga Romanova, writer Boris Akunin, television host and social activist Tatiana Lazareva, actress Liya Akhedzhakova, and many other writers, artists, and musicians.<sup>605</sup>

The immediate mobilization among public personalities was also a result of previous collaboration experience, or simply of awareness of each other's work. Although they came from very diverse backgrounds—professional politicians, civil activists, journalists, businessmen, artists and writers, scholars, and television personalities—hundreds of invisible social ties connected many of them and were established through mutual collaboration in previous projects, or personal acquaintance. For example, Troitsky and Chirikova knew each other through their mutual work on organizing and participating in ecological protests; Navalny has been regularly reposting episodes of Citizen Poet in his blog and in February 2011 wrote an entry about his meeting with Chirikova.<sup>606</sup> Finally, both Bykov and Akunin interviewed Navalny: Bykov before the protests,<sup>607</sup> while Akunin interviewed Navalny as soon as the protests began, admitting that he had been closely following Navalny's activities and had amassed many questions for him (see Figure 39).<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> “Grazhdanskie manifesty,” *Afisha*, May 18, 2012, <http://www.afisha.ru/article/dmitrij-bykov-pisatel/> (accessed June 21, 2013); Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*.

<sup>606</sup> Alexei Navalny, personal blog, entry posted February 4, 2011, <http://navalny.livejournal.com/548930.html> (accessed June 28, 2013).

<sup>607</sup> Bykov and Zharova, “Alexei Navalny: Pervoe postsovetskoe pokolenie.”

<sup>608</sup> “Navalny otvechaet na voprosy Akunina: pozitsiia ‘po natsionalizmu’ i zachem nam gosudarstvo,” NEWSru.com, January 3, 2012, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/03jan2012/navalny4akunin.html> (accessed June 28, 2013).

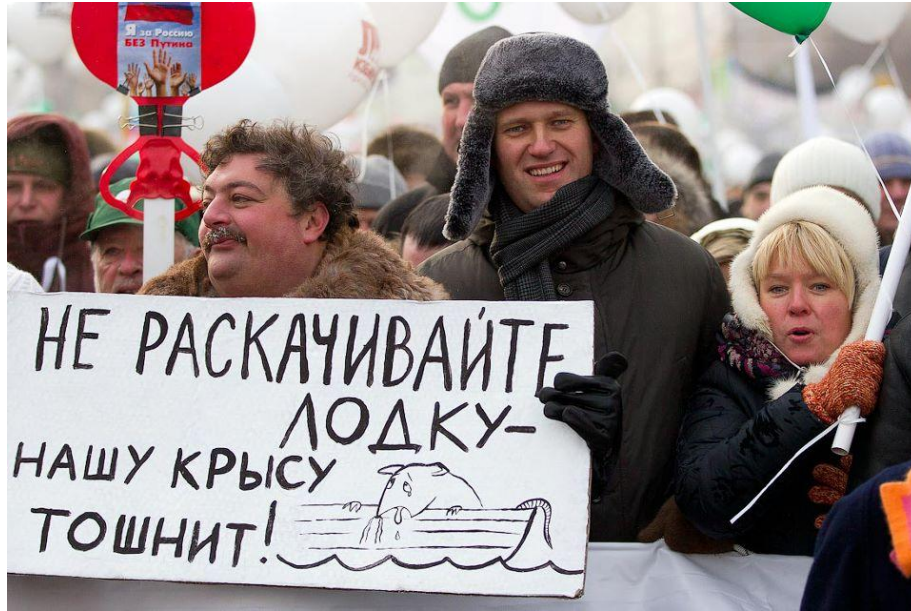


Figure 39. Writer and poet Dmitry Bykov, and social activists Alexei Navalny and Evgenia Chirikova at the rally. Bykov holds a banner on which he responds to the critics of the protests, who were stating that the protesters “rock the boat.” “Don’t rock the boat—our rat feels sick!” Source: <http://krasview.ru/content/thread-image/240445/72c5ec0635e8c4f0b7a1f862b1bef4.jpg>

These ties might not have been as multiple and thick, and were barely visible even to sociologists—hence the pessimistic prognosis that, for example, the Levada Center gave to all protest strategies before the elections.<sup>609</sup> Yet, as sociologists from this research institution later admitted, these connections turned out to be sufficient for the fast and efficient mobilization.<sup>610</sup> The role of the internet and horizontal communication in the establishment of these social connections is less obvious than a short-term facilitation of information dissemination, but it is crucial. The liberal-networked public sphere has become a multi-purpose communicative space for most of these socially active individuals. It allows them to run their individual projects effectively, to inform others about their activity, to stay in touch with likeminded people, to collaborate in loose association with others, to organize, and to coordinate the actions of multiple

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<sup>609</sup> Volkov, *Protestnye elektoral'nye strategii*.

<sup>610</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, 13-14.

individuals. It is hard to tell what their activism, and even their professional experience, would be without fast and effective communication tools enabled by the new media technologies, particularly in the unfriendly environment that the regime created in Russia.

One of the main premises of this study is that technology, human subjects, and societies are mutually constitutive: technology enables certain new practices, while rendering others obsolete, and individuals adjust their behavior accordingly, which, in turn, affects these individuals, as well as society at large. The examples of individual strategies of social participation considered in this study—Citizen Poet, Navalny and his online activism, Russian musicians, and other discussed public personalities—illustrate that the new information communication technologies have greatly enhanced individuals’ autonomy and capacity to act independently, to collaborate with others, and to organize collective action. Their experience during the last few years had been constitutive of what they had become by 2011, and now it is almost impossible to determine how the protests would have developed had there not been horizontal communication networks in place. What is almost certain is that it would have taken longer to organize.

Although the multiple protests that followed the first December mobilization are not the subject of this study, it should be noted that most of the phenomena that were considered in this study were present in a more intense, concerted, and visible form during the protests. For example, as was discussed in Chapter 5, humor and symbolic protest became the main form in which protesters expressed their disagreement: funny posters, costumes, theatrical performances, white ribbons, balloons, flowers, and many smiling faces—all these attributes made the Russian protests look like a Western-style “protestival.”<sup>611</sup> More public personalities began using

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<sup>611</sup> St John, “Protestival”; “Miting na Bolotnoi ‘iznutri’. Vpechatleniia i nabliudeniia uchastnikov,” RIA Novosti, December 10, 2011, <http://ria.ru/society/20111210/512743339.html> (accessed June 21, 2013).

*YouTube* to appeal to people, inviting them to participate in the protests, to sign up as observers during the presidential elections, and simply to publicly support the protesters. The famous “test stroll” that took place in May 2012 gathered dozens of public personalities, writers, journalists, actors, musicians, and scientists, who strolled along the streets of Moscow, meeting and talking with their fans and other protestors.<sup>612</sup>

Organizers had drawn heavily on the professional skills of the participants, particularly those outside politics: advertising professionals came up with the protest’s symbols—the color white, and the name—“The Snow Revolution”;<sup>613</sup> people familiar with the Western experience of organization, for example journalist Masha Gessen, who participated in New York’s ACT UP movement, contributed their knowledge.<sup>614</sup> Consequently, the sit-ins in Moscow, with their atmosphere of the warm conviviality of human interaction, were very similar to the recent Occupy Wall Street movement. There was much innovation and creativity in the 2011-2012 Russian protests. Consequently, to those who mainly relied on the state-controlled media for news, these protests looked foreign and too independent and well organized. Therefore, people who were not sympathetic to the protestors could easily believe the story of the United States organizing an “Orange Revolution” in Russia, which the state-controlled media, and Putin himself, started to promote soon after these protests began (see Figure 40).<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> Ellen Barry, “A Dozen Writers Put Down Their Pens to Prove the Might of March,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2012; Elena Vlasenko, et. al., “Kontrol’naia progulka’ sobrala tysiachi liudei,” Radio Svoboda, May 13, 2012, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/24578476.html> (accessed June 21, 2013).

<sup>613</sup> Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*, 278-279.

<sup>614</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, 15.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



Figure 40: Protesters responding to the regime’s misinformation campaign about the origins of the protests for Fair Elections. Left: “I am looking for the place where the US Department of State gives out ‘**small amounts of money**’!” This protester quotes Putin’s words. Right: “We will be rallying until the US Department of State goes bankrupt.” Source: <http://ucrazy.ru/foto/1324867283-luchshie-plakaty-s-mitinga-na-prospekte-saharova-24-dekabrya.html> and <http://www.ridus.ru/news/20877/>

One of the biggest reservations scholars have when considering the effects of the new media on grassroots politics is that the individuals, states, and corporations currently in power are also taking advantage of new media technologies and, given their resources, are benefiting more from the opportunities these media provide than grassroots civic organizations can. Indeed, as I have shown in this study, the Russian state is actively present on the Russian internet, and was able to implement the most advanced and diverse third-generation controls including legal control, surveillance, cyber attacks, access denial, and explicit and implicit propaganda and discrediting campaigns against the regime’s competitors. All these are true, as was the fact that these controls, as of 2011, did not prevent the formation of the liberal-networked public sphere and relatively free speech in this space. In part, this outcome had to do with the ineffectiveness of online pro-government propaganda campaigns, as well as the tactic of containment of internet communications to which the government resorted, rather than total control.

Despite the substantial surveillance capabilities, the protests took the regime by surprise, and for a while it looked as if the government was finally willing to listen to the protesters: Moscow’s authorities had granted permission for a rally on December 10 without creating



additional problems, and the protesters appreciated the politeness of the police during that rally.<sup>616</sup> After several days of silence, the state-controlled media broadcast unprecedentedly objective reportage from the protests, which made some liberal journalists and critics talk about a “cardinal metamorphoses” of the state-controlled television channels.<sup>617</sup> Yet this “thaw” was soon over, and the first sign of the future backlash was the reaction of the presidential candidate Putin to the protests: he famously called the protesters “Bandar-logs”—monkeys from Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*—and compared the white ribbon to a condom,<sup>618</sup> causing a new wave of responses from the protesters (see Figure 41). Indeed, the regime soon collected itself and began the “tightening of the screws,” which still continues as of 2013.

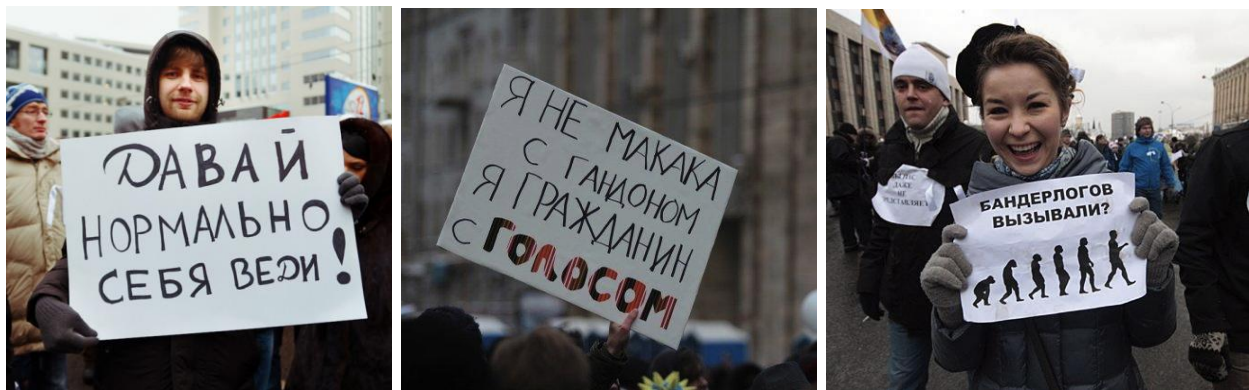


Figure 41. Protesters responding to quotes from Putin. Left: “Hey, you better behave yourself!” Middle: “I am not a monkey with a condom, I am a citizen with the vote.” Right: “Did you call for Bandar-logs?” Source: <http://www.afisha.ru/article/occupy-saharov/> and <http://ucrazy.ru/foto/1324867283-luchshie-plakaty-s-mitinga-na-prospekte-saharova-24-dekabrya.html>

<sup>616</sup> “10 dekabria. Miting na Bolotnoi ploshchadi. Onlain-translitsiia sobytii,” *Novaya Gazeta*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/49988.html>; “Dmitrii Bykov poprivetstvoval ‘dobrozhelatel’ nuiiu i obaiatel’ nuiiu’ politsiiu,” RIA Novosti, December 10, 2011, <http://ria.ru/riatv/20111210/512727010.html> (accessed June 28, 2013).

<sup>617</sup> *Kofe-Breik*, TV Rain, interview with Arina Borodina, December 26, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=NALD1jtaLZk#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=NALD1jtaLZk#!) (accessed June 21, 2013); Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*, 290.

<sup>618</sup> Gleb Bryanski, “Putin: On the pulse or out of touch with Russia?” Reuters, December 15, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/15/us-russia-putin-showman-idUSTRE7BE1PG20111215> (accessed June 21, 2013).

### After the Protests: Some Implications

In the previous section I argued that, although the internet and other new media had a crucial role to play in disseminating information about the first planned protest, it was due to the mid-term shifts in society, and in individual people, that the protests received the support of so many people. Throughout this study I have discussed these changes in attitudes, as well as the civic project-oriented activism of the last several years that has been an essential training ground for the leaders and active participants of the protest. As I have argued in the previous section, network communication technologies have been an essential part of this process, enabling fast and effective communication channels among likeminded individuals, facilitating their individual and collective projects, and providing access to the public through the liberal-networked public sphere.

At the outset of this chapter I also have argued that our analysis of the social implications of network communication technologies would be deficient without looking at the long-term effects of the reconfigurations of communication flows that these new technologies facilitate. It has been over a year now since the protests peaked in May 2012, and we have, quite eventful, if not very long, perspective that allows us to observe certain social shifts and to draw certain conclusions about the effects of new communication technologies on Russian society. The goal of this section is to attempt such an analysis.

The protests of 2011-2012 did not establish a dialogue between the regime and Russian society, and, as I have noted earlier, after the initial steps in the direction of compromise, the government resorted to repressive measures against civil society organizations and individual activists. Yet the lengthy social mobilization provided the valuable experience of practical organizational work and collective action, which profoundly affected those individuals who organized and participated in the protests. For example, interviews conducted at the early

protests confirmed the emotional nature of mobilization as a reaction to the obvious electoral fraud, but also revealed a high degree of uncertainty about the motives and expectations of this mobilization.<sup>619</sup> As sociologist Alexander Bikbov put it, in the winter and spring of 2012 people were coming to rallies “to learn about what rallies are all about,” because many participants had come to a rally for the first time in their lives.<sup>620</sup> Many admitted this was the first time they started to even think about politics and pay attention to what was going on, and their views about the country’s social and political agenda were quite amorphous.<sup>621</sup>

Once thousands of people came together, however, they started to mingle with each other, find acquaintances, and make friends. Despite the diversity of ages and backgrounds, there were certain characteristics that united many attendants of the rallies for Fair Elections. These included, first of all, intellectual curiosity, which was often, but not always, associated with university education, and second, some personal experience in the successful management of one’s own life through running a business, studying abroad, or participating in charity and volunteer projects, and so on.<sup>622</sup> Many of these people felt almost immediate sympathy toward each other: “There are so many people here!” journalist Masha Gessen, one of the attendants of the rally on Bolotnaya Square, quotes a young man speaking to someone on his cell phone, “And they are all normal! I’ve heard like a million jokes, and they were all funny!”<sup>623</sup> For many attendants, socialization with likeminded people and meeting new friends became additional

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<sup>619</sup> Bikbov, “Metodologiya issledovaniia ‘vnezapnogo’ ulichnogo aktivizma,” 134.

<sup>620</sup> Irina Novikova, “Dubinki OMONa prevratili liudei v posledovatelei Gandi: Aleksandr Bikbov o tom, pochemu obitateli ‘OkuppaiAbai’ nachali zhelat’ smerti Putinu,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, May 17, 2012, [mn.ru/politics/20120517/318265276.html](http://mn.ru/politics/20120517/318265276.html) (accessed July 20, 2013).

<sup>621</sup> Bikbov, “Metodologiya issledovaniia ‘vnezapnogo’ ulichnogo aktivizma,” 141, Volkov, “Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v kontse 2011-2012,” 21-22.

<sup>622</sup> Bikbov, “Metodologiya issledovaniia ‘vnezapnogo’ ulichnogo aktivizma,” 160.

<sup>623</sup> Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*, 288.

motivation to keep coming to the protests and sit-ins, and this was not the case only for young people.<sup>624</sup>

As a result of this encounter and social interaction in the space of the protests, power emerged in the sense that Hannah Arendt theorized: the power of human interaction, when people “meet each other, talk, and act in each other’s presence.”<sup>625</sup> Soon after this power emerged, individual rally participants began to create groups and act independently of the main organizers of the protest, professional politicians and social activists, and developed the “capacity to act in concert.”<sup>626</sup> The realization of this power came as a pleasant surprise to many participants, and people were eager to do things together: help organizing new rallies, flash mobs, participate in civic initiatives and election observation.<sup>627</sup> The emergence of these spontaneous civic groups explains diversity, creativity, and length of the protests that could not possibly be organized and coordinated from a single center. On the contrary, as some researchers noted, the leaders of the protest were struggling to keep up with this spontaneous protest, and often borrowed ideas from them for the protest actions.<sup>628</sup>

This ability to quickly organize and act in response to the realities of social, political, and natural life grew over a number of years and matured after every organized project, whether it was the forest fires, or the ecological protests of 2010 that were mentioned earlier, or the protests

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<sup>624</sup> Novikova, “Dubinki OMONa prevratili liudei v posledovatelei Gandi”; Bikbov, “Metodologiya issledovaniia ‘vnezapnogo’ ulichnogo aktivizma,” 160.

<sup>625</sup> Goldfarb, *Reinventing Political Culture*, 30.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid.

<sup>627</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v kontse 2011-2012*, 16; *Oblozhka-1*, Ekho Moskvy, October 25, 2012, Yuriy Saprykin, under “Pozhivem—uvidim”, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/oblozhka-1/933509-echo/> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>628</sup> Grigorii Okhotin, presentation at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, conducted by Levada Center, Moscow, International Memorial Society, November 8, 2012, transcript is available at <http://www.levada.ru/proekt-demokratiya-v-rossii/08-11-2012/protestnoe-dvizhenie-v-rossii-v-2011-2012-gg> (accessed July 4, 2013).

of 2011-2012. The protests became an important testing ground, where many participants discovered that they had enough knowledge, proficiency, organizational and coordination skills to be able to participate in serious street politics. They also met other grassroots activists and saw that they were not alone.<sup>629</sup> In this respect, multiple civic initiatives consolidated and established new grassroots connections and structures. What emerged was what Denis Volkov of the Levada Center called the “economics of independent action,”<sup>630</sup> when people were able to quickly raise money, and gather the necessary in-kind donations for their initiatives. This improved ability for collective action was demonstrated already in the summer of 2012, during a massive flood in the Krasnodar Region, when participants in sit-ins and in the election observations went to the flooded city of Krymsk, or organized the delivery of humanitarian aid from Moscow.<sup>631</sup>

The free interaction among a variety of people and groups also helped expose them to the diversity of social life and forced them to learn how to cooperate and seek compromise with people of different views.<sup>632</sup> This was particularly true about the leaders of the protest movement, some of whom were members of different oppositional parties and factions<sup>633</sup> who before 2011 were organizing protest actions of their own, but never together, in collaboration with other opposition groups. The need to preserve the momentum of mass mobilization created the opportunity for constructive collaboration. In this respect the experience of the leadership in

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<sup>629</sup> See, for example, talks by Denis Volkov, Alexei Levinson, and Maria Lipman at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*; Yuri Saprykin in *Oblozhka-1*, under “Pozhivem—uvidim.”

<sup>630</sup> Denis Volkov, presentation at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, under “Mozhno, naverno, govorit, o poiavlenii ...”

<sup>631</sup> Daria Danilova, “Volontery—o Krymske,” *Bol'shoi Gorod*, July 12, 2012, [http://bg.ru/society/volontery\\_o\\_krymske-11410/](http://bg.ru/society/volontery_o_krymske-11410/); Kirill Filimonov, “Volontery ne boiatsia slomat' psikhiku v Krymske,” Radio Svoboda, July 8, 2012, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/24638629.html> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>632</sup> See Maria Plotko at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*; anonymous leaders of the protest quoted in Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v kontse 2011-2012*, 44.

<sup>633</sup> Among them, for example *Solidarnost'*, *Strategiia 31*, *Yabloko*, and *Levyi Front*.

the protest movement allowed these groups the opportunity to do the work that politicians usually do in a competitive political environment, of which they had long been deprived. Their position of leadership demanded that they formulate their programs, debate publically, and work out an effective course of action, participate in democratic elections—even if only within the ranks of the social movement—learn to persuade, to collaborate, and to act.<sup>634</sup>

As a result of this spontaneous mobilization and consolidation of people with different backgrounds, and the emerging need for the collaboration and coordination of different interests, ad hoc organizations and structures emerged that became the organizational core of the protest movement. For example, established soon after the first protest were *Orgkomitet mitingov* (Organizing Committee for the Rallies) and *Masterskaia protesta* (Protest Workshop) organizations that allowed for organized brainstorming and the implementation of many of the protest actions that followed. Navalny's project, *RosAgit* (Russian Propaganda) was involved with production and dissemination of print materials and symbols of the protest—white ribbons, posters, and other insignia. The funding for the protests was organized through a system of online donations—the so-called *Koshelek Romanovoi* (Romanova's e-Wallet) that journalist and social activist Olga Romanova had opened and managed. After Putin's inauguration, when the protest wave subsided, the *Koordinatsionnyi sovet Rossiiskoi oppositsii* (Russian Opposition Coordination Council) was elected and united many political and civic leaders of the movement, among them journalists, scientists, bloggers, TV personalities, social activists, and professional politicians.<sup>635</sup>

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<sup>634</sup> Yurii Saprykin in *Oblozhka-1*, under "Pozhivem—uvidim," Denis Volkov, presentation at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, under "Est' opyt, pust' ogranichennyi ochen."

<sup>635</sup> "Thousands of Russians vote on Opposition Coordination Council," Russia Today, October 21, 2012, <http://rt.com/news/russia-opposition-council-election-865/> (accessed July 7, 2013).

The anti-corruption and anti-authoritarian spirit of the protest facilitated the implementation and successful practice of the mechanisms of accountability, transparency and public control over the work of the leaders of the protest. Thus, as Denis Volkov reports, Alexei Navalny was forced to tone down his nationalistic rhetoric, while oppositional politicians from the Solidarity movement who organized the first protest had to cede some of their powers to the civic leaders of the protest.<sup>636</sup> Reports about the money collected and spent for the protests were published on Romanova's *Facebook* page and in the liberal media.<sup>637</sup> The meetings of the *Organizing Committee for the Rallies* and later of the *Russian Opposition Coordination Council* were broadcast online, while the main highlights were covered in the liberal media. Thus, the social mobilization that occurred after the parliamentary elections allowed Russian opposition to get the feeling of the democratic mechanisms of social regulation, as well as to demonstrate to their audience that these mechanisms can function successfully.

This process of consolidation of the civic opposition was certainly dangerous for the regime, and after the initial confusion and compromising rhetoric, a harsh and explicit response followed, aimed at the suppression of the civic activism. First, the government demonstrated the miracles of the fast, top-down mobilization of people to the pro-Putin rallies that were organized parallel to the rallies for Fair Elections and were extensively covered in the media. The rhetoric of the speakers at these rallies, and of Putin himself, grew more defensively “patriotic,” depicting

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<sup>636</sup> Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v kontse 2011-2012*, 45.

<sup>637</sup> Ekaterina Smirnova and Elizaveta Surnacheva, “Na chto potrachen ‘Koshelek Romanovoi’—den’gi 24 dekabria,” *Slon*, February 2, 2012, [http://slon.ru/russia/kuda\\_potrachen\\_koshelek\\_romanovoy\\_dengi\\_24\\_dekabrya-736878.xhtml](http://slon.ru/russia/kuda_potrachen_koshelek_romanovoy_dengi_24_dekabrya-736878.xhtml) (accessed July 7, 2013).

the protesters as the “traitors of the motherland.” Putin even used the term “the fight for Russia,” which, according to him, was to continue.<sup>638</sup>

The main tactic of the regime, however, was to introduce restrictive legislation that further complicated the work of human rights organizations, freedom of assembly and protest, and that significantly expanded the interpretation of the terms “espionage” and “treason.” Another legislative initiative that the Duma actively promoted after the protests was a law about the so-called “black lists” of websites that allowed the government to create the lists of sites that contained “unlawful information,” and legally obliged providers of hosting services to block such websites. Although the official goal of this legislation was to protect children from information that could “harm their health and development,” the opponents of this law, among them Russian and international internet professionals, believe that this law prepared the ground for covert internet censorship.<sup>639</sup> In addition, the regime started a series of repressive lawsuits against its opponents, including the association *Golos*, the punk group Pussy Riot, Alexei Navalny, and 27 protesters arrested on May 6 on Bolotnaia Square, while state-controlled TV resumed producing and broadcasting “investigative” documentaries that discredited individual members of the opposition.

Although the dialogue between the regime and the modernized groups of the population did not take place, the harsh response that civic protest received was also an important educational experience that affected the protesters’ understanding of the situation and helped them to draw certain conclusions. For example, a consensus emerged inside the movement that

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<sup>638</sup> *YouTube* video, “Vystuplenie Putina na mitinge v Luzhnikakh 23 Fevralia 2012,” uploaded on February 23, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVHcDKrrYAs> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>639</sup> ““Chernyi spisok’ uzhe zdes,”” *Interfax*, November 1, 2012, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/txt.asp?id=273772>; “Gosduma okonchatel’no priniala zakon o ‘chernykh spiskakh’ saitov, kotoryi kritiki schitaiut tsenzuroi khuzhe kitaiskoi,” *NEWSru.com*, July 11, 2012, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/11jul2012/webblacklists.html> (accessed July 7, 2013).



the regime was not willing to listen or to compromise, and it was certainly not willing to share power or to transform. Together with this realization came the understanding that the democratic project in Russia is a long-term affair, which cannot be accomplished by means of a one-time, even if massive, mobilization, and that no one else, apart from the people themselves will be able to do it. Feelings of disappointment and frustration that followed the initial enthusiasm were then supplanted by the understanding that democratic civic movement in Russia was only at the beginning of its journey, not the end. It was time to re-evaluate one's own capabilities and those of the "adversary," and prepare to reach long-term goals.

This regrouping and re-evaluation was important for people in the movement because it allowed for a more realistic picture of what they could and could not accomplish, and it led them to seek avenues for improvement. For example, there is still the problem of the substantial disagreements inside the political core of the opposition, which should be overcome in favor of further consolidation. There is also the issue of better interaction between this political core and the newly mobilized civic groups that are still scarcely represented in the *Russian Opposition Coordination Council*. For Russian oppositional politicians, this is a new task of finding common language with those for whom the protests of 2011-2012 was an experience of awakening and self-realization as citizens, but who never before supported, and might still not support, Russian non-systematic political opposition.<sup>640</sup> The ability of these two groups to learn about each other and to collaborate will define the future of the movement. According to Levada

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<sup>640</sup> Dmitri Kataev, presentation at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, under "Teper' nemnozhko o proiskhodiashchem."

Center, there is about 9 to 11 percent of strong supporters of the protests, and slightly over 20 percent would rather support it, than not.<sup>641</sup>

Finally, there is an understanding that, by resorting to repressive methods, the regime enters a vicious circle, thus losing the support of more passive, but moderate groups of the population, and moving its base in the direction of the ultra-conservative minority. Repression reveals the fact that the protests affected the regime and that it is vulnerable to the power of well-organized civic protest. They have also had a mobilizing affect on civil society by urging activists to seek ways of reaching out to those who are either skeptical of the protesters, or support the status quo.<sup>642</sup> The potential for such dialogue emerged as more popular public personalities became outspoken about their political views and supported the movement.

Thus, the protests of 2011-2012 did not achieve systematic change of the entire political system in Russia, but as I hope to have demonstrated in this study, such change would be too much to expect of the first wave of mass protests after the years of social inertia and apathy. The democratization of the Russian political system is a gradual and complex process that depends on the democratization of the political culture of individual people, because it is people, not technologies, who are the main agents of social change. The social mobilization that was triggered after the Duma elections of 2011, despite the lack of an immediate outcome, had helped to change perceptions in the minds of many Russians about the nature of social order and their attitudes to politics. From passive observers many of them became active participants, and the attitude that “nothing depends on us” changed to “yes, it does.” The experience of collective

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<sup>641</sup> Viktor Khamraev, “Za mitingami zakrepilos’ stoikoe men’shinstvo,” *Kommersant* no. 236 (5021), December 13, 2012, <http://www.levada.ru/proekt-demokratiya-v-rossii/08-11-2012/protestnoe-dvizhenie-v-rossii-v-2011-2012-gg> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>642</sup> Sergey Davidis, presentation at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*; Yuri Saprykin, “God protesta: Saprykin o tom, gde my okazalis,” *Afisha*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.afisha.ru/article/sapr-god-protesta/> (accessed July 8, 2013).

action was important for the establishment of new grassroots connections, solidarity bonds, and for consolidation of the social movement, all of which affected its participants' attitudes and, ultimately, their political culture. Street protest as a form of political participation was "normalized" and even became a fashionable trend.<sup>643</sup>

As I have shown throughout this study, the protests of 2011-2012 in Russia were a result of multiple socio-political, micro- and macro-level processes, and were accommodated by technologies of the new media. The communications that took place in the hybrid space of the liberal-networked public sphere helped to ignite the initial spark of public outrage, and have been facilitating fast and effective communication among various individual and collective actors, as well as the latter's communication with a wider audience. Apart from that, the networked nature of the new media environment has defined the organizational characteristics of the movement, making it a decentralized network of civic initiatives with multiple centers that are able to self-organize. This decentralized, networked nature of the protest makes it harder for the regime to destroy the entire structure, even if it pressures individual activists.

Diverse opinions exist among the observers and participants themselves about the time and the level of radicalization of the next mobilization, but all seem to agree that this civic mobilization will not go away, because the government has not resolved any of the contradictions that caused it. Instead of exhausting itself, the protest "has moved into the future, not into the past,"<sup>644</sup> and Russian civil society today is different, compared to what it was before the protests. As Artemiy Troitsky put it, "the 2000s, the years of 'zero activity,' are over . . . and

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<sup>643</sup> Sergey Davidis, presentation at the public discussion of the study, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, under "Eshche odin vazhnyi itog"; Alexander Arkhangel'skii in *Oblozhka-1*, under "Kstati, ochen' vazhnaia veshch . . ."

<sup>644</sup> Boris Makarenko, quoted in Nagornyykh and Goriashko, "Novaia protestnaia volna zakonchilas'."

the new decade started for real.”<sup>645</sup> In this respect, the 2011-2012 protests were an important transformative event for Russian society, the results of which remain to be seen in the future.

### Theoretical Findings and Significance

In this study I examined the Russian protests of 2011-2012 as part of a global trend of new social movements that emerged as internet technology became affordable and widely spread, and within the broader context of the global societal transformation of the information technology revolution. My findings are a contribution to the vast literature that explores the impact of networked information technologies on social mobilization and, ultimately, on social and political change in countries with semi-authoritarian regimes. The framework that I outlined in Chapter 1 builds on the work of three scholars, Manuel Castells, Jeffrey Goldfarb and Yochai Benkler. It also draws on the revised theory of the public sphere, which expands Habermas’s concept of the bourgeois public sphere. The revised theory takes into account the diversity of publics, the multiplicity of their interaction forms, the contested nature of the public interest, and the technical characteristics of communication technologies that have structured public spheres in various historical periods and continue to structure it today.

Manuel Castells’s theory of power and counter-power, for example, emphasizes power relationships, which permeate all societies and which Habermas’s theory of the public sphere does not address. The exercise of power can involve coercion, intimidation, and violence, but, as Castells stresses, in modern communication-rich societies the main form of power is not coercion. Rather, it is the power to shape the public mind that is exercised through mass communication and that allows powerful actors to affect public opinion. In this respect mass communications in complex modern information societies perform the role of the public sphere,

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<sup>645</sup> Artemiy Troitsky quoted in Volkov, *Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii*, 14.

because most domestic and international issues of governance are presented to the publics through some sort of mediated mass communication.

Just as the exercise of power is the enduring characteristic of social life, so is the existence of counter-power, which has been resisting domination throughout human history. If power is rooted in the desire of powerful social actors to dominate and impose their will on the rest of the society, counter-power is expressed in a concerted effort of groups of social actors to challenge dominant power structures, and the values and interests that they represent. Unless power and counter-power engage in an open violent conflict, socialized communication serves as a key tool of social influence for both of these social forces, and counter-power has to compete in the public sphere with the incumbent powers for its share of public attention. Given the importance of mediated communication for social influence and control, mass media has become the space of power making and contestation among a variety of social actors, and their role for national and international political processes has gradually increased.

Network information communication technologies introduced a new horizontal dimension to the traditional media-based public sphere, and cardinally transformed the hierarchical, one-way, and top-down manner of message dissemination that is characteristic of most traditional media. This change in the ways information could be disseminated, the fast growth of transnational horizontal communication networks that facilitated citizen-to-citizen and many-to-many types of interactions, undermined the comfortable gatekeeping position of the incumbent powerful actors in the national public spheres of many countries, and ushered millions of new latent and real political actors. The incumbent actors have recognized both the potential of the networked environment, and its danger for their power, and sought to reassert, and if possible increase their influence in the new communication realm. As a result of this complex

process, power strategies of formal politics, as well as the contestations of power and counter-power are being played out in the multidimensional space of both traditional mass media and networked cyberspace, as well as in the “traditional” space of face-to-face interaction.

This framework was extremely fruitful for an understanding of the political processes and social implications of technology in Russia, particularly since most of the studies of the protests of 2011-2012 have concentrated on the human actors and their motives, and have mentioned technology only as a tool that helped them exercise their agency. As was demonstrated in this thesis, our understanding of social mobilization in Russia gains additional depth and structure when it is conceptualized in terms of power, counter-power, the public space that they interact in, and the technological characteristics of this space. In terms of methodology, my study employed a qualitative method of analysis of mediated public communication, which allowed for the tracing and analyzing of people’s online behavior. This method, outlined in Chapter 4, represents a middle ground between quantitative studies that involve large numbers of observations and qualitative analyses of individual web pages. The analysis was structured around concrete events, phenomena, the behavior of individuals and groups of people, as they were reflected in their online communication behavior and in the mainstream media in the period between February and December 5, 2011, the day of the first protest. When selecting these events, individuals, and phenomena to study I used a number of primary and secondary sources, the most important among them being sociological, qualitative and quantitative, studies conducted by two independent groups of sociologists at the rallies and afterward, as well as publications of the Russian independent media.

If we assume that, with the increased importance of mass media in political matters, a certain bias that favors powerful incumbent actors exists in the media-mediated national

discourses of all, even the most democratic countries, it is not surprising that the most powerful actor in Russia, the state, sought to control the mass media and shape the news according to its interests. In fact, as was argued in Chapter 3, the assertion of control over the mass media and the dismissal of disloyal owners, editors, and journalists have been crucial for the consolidation of state power during Putin's first and second presidential terms. As a result of this dominating control, the public sphere of the traditional media in Russia grew devoid of any meaningful critical discussion of public affairs, but abundant with light, consumer-driven entertainment. The other side of this control, however, for the Russian semi-authoritarian regime, was that it grew dependent on positive media representation for the reinforcement of its legitimacy, because only loyal media coverage could compensate for the deficit of democracy inherent in the system.

The creation of new horizontal communication networks had political consequences as Russian cyberspace grew more populated, because they gradually enabled the development of a fully-fledged public space where millions of internet users communicated, formed communities, and shared their opinions on a variety of issues, including political and public interest issues. I used the term "networked public sphere" coined by Yochai Benkler, to describe this technologically facilitated communicative space and the new practices it made possible, but, in order for the concept to better reflect Russian reality, I modified it with the descriptive term "liberal" and used the term "the liberal-networked public sphere" in the study. The reason for this modification was that I sought to denote a particular area in the Russian public space where counter-public discourses are produced and circulated relatively free of censorship, including self-censorship. What I call "the liberal networked public sphere" is not equal to the entire vast space of the Russian internet (RuNet); it includes mostly websites, blogs, and news boards where internet users discuss issues of public interest and current affairs. By stressing "liberal" I also

wanted to highlight the role of the liberal professional media, both online and traditional, in generating and circulating alternative discourses. As I have argued in Chapter 5, the public space of the liberal-networked public sphere is a hybrid space that includes online communication and content-sharing platforms, online professional media, offline media, and cell phone and face-to-face communications, all of which interact and share content.

Participants of the liberal-networked public are united in their attention to current news and public affairs and in their preference for independent information sources, as well as their active participation in the process of communication and content production, or their passive role as its consumers. The liberal-networked public sphere is also embedded in a wider public communication space; it interacts with the public space of the state-controlled media and other professional and leisure communication networks that have little, or nothing to do with politics. There is no clear boundary that delineates this space—its networked and fundamentally social nature allows for flows of information to travel freely along digital networks, as well as reach out to various offline sites. Throughout this study I have demonstrated the fluidity of communications that may start on *Twitter* and end up in a Moscow club, or start offline, from television, and end up as a *Twitter* flash mob, or, in yet another twist, can start on *LiveJournal* and end up on the pages and screens of traditional media, and even on the streets in the form of advertising banners (see Chapters 5-7).

The important consequence of this hybridity and fluidity of the communications in the liberal-networked public sphere is that it represents a new form of public space that is not just a mechanical compendium of coexisting and interconnected “mainstream media, corporately owned new media, and autonomous Internet sites,”<sup>646</sup> but rather a qualitatively different form of public space that was gradually enabled by the new technologies. It is a multimedia,

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<sup>646</sup> Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power,” 253.



multidimensional space that allows for a variety of multidirectional communication forms and for this reason it is much “closer” to the offline real-life world than had been previously imagined. Given a good and worthy reason, communications that take place in the digital networks can easily “spill” offline and materialize on the streets and other public spaces.

The political meaning of this new public space and, therefore, of the information communication technologies that enabled it, is captured well in the term “the politics of small things” that was introduced by Jeffrey Goldfarb, and which draws our attention to the power that is generated on the basis of everyday human interaction and meaning production. This power is often overlooked as trivial, compared to the power of institutions and states, but in the meantime, as Goldfarb shows in several of his books, this power of everyday communication, when people talk to each other, think critically, and participate in common projects, is the main source of the production of meanings that contradict the established consensus and reinterpret social and political reality. These new meanings contain the potential of counter-power, and once they are shared by large groups of populations, begin to shape political and social realities of societies.

This study finds that this power of “small things” is the key to our understanding of the democratizing role of the new information technologies. The networked architecture of the internet and other information and communication technologies in Russia provided technical capabilities for the emergence and gradual development of a new horizontal dimension in the space of public communications. This space connected likeminded individuals in a new way, providing new opportunities for communication and facilitating new communication practices, such as blogging, emailing, or video sharing. It linked different social networks that already existed in society, and created new networks the existence of which would have been highly improbable before. In other words, it interconnected old and new networks in complex and

unexpected ways. Thus, for example, as I show in Chapter 6, a stable connection emerged between the network of traditional liberal media and the blogging community, which shared information and enriched each other's discourses. A direct link also emerged between, for example, the community of professional musicians, their audiences, and the liberal media, which expanded professional strategies for these musicians.

All these millions of new connections self-organized into a complex social networked system that has its hubs and more peripheral nodes, but it does not have a single control center, which, once captured by a single powerful actor, could allow for the infusion of bias in the entire network. This complex network provides the infrastructure for the liberal-networked public sphere, for government media, and for other kinds of interactions. Not only does this networked platform reduce the structural bias of the public space mediated by the traditional media—it makes it much harder to control critical meanings that circulate in it—but it also allows for the establishment of new social connections that improve the capacity of dispersed social actors to engage in loose collaboration, concerted action, and mobilization. This improved organizational capacity may not be obvious even to the actors themselves, and, as this study has revealed, only massive social mobilization made these connections visible.

Indeed, as I have demonstrated in Chapters 5-7, although the protests of 2011-2012 started with spontaneous mobilization, they activated already existing communication networks, and, to a large degree, they were triggered by the information that had already circulated in these networks. People have been discussing and sharing their opinions about current affairs, uploading visual content that characterized the regime and their attitudes to it, and gradually cultivated and forged public opinion that was not favorable toward the regime. Multiple cartoons, *YouTube* videos, photo montages, and vlogs ridiculed the Putin/Medvedev “tandem”

and the manipulative public relations techniques that were used to construct their image in the state-controlled traditional media (Chapter 5). A large share of this content was produced as a form of creative self-expression and meant for entertainment, rather than as a gesture of political protest, but had a deeply political meaning in that it neutralized the power of frames that the state-controlled media were inciting, and provided alternative interpretations of political news in formats that were more appealing to younger internet users.

Used strategically, this content acted as a propaganda tool for the dissemination of alternative discourses. In Chapter 6 I demonstrated how, by building on the strategy of crowdsourcing, Alexei Navalny, his blogging community, and liberal journalists were able to popularize an alternative strategy of voting behavior in the months before the elections, which affected the outcome. They also produced massive amounts of political artwork, graphic design, advertising videos, and protest music that circulated in the networks, and sometimes emerged offline in printed form to promote the idea of coming to the elections and casting a protest vote against United Russia, the “party of power.” Thus, by the time of the mobilization, the protest had its main slogans, themes, images, and even its music ready.

In Chapter 7, I showed that the mobilization itself was also mediated in the liberal-networked public sphere and social networks. All of the media scandals that took place in the months before the elections, leaked and uploaded video materials, and appeals by public personalities to fulfill one’s civic duty and cast a vote against United Russia, were available only in the liberal-networked public sphere; they were not covered by the traditional state-controlled media. The most important factor in this mobilization—evidence of electoral irregularities in the form of personal eyewitness accounts that volunteer observers uploaded on the interactive “map of violations” and in social networks—is that all of these materials were available only online

and in the liberal media. Internet users noticed the unrealistic results of the elections that were broadcast on television: they made print screen, and circulated them online, which amplified the emotional effect.

Thus, the factors that contributed to the mobilization were sociopolitical—disingenuous practices of power transference and the general alienation of more modernized population groups from the regime. But through networked communications people were able to educate each other, to get a better understanding of the circumstances around the elections, and to break through their own inertia and apathy. Through communication, exposure to uncensored discourses and freely expressed opinions, they created a power of which very few (apart from the most astute observers) were aware. This power exemplifies the “politics of small things” that Goldfarb has been writing about. It is the power to get together and think critically in discursive arenas free of censorship and supervision in order to better understand one’s own condition as citizens. The new information communication technologies facilitated new formats of communication, which do not substitute for, but enrich the traditional face-to-face interaction, and few-to-many formats of communication of the traditional media. It also connected multiple, dispersed, and critically thinking groups and individuals, which allowed them to express their agency in new, more concerted and coordinated ways.

The argument that Manuel Castells makes about the contested nature of the new media-based public sphere in modern information societies, for the most part, applies to Russia as well. But the peculiarity of the Russian political context is that truly mass media, such as television and the high-circulation press, are dominated by pro-government discourses. In fact, certain oppositional politicians in Russia do not have access to television at all, so that the mass media only supports the status quo, while the real contestation takes place in the liberal-networked

public sphere. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 5, the Kremlin sought to establish itself in the new communication space, particularly in the late 2000s when the internet, together with the reputation of online information sources, was growing exponentially. The initial approach of attempting to control top media executives and owners was not very productive in the networked space. The Kremlin then resorted to a combination of controls, among them legal and technical, but it also had to resort to networked approaches, for which special youth organizations were created and trained. These groups were actively spreading pro-Kremlin discourses online and contesting those that circulated in the liberal-networked public sphere. They were also producing graphics and video content, and organizing groups in social networks to promote pro-government ideology. But in the space of horizontal communication networks the playing field was much more even for the supporters of the regime and for its critics, which meant that pro-government bloggers, journalists, and media outlets were not able to dominate Russian cyberspace as they did in the public space of traditional media.

In short, the 2011 parliamentary elections became a mobilizing event that revealed the networks of power and counter-powering that existed in society but had previously been invisible. These networks had divergent mobilizing mechanisms and different origins, however. The mobilization of the protesters for Fair Elections happened spontaneously and represented a new form of political participation—a decentralized social movement mediated in the hybrid space of the liberal-networked public sphere, and it was a response to the existing political conditions. The regime had also demonstrated its ability to mobilize big crowds of people to rally in its support, but it relied on its abundant administrative resources and its loyal public opinion managers and journalists. The people who came to the pro-government rallies did not represent political power and were not a part of any social movement. The pro-government mobilization

was a top-down ‘pseudo event’ organized specifically for television cameras in response to the dangerous social mobilization that occurred after the elections.

### Political Significance of Public Contestation

In many ways the social mobilization in Russia during 2011-2012 was similar to protests that took place in different parts of the world (Tunisia, Spain, Egypt, and the United States); they involved digital networked communications and represented a new type of social movement. Although these countries have very different political systems, and institutional and cultural contexts that involve a different degree of respect for citizens’ civil rights, as well as varying expectations of government accountability, there are striking similarities in the ways the networked social movements insured and sustained themselves. Manuel Castells outlines these similarities in his recent study,<sup>647</sup> and I will use his findings to examine the protests in Russia.

The triggering events that gave life to these movements and fueled public outrage were related to the systematic, unresolved problems inherent in the political systems of these countries, or even in the global political system. The legitimacy of governments and existing political institutions had been significantly undermined in many cases, and people felt that the incumbent politicians were unwilling to respond in any constructive way to their grievances, thus defying the most basic democratic principle. By the time of the mobilization, most countries already had an extensive network of political bloggers, alternative media outlets, and critical debate that was taking place there and compensated for the lack of debate in the traditional media.

The protests in Russia did not involve violent clashes of citizens with a military dictatorship, as in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, and in this respect the Russian movement for

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<sup>647</sup> The comparison is made based on Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, and Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

Fair Elections, which gradually transformed into “Russia Without Putin,” and kept changing its slogans as the political “tightening of the screws” proceeded, was more similar to the Spanish and American movements for global social justice that took place just a few months before the protests in Russia. On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 3, the conditions for grassroots activism and for the participation of civil society groups in public affairs in Russia were much less advantageous than in the United States, or Spain. Political opposition was neutralized by non-competitive methods and had little support among the population. The existence of the thriving blogging community and general popularity of social networks had not manifested itself before 2011 in any kind of significant offline mobilization. This led scholars to believe that the political culture of the Russian population, which is characterized by the apathy and conscious disengagement of the intelligentsia from political matters, shapes the online behavior of individuals, and fails to produce the forms of political expression that are common to Western democratic countries.

As I have argued in this study, this was not exactly the case. By the time of mobilization, the individuals and groups of activists that emerged as informal protest leaders had already developed a capacity for autonomous collective action through their previous experiences: they had established connections with the liberal media and with appropriate government institutions; they knew each other, or were aware of each other’s work, and many of them collaborated in various civic initiatives before. This capacity for collective action was gradually built throughout the “apathetic” 2000s, when Russian society had been recovering from the economic hardships of the 1990s and enjoyed a decade of stability that high oil prices helped to sustain. Although civic activism was not massive and was not encouraged by the regime, multiple local initiatives emerged, where people were defending their own rights, the rights of their children, or the

integrity of their public spaces from the massive bureaucracy that had also been growing and merging with local and national business interests throughout the 2000s. The civic potential of society was stimulated through these clashes of individuals and groups with local authorities, when they experienced abuses of power for which there was often no recourse in courts.

The internet and liberal media enabled the development a communication infrastructure for these groups, as well as for alternative political organizations and various non-profit groups, allowing them to fundraise, to reach out to the public, and to interact with each other. It is through these individual and collective experiences operating in the Russian context, and through online and offline interaction and collaboration that many future activists got to know each other and became familiar with each other's work. In addition to these socially active individuals, there were "professional" observers of social life in Russia, liberal journalists and writers, some of whom were covering different civic initiatives and events around them. Writers, as astute observers of reality, were also commenting, writing books about what they observed, and participating in openly critical projects such as Citizen Poet, which was discussed in Chapter 5. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, many public personalities of different backgrounds became more vocal in their criticism of the Russian political system and participated in civic initiatives in the last few years before the protests. There were also millions of internet users, who, even if not participating in any civic initiatives, were exposed to this space of alternative discourses and alternative news stories that the mainstream media was not covering or was distorting.

This process of the gradual accumulation of civic potential and autonomous public opinion formation was occurring in the hybrid space of the liberal-networked public sphere, while the state-controlled media were serving as big filters that sifted through this content and



made sure that the majority of the population would not be exposed to it. In addition, the processes of modernizing and improving living standards affected the country unevenly and were mostly characteristic of the populations of big cities, while the countryside and small towns remained economically depressed and had very limited access to the liberal-networked public sphere. Thus the base of the Russian protests of 2011-2012 was in the cities, primarily in Moscow, and among higher educated and wealthier groups of the population, where a demand emerged for further democratization and modernization of the country. An understanding arose that political freedoms and separation of power were a pre-condition for the diversification of the Russian economy and better opportunities for professional development.

Importantly, the mobilization in Russia helped trigger social mechanisms that were markedly similar to those of other networked movements, and they elicited similar reactions of the incumbent powers. First of all, the Russian movement was clearly inspired by the examples of Occupy Wall Street, and the Orange Revolution in neighboring Ukraine. Some protesters were holding images of Gaddafi and Mubarak, with Putin next to them, and the occupations of public spaces were named in English, for example, Occupy Abai,<sup>648</sup> which confirms the viral nature of the new movements: they are inspired and learn from each other.<sup>649</sup> When people poured onto the streets and squares, they also created what Castells calls *togetherness*, and overcame *fear*, as was the case in other countries. There were multiple accounts about those two feelings in the Russian liberal media. The movement remained committed to non-violent and civil action, and no fatalities resulted from the protesters' encounters with the riot police, despite occasional

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<sup>648</sup> The sit-in Occupy Abai, which took place in May 2011, lasted for several days and was named after Kazak poet Abai Kunanbaev because the occupation took place at the poet's monument in the center of Moscow, and his poetry was inspiring the protesters, for example "Only the talentless resign to their destiny."

<sup>649</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 224.

outbreaks of police violence. As sociologists reported, the police batons actually produced more devout followers of Gandhi among the protesters.<sup>650</sup>

Similar to the Occupy movement and to the Spanish *Indignadas*, the Russian movement for political change was unable to persuade the regime to listen or compromise. Disdainful media coverage also followed, as well as attempts to reframe the causes and goals of the networked movement. In Russia, however, there was an additional effort made to destroy the movement in the eyes of the public: parallel rallies, which were mentioned earlier, were swiftly organized, sometimes on the same days as the rallies for Fair Elections, to demonstrate “support” for the regime and for Putin personally. A massive campaign in the traditional mass media, including fake documentaries, framed it as a manipulated pawn of the United States, and its political leaders as traitors. The key role of the dissemination of authentic information about the protests, apart from citizen reporting, belonged to the liberal media that were an integral part of the liberal-networked public sphere.

There was no attempt made at a complete internet blackout, as was the case in Egypt, but websites of the liberal media, *Glos*, the Levada Center, and individual influential bloggers came under cyber attacks. Internet companies and operators, including *Yandex* and *Vkontakte*, were pressured to shut down online groups dedicated to the protests, which they did not, and to reveal the names of individuals who donated money for the protests, which they did. Similar to the Occupy movement,<sup>651</sup> the Russian branch of the cyber group *Anonymous* got involved in the cyber war and hacked into the email boxes of the two managers of the *Nashi* movement, revealing information about government activities online. As soon as the protests subsided, however, the government made a more decisive, and this time legislative, attempt at internet

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<sup>650</sup> Irina Novikova, “Dubinki OMONa prevratili liudei v posledovatelei Gandi.”

<sup>651</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 162-163.

control by introducing “black lists” of websites, controversial legislation that sparked an international public outcry.

Despite the lack of positive improvements in policy and further restrictions of civic freedoms for the protests in Russia, I argue in this study that the gains for civil society were much larger than they may seem at first glance. The key to the understanding of these gains is in the *process* of concerted collective action and resistance to the power of the regime. This process was almost as important as any potential policy outcome: in order to sustain social mobilization after the first spontaneous protest, and in order to give it some meaningful direction, various civil society groups had to form a coalition of the united Russian opposition and come up with other ad hoc procedures and mechanisms of decision-making. Due to the fundamentally anti-authoritarian nature of the protests, the practices of decision-making exercised in the movement were deliberately transparent and democratic.

These new experiences of interaction and collective action provided more civic potential for Russian civil society than in the previous decade. A new level of understanding emerged of the complexity of a goal that is the transformation of the country’s political system, and of the society’s own strengths and weaknesses. A tremendous amount of reflection, discussion, and analysis was generated after the first wave of the protests subsided in 2012, which confirms the argument about the highly self-reflexive nature of the networked movements that Castells puts forward in his study.<sup>652</sup> The reaction of the authorities removed the veil of ambiguity in state-society relations that the rhetoric of modernization and democratization introduced, helping many to obtain a more sober understanding of the nature of the present regime. In short, the protests helped certain groups of Russian society mature as citizens and become more aware of themselves as collective political actors.

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<sup>652</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 225-226.

The answer to the challenging puzzle about the effects of new information communication technologies, as we have seen in this study, is that networked technologies create the structural potential for the democratization of societies, but the mechanisms for the realization of this potential are more complex than imagined in much of the academic literature. As I have demonstrated, network technologies restructure societies' public space by adding a horizontal dimension of human interactions. They create the *potential* for the emergence of new forms of communication, networking, collaboration, and individual and collective action, and we can observe how these new forms are gradually emerging in Russian society. These new opportunities change the politics of everyday life, "the politics of small things," allowing individuals and groups more autonomy and expanding their capacity to operate outside the formal institutions of society. The democratizing potential of networked technology, in this sense, is indeed very high.

The important theoretical argument this study makes is that the potential for democratization that is inherent in networked technologies cannot be realized until people learn to master it and to use it purposefully for democratic political action. Indeed, as I have illustrated in this study through the example of Russia, in order for new forms of networked collective action to emerge, it takes a significant degree of penetration of technologies in a society, and a substantial level of technical skill and experience in the population. In Russia it took 15-20 years before online communities and the liberal media developed a new complex hybrid space that functioned as a public sphere. I have also shown that the agenda-setting function of this new uncensored communication space grew significantly only in the last few years before the protests, particularly in 2010-2011, and was actively used by various grassroots groups. Thus the

process for the accumulation of civic potential and experiential learning is an essential part of the technologically facilitated democratization.

Furthermore, as I have argued, powerful incumbent actors will always seek to establish themselves in the new space and will do so decisively. The emerging counter-public actors that seek to democratize political systems will always have to face the resistance of the incumbent powers. In order to successfully resist without resorting to violence, civic actors have to come up with innovative forms of communication, organization, and persuasion. As I have demonstrated in this study, we have observed the emergence of new collective networked forms of political participation in Russia, as well as the resistance of the regime. Yet, if we assume that social movements are the main social actors in societies that produce new values through alternative behaviors and re-interpretations of meaning,<sup>653</sup> their interaction with the incumbent power then becomes an important learning and maturing experience. It allows for the practical enactment and manifestation of their values and their further diffusion in society. In Russia the practical learning of counter-publics, crucially, involved practicing new, deliberately anti-authoritarian, more transparent and inclusive forms of communication and self-organization that the new technologies enable.

Finally, the possibility of democratization depends on whether the powers that will sooner or later emerge from these movements will be able to self-consciously cultivate the seeds of the more inclusive and transparent political culture that the new technologies facilitate, and not succumb to the same power traps as the systems that they sought to dismantle. It remains to be seen whether such change will occur in Russia, but we certainly can observe the first steps that have been made in this direction. Thus, while the impatience of many observers with the technologically infused democratization of societies is understandable, although historically

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<sup>653</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 9.

unjustified, democratization is a process that involves change on many levels, not only political; the cultural change that makes this possible takes generations to occur. New communication technologies are, and will continue to be, an integral part of this change, shaping the process and its outcomes in a myriad of innovative ways.

APPENDIX A

AGE AND INCOME LEVEL OF THE PROTESTERS.  
A POLL AT THE SAKHAROVA AVENUE RALLY ON DECEMBER 24, 2011.

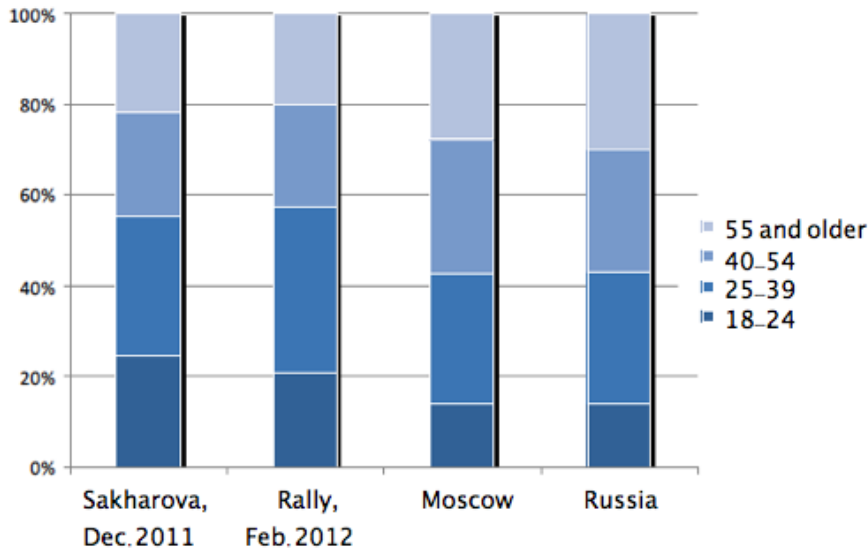


Figure 42. The age of the protesters compared to the populations of Moscow and Russia. *Source:* Levada Center

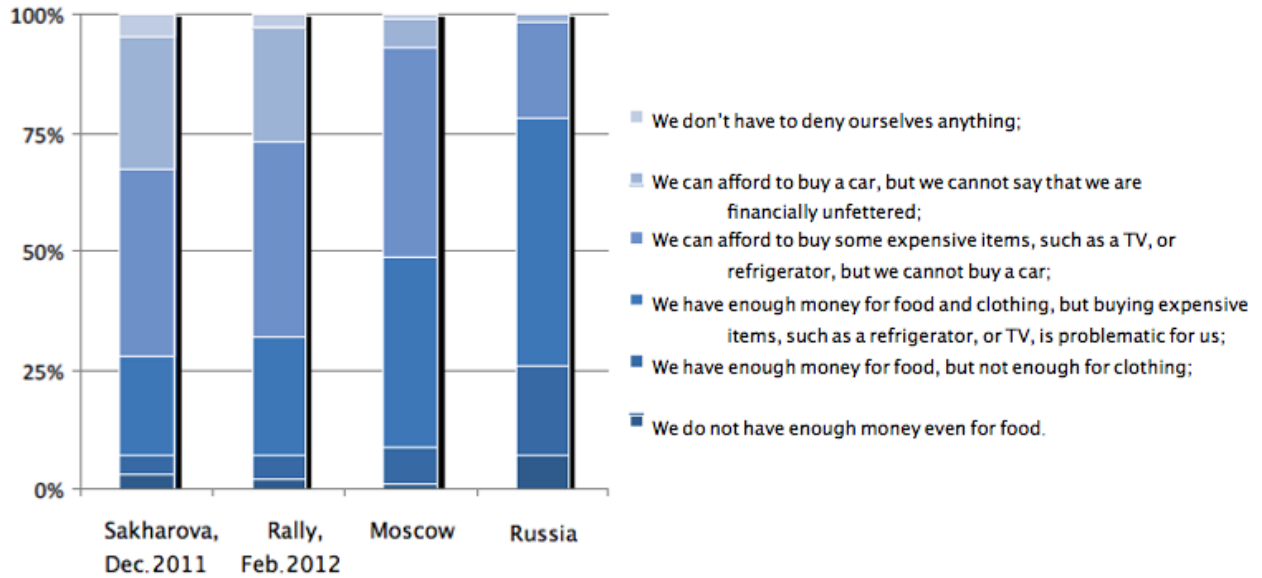


Figure 43. Income level of the protesters compared to the populations of Moscow and Russia. *Source:* Levada Center

Gender		Age			
Male	Female	18-24	25-39	40-45	55+
60	40	25	31	23	22
Education					
Incomplete secondary education					1
High school (11 years)					5
Vocational education					1
Secondary vocational education					11
Incomplete college education (3 years+)					13
College education					62
Two college degrees/Completing my second degree					8

Occupation. If not working, the latest permanent employment	
Business owner	8
Manager (10+)	8
Manager (less than 10 people)	9
Professional	46
Office worker	8
Trade and service worker	4
Laborer	4
Never worked (student)	12
Never worked (homemaker)	2



People of what political views do you sympathize with the most? (Multiple answers were possible)

Anarchists	3
Antifascists	2
“New Left”	2
Communists	13
Socialists / Social Democrats	10
Green	8
Democrats	38
Liberals	31
Conservatives	3
National-patriots	6
Other	4
None	6
Hard to say	3

Have you discussed the latest Duma elections and related events in social networks or blogs in the last three months?

Regularly	37
From time to time	31
No	32

Have you voted in the Duma elections on 4 December, and, if you did, what party have you voted for? Or did you come to the voting place and took the ballot away / spoiled the ballot?

Just Russia	12
Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)	7
Patriots of Russia	2
Communist Party (CPRF)	19
Yabloko	38

United Russia	<1
Right Cause	2
Took the ballot away / Spoiled the ballot	7
Did not vote	13
Do not remember / Do not want to answer	2

How did you learn about the rally “For Fair Elections?” (Multiple answers were possible)

TV	18
Radio	27
Newspapers	10
Magazines	5
Friends, family members, neighbors	33
Internet publications (online newspapers, magazines, media sites)	56
Other Internet sources	33
Other	5
Hard to say	<1

What brought you to this rally? (Multiple answers were possible)

I sought to express my resentment over the falsification of the elections	73
Accumulated discontent with the state of affairs in the country / with politics	73
Disappointment with the lack of promised policy of modernization / with Medvedev	42
Discontent with the government that has no regard for people like me / all the main decisions in the country are made without our participation	52
Solidarity with participating parties	15
Sympathy with the rally organizers	13
Rallies are interesting and trendy to attend	6

My friends went, and I joined them	10
Other	3
Hard to say	1

If all the oppositional parties got the opportunity to participate in the State Duma elections, which party would you vote for? Or would you come to the voting place and take the ballot away / spoil the ballot?

Just Russia	5
Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)	5
Communist Party (CPRF)	11
Yabloko	24
United Russia	1
People's Freedom Party (PARNAS) V. Ryzhkov, B. Nemtsov, M. Kasyanov	10
A. Navalny's new party	19
A. Kudrin's new party	4
M. Prokhorov's new party	8
Party of Russian Nationalists A. Belov / D. Rogozin	2
I would not vote	5
Do not want to answer	7

1. Whom among the following social activists / opposition leaders do you trust the most? (Multiple answers were possible)
2. Whom would you support at the upcoming presidential elections? (Multiple answers were possible)

1		2	
Boris Akunin	35	Boris Akunin	11
Alexandr Belov	3	Alexandr Belov	1
Gennadiy Gudkov	11	Gennadiy Gudkov	3
Michail Kasyanov	7	Michail Kasyanov	3

Alexei Kudrin	13	Alexei Kudrin	6
Sergei Mironov	8	Sergei Mironov	4
Sergei Mitrochin	7	Alexei Navalny	22
Alexei Navalny	36	Boris Nemtsov	4
Boris Nemtsov	13	Leonid Parfenov	12
Leonid Parfenov	41	Michail Prochorov	15
Ilya Ponomarev	4	Vladimir Ryzhkov	9
Michail Prochorov	15	Sergei Udaltsov	2
Vladimir Ryzhkov	18	Vladimir Tor	1
Sergei Udaltsov	8	Yevgeniya Chirikova	3
Vladimir Tor	2	Yury Shevchuk	7
Yevgeniya Chirikova	14	Grigory Yavlinsky	21
Yury Shevchuk	33	Other	7
Grigory Yavlinsky	27	None of them	10
Ilya Yashin	11	Hard to say	12
Others	4		
None of them	4		
Hard to say	7		

1. Are you going to vote on the presidential elections on 4 March, and, if so, than what candidate from the current list are ready to support? Or will you come to the voting place and take the ballot away / spoil the ballot?
2. If none of the candidates will get 50% of votes, and Vladimir Putin and Gennady Zyuganov, or Sergei Mironov, will run in the second round, are you going to vote, and, if so, whom for?

1		2	
Vladimir Zhirinovskiy	5	for Putin	2
Gennady Zyuganov	11	for Zyuganov / Mironov	48
Sergei Mironov	5	I am going to come and take the ballot away / Spoil the ballot	20

Michail Prochorov	18	I am going to vote, but not sure whom for	9
Vladimir Putin	1	I am not going to vote in the second round	14
Grigory Yavlinsky	29	I am not sure, if I am going to vote in the second round	8
I am going to come and take the ballot away / Spoil the ballot	10		
I am going to vote, but not sure whom for	13		
I am not going to vote on March 4th	4		
I am not sure, if I am going to vote on March 4th	4		

1. Regarding the upcoming presidential elections, do you support the slogan “Not a single vote to Putin!” or not?
2. Are you ready to become an observer on the elections on 4 March?
3. In case of electoral fraud, are you ready to participate in a new protest rally?

1		2		3	
Certainly <i>Yes</i>	68	Certainly <i>Yes</i>	44	Certainly <i>Yes</i>	82
Rather <i>Yes</i> than <i>No</i>	18	Rather <i>Yes</i> than <i>No</i>	28	Rather <i>Yes</i> than <i>No</i>	16
Rather <i>No</i> than <i>Yes</i>	8	Rather <i>No</i> than <i>Yes</i>	14	Rather <i>No</i> than <i>Yes</i>	1
Certainly <i>No</i>	2	Certainly <i>No</i>	10	Certainly <i>No</i>	1
Hard to say	4	Hard to say	4	Hard to say	1

Do you live in Moscow, Moscow Region, or outside the Moscow Region?

In Moscow	79
In Moscow Region	18
Outside the Moscow Region	4

What of the following population category do you associate yourself with the most?

We do not have enough money even for food	3
We have enough money for food, but not enough for clothing	4

We have enough money for food and clothing, but purchasing expensive items, such as refrigerator, or TV, is problematic for us	21
We can afford to buy some expensive items, such as TV, or refrigerator, but we can not buy a car	40
We can afford to buy a car, but we can not say that we are financially unfettered	28
We can allow to deny ourselves nothing	5

*Source:* The poll was conducted by Levada Center. N=791; standard deviation 4.8%. In some questions the sum of answers is slightly higher than 100% due to rounding error. The data presented here is partial.

APPENDIX B

TOP 25 MAINSTREAM MEDIA ONLINE, 2011

Rank	Site	Name	Type	Monthly unique visitors, million per month <sup>654</sup>	Monthly audience offline (if applicable)
1	rbc.ru	Ros Business Consulting	Online news portal owned by Mikhail Prokhorov	15-28	
2	ria.ru	RIA Novosti	Government news agency	14.5-20.8	
3	kp.ru	Komsomolskaya pravda	A major state-owned tabloid	16.5-20.4	377,000 on Monday; 2.7 million on Thursday; 655,000 on other days except Sunday
4	vesti.ru	Vesti	State-owned 24-hour news channel	13.2-15	0.7-1.0 % of the national TV audience
5	lenta.ru	<i>Lenta.ru</i>	Liberal online news portal	7-12	
6	gazeta.ru	<i>Gazeta.ru</i>	Liberal online news portal	6.5-10	
7	utro.ru	<i>Utro.ru</i>	Online newspaper	8.6-9.3	
8	echo.msk.ru	Echo Moskvyy	Oppositional radio station, but owned by Gazprom	4-8.5	2.6-2.9 million a day
9	1tv.ru	Channel One	State-owned TV channel	4.7-8.3	15.8-17.5 % of the national TV audience
10	rg.ru	Rossiiskaia gazeta	A government newspaper	4-8	170,000 daily; over 3.3 million on Thursday
11	aif.ru	Argumenty i Fakty	A respectable loyal weekly	5.3-7.1	2.6 million a week

<sup>654</sup> The chart contains information from the following sources: *Rambler Top 100*, *LiveInternet*, *Rating Mail.ru*, TNS Gallop Media.

12	newsru.com	<i>NEWSru.com</i>	Liberal online news portal	5.5-7.0	
13	regnum.ru	Regnum	Online news agency focused on regional news	4.6-6.4	
14	vedomosti.ru	<i>Vedomosti</i>	Liberal business daily newspaper	4-5.8	75,000 daily
15	svpressa.ru	Svobodnaia Pressa	Liberal online nonprofit sociopolitical publication	4.1-5.5	
16	lifenews.ru	LifeNews	Online tabloid	2.8-4.9	
17	rbcdaily.ru	<i>RBC Daily</i>	Daily business newspaper owned by Mikhail Prokhorov	2.8-4.6	
18	bfm.ru	Radio Business FM	Online business news	2.0-4.6	
19	kommersant.ru	<i>Kommersant</i>	A publishing house and a respected liberal newspaper of the same name	2-4.2	125,000—130,000 daily
20	mk.ru	<i>Moskovskii Komsomolets</i>	A major private tabloid	2,9-4	
21	ntv.ru	NTV	Gazprom Media-owned TV channel	2.0-4.0	14-16 % of the national TV audience
22	rosbalt.ru	<i>Rosbalt.Ru</i>	Online news agency with a focus on Russian North West	2-3.3	
23	ng.ru	<i>Nezavisimaia gazeta</i>	Independent newspaper	2.1-2.8	40,000 daily
24	izvestia.ru	<i>Izvestiia</i>	A respectable state-influenced newspaper	2.0-2.8	148,672 daily
25	interfax.ru	Interfax	Independent News Agency	n/a	

#### LIBERAL MEDIA OUTSIDE TOP 25, 2011

bbc.co.uk/russian	BBC Russian Bureau	British Broadcasting Company/in Russian	1.1-3.1	
expert.ru	<i>Ekspert</i>	A moderate business weekly magazine	1.9-2.7	85,000 a week



fontanka.ru	<i>Fontanka.ru</i>	One of the most popular St. Petersburg news portals	1.7-2.7	
tvrain.ru	TV Rain	Independent TV station	0.4-2.2 (kept growing in 2012-2013)	n/a
svoboda.org	Radio Svoboda	U.S.-funded radio station	1.4-2.0	
dp.ru	<i>Delovoi Peterburg</i>	St. Petersburg newspaper specializing on business news	1.4-2.0	20,000 daily
slon.ru	<i>Slon.Ru</i>	An independent business portal with new media elements	0.9-1.7	
sobesednik.ru	<i>Sobesednik</i>	Independent weekly newspaper	0.4-1.7 (kept growing in 2012-2013)	170,000
novayagazeta.ru	<i>Novaya Gazeta</i>	Oppositional newspaper	0.7-1.5	284,500 three times a week
finam.ru	Finam FM	Liberal radio station	0.85-1.0	106,000-137,000 daily
grani.ru	<i>Grani.ru</i>	Liberal online news portal	0.7-1.0	
newtimes.ru	<i>Novoe Vremia</i>	Independent weekly magazine	0.2-0.5	50,000 weekly
bg.ru	<i>Bol'shoi Gorod</i>	Magazine about life in Moscow	0.1-0.5	180,000 twice a month
rusrep.ru	<i>Russkii Reporter</i>	Independent weekly magazine	0.2-0.4	168,100
polit.ru	<i>Polit.ru</i>	Political news and analysis portal	n/a	
snob.ru	<i>Snob</i>	A social network and online magazine for liberal elite communication, also published in New York and London	n/a	

APPENDIX C

SELECTED TWITTER COMMENTS ABOUT THE MEETING OF THE PRESIDENT,  
DMITRY MEDVEDEV, WITH HIS SUPPORTERS ON OCTOBER 15, 2011

Is there any broadcast of #pitiful available for those who do not have TV?	sult, 14:37
Take him away, what kind of f... “middle class” is he talking about! #pitiful	trynov_dmitry, 14:50
<b>RT*</b> @noliquid: #pitiful is so #pitiful that not only do I feel embarrassed for my country, I feel physical pain.	natashazotova, 14:54
#pitiful: “It is pleasant to critique the powerful. When I leave, I will also be critiquing the powerful.”	natashazotova, 14:57
Tag #pitiful to the global Twitter trends!	noliquid, 15:06
Rossiya-24. All: Dmitry Anatolyevich, you are so great! Him: No, I am not so great #pitiful	iaesandman, 15:11
Delusion of grandeur. He assembled this cheesy crowd to justify himself, thinking that he had let somebody down by his refusal to fight #pitiful	mediator_rus, 15:12
<b>RT</b> @megamegadenis: I cannot watch this, how long is this bacchanalia going to last? #pitiful #DA #Medvedev	russia_everyday, 15:18
<b>RT</b> @noliquid: #pitiful “We have to abandon this infantilism.” Begin with yourself, a bedbug!	delitrem, 15:19
@MedvedevRussia - a #pitiful president, whom one doesn't even feel sorry for. I can't stand this anymore, I turned this rambling off.	estraniero, 15:19
I am curious - are they going to kiss his ass only, or will there be something more interesting? #pitiful #medvedev #vesti24	shwed_berlin, 15:24
“liberated media” This lickspittle from ABBY lives in some different country. #pitiful	noliquid, 15:26
“Russia should have something else, apart from gas and oil.” Coal? #pitiful	shtukaturkin, 15:28
Reading about #pitiful [note: he is reading what was posted under the hashtag] and feel that he will repeat the fate of #thankputinforthat, let's give #pitiful the last chance)	nick_ru 15:34
Medvedev alone laughs at his jokes. #pitiful	goncharov_k 15:35
<b>RT</b> @vox_tox: #pitiful introduced idiots into fashion	sssmirnov, 15:40
@burmatoff says Medvedev reads Twitter, Medvedev says the opposite. What the f...?	trynov_dmitry, 15:41
<b>Who is not #pitiful for you? Maybe McCain, or Nemtsov?*</b>	dmitry_kirienko, 15:42
Somebody tell #pitiful to his face what people think about him . . . Ask at least one good question, tell the truth . . . Do not be cowards . . .	igor_fadeev, 15:52

Timakova [note: press attache for the president Medvedev]: Bloggers who are making fun of the president under the hashtag #pitiful are simply envious that he has so many followers	kozlovsky, 16:03
The main result of the meeting is that #pitiful openly admits that the government does not depend on people in any way.	noliquid, 16:05
<b>RT @strnow:</b> “Our country is resource dependent, let us make it a touristic mecca” To hell with science, industry, and agriculture #pitiful	wizardfox_net, 16:11
I hope that everybody who is present at the meeting with #pitiful will get on the LISTS [note: refers to something mentioned in the meeting they are all watching]	sssmirnov, 16:13
<b>A crowd of idiots has gathered under the hashtag #pitiful. I feel sorry for you guys ... Rather, it is a gathering of moral morons )))</b>	@YanaChep, 16:22
What about the spring swap with Vova? #pitiful @KremlinRussia About the stagnation - “the same people, only in different positions.” Don’t think that’s going to happen.	kradmantel, 16:24
That’s ingenious #pitiful <b>RT @oleg_kozyrev:</b> They say that a strong wind rises from the bloggers’ fast nodding at the meetings with the president.	navalny, 16:33
How long can you watch this plush clown when Liverpool-Munich are playing at the same time?! #pitiful	porco_russo, 16:34
)) On @MedvedevRussia birthday I wished for him to finally become the president - and he is gone #pitiful. I wish the same thing for Putin (now he will also be gone for sure)	ost_wenger, 18:17
None of his “supporters” have told @MedvedevRussia that the circus is already gone #pitiful.	alexgusarov, 20:37

\* RT—messages that were re-tweeted

\*\* The messages in bold were posted by the pro-Kremlin youth

APPENDIX D

COVERAGE OF THE STORY ABOUT “THE PARTY OF CROOKS AND THIEVES.”  
FEBRUARY 7 - APRIL 4, 2011

Media outlets from the top 25 list are in bold. Newspapers and radio stations usually have their materials both in print and on their websites, so those newspapers and radio stations, which websites are in the top 25, are also in bold.				
7-15 February, 2011	Online	Central Press Online	19	Noviy Region ( <i>nr2.ru</i> ) - stories appeared in 6 regions; <i>topnews.ru</i> ; <b><i>gazeta.ru</i></b> ; <b><i>newsru.com</i></b> ; <i>kprf.ru</i> ; <i>telnews.ru</i>
		Central News Agencies	1	<i>stringer-news.com</i>
		Internet Media	1	<i>politsovet.ru</i>
16-20 February, 2011	Offline	Central Press	4	<b><i>Kommersant</i></b> , <i>Novaya Gazeta</i>
		Regional Newspapers	1	<i>Metro</i> , SPb
		Central TV and Radio (+ Online)	1	Radio Svoboda
	Online	Central Press Online	7	<i>novayagazeta.ru</i> ; <i>svobodanews.ru</i> ; <i>telnews.ru</i> ; <b><i>vedomosti.ru</i></b>
		Internet Media (Russian Regions)	4	<i>apn-spb.ru</i> (agency of political news, SPb); <i>webkrasnodar.ru</i> (Krasnodar Region City portal); <i>dp.ru</i> ( <i>Business St. Petersburg</i> ) <i>shans-online.om</i> (News of the Republic of Khakassia)
21-25 February, 2011	Offline	Regional Newspapers	1	<i>Golos Pravdy</i> (Yoshkar-Ola, Mari-El Republic)
		Central TV and Radio (+ Online)	3	Radio Svoboda; <b>Echo of Moscow</b> .
	Online	Central Press Online	25	<b><i>lenta.ru</i></b> ; <b><i>vedomosti.ru</i></b> ; <b><i>svpressa.ru</i></b> ; <i>kprf.ru</i> ; <b><i>mk.ru</i></b> + 9 more
		Central News Agencies	2	<i>cjes.ru</i> (Center of Extreme Journalism)
		Regional News Agencies	3	New agencies of the cities of Barnaul ( <i>amic.ru</i> ) and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii ( <i>fishkamchatka.ru</i> )

Media outlets from the top 25 list are in bold. Newspapers and radio stations usually have their materials both in print and on their websites, so those newspapers and radio stations, which websites are in the top 25, are also in bold.

		Internet Media (Russian Regions)	16	News portals of Ekaterinburg, Ryazan, Krasnodar Region, St. Petersburg, Tomsk, Udmurt Republic; Russian southern region, and Republic of Khakassia.
26-03 February/March, 2011	Offline	Central Press	1	<i>Veteran</i> newspaper
		Regional Newspapers	1	<i>Den'</i> (Izhevsk)
		Central TV and Radio (+ Online)	1	FinamFM
	Online	Central News Agencies	1	<i>cjes.ru</i> (Center of Extreme Journalism)
		Regional News Agencies	2	<b><i>rosbalt.ru</i></b> , Siberian News Agency (Krasnoyarsk)
		Central Press Online	23	<b><i>lenta.ru</i></b> ; <b><i>vedomosti.ru</i></b> ; <b><i>sport.rbc.ru</i></b> ; <b><i>svpressa.ru</i></b> ; <b><i>sobesednik.ru</i></b> + 5 more
		Internet Media (Russian Regions)	10	News portals of St. Petersburg, Caucasus, Bryansk, Novokuznetsk, Tomsk, Udmurt Republic, and Republic of Khakassia.
Offline Media		13	Online Media	114
04-04 March/April, 2011	Offline	Central Press	46	<i>The New Times</i> , <b><i>Izvestiya</i></b> , <i>Zavtra</i> , <b><i>Kommersant</i></b> , <i>Kommersant Vlast'</i> , <i>Novaya Gazeta</i> , <b><i>Moskovsky Komsomolets</i></b> , <i>Pravda KPRF</i> , <i>Sobesednik</i> , <i>Sovetskaya Rossiya</i> , <i>Russkii Reporter</i> , and 5 more.
		Regional Newspapers	40	Newspapers in Vladivostok, Bryansk, Voronezh, St. Petersburg, Makhachkala, Izhevsk, Perm, Berdsk, Gorno-Altai, Kislovodsk, Ulyanovsk, Ryazan, Orenburg, Pskov, Yakutsk, Ivanovo, Samara, etc.
		Central TV and Radio (+ Online)	12	Radio Svoboda; <b>Echo of Moscow</b> ; Russkaia Sluzhba Novostei.
		Regional TV	1	OPEN TV (Orenburg)
	Online	Central News Agencies	11	<i>stringer.ru</i> , <b>Regnum</b> + 2 more
		Regional News Agencies	16	News agencies in Barnaul, Ekaterinburg, <b><i>rosbalt.ru</i></b> , Arkhangelsk, Vladivostok, Saratov, and Krashoyarsk.

Media outlets from the top 25 list are in bold. Newspapers and radio stations usually have their materials both in print and on their websites, so those newspapers and radio stations, which websites are in the top 25, are also in bold.

		Central Press Online	154	<b><i>lenta.ru</i></b> ; <i>The New Times</i> ; <i>vedomosti.ru</i> ; <i>novayagazeta.ru</i> ; <b><i>newsru.com</i></b> ; <i>svobodanews.ru</i> ; <b><i>gazeta.ru</i></b> ; <i>кремль.орг</i> ; <i>коммунист.ру</i> ; <i>kprf.ru</i> ; <i>полит.ру</i> + over 40 more.
Offline Media		99	Online	181

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