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Russian Digital Dualism: Changing Society, Manipulative State

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Summary

The article studies the effect of the Internet on Russian society in the 2000s, as well as the complex relations between the Internet, groups of digital activists and the manipulative state. The Internet creates new spaces for politicians and proto-politicians to practice digital activism, develop relationships of trust and new identities. At the same time, it becomes an object for increasing neo-Nazi and Islamist mobilization, and subject to greater control by a government worried by the inability to dominate this sphere.

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Introduction

With all bad and good sides of the digital technology, going online for many politicians and proto-politicians[1] is not an internal emigration or escape, as many cyber-skeptics claim. What we now see in the Russian Internet (RuNet) is the creation of new spaces for expression.

So far, these spaces are used for politics, activism, self-help and debate. At the same time, they are used for trolling,[2] discrediting opponents and organizing violence. In some respects, they create tensions between the transformation of the Russian society and a manipulative state.

The digital universe of RuNet is not ideal—obviously it is limited by the discursive framework of those who create and inhabit these spaces. Why do only a few bloggers discuss elections, traffic jams and officials' road violations? Why are there no Russian blogger-peacemakers who could at least try to apply citizen diplomacy to the situation in Georgia?

These questions lead us to a set of broader social issues that so far cannot be solved online. Sam Greene, Head of the Moscow-based Center for the Study of New Media and Society, proposes the term of "*aggressive immobility*" to describe the social mechanics of contemporary relations between the government and society in Russia. Greene identifies a process of "individual modernization," linked to Internet usage and foreign travel. While some parts of society are changing, the general population aggressively rejects any serious change introduced by the government, being afraid of losing the previous achievements. At the same time, the population is so afraid of change that it is uninterested in fighting for a fair elections or changes in foreign policy, etc. Greene, however, notices that there is a growing mutual irritation between the government and society (Mikhail Dmitriev, Head of Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research calls it a "black hole"). Online activities are a perfect example of how society can be effective in confronting the government.[3]

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[1] The term "proto-politician" is taken here to mean people who are politically minded and engage in politically important activities, but who do not position themselves as politicians.

[2] In Internet slang, a troll is someone who posts inflammatory or off-topic messages in an online community, with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or otherwise disrupting normal discussion.

[3] S. Greene, "Rossiya-2020: scenarii razvitiya, Nepodvizhnoe obscestvo" [Russia-2020: Scenarios for the Future, Immobile Society], <*Vedomosti*>, 4 May 2011.

The Internet is becoming a place for individual modernization. Even if the Russian online space is a projection of the offline social psychology and social institutions, there is still no government domination of that domain (at least thus far). This, as we can see, is changing: the authorities (not just the government, but a broader group of decision makers) seem to be increasingly interested in the digital sphere. As the importance of the Internet grows, attempts to control it are becoming more persistent.

The government is not the only actor trying to dominate this space, however; Neo-Nazi and Islamist groups are increasing their presence also. Importantly, these groups impose narrative schemes giving all events meaning through the prism of ethnic or religious conflict.

The nature of the Internet allows all these groups to develop simultaneously: radical movements, government-sponsored provocateurs, recreational Internet users and proto-politicians. So far they might not even notice each other, but as the Internet becomes more populated and the density of interconnections rises (current research shows that different political sectors overlap very rarely), we might see conflict among those virtual "inhabitants."

Changing Individual

The Internet changes societies globally. Russia is no exception. Millions of new users join RuNet every year. By the middle of 2011, Internet penetration had reached 46 percent of the population: 52.9 million Russians use the Internet at least once a month.[4] Most new Internet users are neither activists nor are they interested in politics or social change. Unwittingly, however, they become the subjects of a serious paradigmatic change in Russian society.

The change is not vivid and affects the following aspects: activism, creativity, trust, identity and nationalism, social "lifts" (social mobility and promotion) and change of media mechanisms, the re-imagination of democracy and representation.

Activism

In the last two years, digital activism has coalesced around a number of more or less sustainable communities. For example, the anti-wildfire activism is widely known and even mentioned by the world's top politicians; nonetheless, some of the lesser known cases are important too.[5]

In April 2010, the site <Ru_vederko> was created on the back of public outrage following the death of two pedestrians after a car crash involving a senior Lukoil executive.[6] Developing the practices initiated by various motorist movements (protests starting in the mid-2000s, mainly against limitations on car imports), since its online presence began, it has played a crucial role in the civic protest campaigns dedicated to the perception that officials carry out traffic violations with impunity. The site tracks almost all official cars, helping to expose those government officials that violate traffic rules and even commit more serious crimes.

A similar transformation happened within the environmentalist community, as demonstrated by the movement to protect the Khimki

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[4] "Internet Audience Is Growing Faster than Expected," <Public Opinion Foundation>, 15 June 2011.
[5] Russia Wildfires 2010, Special Coverage Page, <Global Voices Online>.
[6] On 25 February 2010, the car of A. Barkov, one of Lukoil's senior managers, killed two women in a traffic accident.
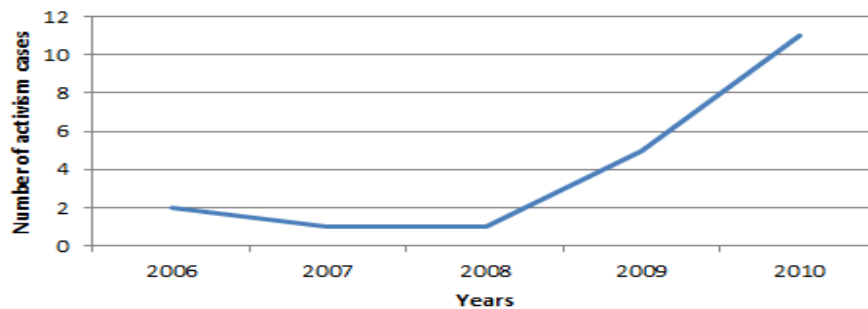
forest near Moscow. A movement to oppose the building of a highway that would divide the Khimki forest park has been active since 2007, yet it was only in 2010 that it began to leverage the use of new media to increase its impact. The website <ecmo.ru> existed before, however, the leader of the movement, Yevgenia Chirikova was reluctant to engage in the virtual sphere.

Another important case of institutionalized activism is the site <rospil.info>, created in 2010 by popular anti-corruption blogger Alexey Navalny. It offers citizens a tribune to expose suspicious public procurement tenders. Rospil's global innovation was acknowledged by the Die Welle's the "Best of Blogs" Award. Before Rospil, the discussion of the suspicious procurement decisions existed as a number of disparate LiveJournal communities that were unable to leverage their effect. The crowd-source[7] mechanism of <rospil.info> definitely played an important role in the restructuring of this kind of activism. According to expert Mary Joyce's research on global activism, the number of cases of digital activism in Russia is increasing exponentially (Fig.1).

Blog campaigns or "blogwaves" had become an important part of the information and political landscape in Russia. Usually, blogwaves are directed against corrupt or unacceptably arrogant officials. While a successful blogwave can result in the dismissal of a mid-level official, it is rare that they lead to the dismissal of a high-ranking figure. Thus, even this last instrument of effective social feedback (since elections no longer allow the citizenry to communicate opinions or affect political change) becomes neutralized by the total ignorance and indifference of the authoritarian government.

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[7] Crowdsourcing is the act of outsourcing tasks traditionally performed by an employee or contractor to an undefined, large group of people or community (a "crowd"), through an open call.

Fig. 1. Number of activism cases in Russia,[8] 2006-2010

Source: Global Digital Activism Data Set, Meta-Activism.org, <www.meta-activism.org/data-set/>. The overall set for Russia was filtered by the author.

The number and popularity of crowdsourcing websites is also growing (Table 1). While in 2009 there were only two crowdsourcing portals. In 2010, six more were created, and by the middle of 2011, another six started working, creating core activism communities around them. Crowdsourced portals play an important role in empowering digital civil society cores since they are much better exposed and are able to present the results of their activity better.

Table 1. Growing number of crowdsource websites

2009	2010	mid-2011
<88003333350.ru> (founded 2003, tracks electoral violations) <taktaktak.ru> (facilitates mutual help efforts)	<dalslovo.ru> (tracks politicians' promises) <rospil.info> (tracks suspicious public procurement deals) <democrator.ru> (collects complaints about city administration) <streetjournal.org> (collects complaints about city administration) <lizaalert.org> (network for search and rescue of missing people) <russian-fires.ru> (organized efforts to fight wildfires)	<vzyatochnik.info> (maps bribes given) <roskomvzyatka.ru> (maps bribes given) <gdecasino.org> (maps illegal casinos and gambling sites) <rynda.org> (unites volunteers and those who need help) <holoda.info> (organized efforts to fight winter hardship) <rosyama.ru> (collects information on potholes in urban areas)

Source: Compiled by the author.

Yet, almost all the projects stay out of politics. Most of the leaders of activism communities and crowdsourced projects stay out of politics, at least explicitly. Despite the fact that very often there are

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[8] Activism is defined by the authors as

a) any instance in which citizens use digital technology is used in a campaign for social or political change, either as individuals or through a nonprofit organization, and

b) any instance in which citizens use digital technology to create or alter a public discussion on social and political change.

opposition politicians involved in the projects, project organizers themselves are rarely brave enough to affirm an explicit political agenda.

The reason: the price of being explicitly political in Russia is too high (and may vary from legal prosecution to untraceable "results" as like employment problems). This is why most digital activism projects remain (at least so far) apolitical or more appropriately: proto-political. Thus "the error of NIMBY (not in my back yard)," which political analyst Vladimir Gelman identifies,[9] is a rational choice rather than a mistake. Gregory Asmolov, co-editor of RuNet Echo at Global Voices, goes even further, calling the constellation of activism communities an emerging political system that sooner or later will either have to merge with or confront the traditional system ("Arab Spring" scenario).[10]

Creativity

The Internet is a creative space for Russians, as it is worldwide. Youth, *digital natives*, engage in this world creating new meanings and new digital subcultures. A lengthy article by Alexander Gorbachov on *kid-hop*, amateur hip-hop uploaded on YouTube by teenagers, features dozens of underage artists.[11] Although it is hard to agree with Gorbachov that kid-hop fans appeared on the Moscow streets during the Manezhnaya race riots,[12] it is a fact that the generation raised on various kinds of digital self-made creativity will soon reach voting age. Within the decade, they will be of an age to occupy decision-making positions.

Global hipster culture[13] is closely connected with the Internet. Hipster websites are finding their way into politics: while <epic-hero.ru> ("The first hipster blog about politics, economy, and society") was a hub for liberal hipsters in 2010-2011, <spasiboeva.ru> ("Internet-training ground to test new types of digital weapons of mass destruction"), seems, on the contrary, to be a pro-Kremlin website aimed at the hipster subculture. In July 2011, however, Ilya Klishin, the creator of <epic-hero.ru> was employed by media agency "Legenda" that supports government PR-projects, consequently <epic-hero.ru>

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[9] V. Gelman, "Lovushka dlya aktivistov" [The Activist Trap], <Slon.ru>, 9 December 2010.

[10] G. Asmolov, "Is Russia's Political 'Black Hole' About to Reach Tipping Point?" <Global Voices Online>, 21 July 2011.

[11] A. Gorbachev, "True Pioneer Word. Russian Teenage Hip-hop," <Afisha.ru>, 1 February 2011.

[12] The Manezhnaya race riots happened on 11 December 2010. More than 10,000 football fans mourning the murder of supporter Egor Sviridov by Aslan Cherkesov a Northern Caucasian carried out a violent demonstration against immigrants and government unaccountability.

[13] Hipsters are a subculture of young, recently settled urban middle class adults and older teenagers with musical interests mainly in indie rock.

had to abandon its political agenda. This does not necessarily reflect state manipulation, it could be a result of the overall cultural and political environment, when no independent media project can be profitable, especially not a semi-professional blog with little capital behind it. Even if such a blog found its audience, it would be hard to find companies willing to advertise on it.

Trust

The Internet mends society's texture; whether the government likes it or not. Online communities create ties inside the atomized society, and re-create group identities and values. As leading activist blogger Marina Litvinovich points out, "networks also help citizens to overcome the post-Soviet trauma that led to disconnection and atomization within Russian society."[14]

The government, however, does not yet use the power of these networks. Using the dichotomy of "starfish (networked) and spider (hierarchical)" organizations proposed by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom,[15] the Russian government fails to appreciate the potential of networked organizations and the possible ways to use them constructively.

As the number of activism hubs grows and, more importantly, time passes, relationships of trust are becoming stronger. People like Alexey Navalny, Yevgenia Chirikova, or Leonid Volkov (Yekaterinburg politician and author of the "Cloud Democracy" concept explained below) are becoming catalysts (initiators) of "starfish" organizations that keep producing trust and respect inside the communities they create.

For example, in the Urals region (mostly Perm and Yekaterinburg region), bloggers and networked activists belong to different ideology camps: would be liberals (like Leonid Volkov or Fyodor Krasheninnikov), social-democrats (like Valeriy Nazarov) and nationalists (like Yevgeniy Roizman or Vadim Boulatov). Even if they disagree on political positions, these bloggers have developed a certain level of mutual trust, thanks to a shared regional identity and the kudos that comes from being a reliable blogger (consistent content and transparency). As a result, even their readers also seem to trust bloggers from the other ideological camps (though this trust is limited to within the Urals region).

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[14] M. Litvinovich, "Russia: Social Networks and Civic Mobilization," <Global Voices Online>, 2 June 2011.
[15] O. Brafman, R. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations,* London, Penguin, 2006.

United Russia's persistent efforts to discredit Alexey Navalny are failing to make an impact upon the online audience—despite success offline—simply because Navalny and his supporters are quick enough to counter efforts to discredit him before campaigns can gain momentum. This, together with the absurdity of *United Russia*'s charges, helps Navalny to deflect attacks, something that most opposition politicians have failed to achieve (poll data show that most opposition politics are perceived negatively both off and online).

Changing Society

Social Lifts and Change of Media Mechanisms

The overall discourse of the blogosphere is critical towards the government. Moreover, despite being marginal in offline political life, liberals are quite influential in the online space.

Four of the top ten bloggers (at the moment of writing) publish critical—though not always liberal—blog posts from time to time.[16] This is supported by research on public discourse in the Russian blogosphere undertaken by Harvard University, "the majority of Russian bloggers appear to write from a more independent, non-aligned perspective," while at the same time there is a certain "absence of a strong unified opposition to the governing party."[17]

The critical attitude towards government sometimes reaches its extremes. The "Primorye partisans," a guerrilla gang in the Russian Far East that carried out assassinations of police officers, showed that bloggers supported the guerillas on the whole.[18] The demonstrative effect of the guerrillas' actions as it was spread and multiplied by the networks was so impressive that guerrilla groups quickly appeared in several other regions (they were quickly neutralized by the police). Such groups were voluntary and were not founded by the original group. The Internet *per se* was not involved, except as the channel for the "demonstration effect." Allowing copycat groups to see the actions of their role models created a completely new (and quite serious) security hazard.

The presence of independent online commentators within the context of tight control over the traditional media has encouraged "information upwelling." Upwelling is an oceanographic term describing the phenomenon when "dense, cooler, and usually nutrient-rich water moves towards the ocean surface, replacing the warmer, usually nutrient-depleted surface water." In this metaphor, Russian conventional media are the "surface waters," forming an "information

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[16] RuNet Blog Rating, <Yandex.ru>.
[17] B. Etling, *et. al.*, "Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization," Harvard University, Berkman Center for Internet & Society, *Research Publication* No. 2010-11, October 2010.
[18] M. Reshetnyak, "Russia: Bloggers Discuss the Case of a Cop-Killing Gang," <Global Voices Online>, 16 June 2011.

surface" for most of the population, yet depleted in independent news and analysis due to direct instructions ("temniki"), commercial constraints, and outright censorship. The information from blogs represents the "nutrient-rich water" from the deep.

As in upwelling, most blog campaigns start in the depths of the blogosphere. If they reach the information surface, they can become effective and result in dismissals, political decisions, etc. This usually happens if one of the conventional media companies decides to publish the results of the "blogger's investigation." Television journalists are simply unable to publish the results of their own investigations and only a few print journalists can do so. Bloggers, however, are much freer in what they can publish and make public. In the cases when the traditional media have featured the topic from the bloggers, they simply draw attention to the topic rather than criticize the situation directly (in most cases this is enough).

In this process of information upwelling, traditional media companies become gateways for public awareness, especially for the population without Internet access (not just the elderly, but also the less educated). The large "unconnected" population and general apathy are important factors limiting the influence of blogs. However, they still have influence—through more connected individuals: mainly teenagers, the young and those with higher education.

The Internet acts as a "social elevator," as in the case of Alexey Navalny. As a traditional politician, Navalny was not very successful— his political career started in 2001 but he only found true popularity with his online engagement. People might not know Navalny directly, in April 2011 only 6 percent of Levada responders stated that they knew who he was;[19] but the Internet allowed to spread the meme[20] "*United Russia*—party of crooks and thieves" within a few months to a much broader audience. By June 2011, 33 percent of Levada respondents said that they would agree or strongly agree with the statement.[21]

Still, there are no examples of online proto-politicians winning even local elections thanks to online mobilization alone. Anton Tolmachev, a businessman and blogger who tried to run for the deputy at Sverdlovsk region assembly using online mobilization, confesses, the current election system is designed to exclude any non-system figures from the electoral process.[22] Independent politicians can acquire large audiences online rather quickly,[23] but they cannot

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[19] "Six Percent of Russians Know Alexey Navalny," Levada Centre, 6 May 2011.
[20] An Internet meme is an image, video, phrase or simply an idea that spreads from one person to another seemingly for no logical reason.
[21] "About *United Russia* Party," Levada Centre, 6 May 2011.
[22] A. Tolmachev, "Vybory : Den' semnadtzaty. Posledniy." [Elections: The Seventeenth and Last Day], <http://legart.bestpersons.ru/feed/post42374534/>, 29 January 2011.
[23] Indeed, many do already since the entrance cost is low: to start a blog you just have to have some writing talent and technical capacity.

institutionalize their presence and remain independent in the "real" political system.

Nationalism

Identity and nationalism

Recent Levada Center polls indicate that nationalist sentiment has reached an unprecedented level of support in Russia (Fig.2). Nearly 58 percent of respondents supported the slogan: "Russia for Russians" and 68 percent stated that the government should limit immigration in 2011.

An important development of the nationalist discourse is the debate between *natsionalisty* (ethnic nationalists that see Russia as an ethnic state) and *impertsy* (political nationalists that see Russia as an empire). This is important because nationalism poses a serious (and so far legitimate) alternative to the traditional imperialist thinking that derives its inspiration from the Soviet and Tsarist ideologies. While the debate has a long history, it first appeared online in 2006. In 2011, the distinction between those two discourses became so marked that content analysis by Bruce Etling identified the word "rossiyanskoe"[24] as one of the most widely used words in the nationalist cluster.[25] Positive answers on isolationist questions indicate that anti-immigration and generally xenophobic slogans are more popular than ever.
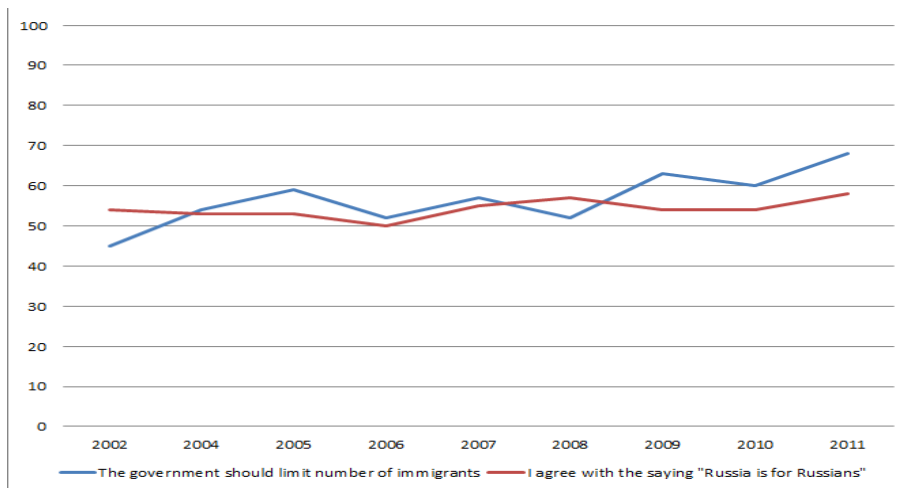
Regional identities are also developing strongly. The ambitious, project to develop a Siberian language that was launched in 2004 by linguist Yaroslav Zolotarev (with its own Russian-Siberian dictionary[26]) was not very successful and nearly died in 2010; however, less colorful regional communities flourish online. For example, the "Vladivostok" LiveJournal community (<vladivostok.livejournal.com>) with nearly 3,000 members is viable. Moreover, a dictionary of the local slang, *Globus of Vladivostok*, has been published online and as a book.[27] While the book can be bought in the city of Vladivostok only, the online dictionary is available for everyone. During interviews, Vladivostok bloggers agreed that the topic of regional identity and regionalism appears from time to time on the message boards and in local communities, becoming stronger as time goes on.

[24] Rossiyanskoe is a pejorative adjective used by ethnic nationalists instead of "rossijskoe" to mark something belonging to the oppressive empire rather than ethnic Russian "russkoje" state.
[25] B. Etling, "Do Russian Blogs Represent an Alternative Public Sphere?" <Media Cloud>, 11 May 2011.
[26] "Sibirska Volgota" [*Sibirska vol'gota*], <www.volgota.com/govor/dictionary>.
[27] "Globus Vladivostoka" [The Globe of Vladivostok], Wikia; <http://ru.vlad-globus.wikia.com/wiki/%D0%A1%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%B1%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%8F:AllPages>.

Fig. 2. Nationalism in Russia, 2002-2011

Source: Nationalism in Contemporary Russia, <Levada Centre>, 2 April 2011. More positive answers on isolationist questions indicate that the anti-emigration (and more generally xenophobic) slogans are more popular than ever.

Nationalist mobilization

The Internet not only provides abilities for positive change but also creates new, more efficient opportunities for the coordination of violence.[28] While the police and the Prosecutor's office concentrate on enlarging the list of forbidden "extremist materials," and finding teenagers who spread videos of violence or ethnic hatred, the law enforcement bodies fail to prevent outbreaks of violence. Combating uploaded videos is like fighting with windmills: it only tackles the external signs of a much deeper problem.

The first case of network-based nationalist violence was in August 2006. Previously, outbreaks out nationalist violence occurred on an almost annual basis from 2001, but they were not coordinated online. The initial response to brutal murder by the representatives of North Caucasian diaspora in a small northern town of Kondopoga turned into a full-blown *pogrom* and resulted in the total blockade of the town by police special unit teams (OMON). Back then, the first online message entitled "War in Your City" was created by user *Lapochka* at the local forum <onego.ru> (now unavailable) and called everyone to gather in the streets. Within three days, mass demonstrations and ensuing pogroms forced all people of North Caucasian descent to flee the town.

In summer 2010, peaceful demonstrations dedicated to the murder of football supporter Yuri Volkov attracted several thousand football fans in the center of Moscow.[29] When a second football fan,

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[28] Nationalism is not *a priori* connected with violence but rather the Russian version of nationalism is immanently associated with violence and the cult of power.
[29] A. Sidorenko, "Why Did they Kill Yuri Volkov?" <Global Voices Online>, 22 July 2011.

Yegor Sviridov, a member of the Spartak Moscow fan club was killed by members of the North Caucasian diaspora in December 2010, the protest turned violent. The mourning of Sviridov's death transformed into massive race riots in Manezhnaya square, central Moscow, with over 10,000 participants. Several people were injured and one death was reported.

As the statistical analysis showed, the main platform for organizing Manezhnaya manifestation was <fanat1k.ru>, a media portal of the "Spartak Ultras" group.[30] As such, the main sites advocating violence were not nationalist blogs, but sport and social websites that were "nationalized."

According to political activist Stanislav Yakovlev, it was an organization called *Dvizh* that was responsible for the Manezhnaya events. *Dvizh*, a term used to describe a right-wing mob, is a leaderless organization. "You cannot control *Dvizh*, and you cannot make a deal with it," wrote Yakovlev,[31] underscoring that this mob does not consist of the "poor and miserable," but lower to upper-middle class adults, some even employed in creative professions.

While in 2008 nationalists seemed a rather minor, self-enclosed group, in 2011 they are much more vocal and cannot be ignored or silenced. Thus we can see that a "dark side" of Internet is developing simultaneously with the positive progress of online civil society.

Re-imagination of Democracy and Representation

Nevertheless, the socio-political changes driven by the Internet cannot be reduced to just nationalist mobilization and digital activism. For some, the Internet changes the philosophical understanding of authority and power. As in the rest of the world core democratic techniques such as voting and decision-making are being re-imagined and put into a new digital framework.

In 2003, Denis Smagin, creator of the crowdsource portal <dorogi.teron.ru> proposed a regular bug-tracker (used in software development to track bugs and monitor their resolution) to report holes in the roads of the city of Perm. The software neither had a map nor did it allow the uploading of pictures of the holes. Yet, several years later Perm regional government was unable to ignore quite popular portal and imported this crowdsourced data to the government portal <dorogi59.ru>.

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[30] A. Sidorenko, "Russia: Studying Online Mobilization of the Manezh Riots," <Global Voices Online>, 15 December 2011.
[31] Stanislav Yakovlev's page on <LiveJournal>.

In 2010, two portals <streetjournal.org> and <democrator.ru> used the same method to address a broader range of problems—"report - inform - track down the solution." They not only allow users to complain but also invite the authorities to advertise the solution of the reported "bugs" (holes in the streets, violations of the law, etc.). In 2011, bloggers and political activists Leonid Volkov and Fyodor Krasheninnikov, proposed the concept of "Cloud Democracy," an online, open-source system that would allow a balanced mechanism of delegation of power and competence leveraged by the speed of telecommunications and familiarity of such tools as online voting.[32] Despite looking like e-government or e-administration, the concept goes further as it concentrates not on governmental services but on the whole political system.

This trend appears from time to time in different parts of the online discourse. The more people associate governance with the content management system (CMS[33]) or other online services, the less sacred power is. The sanctification of power and reference to its "divine" nature is one of the cornerstones of the authoritarian system. This is why Alexey Chadaev, a former *United Russia* ideologist objected to government officials blogging or tweeting, because the Russian political leadership is based on "three values: miracle, secrecy and power," in other words, exclusivity and distance from its people.[34] Ironically, Chadaev proposed his own, authoritarian project of "direct Internet democracy," which simply put the current (undemocratic) electoral system online, thus making it even more hypocritical.

Another aspect for a greater understanding of the liberating power of the technology is crowdfunding, public donations. By 2011 Alexey Navalny collected 214,000 US dollars for the support of the anti-corruption project via <Yandex.money>, an online payment provider. Never before had any online proto-politician collected such an amount. Boris Nemtsov followed his example, collecting money for the publication of a book exposing Vladimir Putin's corruption schemes, *Putin. Itogi*.

As the blogger Oleg Kozyrev has pointed out, crowdfunding is an innovation since it allows Russians to sponsor the politics they like directly. It also has the benefit of transparency—if people pay for the politicians they like, those politicians cannot be accused of serving the interests of oligarchs.[35]

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[32] A. Sidorenko, "Russia: Envisioning the 'Cloud Democracy' Utopia," <Global Voices Online>, 22 July 2011. The book is freely available here : <http://cdem.ru/>.
[33] A content management system is a collection of procedures used to manage work flow in a collaborative environment. Online, this means allowing for a large number of people to contribute to and share stored data.
[34] "Ideolog EdRa hochet zapretit blogi chinovnikov," [*United Russia* Ideologist Wants to Ban Blogs by Officials], <Fontanka.ru>, 25 October 2010.
[35] Oleg Kozyrev's blog on <LiveJournal>.

Manipulative State

Limits of Control

According to various Internet freedom benchmarks, Russia is somewhere between a Western-style open digital environment and a closed authoritarian system.[36] It has been ranked "partly-free" by Freedom House and "under surveillance" by Reporters without Borders.

While the networked society can thrive and actively compete with the government (an observation that leads many analysts to believe RuNet is fully free), government measures are directed to limit this freedom and therefore to undermine the power of the blogosphere. While playing by the certain rules, the government is consistent in asserting its power over the digital sphere via manipulations.[37]

When speaking of the government in its role of the Internet regulator, it is better to think in terms of the political leadership rather than the government as an institution *per se*. While most ministries are rather weak actors in the digital environment, the core pro-government actors are *United Russia*, the leaderships of pro-Kremlin youth movements (often accused of starting DDoS-attacks[38]), pro-Kremlin think tanks, and, most probably, certain departments of the FSB.

Control is coordinated by a number of other institutions. The blocking and removal of the websites (by the Prosecutor's office), so far is restricted to ultra-right nationalists, infected websites and child pornography. In March 2011, responsibility for these two categories of "problem websites" has been transferred to the Ministry of Interior. While an attempt was made to implement a ban on YouTube, it was quickly rejected by court action in Russia's Far East. The Prosecutor's office is also responsible for the prosecution against individual bloggers.

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[36] Freedom on the Net 2011, <Freedom House>, 2011. Enemies of the Internet, <Reporters Without Borders>, March 2010.
[37] J. Nocetti, "'Digital Kremlin': Power and the Internet in Russia," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 59, April 2011.
[38] A distributed denial-of-service attack (DDoS) is an attempt to make a computer resource unavailable to its intended users. It generally consists of the concerted efforts of an individual, or group to prevent a website or service from functioning efficiently or at all, temporarily or indefinitely.

The Russian digital environment is especially affected by so-called third generation controls,[39] these include paid blogposts ("Nashi" youth movement), videos to discredit individuals ("Nashi" and FSB), DDoS attacks ("Nashi" and a vague group of "patriotic bloggers," volunteers), phishing and hacking of the blogs (Foundation on Effective Politics, which closed in summer 2011 and "patriotic bloggers"), flagging and reporting abuse in order to close portals.

The problem of these methods is not that they suffocate independent voices; it is that it is not possible to trace them to the government or pro-government structures. The only evidence they might be produced by the government is the direct effect these measures put on digital dissidents.

Russia, however, has not yet engaged in the more direct techniques already practiced in Belarus, such as hashtag spamming, deliberate Internet speed decrease, and wholesale creation of fake webpages. It is likely that under current regime it will avoid such blatant practices.

The recent DDoS attacks against LiveJournal in April and July 2011 seem to be the greatest cause for concern. The second attack on LiveJournal nearly destroyed the platform, leading some bloggers to announce the end of the political blogosphere. However, the speed with which top bloggers re-built their audiences in Google+ and Facebook is encouraging. Despite being seriously hit, LiveJournal showed its sustainability and resilience.

If Not Control, Then What?

The government does not only want to control the Internet,[40] it also wants to use it. The efficiency of this use depends on the department and the level of the government. Current strategies of different representatives of the Russian government can be divided into three general approaches: incomprehension and fear of the "Internets"; use of the networks as a PR-tool; and reluctant cooperation with society.

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[39] According to the classification proposed by the authors of *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. R. Deibert, J. Palfrey, R. Rohozinski and J. Zittrain (eds), Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010.
[40] The first statements about control the Internet were made by various FSB officials in 2009-2010. Soon after, Minister of the Interior Rashid Nurgaliev called for greater control of the Internet. In September 2011, Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika followed suit saying that social networks should be controlled "in order to defend civic liberties" (referring to the London riots in August 2011).

Incomprehension and fear of the "Internets"

This approach is typical of the "silovie vedomstva" (police, Prosecutor's office, FSB, Ministry for Emergency Situations, Army). Lack of understanding of the digital sphere and social networks, was particularly evident during the Russian wildfire crisis of 2010, when the Ministry for Emergency Situations (MChS) not only failed to organize the public effort to fight the wildfires, but even opposed the volunteer brigades. In 2011, this opposition led to the passing of the law "On Volunteer Firefighting Brigades," effective since 22 May 2011.[41] The law requires volunteer brigades be constituted as legal bodies that would need a license to provide firefighting services. Moreover, "Molodaya Gvardia," the youth wing of *United Russia* together with the Ministry launched the "I Am a Rescuer" project aiming to unite "700,000 members" in order to provide help to MChS but yet be somehow dependent on it.[42] In 2011, volunteer firefighters simply ignored the law, moving out to the fire sites simultaneously with MChS and fighting fires in parallel with the autorities. Instead of embracing networked associations of volunteers, the MChS created a parallel centralized (and politicized) structure that is neither sustainable (in operational cost terms) nor efficient (since it relies on extrinsic motivations: money).

The army also seems not to understand the internet. While it is defensible that the army does not engage in social networking for security reasons, it is hardly understandable that there is still no cyber warfare strategy. The Russian military doctrine includes only one point on the development of the "information struggle," while the rest of the doctrine is focused on twentieth century methods of warfare.[43]

The Ministry of Internal Affairs (police) does not seem to get "the online stuff" either. The ministry had created a Vkontakte group where started to re-post official (and quite coarse) news from their own police-department. At the same time, the ministry launched a prosecution against Dmitry Vorobiev, a police officer who had created <police-russia.ru>, an independent portal where policemen could discuss their professional problems and expose bureaucracy and corruption.[44] The fact that UK police have behaved similarly towards the police blogger Richard "Night Jack" Horton, illustrates the global challenge for law enforcement to be more transparent in the digital era.[45]

Before the case of <police-russia.ru>, five officers were prosecuted for video addresses they made on YouTube in 2010 (Major

[41] Text of the law: <www.rg.ru/2011/05/11/ohrana-dok.html>.
[42] "Proekt MGER 'Ya—spasatel' nabiraet oboroty," [Project MGER "I am a Lifeguard" is Gaining Momentum], <Molodaya Gvardya>, 3 May 2011.
[43] Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, <Kremlin.ru>, 5 February 2010.
[44] M. Litvinovich, "Russia: Ministry's Online Blunders," <Global Voices Online>, 16 June 2011.
[45] "No More Action over Police Blog," <BBC News>, 17 June 2009.

Alexey Dymovski and his followers). In all these cases, the police commanders have focused on eliminating the sources of "leaks" rather than attempting to reform their departments.[46] This pattern of official behavior was repeated in 2011, when the military unit in the Far East sued Major Matveev for uploading a video revealing that conscript soldiers in his unit were fed dog food. When the courts rejected libel accusations against Matveev, his bosses launched case accusing him of abuse of power.[47]

The only successful case of a Police internet presence is <@OMON_Moscow> (the model of integration with the bloggers later copied by the Belarus <@Guvd_Minsk>). Police confirmed that the owner of the account served in OMON (the Russian analogue of SWAT) but said he "was not the official representative of the police." It not only created "a human image" of those who usually disperse opposition demonstrations but also provided some information on the internal actions of OMON. The Belarusian case went even further, by directly confronting the opposition. It even defended authoritarian actions. The account offered what all other channels could not: direct contact with "the other side of the barricade."

Use of the Internet solely as a PR tool

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev launched his video blog in January 2009, with the presidential LJ-community <blog_medvedev> allowing pre-moderated comments opened four months later. For some people the President's blog became a place where they could file a complaint, hoping to solve their problems. The attempt to petition the Head of State in the blogosphere seemed rather efficient: the opening post gathered more than 4500 comments. This recalls the age old tradition of "petitioning the Tsar." In 2011, however, a rare post gathered around 400 comments. Not so impressive for the head of state.

Medvedev was trying to copy the technique of blogging that proved to be successful by the few innovative regional governors. Oleg Chirkunov, governor of Perm region, started his blog in July 2008 and is currently in the RuNet Top-150 blog rating. Nikita Belyh, former leader of the liberal party *Union of Right Forces*, kept a blog before becoming governor of the Kirov region.

Right after the opening of the Medvedev's blog other regional governors succumbed to the "blog fashion." By the end of 2010, almost

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[46] A. Sidorenko, "The Sad Fate of Russia's "YouTube Cops," <Global Voices Online>, 7 December 2011.
[47] "Sud otklonil isk k mayory Matveevu, rasskazavshemu o sobachikh konservakh, kotorymi kormyat soldat," [The Courts Reject a Lawsuit against Major Matveev, Who Reported that Soldiers Fed Dog Food], <Gazeta.ru>, 29 July 2011.

every governor had a blog or other social media account but most of them[48] (unlike those of Belyh and Chirkunov, and probably few more) were uninteresting: simply copying the PR department of the regional administrations. Sometimes they even lacked the critical comments section, a fact which vividly highlights the vision of feedback and public debate held by most governors.

In January 2010 President Medvedev took a further step toward bringing blogs into the official mainstream. During a meeting with governors, Medvedev said that those officials who do not use the Internet might lose their jobs. He advised the governors to "penetrate blogs, more actively participate in online discussions and support online mass media." Liberal experts were quite skeptical about this initiative—what kind of discussion can those officials provide online, when they condemn it in real life?

Obviously, officials that are active on blogs or on Twitter, raise suspicions: if they are so active online, do they really have time to fulfill their functions?

Blogging was not the only Medvedev's initiative in the digital sphere. To discuss the new law "On Police," an online platform <http://zakonoproekt2011.ru/> was created. At the beginning, it seemed that Medvedev was trying to fix the absence of the democratically elected parliament and to listen to the vox populi. In order to prove this, a citizen campaign "Five Simple Amendments" was launched to identify the five most crucial changes. As a result of the campaign, the five proposals were rated as the most popular amendments.

When the law was signed by Medvedev, only two basic amendments had been included in the new law, while the rest (as well as other citizen-centered amendments) were ignored.[49] The discussion of the police law gathered nearly 20,000 comments, but as soon as users realized that neither lawmakers nor the president will listen to them, they were no longer eager to participate in discussions. The next draft bill under discussion, "On Education" gathered half as many comments. The online discussion of legislation as a feedback mechanism was discredited, undermining the idea of digital "state feedback."

All these examples illustrate that even as the government tries to engage people in discussion (or at least seem to be doing so), it is unable to overcome the authoritarian model of state-citizen relations. This failure has led to the slow decline in the engagement of the citizens who—briefly—believed that the change was possible.

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[48] "Chinovniki v seti," [Civil Servants on the Web], <Vedomosti>, 12 March 2011.
[49] "1 marta v Rossii vstupaet v soly Zakon o politzii," [The New "Law on Police" Comes into Force 1st of March in Russia], <Radio Liberty>, 26 February 2011.

Reluctant cooperation with society

There are some good—or at least not so bad—examples of cooperation between bloggers and the government. Most of them can be observed on the regional level. So far, there is at least one example of such cooperation. Detailed research is needed to see whether this model has been duplicated elsewhere.[50]

Aforementioned Oleg Chirkunov, Perm Krai governor, was among the few officials to integrate crowdsourced citizen data into an official government portal. The Perm regional government is actively participating in street-journal.org, among other projects. Chirkunov's actions demonstrate a will to communicate and cooperate with those who can actually provide better tools for solving the issues the government is responsible for. Digital technology provides online civil initiatives the advantage over traditional, centralized government reporting systems. Yet, this is not been understood by the majority of Chirkunov's colleagues. But still, even with this will to cooperate, evidence of the social "divorce" between the government and society remains visible. Perm authorities express their attitude towards digital civil society initiatives: "It would be great if they [bloggers, digital activists] would learn how not to involve us [the government] at all."[51]

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[50] The regions where such model might take place (to be researched): Tatarstan, Tomsk region, Kaliningrad.
[51] A. Sidorenko, "Russia: Online Ecosystem Case Study of Perm Region," <Global Voices Online>, 4 March 2011.

Conclusion

The society and the government are about to meet head on. Most Russian experts agree that they might come into confrontation after the 2012 election.

So far, the government—unable to establish relations of trust, feedback and two-way communication and decision-making with the society—is interested in dispersing and mixing up the digital sphere, producing what Internet analyst Evgeny Morozov would call "the Spinternet," an anonymous and largely manipulative digital space.[52] The latest attack on LiveJournal is an important example of such policies.

It is also interesting to see the personal differences in the approach towards the Internet of Medvedev and Putin. Medvedev is an example of networked authoritarianism, while Putin's model is strongly hierarchical, actually denying the importance of networks. So, Medvedev's authoritarian rule looks more sustainable in the Internet era than Putin's model. For Putin, who will in all likelihood be the next president, the lack of understanding of how online networks work might be especially dangerous.

As policies of control become more obvious, they could provoke a counter-reaction: resulting in the radicalization of the bloggers and the fomenting of a separate digital identity. Given that the world described in blogs is different from the one shown on television, the rising number of Internet users, this might involve more people than usually attributed to the overall audience of the blogosphere.

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[52] E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, New York, Public Affairs, 2011.