

Maria Goncharenko

## The virtual freedom of Russia. Has the uncensored Internet anything to do with the recent protests in Russia?

Free mass media are one of the key elements of democracy. Internet in Russia, even far from being a mass media, grants its users a significant freedom of information and opinion. In a few years Internet expansion has altered the informational space and has challenged a number of political equilibriums. Communication experts are talking about the increasing Internet influence on Russian politics. This study provides a brief overview of political and civic online activity in Russia and checks on the relationship between recently grown protests and uncensored Internet.

### Politics in Russian media space: TV, press, Internet

The regime type identification in contemporary Russia may have certain bizarre outputs such as “sovereign democracy”<sup>1</sup> or “competitive authoritarianism”<sup>2</sup>, or even “glamour authoritarianism”<sup>3</sup>. Whatever it is, no doubt rises about the importance of state controlled mass media for regime legitimization.

In Russia’s media landscape the Television is the main source of information for the majority of the population and all leading federal TV channels are under the direct control of the government. Certain topics are totally banned from public discussion. Parliamentary oppositional parties have an unequal access to media during elections and a measured coverage during legislature.

Russian newspapers and radio stations are more free than federal TV. It is common to suppose that these media have small or niche audiences and do not challenge the authorities. The independent media outlets – though officially permitted – have been periodically threatened and sometimes attacked by gov-

<sup>1</sup> Term coined by Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov.

<sup>2</sup> S. LEVITSKY - L. WAY, *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*, in «Journal of Democracy», vol. 13 no. 2, 2002, pp. 51-65.

<sup>3</sup> S. BELKOVSKY, [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/02/19\\_a\\_2642194.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/02/19_a_2642194.shtml).

No. 120 – JUNE 2012

### Abstract

The extent of Russian on-off political protests ongoing since December 2011 has astonished experts, politicians and activists themselves. The Russian opposition brings people out to the square notwithstanding the extremely strict or none access to mass media. The peculiarity of the Russian media landscape consists of the coexistence of the government-controlled Television and the uncensored Internet. This gap pushed extra-parliamentary opposition online. How do the new technologies benefits or shortcomings favor or hinder the political activism in Russia?

*Maria Goncharenko, University of Milan*

(\*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

ernmental and/or criminal organizations. On numerous occasions journalists of some liberal newspapers (such as «Novaya Gazeta» and «Kommersant», known for their critical position towards ruling establishment) suffered injuries and were murdered. The moving factor of the assaults is investigative activity of the journalists. The way the inquiries are held by police makes one wonder whether the officers aim to reveal or to hide the persons behind the crimes.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, political control was not extended to the Internet. There is no evidence of significant technical filtering of the Russian Internet<sup>5</sup>. Runet<sup>6</sup> may be considered the less censored public space, even if authorities have contrived some “wild” repressive practices. They engage paid bloggers to vilify original post or to misguide the discussion<sup>7</sup>. Otherwise the DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attacks may hit an Internet site in a moment that is particularly important for its functioning<sup>8</sup>.

At the end of 2011 the number of weekly Russian Internet users has reached 54.5 million people, that's 47% of the adult population. The increase of Internet audience during the last year is 17% (and during the 2010 it was 18%). More than 93% of the new users live outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg. So the federal subjects have given the important boost to Internet diffusion in Russia, even if the two capitals detain the highest relative indexes (Moscow – 68% and Saint Petersburg – 71%)<sup>9</sup>. Internet penetration is mainly concentrated in urban centers, but that is where the majority of the population lives. A typical Runet user is young, affluent and educated; and s/he is an office worker.

Political activism in Runet is above world online average<sup>10</sup>. That is partially due to the limited (or denied) access to the traditional media for the opposition, both systemic (parliamentary) and non-systemic (extra-parliamentary). Government is present in Internet too, but there is a difference in the way authorities and opposition use the web. Ruling elite relies mainly on major media for its political communication. Its appearance in Internet is a tribute to fashion, a caprice, or a desire to appear up to date. Often their sites are pure informative sources, and the informational flow goes one way. On the contrary, for the opposition Internet is the only or the main means of information and communication with its followers. The opposition representatives are interactive; they encourage discussions and exchanges of users' opinions.

Russian online community is anarchic and chaotic. However some generic features can be distinguished. Active Internet users form what is called “blogosphere” with more than 55 millions of blogs. Most of politically involved and influential bloggers have their beginnings on the *LiveJournal* platform and recently almost all of them have created *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts. However such accounts did not replace the former ones; they support the original blog, attract new readers by spreading information in alternative communities. Even if a great number of bloggers has a critical position towards authorities, often they do not belong to any political movement or group.

The Russian authorities did not seem to intend to introduce any measures of Internet regulation or control, at least until December 2011 when after the election results protests the Federal Security Service (FSB) made a pressure on the largest Russian social network *Vkontakte* to close opposition groups on the site. *Vkontakte* refused not so much for the sake of freedom as for the sake of

---

<sup>4</sup> Since 2000 until 2009 8 journalists of «Novaya Gazeta» were murdered, two had survived the attempted homicide, [www.novayagazeta.ru](http://www.novayagazeta.ru). During the investigation on the heavy beating of «Kommersant» journalist Oleg Kashin his colleagues were asked some suspicious questions, such as whether Kashin was aware of what he was writing about. «Kommersant», no. 205(4505), 8 November 2010, <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc-y/1534956>.

<sup>5</sup> B. Etling *et al*, *Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere*, Berkman Center Research Publication, October 2010, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> «Runet» has several meanings; mainly it is used to design the Russian Internet.

<sup>7</sup> B. Etling *et al*, *Public Discourse in the Russian...*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.newsru.com/russia/06may2012/moreddos.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Public Opinion Foundation, FOM (ФОМ), <http://fom.ru/>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.telecomru.ru/article/?id=6185>.

competitiveness<sup>11</sup>. It is reasonable to suppose that some attempts of Internet regulation may be expected in the near future.

### The alternative is Internet

Internet development in Russia has favored – some experts argue<sup>12</sup> – the creation of the “Fifth Estate” which is a platform for networked individuals capable to challenge the influence of established institutions, to increase the accountability of the press, politicians, doctors and academics by offering alternative sources of information and opinion. Three functions of political and civic Runet can be easily identified.

Firstly, it is **an alternative source of information** turned out to be a valuable tool for the denouncing of corruption practices of institutions. Thus, on November 2009 Alexey Dymovsky, then militsiya<sup>13</sup> major, posted a video on *Youtube.com*, in which he spoke out against endemic corruption of the militsiya. The video just added fuel to the fire of public discussion on law infringements by Russian militsiyamen<sup>14</sup>. Other exposes followed. On December 2009 President Medvedev signed a decree on the reform of the Russian law enforcement agency. That proved the ability of the Internet community to put pressure for alternative issue placement in public agenda, expanding the discussion on topics disregarded by traditional media. Russian bloggers are producing and sharing information online that is collectively determined to be of public importance.

Secondly, Internet has played a role as **an alternative connection means** for the people who criticize the authorities. That was important for getting aware of how many citizens are unhappy with the present state of affairs. Through Internet it became clear that their number is considerable and growing. The first visible protest action was the blue buckets campaign started on April 2010. Drivers fitted their cars' roofs with a blue toy bucket to manifest their disapproval of abuse of blue flashing emergency lights by state officials, businessmen and celebrities violating the Traffic code. The first blue bucket flashmob was organized by journalist Sergey Parkhomenko through the Internet project “Snob”<sup>15</sup>. Further on, the movement named “The Society of Blue Buckets” was founded<sup>16</sup>.

During the protest actions following the Parliamentary elections in December 2011, Presidential elections on March 2012 and Putin's inauguration in May, social networks played a role in spreading the appeals, keeping in touch and providing instant communication. Thus on May 6, 2012, during the manifestations on Bolotnaya square, one of the oppositional leaders Navalny made his appeal to the crowd via Twitter: «...[demonstrators] there is no other way to get in touch with you. We are going to sit down until they open entirely the entrance in to the square. Tell this to your neighbor»<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, Internet reveals itself to be **functional for civil society development** in Russia. The type of civil organization that seems to be most successful is an issue-based campaign. Online crowd-sourcing platform *Help Map*, which coordinated practical aspects of emergency during the 2010 wildfires in Russia, was so well functioning that it won a Russian National Internet Award for the best project in the “State and Society” category<sup>18</sup>. Khimki forest protection became a worldwide

---

<sup>11</sup> Public letter of Pavel Durov, in «Vkontakte» founder, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/12/12/durov/>.

<sup>12</sup> G. ASMOLOV - J. MACHLEDER, *Social change and the Russian Network Society*, Internews, August 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Before 2009 reform “militsiya” was the name of Russian law enforcement agency. Now they call it “Police”.

<sup>14</sup> In 2009 the massive journalists' investigation campaign on crimes committed by militsiya men gets to unknown levels in Russia. The case of Major Yevsyukov, who had killed three persons and injured six in a unfounded shooting in a supermarket, gave the origin to public discussion that brought to the reform of Ministry of Internal Affairs.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.snob.ru/profile/5593/blog/16758>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://sinevedro.ru/>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://newsru.com/arch/russia/06may2012/marsh.html>.

<sup>18</sup> G. ASMOLOV - J. MACHLEDER, *Social change...*, cit.

famous issue of civic ecological initiative aimed to stop deforestation of the Khimki area for the purposes of the Moscow – Saint Petersburg highway construction. The numerous protest actions and an open forum “Anti-Seliger”<sup>19</sup> were organized and funded thanks to bloggers’ involvement and social networks. The high-profile anticorruption investigations<sup>20</sup> by Alexey Navalny made public through his *LiveJournal* blog are other prominent examples of major Internet transparency compared to other media.

These and many other projects involved thousands of networked individuals in the causes through creating meaning, organizing social behavior and crowd funding.

### What politics goes online?

In the last decades it was suitable for common Russians to reject politics as such. Political apathy affected them after a long period of forced political participation typical of totalitarianism, besides the two revolutions that had open and closed that century. The demand for stability, both political and economical, was the crucial imperative of previous Putin’s and Medvedev’s presidencies. They matched this goal on the wave of favorable barrel’s world price. However, now the political demand of the people has changed to some extent. Years of political stability and economic wealth fostered the growth of the middle class. Young creative people with “innate absence of fear” stood up from the phlegmatic mass of apolitical majority. They ask to not take them for fools. They demand for more transparency, for political turnover and for respect for the law. The evolving political consciousness of these people pushes them to the action.

Among oppositional online activists two major communities can be distinguished: the one of nationalist orientation and the democratic one. Both of them are considerably fragmented. The third political alternative is the left movements; however, traditionally they are primarily offline organizations<sup>21</sup>.

The cluster of nationalist bloggers gathers both amateurs of Russian/Soviet glorious history and openly xenophobic organizations. The Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) was founded in 2002 in reaction to some violent crimes committed by non-Russian ethnicities, mainly Caucasus immigrants. The movement had exploited numerous cases of interethnic tensions between Russians and immigrants to gain visibility and popular sustain. In 2006 in the town of Kondopoga (northern Russia) interethnic clashes had involved Russians and Chechens. DPNI representatives appeared in the town and were able to organize the online coverage of the events (contrarily to the official media silence). The riot peaked with the exodus of ethnic Caucasians from the town. Other examples of nationalist violence and propaganda led to the ban of the Movement. After the suspension of the DPNI activities, it merged with other nationalist groups creating a united organization “Russians”<sup>22</sup>. The latter took part in the organization of the protests after the elections in December 2011.

The democratic opposition is another example of a political force that would have a difficult time ever reaching a substantial audience in Russia without Internet. In 2008 the democrats founded *Solidarnost’*, a liberal democratic political movement, to bring together the efforts of liberal political parties and groups, such as the *United Civil Front* led by Garry Kasparov and the Russian United

---

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-activists-meet-in-forest/2011/06/20/AGri66dH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-activists-meet-in-forest/2011/06/20/AGri66dH_story.html).

<sup>20</sup> In November 2010, Navalny published confidential documents proving corruption practice in *Transneft*, a Russian oil pipeline company. Navalny unclosed the numerous cases of abuse of power and private use of public funds. He has labeled the United Russia as a «party of crooks and thieves».

<sup>21</sup> The Communist Party of Russian Federation is the leading left party, gained 19,19% of Parliament seats in last elections.

<sup>22</sup> <http://rusnat.com/>.

Democratic Party *Yabloko* and others<sup>23</sup>. The members of these political organizations have promoted several Internet-based initiatives. On 10 March 2010 the public campaign «Putin must go»<sup>24</sup> has started to collect signatures for the resignation of Putin.

Besides the limited access to mass media, there are at least two factors that make the job of Russian democrats tough while obtaining the support of the people. The first one is the abovementioned fragmentation. The second one is a kind of allergic syndrome that affected Russians after the shock therapy of the early Nineties. In people's minds "democratic" is associated with a liberal rhetoric hiding the wild capitalistic imperative pushing forward egoistic interests of a small group of oligarchs at the expense of the population.

It's worth mentioning that most of these concurring political groups and movements have proved to be able to put aside their ideologies and to unite for the sake of shared interests. *Strategy-31* is a good example of common action sponsored by democrats, human rights groups and nationalists. *Strategy-31* is a civic initiative launched by political activist and writer Eduard Limonov in support of the right to peacefully assemble in Russia, granted by Article 31 of the Constitution. The protests take place on 31st of every month with 31 days. The first manifestation was held on July 31 of 2009 and the next one will take place on next May 31.<sup>25</sup>

The protest mood marks the performance art and happenings in Russia; that's why their online activity is more remarkable than the one of their colleagues from abroad. *Monstrations*<sup>26</sup> are annual happenings taking place in more Russian cities on May 1<sup>st</sup> to mock pro-governmental demonstration of the present and of the past by carrying nonsense slogans. The group of political protest artists *Voyna* has openly declared «philistines, cops, the regime»<sup>27</sup> to be their enemies. The *Pussy Riot*<sup>28</sup> performance of a punk rock song ("Holy Godmother, chase Putin out") in the Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, on February 21, 2012, caused the arrest of members of the group. The direct or allusive criticism towards the authorities has procured the leaders and participants of these actions repeating arrests, prosecutions and difficulties in their artistic and personal lives. The only way to make the unlawful detentions and questionable trials public is the Russian blogosphere.

## Final remarks

Runet has become an alternative source of information, an alternative channel for communication and an alternative way for real problem solving, especially at the local level. Citizens that bumped into the inefficiency and indifference of authorities began to talk to each other. In few occasions they were capable to cope with difficult situations bypassing authorities. Successful actions made them believe that change is possible, so they came to ask for political reforms.

This brief overview shows that the gap of freedom of information and action between Internet and traditional public space has generated a cluster of society that demands for a new *perestroika*. This gap cannot stay frozen. If it is going to grow (an impossible mirage) then some kind of virtual parallel state will appear in Russia. If this gap is going to close we hope that will happen for the official public space becoming more open to oppositional activities and not for Internet becoming censored by the power.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Yabloko* was the first Russian political party ever to open a web site on March 1996, <http://digit.ru/internet/20110928/384395231.html>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.putinavotstavku.org/>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://strategy-31.ru/>.

<sup>26</sup> <http://monstration.ru/>.

<sup>27</sup> <http://en.free-voyna.org/about>.

<sup>28</sup> <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/>.

Finally, one must keep in mind the volatility of the Internet phenomena. Digital technologies reduce the individual costs of participation and alter the perception of aligned risks and benefits. It is easy but ineffective to simply “Like” a post on Facebook or to share an article on Twitter. Political involvement is something more, and the number of people ready to act offline to advance their rights becomes crucial for Russian democracy.

La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.

I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l'Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali e articolati in:

- ✓ Programma Africa
- ✓ Programma Caucaso e Asia Centrale
- ✓ Programma Europa
- ✓ Programma Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente
- ✓ Programma Russia e Vicini Orientali
- ✓ Programma Sicurezza e Studi Strategici
  
- ✓ Progetto Argentina
- ✓ Progetto Asia Meridionale
- ✓ Progetto Cina e Asia Orientale
- ✓ Progetto Diritti Umani
- ✓ Progetto Disarmo
- ✓ Progetto Internazionalizzazione della Pubblica Amministrazione

Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

ISPI  
Palazzo Clerici  
Via Clerici, 5  
I - 20121 Milano  
[www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it)

© ISPI 2012