

# RUSSIAN PROTEST ON- AND OFFLINE

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OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATIONS IN DECEMBER 2011

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## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MOSCOW OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATIONS IN DECEMBER 2011



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- Social media played an important role in the Moscow opposition demonstrations in December 2011, functioning both as an alternative arena for public debate and as a tool for mobilising the protests. In a matter of months, the political atmosphere in the country changed and the legitimacy of the Russian power vertical was called into question.
- Even before the Duma elections in 2011, social media had turned into an alternative forum for political debate in Russia. These media frayed the image of United Russia and Vladimir Putin, politicised new audiences, and helped to form both a collective 'anti' identity and networks among the protesters.
- The reports of the falsification of the Duma elections circulated through social media channels and exploded into anger on the part of the betrayed voters. Social media were put to good effect when making the practical arrangements for the protests, such as financing the street demonstrations and recruiting participants.
- Albeit crucial in mobilising discontent, social media is less well-suited to building lasting political structures. In the longer run, the conflict-torn opposition has to transform the protests into offline organisations and decide, among other things, who can represent the street protesters in negotiations with the power-holders.
- Imposing strict internet control in Russia does not seem likely since the Russian urban middle class is accustomed to seeking information and expressing itself freely on the net. Removing this freedom would lead to an increase in anti-government sentiments and the intensification of protests in big Russian cities.

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Even the well-known children's animated character Cheburashka demanded honest elections. Photo: Person Behind The Scenes / Flickr.com.

## Introduction

This paper discusses the events leading up to the large street demonstrations against the falsification of the Russian Duma elections in Moscow on 10 and 24 December 2011. The sudden emergence of the protests caught prime minister Vladimir Putin's regime by surprise and revealed its inability to understand both the degree of discontent among the Russian urban population and the growing power of social media. Within just a few months, the stagnated political atmosphere in Russia was electrified and the legitimacy of the Russian ruling elite was called into question.<sup>1</sup>

This paper centres on the role of social media in organising the opposition protests in Russia, where the leeway for civic activism has been on the wane under the Putin-Medvedev tandem. By social media I refer to interactive internet and mobile communication technologies with user-generated content. I focus in particular on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, its Russian clone *Vkontakte*, and the Russian-language segment of LiveJournal (*Zhivoi Zhurnal*), all of which were paramount in preparing and organising

the December demonstrations. This focus on social media excludes Russian independent professional print and web media, despite their importance for the protests.<sup>2</sup>

The main claim of this paper is that the emergence and mobilisation of the street demonstrations was greatly facilitated by social media, which functioned both as an arena for discussion and debate and as a tool for organising the protests. I maintain that social media paved the way for the December street demonstrations by diffusing alternative information on political events in the country, fraying the image of the immunity of Vladimir Putin, creating a collective identity against United Russia – dubbed a 'party of swindlers and thieves' – and building networks between civic actors. When the falsification of the Duma elections was revealed, again through social media, these networks could be used to mobilise mass protests.

1 I would like to thank Risto Alapuro, Angelina Davydova, Vladimir Gel'man, Arkady Moshes, Katri Pynnöniemi, Teija Tiilikainen, Philip Torchinsky, Dmitry Yagodin and the members of Helsinki Research Group for Political Sociology for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. I remain responsible for the conclusions and any factual errors in the text.

2 For studies of social media, politics and civil society in Russia, see e.g. <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/lonkila/>; Bruce Etling et al. (2010) *Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization*. Berkman Center Research Publication, Harvard University. Available at: [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Public\\_Discourse\\_in\\_the\\_Russian\\_Blogosphere\\_2010.pdf](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Public_Discourse_in_the_Russian_Blogosphere_2010.pdf), accessed 8 February 2012; Florian Töpfel (2011) Managing public outrage: Power, scandal, and new media in contemporary Russia, *New Media & Society*, 13(8), 1301–1319.

## Particularities of the Russian-language internet

Understanding the role of social media and the sudden emergence of the Moscow protests warrants a look at the specific features of the Russian-language internet. One of the most important of these features is the strong recent and ongoing growth in internet and mobile communications, which poses a challenge to broadcasts by the state-controlled national TV channels. This growth is illustrated by the increase in the daily internet audience among adult Russians from 22% in 2009 to 35% in 2011, and by the increase in the weekly audience from 32% to 44%.<sup>3</sup> This growth has coincided with an explosion in the use of mobile communication resulting, among other things, in the important role played by Twitter in the December protests. Despite the strong growth, internet use is divided according to age, geographical location, and socio-economic factors. It is no coincidence that the protests were strongest in the big Russian cities, notably in Moscow, where internet penetration is at its highest.

Second, the Russian-language internet is relatively isolated from the global internet. Despite the commonly held belief, the internet is not a homogeneous sphere where everyone may freely communicate with everyone else. Rather, internet use in Russia and elsewhere is conditioned by its historical development, language barrier, and political and cultural context. This development has shaped the Russian blogosphere into a relatively closed cultural community of Russian citizens and Russian-speaking diaspora around the world. The inward-oriented nature of this community is illustrated by the fact that the Russian-language internet is commonly dubbed 'Runet' by its users (imagine Finnish internet users calling the internet 'Finnet').

The third specificity of Runet is the significance of the Russian-language segment of the LiveJournal blogging platform and social network site (*Zhivoi Zhurnal* or *ZhZh* in Russian), both for Russian urban culture in general and for civic activism in particular. LiveJournal was one of the first global social network sites and was founded at the end of the 1990s as a publishing platform for U.S. teenagers' blogs.

It became, however, extremely popular among the first generation of Russian internet users to the extent that it was synonymous with the word weblog in the Russian language for a long time. In 2011, Russians were still the second largest group of LiveJournal users worldwide and *Zhivoi Zhurnal* had become a permanent fixture in the Russian blogosphere, urban culture, and political debate.

In terms of civic and political activism, LiveJournal's built-in networking functions are particularly important: the user can link their blog both to those of other users and to the innumerable *Zhivoi Zhurnal* communities, whose topics cover a wide spectrum of issues from art and hobbies to politics. Thanks to this networked structure, a political *Zhivoi Zhurnal* blogger in Russia runs less risk of drowning in the endless ocean of individual, isolated blogs. Instead, the blogger is included in a virtual community which embraces an important part of the Russian intelligentsia within one interconnected technical platform.

*Zhivoi Zhurnal* has also been an important tool for the practical organisation of resistance: several opposition demonstrations have been mobilised through *Zhivoi Zhurnal* communities, which have also published accounts, photos and videos of the violent harassment of demonstrators by the Russian law enforcement agencies. In the December 2011 demonstrations, however, the organising role of *Zhivoi Zhurnal* was challenged by the newer social network sites such as Facebook and *Vkontakte*, as will be described in the fourth section in this paper.

Finally, Russia is one of the few countries in the world where Facebook is not the leading social network site. Instead, its lookalike Russian clone *Vkontakte* (In contact) was a clear leader with 27.8 million visitors in 2010, followed by *Odnoklassniki* (16.7 million), whereas Facebook, despite its impressive growth figure, was only fifth with 4.5 million visitors.<sup>4</sup> Many users have accounts both in *Vkontakte* and Facebook, but the popularity of the latter is growing, particularly among those educated urban Russians who want to keep in touch with their friends and acquaintances abroad. The important

3 FOM 2011. Dinamika proniknoveniya interneta v Rossii. Osen' 2011. Available at: <http://runet.fom.ru/Proniknovenie-interneta/10283>, accessed 8 February 2012.

4 ComScore, 20 October 2010. Available at: [http://www.comscore.com/Press\\_Events/Press\\_Releases/2010/10/](http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2010/10/), accessed 8 February 2012.

role of Facebook in the December demonstration may also have something to do with its lesser degree of vulnerability to the pressure exerted by Russian state officials.

### The emergence of social media as an alternative public sphere in Russia

Vladimir Gel'man has referred to the Putin–Medvedev-era media regime as ‘half-freedom of speech’ (*polusvoboda slova*). This means, first, that the most important national TV channels are controlled and regulated by the government. Second, certain topics – such as the private life of Vladimir Putin – have been excluded from the public agenda, and selective punishments are at times meted out to the media and journalists. Finally, of the social and political questions, only those beneficial for the ruling elite are publicly discussed in the state-controlled media.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the half-freedom of speech, various campaigns against the Russian power vertical emerged throughout the Russian Federation during the first decade of the 21st century. These included the movements against the demolition of historical and cultural buildings, monuments and areas in St. Petersburg and Moscow, the Russian car drivers’ protests, the struggle around Khimki forest, Strategy 31 demonstrations, the Dissenters’ marches, and others. These protests and movements were partly or wholly organised through the internet and social media, and many gained nationwide visibility.

In addition to mobilising local social protests and movements, citizens’ accounts of corrupt practices and misuse of power by the Russian elite and officials were increasingly diffused in social media, notably via YouTube. One example of these internet scandals was the case of ‘the honest police officer’ Dymovsky, who addressed Putin in his self-made YouTube video in November 2009 concerning the corrupt practices in the local police force. Another example was a popular YouTube video, *Mercedes S-666*, published

by the Russian rapper Noize MC in February 2010. The name of the video and song refers to the car accident where the Mercedes owned by Anatoly Barkov, the Vice President of the oil company Lukoil, killed two people. Police accused the driver of the other car, but the scandal that was propagated through social media forced a re-examination of the case. Though Barkov was cleared of charges, the campaign, as well as the car drivers’ campaign against *migalki* (flashing blue lights which the Russian elite use on their cars to pass traffic jams), empowered and encouraged participants, proving that effective civic resistance could be organised through the internet.<sup>6</sup>

Even the immunity of Vladimir Putin started to fray. One of the early signs of this was a popular video clip circulating on YouTube of a televised meeting where Putin was challenged by Yuri Shevtschuk, a St. Petersburg rock musician, on the civic freedoms in Russia in May 2010. This video was followed in late 2011 by one of Putin getting booed when congratulating the Russian free-fighter Fedor Emelianenko after a martial arts fight. These videos, and many others poking fun at United Russia or Vladimir Putin, appeared on YouTube during 2011, and in December in particular. They started to erode Putin’s image and the atmosphere of fear surrounding participation in political opposition. This atmosphere had been created by the repeated harassment of opposition demonstrators in Russia and the beatings and killings of critical human right activists and journalists such as Anna Politkovskaya, Stanislav Markelov, Anastasia Baburova, Natalia Estemirova and Oleg Kashin, among others.

In February 2011 a debate between Alexey Navalny, the new hero of the Russian internet generation, and Evgeny Fedorov from United Russia gained over 600,000 viewers on YouTube in a short space of time. In the debate Navalny accused United Russia of being a corrupt ‘party of swindlers and thieves’ – a slogan that was to become widely popular during the December protests. In the audience poll after the debate, 99% of the voters supported Navalny’s position.

YouTube hits of this nature also managed to capture the attention of an apolitical audience who had been mostly surfing the net in search of entertainment

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5 Vladimir Gel'man (2010) *Lovushka polusvobody*, *slon.ru*. Available at: <http://slon.ru/blogs/gelman/post/310531/>, accessed 8 February 2012. Half-freedom, as the term implies, does not encompass total control due to the existence of critical independent media such as *Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho Moscow*, internet news portals and internet television channels.

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6 Etling et al. (2010), Töpfl (2011).

and a social life. Unlike *Zhivoi Zhurnal* – an arena for the already active Russian intelligentsia – popular YouTube scandal videos politicized new groups of Russians formerly ignorant of electoral issues. Among them were well-educated ambitious people who were fed up with widespread corruption and the privileges granted to those well-connected to the power vertical.

Since living simultaneously on- and offline had become a reality for educated urban Russians, they increasingly turned to social media, independent news portals and internet TV for an alternative to the biased nature of Russian television broadcasting. This nature was harshly criticised by a well-known television personality, Leonid Parfenov, in the national TV gala in November 2010. In his speech circulating on YouTube, Parfenov, who had just visited the severely battered journalist Oleg Kashin in hospital, accused Russian television of continuing Soviet-era habits, and TV journalists of functioning as officials of the Russian administration.

The political importance of social media described above has also been decelerated by several factors. First, as noted, most social media users in Russia or elsewhere are not primarily interested in politics, but surf the net for other purposes. Second, although there has been no concerted and consistent effort to apply internet censorship in Russia, individual bloggers have been taken to court on account of their blog content, and proposals to increase control over the internet surface in Russia time and again.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, power-holders can monitor the sentiment and networks of the opposition and civil society through social media. Pro-government activists were also active in the social media during the December protests, disseminating smear videos and writing bots to fill the opposition blogs with spam. The Soviet-style campaigns were countered by numerous videos making fun of the ‘party of

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7 The purchase of the Russian-language segment of LiveJournal in 2007 by a Kremlin-friendly businessman, Alexander Mamut, for example, fuelled speculation about the increasing control. On the internet control in Russia in 2011, see Damir Gainutdinov and Pavel Chikov (2011). *Nepravitelstvennyi doklad ‘Nesvoboda Interneta – 2011’*, *Novaya Gazeta*, 28 January 2012, available at: [www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/50694.html](http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/50694.html), accessed 8 February 2012.

swindlers and thieves’ and of Putin’s comments concerning protesters. In addition, during the Duma elections, the websites of the opposition media (e.g. *Novaya Gazeta*, *Ekho Moskvy*) and the website of *Golos* – an NGO for election monitoring – were brought down by anonymous, but coordinated hackers.

Prior to the elections, the Russian-language social media had thus grown into an alternative public sphere substituting for the biased reports of national state television. This sphere had accumulated growing discontent and created an ‘anti’ identity among part of the Russian urban middle class. But in order to take the protest to the streets, many problems connected to the practical organisation of the demonstrations had to be solved, among them the recruitment of participants and overcoming the problem of distrust between civil society actors in Russia.

#### **Social network sites as organising tools for the December demonstrations**

In addition to a collective opposition identity, social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, *Vkontakte* and *Zhivoi Zhurnal* created and reinforced personal ties and networks between actual individuals. In Russia, personal networks are particularly important because they are used to solve all kinds of everyday problems, to compensate for the shortcomings of formal institutions and, increasingly, to organise joint action and protests.<sup>8</sup>

Although the civic activists on social network sites often fight for local issues (such as saving a particular building or park, for example), finding like-minded people through these sites empowers the activists. It also helps them to see general mechanisms of injustice behind the particularities of their own struggle. Social network sites also create *non-political* personal communities of the like-minded, young urban Russians, which can be quickly activated to mobilise people in case of a trigger event. In this sense they prepared the ground for the December demonstrations by forming ties between civil society actors and organisations.

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8 On the role of personal networks in Russia, see <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/lonkila/selected-publications/>



Protesters in Moscow demanded: 'Swindlers and thieves, give us back our elections'. Photo: Dmitry A. Mottl / Wikimedia Commons.

The strength of social network sites such as Facebook and *Vkontakte* in mobilising the protests is based on their very structure: these sites not only reflect 'naturally occurring' human sociability, but also imply a particular view of social life, based on a *personal network* model. In this model, social life is devoid of institutions and is instead rooted in the focal individual, her network members, and the ties between these network members. The correspondence between this person-centred model of social network sites and the *de facto* functioning of Russian society – similarly based on personal networks – offers a solution to the problem of trust. In the regulated Russian media environment, the trusted personal ties between activists (and links created between local opposition movements) established through SNS may function as 'bridges' connecting the otherwise isolated people and groups. Similarly, an invitation to participate in the protest is more likely to have an impact when coming from one's own network of connections than from an anonymous source.

The ties created in social media and SNS assist in overcoming Russians' low trust in most social institutions – among them civil society organisations. In order to show up in an opposition street demonstration in Moscow, a participant has to have a certain degree of trust in both the organisers, fellow participants, and one's own personal security. Protesters do not wish to get beaten up or jailed during a demonstration, they hope to be in the larger company of like-minded people, and democratically

inclined participants do not want to show up in a public demonstration arranged and led by neo-Nazis.

Trust of this kind was not evident in December 2011, but social media had a role in creating it. In addition to the ties to one's actual SNS connections, trust in some of the speakers in the demonstrations was based on their reputation formed through social media. Leonid Parfenov and Alexey Navalny, for example, had earned their places among the public speakers at demonstrations because of their courageous public activities.<sup>9</sup>

A more general type of confidence in anonymous fellow Russians was also emerging in social media: By looking at the number of viewers of opposition YouTube videos or at the number of protesters enrolled in street demonstrations on social network sites, one could get a gut feeling about the societal anti-government atmosphere, and an estimation of the scale of the discontent.

The practical organisational tasks of the December demonstrations were also facilitated by social media:

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<sup>9</sup> Selecting the stage speakers for the demonstrations was not easy because of the heterogeneous nature of the protest movement. On the formation of the organizing committee and its internal conflicts, see Stanislav Kuvaldin: *Rozhdenie Bolotnoi. Ekspert* no. 2 (785), 16 January 2012. Available at: <http://expert.ru/expert/2012/02/rozhdeniye-bolotnoj/>, accessed 8 February 2012.

the organisers kept in touch through Facebook chat, broadcasted their meetings and organised polls concerning demonstration speakers through the internet.<sup>10</sup> This organisation was also made easier by a new application for the collection of money through Facebook, launched by the biggest Russian search engine, Yandex. The money needed for the meeting at Prospekt Sakharova, for example, was collected through this application and deposited into the account of one of the organisers, Olga Romanova, who published the expense report on her Facebook page.

Although as a rule more people tend to enroll beforehand for demonstrations through SNS than actually show up on the street, in Moscow the opposite seemed to have occurred: the actual number of demonstrators was greater than those who enrolled in advance. This can be explained by several factors: First, in the December demonstrations, people who were not inclined to use social media also showed up. Second, some participants probably feared risking their reputation through signing up publicly for an opposition demonstration through social media. Finally, many people just showed up on the spur of the moment.

In sum, various types of social media had different, albeit overlapping roles in the Moscow demonstrations. YouTube accumulated discontent and dissolved the atmosphere of fear through videos revealing corruption scandals and making fun of the power elite. *Zhivoi Zhurnal* was the epicentre of political argumentation and debate, while *Vkontakte*, Facebook and Twitter were tools for creating networks, financing the street demonstrations, and recruiting participants.

### **Trigger event: The falsification of the Duma elections**

In autumn 2011 the Putin–Medvedev rule had seemed to take on a quasi-eternal existence, and analogies with Brezhnev’s era of stagnation had started to flourish. The splintered opposition had not succeeded in mobilising the allegedly passive and apolitical Russian public. However, the atmosphere changed with astonishing speed, facilitated by social media, and fuelled by the accumulated dissatisfaction.

Putin’s announcement in September 2011 that he intended to run for a third term had already gravely disappointed that part of the population which was still hoping for a change in the direction of the country. These hopes were finally dashed, however, with the falsification of the Duma elections in December, which was widely debated on social media sites.

Although the final scale of the falsification is still unclear, after the election the Russian-language social media was filled with reports of individual acts of fraud, observed particularly in bigger cities. These included, among others, reports of groups of people voting several times in different polling stations (a practice called *karusel* in Russian), the falsification of the results from the polling stations at the city level, exit polls at odds with election results in Moscow, and non-voluntary voting for United Russia, say, in army units or state institutions. Statistically oriented bloggers examined the strange distribution of voting behaviour, wondered about the gaps between the results from the polling stations in neighbouring city districts in Moscow, and were irritated by the Stalin-era voting percentages in the Caucasian republics.

These reports of falsifications ignited the fury of the betrayed voters. They resulted in mass street demonstrations around the Russian Federation, the biggest of which were organised on 10 and 24 December 2011 at Bolotnaya Square and Prospekt Sakharova in Moscow.

Until 10 December, the opponents of Putin’s regime had faced several difficulties in organising demonstrations: The permission for opposition protests had, for example, been granted for locations far from city centres, or demonstration permission had been given to the pro-Kremlin youth movement at exactly the same hour and in the same location as the opposition protesters.

As a result, prior to 10 December, the opposition demonstrations had usually drawn modest crowds of tens or hundreds of people. Moreover, the demonstrators had faced the threat of being physically assaulted by the law enforcement officials. In all, demonstrating in Putin’s Russia was regarded as high-risk activism by a small number of dedicated activists for whom showing up in a peaceful demonstration could lead to jail or even hospital.

This changed abruptly on 10 December when tens of thousands of people gathered in Bolotnaya

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10 Kuvaldin (2012).

Square in Moscow with parallel demonstrations in other Russian cities. Live coverage of the unfolding events could be followed in real time through Dozhd TV, tweets and livecast reports at the street level. Numerous photos published in blogs and news portals proved that the gathering was conducted peacefully and that the crowd was considerably bigger than most people had thought possible. What is more, national television, in a notable change of policy, started broadcasting the opposition demonstrations in December.

The role of Twitter in diffusing information and live reporting events was important, due in part to technical reasons. The short format (a tweet contains a maximum of 140 characters) is not only valuable in the quick diffusion of news, but tweets can also be transmitted via SMS from all mobile phones – even when the mobile network is overloaded.

In addition to its political pressuring function, the successful meeting in Bolotnaya Square had an empowering impact both on internet viewers, as well as on the participants themselves, who passed this feeling of empowerment on to their audiences in various social media.

The follow-up demonstration in Prospekt Sakharova in Moscow on 24 December drew an even bigger crowd, an estimated 100,000 people or more, in another peaceful demonstration. The third mass protest took place on 4 February 2012, but could not be covered in this paper.

### **The future role of social media in Russian politics**

This paper has suggested that social media may have an important role to play in mobilising the discontent of citizens under the conditions of a semi-authoritarian political regime, with no explicit censorship of the internet.

In the Russian case, several factors affected the role of social media in the December protests. These included the recent strong growth in internet access and mobile communications, the particular structure and traditions of the Russian blogosphere, the digital divide between urban centres and the countryside, and the role of personal networks in Russian society.

Albeit crucial in mobilising discontent, social media is less well-suited to building lasting political structures. In the longer run, the conflict-torn opposition has to transform the protests into offline organisations and decide, among other things, who can represent the street protesters in negotiations with the power-holders.

Even if an ‘iron-fist’ scenario of increasing state control after the presidential elections is possible, implementing strict political control over the internet in Russia would be counter-productive: The Russian urban middle class is accustomed to seeking information and expressing itself freely on the internet. Removing this freedom would very likely lead to an increase in antigovernment sentiments and the intensification of protests in big Russian cities.

In a ‘liberal’ scenario, civil society and opposition organisations would be granted more leeway and the control over national TV channels would be loosened. At present, national television runs the risk of losing the minds and advertising money of the educated urban middle class to social media. But a more liberal national television might result in the spread of discontent around the country.

In any event, the December protests marked a significant change in the societal and political atmosphere in Russia. This change was facilitated by and channeled through social media, and will point to a thorough reconsideration of the Russian ruling practices.

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