

Bolotnaia Five Years On: Can Online Activism Effect Large-Scale Political Change in Russia?

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ABSTRACT

This work explores the role of new media in Russian politics and ultimately argues that their potential to bring about significant political change in the current Russian political landscape is limited. The 2011-2012 winter protests, in Bolotnaia Square in Moscow and across Russia, led to a boom in both Russian and English-language protest scholarship, especially regarding the role that new media and online communication networks play in the organisation and execution of political movements. But the significance of this case study is not limited to Russia: this question must be understood in a global context. In a post-Arab Spring world, this topic is one of active discussion and current global relevance. This paper aims to consider the Russian case study in that broader context, bridging gaps in existing scholarship in this field.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of Putin's rule, pro-government media have become increasingly dominant in Russia and there has been a consequent marginalisation of opposition narratives from mainstream media discourse. This has meant that the online sphere not only 'appears to be a key element of modern protest in many ways, defined by its unprecedented nature and organisational potential',¹ but also appears to be the only realistic medium for the opposition to carry out anti-government political activity.² In this essay, the highly important 2011-2012 winter protests will be used as a case study and as a springboard for wider discussion of the characteristics, strengths and flaws of online political communication in Russia. Additionally, examination and evaluation of the advantages and limitations of online communication platforms

¹ Aleksandra Van'ke, Irina Ksenofontova and Irina Tartakovskaia, 'Internet-kommunikatsii kak sredstvo i uslovie politicheskoi mobilizatsii v Rossii (na primere dvizheniia "za chestnye vybory")', (hereafter, 'Internet-kommunikatsii kak sredstvo i uslovie politicheskoi mobilizatsii'), *INTER*, 7, 2014, pp. 44-73 (p. 44).

² Nicole Bode and Andrey Makarychev, 'The New Social Media in Russia: Political Blogging by the Government and the Opposition' (hereafter, 'The New Social Media in Russia'), *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60(2), 2013, pp. 53-62 (p. 54).

themselves as political tools is crucial. By combining these approaches, this work aims to suggest an answer to the question of whether online activism has the potential to effect large-scale political change in Russia and then to provide strategic recommendations for future action.

CASE STUDY

Between December 2011 and May 2012 dissatisfied Russian citizens took part in the largest public demonstrations since the El'tsin era on the streets of Moscow and in other cities across Russia.³ In late 2011, evidence of election fraud benefitting the ruling party, United Russia, was spread across online platforms. This, in turn, inspired the '*Za Chestnye Vybory*' (For Fair Elections) movement, which 'not only provoked a widespread protest movement, but also problematised the question about ideological unity within Russian society'.⁴

It is important to recognise that the 2011-2012 protests cannot and should not be classified as successful in the conventional sense. Firstly, the fraudulent election proceedings were in no way affected by the mass mobilizations;⁵ secondly, trust in Putin only increased between January and March 2012⁶. More importantly, the large and unexpected mobilisations were made possible through the power of the online sphere, and the consequent offline political action then came to the attention of the ruling government. As a direct result of this, the sphere in which the opposition in Russia operates has changed significantly: since 2012, 'systematic Internet regulation has increased in Russia more than anywhere else in the world',⁷ and Putin's government has 'approved a series of repressive, vaguely worded measures that significantly expand the array of regulatory tools available'.⁸

The real success and significance of the 2011-2012 mobilisations has been in establishing the use of the internet as a tool to politicise the public and mobilise Russian civil society, particularly around the issue

³ Sara Oates and Tetyana Lokot, 'Twilight of the Gods?: How the Internet Challenged Russian Television News Frames in the Winter Protests of 2011-12' (hereafter, 'Twilight of the Gods?'). Available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2286727 [accessed 28 March 2016], p. 6.

⁴ Raisa Barash, 'Internet kak sredstvo samoaktualizatsii i revoliutsionnoi samoorganizatsii', *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniia*, 3(109), 2012, pp. 100-09 (p. 101).

⁵ Oates and Lokot, 'Twilight of the Gods?', p. 17.

⁶ See Dmitrii Gromov, 'Zimnee protivostoianie 2011-2012 gg.: dve taktiki mobilizatsii I samoprezentatsii' (hereafter, 'Zimnee protivostoianie 2011-2012'), *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 2, 2013, 109-125 (p. 123) and Economist, 'Vladimir Unbound', *The Economist*, 30 January 2016 <<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21689626-russias-president-impervious-woes-afflict-normal-leaders-vladimir-unbound>> [accessed 31 March 2016].

⁷ Andrey Tselikov, 'The Tightening Web of Russian Internet Regulation'. Available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2527603 [accessed 13 April 2016], p. 13.

⁸ Freedom House, 'Russia: Freedom of the Press 2013'. Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/russia> [accessed 15 March 2016], (para. 3 of 13).

of electoral fraud. Oates considers that during the course of these protests, the internet '[crystallised] online solidarity into a visible opposition to the Russian regime'.⁹ This, therefore, raises the exciting question of what this new 'visible opposition' can and will achieve in the future.

Although Oates, whose work provides the most comprehensive background for almost all areas of Russian internet scholarship, sees 'compelling evidence that the long dominance of state-run television has come to an end for a significant number of Russians',¹⁰ mainstream television channels, which are overwhelmingly government-friendly, remain the most trusted source of information in Russia.¹¹ The online sphere, by contrast, has 'provided a space for diverse opposition movements', especially in the context of increasing state influence in the media landscape since 2000.¹² Besides promoting alternative narratives in Russian national discourse and shedding light on topics that are not granted airtime on mainstream television channels, online activities such as blogging have been able to facilitate a 'qualitatively new opportunity to get rid of a top-down and unilateral model of political communication [...] and [pluralise] the monologic structure of Russian political discourse'.¹³

However, since Medvedev's acknowledgment of the importance of an online government presence, and his encouragement of politicians to engage in blogging in 2009-2010,¹⁴ it is clear that 'the battle for digital space has become a significant factor in Russian political and civic life'.¹⁵ The presence of pro-government voices in the online sphere is indeed growing as a result of Medvedev's actions, and officials and pro-government bloggers are continually revising their online strategies so as to avoid 'authoritative political discourse [becoming] the object of contestation and ridicule' as it often does through the spreading

⁹ Sara Oates, *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere* (hereafter, *Revolution Stalled*), Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 54.

¹¹ Denis Volkov and Stepan Goncharov, 'Rossiiskii Media-Landshaft: Televidenie, Pressa, Internet', *Levada-Tsentr*, 17 June 2014, <<http://www.levada.ru/old/17-06-2014/rossiiskii-media-landshaft-televidenie-pressa-internet>> [accessed 31 March 2016], (para. 14 of 27).

¹² Natalya Konradova and Henrike Schmidt, 'From the utopia of autonomy to a political battlefield: towards a history of the Russian internet' in Michael Gorham, Ingunn Lunde, and Martin Paulsen, *Digital Russia: The Culture, Language and Politics of New Media Communication* (hereafter, *Digital Russia*), New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 34-54 (p. 46).

¹³ Bode and Makarychev, 'The New Social Media in Russia', p. 54.

¹⁴ Michael Gorham, 'Politicians online: Prospects and perils of "direct internet democracy"' (hereafter, 'Politicians online') in Michael Gorham et al., *Digital Russia*, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp.233-250 (p. 233) and Florian Toepfl, 'Blogging for the Sake of the President: The Online Diaries of Russian Governors', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64(8), 2012, pp. 1435-59 (p.1444).

¹⁵ Martin Paulsen and Vera Zvereva, 'Testing and contesting Russian Twitter' in Michael Gorham et al. *Digital Russia*, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 88-103 (p. 101).

of viral and ironic hashtags.¹⁶ As Alexanyan et al. conclude, the online sphere has remained a largely oppositional space in which ‘pro-government elements have not been able to gain a toehold’.¹⁷

Legislation that has come into force since the 2011-2012 protests, such as the law that any blogger with over 3,000 unique daily visitors to their page must register as a media outlet with Roskomnadzor and is subject to the same regulation as any mass media channel,¹⁸ is further evidence of the government’s awareness of the political power of online narratives and of social networks’ ‘subversive potential’, especially during ‘periods of political tension’.¹⁹ To further understand the political power struggle that is taking place in the online sphere in Russia, and to examine the potential of online narratives to achieve mainstream attention, it is useful to look at how this conflict played out in the context of the 2011-2012 protests.

During this period, Russian bloggers and online activists brought the trigger issue of electoral fraud to the forefront of online discussion and incited unprecedented engagement and mobilisation around this issue. This was achieved not only without the help of the mainstream media, but also while leading opposition activists, such as Alexey Navalny, were blacklisted from the sphere.²⁰ These facts suggest that if opposition narratives had been granted exposure in the government-friendly mainstream media, the movement would have been much larger.

However, ‘for the first time in post-Soviet history, the Kremlin’s ability to control the news agenda was significantly challenged by not only the scale of the protests, but the way in which the internet was able to disseminate news and evidence of the breadth of activity’.²¹ By analysing the coverage of various media outlets over the months of the protests, Oates and Lokot find that ‘the state-run news was forced to adjust its frame so as to come close enough to reality to be feasible for the viewer’.²²

Initially, on December 10 when participation at Bolotnaia Square in Moscow was estimated at between 25,000 and 60,000,²³ mainstream media coverage, such as that of Pervyi Kanal, ‘focused on the event rather than the ideas and the broader political movement and/or causes of the action’ and selected interviewees that could be portrayed as ‘silly arty people not beloved by First Channel’s audience

¹⁶ Gorham, ‘Politicians online’, p. 234.

¹⁷ Karina Alexanyan et al, ‘Exploring Russian Cyberspace: Digitally-Mediated Collective Action and the Networked Public Sphere’ (hereafter, ‘Exploring Russian Cyberspace’). Available at <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2014998> [accessed 12 August 2015], p. 11 and Gorham, ‘Politicians online’, p. 246.

¹⁸ Tselikov, ‘The Tightening Web of Russian Internet Regulation’, p. 13.

¹⁹ Paulsen, Zvereva, ‘Testing and contesting Russian Twitter’, p. 101.

²⁰ Matthew Kaminsky, ‘The Man Vladimir Putin Fears Most’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 2012

<<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203986604577257321601811092>> [accessed 31 March 2016], (para. 11 of 27).

²¹ Oates and Lokot, ‘Twilight of the Gods?’, p. 2.

²² Ibid, p. 24.

²³ Ibid, p. 8.

demographic'.²⁴ In this way, mainstream media discredited the opinions of, and even mocked, those taking part in the anti-government protests.

By February 4 2012 though, when protest participation across Moscow was estimated at between 36,000 and 120,000,²⁵ the coverage of commercial channel NTV, which in December had made 'no mention of parties' and 'no overt connection between the electoral manipulation [of] the ruling party and the protests',²⁶ had developed to the point that it framed events as a 'legitimate protest' and 'showed that protesters organised themselves into three columns [...] [giving] a rather legitimate form to the rather amorphous Russian opposition'.²⁷ The protests, and the online information networks surrounding them, had grown to such a size that mainstream media channels could no longer ignore or discount them: discourse around the protests 'welled up from the internet to the state-run news even in a controlled media system'.²⁸

Unsurprisingly, the limited number of independent news outlets that continue to exist in Russia were heavily involved from the very beginning and complemented the work of oppositional internet users. Throughout the protests the 'more diverse and dispersed' opposition networks were 'well linked with media outlets that enjoy a significant Twitter presence'.²⁹ Independent radio station Ekho Moskvy, for example, 'live-tweeted the protests on December 10 on its website, in addition to posting video recordings of select moments from speeches, and publishing details of events and analysis as the protests [developed]'.³⁰ This collaboration between active citizen opposition networks and online independent media meant that during the protests, opposition narratives '[dominated] the Twitter landscape'.³¹

To bring this idea into a broader context, we can address the study conducted by Cottiero et al. of 'Vesti nedeli', one of the most popular prime-time television news programmes in Russia that is presented by the notorious 'man at the helm of Russia's state-owned media' Dmitry Kiselev.³² The study examines how certain strategies were employed, such as the heavy emphasis on buzzwords such as *fashisty* and *banderovtsy* in coverage of the events in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014, to incite pro-government discourse both offline and online.³³

²⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 24.

²⁹ Samuel Greene, 'Twitter and the Russian Street'. Available at <https://www.scribd.com/doc/94393092/Twitter-and-the-Russian-Street-CNMS-WP-2012-1> [accessed 12 August 2015], p. 2.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 13.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Christina Cottiero, Katherine Kucharski, Evgenia Olimpieva, and Robert W. Orttung, 'War of Words: The Impact of Russian State Television on the Russian Internet', *Nationalities Papers*, 43(4), 2015, pp. 533-55 (p. 535).

³³ Ibid, p. 540.

However, when Cottiero et al. measured online engagement with buzzwords from ‘Vesti nedeli’ against the popularity of opposition politician and activist Alexey Navalny, it was found that, although ‘[Navalny’s] popularity has been declining in the face of Kremlin-driven court cases against him, search queries [were] much higher [for Navalny] than observed for any of the Kremlin’s agenda-setting terms, or indeed Kiselev himself.’³⁴ This shows how ‘Russia’s state propaganda has not had as deep an impact on the part of the Russian population that uses the internet’,³⁵ meaning that, in theory, Russians who engage with politics through the internet hold oppositional views to a greater extent than those who engage exclusively with traditional media. These traditional media, in order to maintain their current dominance in the Russian media landscape and to quash opposition voices, will have to constantly employ a strategy of ‘increasingly hysterical media coverage’,³⁶ which Cottiero et al. understand as ‘not a sustainable strategy’.³⁷

It is clear that the online sphere in Russia is being used to increase awareness of alternative discourses. The political potential of this online sphere should not be ignored, ‘especially when viewed against the backdrop of the Kremlin’s loss of ability to [...] dominate the symbolic and ideational landscapes’.³⁸ With internet access increasing in Russia, especially among younger generations, ‘outstripping growth in virtually every country in Europe’, it follows that its oppositional potential will only continue to flourish.³⁹

Analysis of the conflict between traditional and new media, both directly concerned with the 2011-2012 protests and in a broader context, has not only shown that new media play a crucial role in spreading oppositional narratives ignored by mainstream media, but has also proved that online narratives have a growing power to invade pro-Kremlin agenda-setting territory.

It is tempting at this point to assume that new media and online activism have clear and exponentially increasing potential to transmit oppositional narratives to a larger audience, alter political views and then instigate large-scale political change in the future. However, it should be remembered that around 30-40 per cent of the Russian population are largely passive and apolitical,⁴⁰ and that audiences in general tend not to be politically curious or interested in actively searching for alternative sources of political information.⁴¹

³⁴ Ibid, p. 550.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 552.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bode and Makarychev, ‘The New Social Media in Russia’, p. 61.

³⁹ Oates, *Revolution Stalled*, p. 54.

⁴⁰ Aleksandr Belousov, ‘Political Propaganda in Contemporary Russia’, *Russian Politics and Law*, 50(3), 2012, pp. 56–69 (p. 56).

⁴¹ MemorialRU, *Seminar “Gosudarstvo i obschestvo v zerkale SMI” v ramkakh tsikla “V kakoi strane my zhivem”*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 March 2016, [accessed 31 March 2016].

Scholars writing on online communication structures in Russia disagree on the extent to which new and social media can actually expand beyond their existing audiences. Greene, for example, makes reference to Egypt, where in 2011 the shutting off of internet access led to *increased* mobilisation, and to London, also in 2011, when ‘riot-related Twitter activity followed, rather than preceded, activity in the streets’.⁴² Dokuka, meanwhile, draws special attention to the prevalence of homophily in online networks, or the ‘tendency [for users] to associate with others they perceive as being similar to themselves’.⁴³ This is an area in need of further research. However, since disagreement among scholars often springs from differing research methodologies adopted to understand mass internet usage, this leads on to discussion of the internet itself as a tool for political activism, and, more precisely, the characteristics of political internet usage that are being observed in Russia today.

Across online platforms, ‘the prevailing forms of engagement remain passive forms of virtual praise, taking part in voting, and spreading information’.⁴⁴ These passive actions are indeed essential, as they ‘become a stimulus for further communication’ and facilitate the growth of the opposition network.⁴⁵ However, this characteristic of political internet usage is linked to the concept of ‘slacktivism’, where users observe or ‘like’ commentary of social issues and invest ‘minimal time and effort, often without mobilization and/or demonstrable effect in solving a social issue’.⁴⁶ The very features and tools available on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook facilitate and encourage this kind of behaviour online.⁴⁷

Symbolic acts of participation in oppositional online societies that require minimal effort and ‘do not come with risks or the need for many resources’ are obviously convenient and even preferable for many internet users in today’s Russia.⁴⁸ However, while ‘digital technologies reduce the individual costs of participating in civil life and alter the risks of doing so’, this may mean that those who engage in the passive spreading of information online are not prepared to translate any political statements that they make online

⁴² Greene, ‘Twitter and the Russian Street’, p. 2

⁴³ Sofia Dokuka, ‘Do Online Networks Play Role? A Case-Study of Russian protests’. Available at http://www.newmediacenter.ru/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Online_network1.pdf [accessed 15 March 2016], p. 9 and for a deeper theoretical analysis of homophily, see Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M Cook, ‘Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 2001, pp. 415-44.

⁴⁴ Irina Ksenofontova, ‘Rol’ interneta v razvitiĭ protestnogo dvizheniia’, *Monitoring obschestvennogo mneniia*, 3(109), 2012, pp. 114-16 (p. 116).

⁴⁵ Irina Ksenofontova, ‘Novye solidarnosti v internete: ot diskusii k deistviu (na primere dvizheniia “za chestnye vybory”)’ (hereafter, ‘Novye solidarnosti v internete’), *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 2, 2013, pp. 125-37 (p. 129).

⁴⁶ Cerise Glenn, ‘Activism or “Slacktivism?”: Digital Media and Organizing for Social Change’, *Communication Teacher*, 29(2), 2015, pp. 81–85 (p. 82).

⁴⁷ Anna Sanina, ‘Vizual’naia politicheskaia ironiia v Runete: keis soobshchestva “Potsreotizm”’ (hereafter, ‘Vizual’naia politicheskaia ironiia v Runete’), *INTER*, 9, 2015, pp. 79-95 (p. 80).

⁴⁸ Ksenofontova, ‘Novye solidarnosti v internete’, p. 135.

into offline action.⁴⁹ Users who support a movement by spreading information across online networks, but are not prepared to engage offline, may distort estimates of how many people are actively engaged with the movement and therefore how strong that movement really is.⁵⁰ Therefore, although the unprecedented scale of the 2011-2012 protests presented a general increase in political participation in Russia, ‘assessing changes of the level of overall participation in civil society is much more difficult’.⁵¹

In his work *The Net Delusion*, based on conclusions drawn in hindsight after the Arab Spring movement, Morozov highlights a serious danger in this characteristic of internet use in that it gives ‘young people [...] the wrong impression that [digital] politics [...] is not only feasible but actually preferable to the ineffective, boring, risky, and, in most cases, outdated kind of politics practiced by the conventional oppositional movements’.⁵² Morozov goes on to suggest that an inclination towards online politics ‘would make the next generation of protesters less likely to become part of traditional opposition politics’.⁵³ In this way, the use of online platforms to spread political ideas and incite mobilization could actually be fatally flawed: engagement online may be active and growing, but this may never translate into tangible offline change of any significance in the mainstream political arena.

Sanina, a pioneer author in the field of irony in Russian political discourse, points out that ‘the internet is becoming a new underground platform for Russian political irony’ as a result of the favourable ‘conditions of virtuality, lack of censorship and anonymity’.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Bode and Makarychev, in their study of the Russian opposition’s online activist strategies, identified satire as one of the four main methods that online activists use to mobilise their readers.⁵⁵ By employing a strategy that ridicules the regime with satirical doctored photographs, videos or text, activists aim to ‘evoke disdain toward those in power and to activate a strong desire within readers’, which is ‘an important element in trying to mobilise people’.⁵⁶ Sanina considers such activity to have ‘strong potential to attract media attention, educate the public and build community among activists’.⁵⁷ There is no doubt that these are significant factors that would increase the visibility, participation and influence of any political movement.

⁴⁹ Alexanyan et al., ‘Exploring Russian Cyberspace’, p. 4.

⁵⁰ David Faris, ‘Revolutions without revolutionaries? Network Theory, Facebook and the Egyptian blogosphere’ (hereafter, ‘Revolutions without revolutionaries?’), *Arab Media & Society*, 2008 <<http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=694>> [accessed 17.03.2016], (para. 20 of 23).

⁵¹ Alexanyan et al., ‘Exploring Russian Cyberspace’, p. 5.

⁵² Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, New York: Public Affairs, 2012, p. 201.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sanina, ‘Vizual’naia politicheskaia ironiia v Runete’, p. 81.

⁵⁵ Bode and Makarychev, ‘The New Social Media in Russia’, p. 58.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 59.

⁵⁷ Anna Sanina, ‘Visual Political Irony in Russian New Media’, *Discourse, Context & Media*, 6, 2014, pp. 11-21 (p. 12).

However, although ‘visual irony is one of the important indicators of how a country’s current situation is being perceived by its people’, it should be understood that ‘ironical actions are of a passive nature’.⁵⁸ Sanina suggests that new media can actually depoliticise audiences by ‘encouraging them to confuse online rhetoric with substantial political action [and] diverting their attention away from productive activities’.⁵⁹ When writing on the use of humorous and satirical placards at the 2011-2012 protests, Ksenofontova observes that ‘at a certain stage of the development of the movement a “playful” and depoliticised form of protest begins to dominate’.⁶⁰ This raises the question of whether the use of satire and humour in online political activism could actually be a depoliticising force that detracts from online opposition society members’ efforts to inspire politicisation and mobilisation.

Taking this into a broader context, it is worth examining Suslov’s work on the hashtag *#krymnash*, which first appeared on March 8-9 2014 in celebration of the signing of Crimea’s accession treaty to Russia.⁶¹ Interestingly, the linguistic structure of this hashtag, *#krymnash*, ‘[harks] back to [...] late Soviet “authoritative language”,⁶² a revival of which can be observed as a trend in Putin-era propaganda.’⁶³

While supporters of the annexation adopted the hashtag and created variations such as *#DobroPozhalovat’Domoj* (‘welcome home’) and *#SvoikhNeBrosaem* (‘we don’t leave our own behind’), those against the annexation appropriated the hashtag *#krymnash* ironically.⁶⁴ This ironical interpretation of the hashtag portrays the meaning: ‘I am powerless to change



An example of the ironical interpretation of *#krymnash*

⁵⁸ Sanina, ‘Visual Political Irony in Russian New Media’, p. 20.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ksenofontova, ‘Novye solidarnosti v internete’, p. 131.

⁶¹ Mikhail Suslov, “‘Crimea Is Ours!’ Russian Popular Geopolitics in the New Media Age” (hereafter, “‘Crimea is Ours!’”), *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55(6), 2014, pp. 588-609 (p. 600).

⁶² Ibid, p. 602.

⁶³ Oleg Panfilov, *Putin and the Press: The Revival of Soviet-Style Propaganda*, trans. Maria Blake, London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2005, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Suslov, “‘Crimea Is Ours!’”, p. 600.

something bad and evil that is happening in my life, but I have one bitter consolation – Crimea is ours!'.⁶⁵ The cartoon in Figure 1,⁶⁶ which was posted on blogging platform LiveJournal, is a good example of the ironical use of *#krymnash*.

Suslov proposes that 'ironically, if "Crimea is ours" imagery has returned dignity, self-esteem, and the sense of historical importance to [pro-annexation] social network users, its interpretation in the geopolitical and 'civilisational' context has stolen agency, autonomy and political subjectivity from the 'grassroots'.⁶⁷ According to Suslov, users adopting the ironical meaning of the hashtag '[display] a perceived lack of agency [and] an inability to change one's own conditions or influence political decision-making'.⁶⁸ In this case, satirical opposition-minded internet users have actually suffered a loss: the community of pro-annexation internet users who engaged with the hashtag's intended meaning was strengthened, whereas those who satirised the slogan lost touch with the seriousness of the issue, to depoliticising effect. This is certainly not what an opposition movement should be aiming for in its activism if it is indeed striving to actively engage followers with political issues and to mobilise them.

Irony in Russian political discourse is nothing new and it 'has its own traditions, that were forms even in the era of tsarism and were strengthened through the Soviet underground movement: caricatures, the grotesque and anecdotes.'⁶⁹ *'Steb'*,⁷⁰ for example, which emerged in the late Soviet period among groups such as the Mit'ki and necrorealists, has been observed in modern Russian political discourse.⁷¹ This form of irony is unique and is defined by Yurchak as '[requiring] such a degree of overidentification with the object, person or idea [...] that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mix of the two'.⁷² This definition mirrors the depoliticising lack of agency seen around the hashtag *#krymnash* in Suslov's study.

Such traditions of political irony are continued in twenty-first-century online communication where, importantly, the modern internet has its 'own individual arsenal of means for creating ironical materials'.⁷³ Since the tools available on online social networking platforms now facilitate the spreading of satirical materials at an unprecedented speed and to an audience of unprecedented breadth, this depoliticising, ironic engagement with political issues is taking place on a larger scale than ever before. Therefore, the prevalent

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 601.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 604.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Sanina, 'Vizual'naiia politicheskaia ironiia v Runete', p. 80.

⁷⁰ Vlad Strukov, 'Networked Putinism: The Fading Days of the (Broadcast) Era', *Digital Icons*, 7, 2012, pp. 111-23 (p. 112).

⁷¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 249.

⁷² Ibid, p. 250.

⁷³ Sanina, 'Vizual'naiia politicheskaia ironiia v Runete', p. 80.

trend for irony and humour in online discourse may be steadily decreasing the probability of online engagement materialising into serious offline activism in the mainstream political sphere.

Barash points out a further important characteristic of online political communication in Russia in that ‘social networks today are not only the most effective mobilisation tool, but also in many ways the only real instrument of horizontal communication in society’.⁷⁴ In the context of the 2011-2012 protest movement, though, this horizontal communication structure, common in new media communication, seems to have had negative consequences. Suvorov observes, for example, that ‘There is no structure or hierarchy in the protest movement. There are “leaders” and the masses, and between the two a huge yawning gap’.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Van’ke et al., in their study of the 2011-2012 protest-orientated Facebook group ‘We were at Bolotnaia and will come again’, observed that ‘throughout the whole existence of the group the moderators preserved their anonymity’.⁷⁶ They see this movement as one ‘that has positioned itself from the very start as a “leaderless” movement, not dependent on any concrete leaders’.⁷⁷ Although prominent bloggers such as Alexey Navalny are often considered leaders of the protest movement,⁷⁸ Barash considers that there is an ‘lack of any leader in various camps’, which is preventing the online sphere from effecting real political change in Russia.⁷⁹

Without any solid leadership structure in the opposition, the ‘make-up of the protest group is quite large in number, but altogether heterogeneous when it comes to socio-demographic indicators’.⁸⁰ In this way, the movement ‘unites only those who are under the slogan “against Putin”’,⁸¹ rather than organising those with similar and more nuanced political goals and ideas to join forces and instigate significant political change. It could be argued, however, that such a ‘common goal’ as the fight for fair elections ‘forced representatives of various ideological persuasions to come together’.⁸²

The emergence of decentralised and leaderless movements could in fact present a serious problem for opposition actors in Russia today. Morozov, again not writing specifically about the Russian context, suggests that such structures ‘exploit all the benefits of the internet to mobilize their supporters while also believing that they won’t need to become centralized, hierarchical, and competitive in the political arena’.⁸³

⁷⁴ Barash, ‘Internet kak sredstvo samoaktualizatsii i revoliutsionnoi samoorganizatsii’, p. 103.

⁷⁵ Gleb Suvorov, ‘Obshchestvo anonimnykh revoliutsionerov’, *Slon*, 20 March 2012, <http://slon.ru/russia/obshchestvo_anonimnykh_revolutsionerov-765700.xhtml> [accessed 16 March 2016], (para. 7 of 12).

⁷⁶ Van’ke et al., ‘Internet-kommunikatsii kak sredstvo i uslovie politicheskoi mobilizatsii’, p. 56.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Barash, ‘Internet kak sredstvo samoaktualizatsii i revoliutsionnoi samoorganizatsii’, p. 107.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁸⁰ Ksenofontova, ‘Novye solidarnosti v internete’, p. 134.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁸² Gromov, ‘Zimnee protivostoianie 2011-2012’, p. 121.

⁸³ Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, p. 327.

As demonstrated above, the online opposition network that existed in Russia in 2011-2012 fits this description: an anti-government protest movement was broad and united in the online sphere, but showed few signs of having the potential to centralise and develop a hierarchy within itself in preparation for future offline action. According to Morozov, if a movement fails to do this, its chance of effecting change in mainstream politics is very low.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the 2011-2012 mobilizations brought about no systemic political change concerning the election process, and nor did they prevent United Russia, the ruling party, from benefitting from electoral fraud. As Oates and Lokot put it, ‘the protests showed Russians they had [a] voice [but] that this voice was meaningless’.⁸⁵ Furthermore, as shown by the reaction of the government to the protest movement, ‘the internet remains vulnerable to manipulation and control’.⁸⁶ This means that the opposition in Russia will, for the foreseeable future, have to ‘constantly innovate, using new technologies, strategies, and tactics to combat the state’s built-in strategic advantages in resources, manpower, legitimacy, and strength’.⁸⁷

Analysis of the 2011-2012 protest movements in Russia has shown that online activism has the power to create large oppositional online communities, which are steadily growing as internet penetration levels in Russia continue to increase. Furthermore, social networking platforms themselves have been proved to be a medium providing effective tools for creating such communities and spreading information within them. Whether this means that activism efforts online can or will amount to any large-scale political change in Russia, however, is a different question, and one that is more concerned with the characteristics of political internet use, the methods used by online opposition activists, and the organisation of opposition voices in the online sphere.

In this way, it can be argued that it is opposition-minded activists and internet users themselves who are curbing the potential of online activism to effect large-scale political change. Although tendencies such as widespread visual political irony, ‘slacktivism’ and horizontal communication structures can be considered inevitable difficulties with modern online communication and fundamental limitations of the internet itself

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Oates and Lokot, ‘Twilight of the Gods?’, p. 17.

⁸⁶ Alexanyan et al., ‘Exploring Russian Cyberspace’, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Faris, ‘Revolutions without revolutionaries?’, para. 18 of 23.

as a political tool, the next step forward in online opposition activism in Russia will be defined by the extent to which activists and internet users are able to overcome these obstacles.

This in turn raises questions of whether online engagement would remain so high if the highly shareable humorous elements of online communication were to be reduced, and whether enough Russians are actually prepared to convert online views into offline action in a society that is becoming increasingly hostile towards those who openly oppose the government. Finally, since the group of Russians opposing Putin is so heterogeneous, would the division of this large group into more hierarchical and interest-specific structures leave any one group that would have the potential to make any significant difference in the mainstream political arena?

The 2011-2012 Moscow protests and continuing efforts of activists represent ‘a step in the evolution of Russian citizens from relatively passive to relatively active in their civil society’, which, in theory, could reach a critical mass at some point.⁸⁸ However, by understanding the characteristics of online communication in Russia as well as the political climate in which the Russian opposition is forced to operate, it seems that ‘no one should hold their breath for a wave of revolutionary action to pour out of the internet onto the streets in Russia’.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Oates and Lokot, ‘Twilight of the Gods?’, p. 17.

⁸⁹ Barash, ‘Internet kak sredstvo samoaktualizatsii i revoliutsionnoi samoorganizatsii’, p. 108.

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