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Social Media in Russia: Between State and Society

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Abstract

Social media in Russia exists in a state of flux between the increasing state control on the one hand and the tradition of free online communication in the country on the other. Despite the risks free online spaces might constitute to the stability of the regime, the state continues to tolerate them, as they also provide a number of benefits for the regime, such as citizen feedback, illusion of democracy and a way to vent people's anger.

Introduction

Over the last decades, the Russian social media landscape has developed into a fragmented field in which global social media platforms and messengers such as Facebook, Google and WhatsApp compete with their Russia-based competitors such as VK.ru, Yandex and Telegram. This is a rather unique situation worldwide: even when countries have their own social media platforms, these are either not that popular, or, as in China, global platforms are not allowed on the market to compete freely with domestic social networks. As of 2019, the most popular social media platform in Russia was YouTube (87% of user share in the country), followed by VK.ru (83%), WhatsApp (69%), Instagram (56%) and Odnoklassniki (54%). Facebook was ranked only 7th in this rating, after the Russia-based messenger Viber (Statista 2020).

These platforms have different coverage user profiles and constitute in essence large filter bubbles for different social milieus of Russian society. Thus, Odnoklassniki ('Classmates') has a reputation of being a social network for elderly people, with depoliticised content, Facebook is often seen as a bulwark of liberal intellectuals, and Telegram is used both by pro-state and oppositional actors to follow the other's behind-the-scenes actions. Over time, users migrate from one social network to another, and the images of the platforms transform accordingly. Thus, Twitter, which used to be popular for political content in the beginning of 2010s, in recent years has given way to Instagram, which has become a forum not only for celebrity gossip, but also for political discussions. In this fragmented landscape, different social media platforms play specific roles, both for the state and for civil society. In this article, I will briefly outline the previous development of Russian political communication on social media and assess the status quo in this tug-of-war between state and society.

In the Beginning Was Freedom

Until the 2010s, online communication in Russia remained largely unregulated, while media law for

traditional media was already rather restrictive. As a result, RuNet (Russian Internet) has developed into a rather free space with a well-developed political blogosphere. In the late 2000s, a research team at the Berkman Centre for Internet & Society mapped the Russian political blogosphere and found that the online "news diets" of Russian bloggers were more independent and oppositional than that of the average Russian Internet user (Etlings et al. 2010). These results were indirectly confirmed by Koltsova and Shchetbak (2015), who explored political postings of the top 2000 bloggers of the LiveJournal blogging platform gathered in 2011 and 2012 and concluded that "Russian blogs performed the role of a media 'stronghold' of the political opposition" (Koltsova and Shchetbak 2015, p. 1). Despite this evidence of the oppositional character of the Russian political blogosphere, many scholars at the end of 2000s expressed doubt regarding the democratizing potential of the RuNet. Sarah Oates in her book "Revolution Stalled" wrote that "until December 2011, there was little compelling evidence that the Internet had made a significant difference in Russian mainstream politics" (Oates 2013, p. 1).

The protest movement 'For fair elections' in 2011–2012 proved these estimations wrong. It began as a reaction to cases of election fraud, which were documented by citizens and spread via social media. According to many scholars, social media, in particular Facebook, played a significant role in mobilizing the protesters (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2013, Kluyeva 2016, Denisova 2017). In his study of protest communities on Facebook and V Kontakte, Panchenko concluded that despite the small number of users of Facebook in Russia compared to the Russian social network VK, the audience of the protest communities on FB was twice as big as that of VK (Panchenko 2012). Protesters used online tools for self-organization, for voting for speakers at the rallies, and for organizing single-person protests.

The State Strikes Back

In the years prior to 2012, communication of the state on social networks was rather scarce and was mostly limited to blogging of governmental officials. As Toepfl (2012) wrote, it was then-President Dmitry Medvedev's use of new digital technologies that made many other officials start their own blogs. Toepfl examined the content of blogs of regional leaders and concluded that these blogs played "a far greater role in generating legitimacy for the Russian political system than they do in democracies, because the semi-authoritarian Russian system lacks other mechanisms which generate (input) legitimacy in developed democracies" (Toepfl, 2012, p. 1435). Bode and Makarychev compared the content of opposition and pro-government bloggers in 2011–2012 and found that pro-state blogging was used by state officials as a "depoliticizing [tool] meant to decrease the degree of—and space for—political expression" (Bode und Makarychev 2013, p. 55).

Toepfl also analyzed the ways in which the government dealt with scandals spread via social media using the example of two case studies of scandals that emerged and evolved on social media. He concluded that traditional pro-state media "played a crucial role not only in the outbreak but also in the framing of the two scandals" (Toepfl 2011, p. 1313). These studies showed that the state was trying out different mechanisms of co-optation of social media even before the third term of Putin's presidency.

After the protests of 2011–2012, the government became aware of the mobilizing potential of online media and implemented a series of restrictive Internet laws. The most prominent of them was the so-called "Yarovaya-package" of 2016, which obliged Internet providers to store all data for half a year and introduced stricter punishment for reposting of "pro-terrorist" or "extremist" content. In 2019, several new laws marked a milestone in the development of Internet control in Russia, the laws against "fake news" and "disrespect" of governmental officials online, as well as the so-called "Sovereign Internet" bill. The latter obliged providers to install state monitoring tools, which grants the state even more control over online content.

As Vendil Pallin notes, "most laws are not systematically implemented and by no means all opposition content that is posted on the Internet leads to legal or other actions from the authorities" (Vendil Pallin 2017, p. 17). These laws have, however, had a remarkable effect on society, namely in terms of increase of self-censorship among media professionals as well as among average Internet users (Bodrunova et al., 2020).

Alongside these restrictive measures, the government has been increasingly using co-optation strategies to pro-

mote its agenda through social media. For instance, it is known that paid trolls are used to promote pro-state discourse as well as to defame opposition. In addition, as studies have shown (Zavadski and Toepfl 2018; Daucé 2017), the Russia-based search engine Yandex employs algorithms that lead to reinforcement of pro-state narratives.

"Be Like Water": Civil Society Keeps Finding Free Spaces Online

Although the state has learned to use social media for its own purposes, free online spaces have not ceased to exist. On the one hand, the tradition of free online communication in Russia seems to be hard to erase. On the other hand, free communication spaces can be of interest to the regime (Toepfl 2020, Stockmann 2013). They might serve as feedback mechanisms for the state, which are essential in the absence of normally-functioning opinion polls. It can also give people an illusion of democratic freedoms and a way to vent their anger. These benefits, however, come with certain risks to the regime (Toepfl 2020).

Thus, YouTube, which has been tolerated by the Russian state, has developed into an alternative to television in Russia, with a prominent oppositional agenda. My research on the most popular political YouTube videos in Russia during the presidential campaign of 2018 has shown that anti-Putin discourse prevailed in the top videos on Russian YouTube. The so-called "Schoolchildren's Protests" of 2017 were triggered by a YouTube video by Alexey Navalny about the alleged corruption of the Prime Minister Medvedev. This video, "He is not Dimon to you", has so far gathered more than 36 million views on YouTube.

Obviously, this social network constitutes a certain risk for the stability of the regime. However, banning the platform, which is highly popular among younger Russians and is a source of income for many citizens, would mean for the government risking an unpredictable wave of protests.

The ban of Telegram, which lasted from 2018 through July 2020, has demonstrated the counterproductiveness of this measure. During its ban, Telegram even increased its number of Russian users, and has become an important arena for oppositional talk, leaks, and coordination of protests. The government began to involve itself in Telegram and to manipulate anonymous news channels in its interests (Rubin 2018). As a result, the Russian segment of Telegram resembles a big bazaar of leaks, rumours and compromising materials, where it is hardly possible to orient oneself. Many respondents in my recent study on anonymous news channels on Telegram, which I conducted together with Anna Smolyarova, admitted that they ceased to follow politics on Tele-

gram because they were overwhelmed with the amount of unreliable information there.

And the Winner Is...?

In 2019, two notable cases showed that despite the control tools the state has at its disposal, the power of social media can still challenge state authorities in Russia. The first case was the arrest of the investigative reporter of news portal *Meduza* Ivan Golunov. He was detained in Summer 2019 for alleged drug dealing. A wave of solidarity that started on social media under the hashtag #ЯМыИванГолунов (#IWeIvanGolunov) made the authorities withdraw the fabricated accusation. The second case was that of the student Yegor Zhukov, who was detained during the Moscow protests alongside with other protesters. Thanks to a large support campaign organised via multiple social media platforms, he was not imprisoned.

Social media has also been used by protesters in numerous local protests of recent years. For instance, in August 2020, the defenders of Kushtau mountain in Bashkortostan managed to stream their protest via social media despite local blocking of Internet connection. During the Covid-19 lockdown, users invented a new way to express their protest: the so-called “online rallies” on Yandex-maps, where people usually share traffic information. Citizens posted comments critical of the government on map locations in front of city administrations. The comments were soon deleted, but this showed how inexhaustible and creative users are in adopting new methods of using social media to voice their discontent.

About the Author

Anna Litvinenko, PhD, is a researcher at the Division for Digitalization and Participation at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies of the Free University Berlin.

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The use of social media by citizens has among others one particularly important ‘side effect’: people learn to hold those in charge accountable. A study by Kamilla Nigmatullina and myself (Litvinenko and Nigmatullina 2020) on local media freedom in 33 Russian regions showed that VK public pages of local news outlets are usually full of critical comments. One small anecdote perfectly illustrates the relationship between officials and citizens in regard to social media: In 2019, administrations of the Russian regions had to implement a social media monitoring system “Incident Management”. Local authorities were obliged to monitor and react to critical comments of citizens on social media. People very soon understood that posting a comment online was a quite effective way to complain about any shortcoming in the city. As a result, citizens have become more demanding and now expect immediate response from city administration. At the same time, public relations specialists working with the system reported that they were overwhelmed with the increase in workload that came with this monitoring and giving feedback to the citizens.

This example shows that, although the state has tools of control over social media at its disposal, it still cannot enjoy the benefits of online communication without taking certain risks. The state is forced to deal with the free nature of bottom-up communication and tolerate a certain amount of Internet freedom, which means that the window of opportunity for political dissent in the country remains open.

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