

Analysis No. 232, February 2014

THE BLOGOSPHERE IN RUSSIA: REALITY OR ILLUSION? NAVALNY'S CASE

Sabrina Regolo

In its approach to the demonstrations in Bolotnaja Square in December 2011 following Putin's second presidential bid, Russian policy had to deal with unexpected protests triggered by Russian blogs, a new communication medium that appeared around 2008, and by a new "peculiar" political blogger, Aleksej Navalny. Russia underwent a revolution of new-generation communication and information exchange.

This paper aims to examine the effect the blogosphere has had on the Russian people, focusing on its development and starting from the period it appeared in Russia for the first time. It will be explained how Russian blogs began to be the alternative to newspapers, television and radio and how the new generation approached this phenomenon. In a country hit in the past 10 years by a plethora of information via Internet and by a radical revolution of the new generation, this paper intends to analyze how blogging influenced politics and how politics influenced the Russian blogosphere. Starting from a political point of view and considering Russia as a country where there is only one ruling party, it will become clear how a political blog can have a big impact on readers and create a nationwide protest like the one in December 2011. The paper will examine in particular Navalny's case, focusing on the way he persuaded people to demonstrate and it will show the weak and the strong points of Russian blogs.

Sabrina Regolo is communication specialist for an import-export company in Saint Petersburg, Russia. She is responsible for the office a manager consulting company providing support to Italian companies interested in entering the Russian market.

Speech in politics: how the mass media and illocutionary acts achieve goals

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has undergone a number of serious changes: Gorbachev's mandate seemed to be a breath of fresh air in a tired and economically tested country. European literature underlined the advantages of this new period during the 90s even if the impact Gorbachev had on Russian society was seen differently by Russians and Russian philosophy. Gorbachev's "Glasnost" opened a new way of thinking and forced Russia to take responsibility for and be aware of its past, recalling what the country had gone beyond¹.

Many historical facts that were covered up by previous leaders came to light thanks to radio, television and newspapers. In fact, for the first time people could know more about the previous political period. However, the new way of spreading information and knowledge seemed to be invasive and it reflected the culturally and socially sensitive period Russia was going through.

When the first multi-party elections were held in 1990 for the first time the real protagonists were the masses, which took part actively in the new political course. Although these elections could not be properly defined as multi-party elections because the Russian Constitution had not yet been modified, in any case they were impressively symbolic. When a new multi-party law was introduced by the government, this step was assumed to be a new way of promoting political differences in a finally competitive area. In reality the political monopoly of the CPSU², seen as the "national and social organization nucleus", aimed at being the only social-democratic party on stage. On 15 March 1990, Gorbachev was elected as the first executive president of the Soviet Union. He was the sole candidate on the ballot. The Congress met for the first time on 25 May in order to elect representatives from Congress to sit on the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the Congress posed problems for Gorbachev: its sessions were televised, airing more criticism and encouraging people to expect ever more rapid reform. Furthermore, Boris Eltsin was elected in Moscow and returned to political prominence to become an increasingly vocal critic of Gorbachev. Following American practice, Gorbachev chose a vice-president. This decision would come back to haunt Gorbachev later³.

the new way of spreading information and knowledge seemed to be invasive and it reflected the culturally and socially sensitive period Russia was going through

¹ Look at raioeuropa.wordpress.com

² In Russian: *КПСС, Коммунистическая партия Советского Союза (KPSS, Kommunisticheskaja Partija Sovetskovo Sojuza).*

³ See *L'Urss: dal trionfo al degrado. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica dal 1945 al 1991*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2008.

The following years were characterized by a deep economic crisis during which the traditional mass media denounced the country's difficult social situation. During this delicate period people's attention needed to be distracted from economic default, otherwise the system could have been collapsed. In 1991 Eltsin used the mass media to gain credibility and to make people focus their anger against Chechnya. People's anger helped the leader to achieve his goal and the Chechen War took place. A strong use of the language and slanted mass media influenced people's point of view.⁴

The trilogy "able speech, strong language and personality exaltation" usually represents the main Russian leader's characteristics and what Eltsin really exploited during his electoral campaign. In Russia the glorification of the "individual" is the only way to conceive the political party, which is identified by its unique leader. This same glorification led to Putin's election in 2000.

From a social point of view, Russian society was divided into two blocks: the older generation, closer to traditional mass media like television, radio and newspapers and the new one, which was getting closer to another way to receive the news: Internet⁵.

After the third Putin mandate a new way of receiving information arose, and several irregularities were reported during the political campaigns. In 2009 Internet and blogs were already widespread and in every part of the country many different people could communicate without censure.

Since the traditional mass media seemed to be manipulated and oriented by the older generation and the nostalgic part of the country, it was no secret that there was no real "free press" in Russia. Political events did not allow people to react to censure and the Russian people could very rarely actually know that given information was flimsy.

Internet users hoped to find in it the answer to many politically unanswerable questions: could the blogosphere actually replace the old mass media? Could it actually represent the real "free press" in Russia?

The features of the blogosphere in Russia

The electronic revolution took place during the Eltsin period and it truly influenced politics: many different political leaders wanted to take part in the political sphere and vied for people's attention, appearing in newspapers and on the first, embryonic Internet. Whoever could spend money to advertise was able to get the attention of the country. For the

In Russia the glorification of the "individual" is the only way to conceive the political party, which is identified by its unique leader. This same glorification led to Putin's election in 2000

In 2009 Internet and blogs were already widespread and in every part of the country many different people could communicate without censure

Internet users hoped to find in it the answer to many politically unanswerable questions: could the blogosphere actually replace the old mass media?

⁴ M. MORINI, *Partiti politici e democratizzazione in Russia*, Rubbettino, Torino, 2009, p. 55.

⁵ T.A. GRAHAM, *Russian Election watch*, edited by "Belfer centre of science and International affairs", no. 2, 2009.

first time communication was not just “unidirectional”, going from the source to the addressee, but “multidirectional”, coming from many different voices that clashed and communicated with one another.

During the 90s when newspaper *layout* changed, Russia experienced the real leap into modern electronic time: the change did not involve just technical differences but for the first time was related to a radical change in terms of topics and arguments of discussion. For the first time ecology, sanitary and health conditions and human rights became the most debated themes.

Internet helped the user to get more information without spending too much time: fast information was something absolutely new in Russia and people got what they really needed from the net: debate.⁶

Since 2000, it has been estimated that one person in five regularly uses Internet: today 20 per cent of the population is online (unlike in 2005, when just a small 10 per cent was). This increase is due to political facts, which pushed people to want more news. Frequency of use, social extraction and age are the three survey indicators used to verify the veracity of this percentage. 11 per cent of the population is connected to Internet every day and the biggest cluster is represented by young people (between 18 and 24 years of age).⁷

Since Russia is such a huge country, so-called “polarization” is the most frequent phenomenon of widespread information: where bureaucracies are less developed Internet is not much used. Consequently information and innovation are disjoined and localized. 32 per cent of users, in fact, are concentrated in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The most popular use of Internet is reading the news, even if other different kinds of uses were noted (playing games, watching porn, downloading movies and music).

The blog was born in the United States and appeared for the first time in 1992: it came to Russia only around 2000 because of the strong political censorship of the previous years and because of the backward technology of those years. The Russian blogosphere, differently from other blogospheres in the world has many fewer arguments than the American ones and they are mostly just about politics. Political blogs in the United States are just 15 per cent of the total amount, and they usually support government: they look compact and they are furthermore better structured and organized. So-called “party politics”, the political orientation that gives political parties an essential position in political life, does not exist in Russia, therefore Russian blogs look like a

Since Russia is such a huge country, so-called “polarization” is the most frequent phenomenon of widespread information: where bureaucracies are less developed Internet is not much used

The Russian blogosphere, differently from other blogospheres in the world has many fewer arguments than the American ones and they are mostly just about politics

⁶ I. ZASSOURSKY, *Media and power in post-Soviet Russia*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2004, pag. 97.

⁷ See <http://www.lsd.it/2008/internet-in-russia-uno-sviluppo-impetuoso/>.

conglomerated union of different political positions that come into clash. Disorganization is the peculiarity of Russian blogs and their fragmentary characteristic is explained by a lack of institutions. In the end the Russian blog is basically based on debate and free discussions⁸.

Unlike all the other blogs in the world, the Russian blogosphere is characterized by user secrecy: since the political situation has always been sensitive, Russian users prefer to remain anonymous instead of signing their names and taking responsibility for their words. Just a small 15 per cent of Russian blogs are signed with real names and surnames, a small 18 per cent uses just the first name and 67 per cent prefers to use invented names. The most prominent cluster in the Russian blogosphere concerns politics, and is supported by websites in English (nytimes.com, washingtonpost.com, europe.wsj.com)⁹.

The most reliable and famous blog in Russia is *LiveJournal*, considered to be one of the few free credible presses in the country. *LiveJournal* appeared for the first time in 2001 thanks to Roman Leibov, professor at Tartu University in Estonia¹⁰. The Russian blog basically speaks the Russian language and that is why what is shared on it is something precious for Russians. In a country where it was formerly impossible to communicate properly with each other *LiveJournal* provided a great chance to be able to write almost whatever users want, think and wish. Russian geography influences information in Russia: it has been always very hard to know what was happening in other parts of the country and to receive proper news in real time. *LiveJournal* was revolutionary for Russia: for the first time there was the chance to organize “communities” where any political topic could be discussed without censorship. Every page of *LiveJournal* has a “maintainer”, who drives the community and decides the topics the community discusses¹¹.

But where is the divide between blogging and real life in Russia?

This “public diary” let many unknown Russian bloggers become popular, gave many anonymous people the chance to have not only a voice but also a face. Especially during Putin’s re-election Navalny’s popular blog (managed by the blogger since 2008) became particularly useful and filled the gap between web life and real life, creating a mind-change in order to pass on the “protest”.

Unlike all the other blogs in the world, the Russian blogosphere is characterized by user secrecy: since the political situation has always been sensitive, Russian users prefer to remain anonymous instead of signing their names and taking responsibility for their words

LiveJournal was revolutionary for Russia: for the first time there was the chance to organize “communities” where any political topic could be discussed without censorship

⁸ E. BREWS, *Публичный дискурс в российской блогосфере: анализ политики и мобилизации в Рунете*, (ed.by) the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University, Harvard, October 2010, pag. 143.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ See <http://james-nicoll.livejournal.com/2985250.html>.

¹¹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17177053>.

Multimedia becomes reality: December 2011 and Navalny's effect

The blogosphere had a huge impact on the country: it revealed true political behavior during the election of 2011, not only showing political *fallacies* to the users for the first time but also permitting many people to create their own pages in order to exchange news and updates with other users. Even if *LiveJournal* was supposed to be the principal political portal in Russia, also *vkontakte* and *Facebook* seemed to have the same power: just 35 per cent of the younger generation watches television today in Russia, the remaining part writes and reads the news on Internet¹².

The traditional mass media like radio, newspapers and television were overtaken by new online journalism, that became the only uncontrolled mass medium where information was at last credible and verified (especially when supported by videos and pictures). But the Russian case about mass media revealed that even if information was actually able to be (and still is) faster and free, it is not proper to speak about “homogeneity” of thoughts and full dependability of news. Thinking about the “free press” it is clear that intended for “free” is not only the way to spread information (Internet can give this chance to people) but also the “mode” of doing it. The blogosphere seems to be more of an independent editorial than a real free press because of its undefined structure. Journalism is supposed to be totally objective, on the contrary *LiveJournal* is made up of many different readers/writers.

An important element about the Russian blogosphere concerns the language used to talk about politics and other topics: even if many people in Russia speak English today, *LiveJournal* in particular is written almost 100 per cent in the Russian language. This is an important element that reveals two things about Russia: firstly, the Russian people try to keep foreigners away from their political discussions, thinking that Russian political facts are private and intimate. Secondly, the Russian people began changing their way of speaking and writing: the language used online is characterized by linguistic poverty and by the so-called “KISS” (Keep it short and simple)¹³.

Using the Russian language instead of English allowed the bloggers to use some dialectical linguistic techniques; words like “nationalism” or others inspired by Soviet “nostalgia” caught reader's attention. It has been known since the Dark Ages that strong speech during sensitive political times can be effective. Aleksei Navalny was one of the best users of linguistic and persuasive techniques.

just 35 per cent of the younger generation watches television today in Russia, the remaining part writes and reads the news on Internet

The blogosphere seems to be more of an independent editorial than a real free press because of its undefined structure. Journalism is supposed to be totally objective, on the contrary LiveJournal is made up of many different readers/writers

¹² S. ADAY, *Blogs and Bullets: New media in contentious politics*, Peaceworks No. 65, US Institute of Peace, 2010, p. 192.

¹³ M. ULRICH, *Tradurre: un approccio disciplinare*, De Agostini Scuola SpA, Novara, 2006. p. 42.

A lawyer and famous blogger, Aleksei Navalny was defined by the famous Russian website “Way to Russia Today” as follows:

“It looks like Navalny is an interesting mix: Yale-educated lawyer on one side, active Internet activist on the other, a fighter of corruption, a moderate nationalist, pro-gun, tolerant, soft-spoken, and intimidating – all at the same time”.

His political activities started in 2008, when he began blogging about the malpractices of big Russian companies.

In order to get people’s approval, the blogger used different ways. First he used examples from Europe in order to spur people to get closer to European ways of thinking and living, rather than remaining blocked in traditional Russian points of view (He tried to promote free weapons use in Russia).

Secondly, “(...) Using his rights as a minority shareholder to access the financial reports of major Russian corporations, he invests in the blue chips and then looks for discrepancies in their data and any inefficient activity on their part. His other activity involves looking through the tenders for government purchases published openly on the Internet”¹⁴.

Navalny’s goal was not only to publish information about political and economic inaccuracies but also to start actual legal actions against some companies like Gazprom. The “Navalny effect” became huge in 2010, when all the country could see what was happening in Russia. Russian users not only followed Navalny but also helped him by reporting to him what they witnessed during the elections.

The following year was the most important in Navalny’s career because he denounced all “Edinaja Rossija” mistakes and unfairness. He was arrested on 5 December 2011: Navalny’s blog was spread around the Russian Federation and since December 2011 it has been written in English as well. Navalny aroused Russian feelings, bringing a country not only to read his blog, but also to actively participate throughout out the demonstrations. What made Navalny’s blog the most important in Russia in 2011 was the way he used to convince people to participate actively in the political protests that took place in Moscow and many other cities in Russia in 2011.

Navalny used two kinds of linguistic techniques. He used official Russian language when he published real documents where the wrongdoings of big Russian companies were exposed. At the same time he used an emotional language when he wanted to attract people’s attention and gain their

Navalny’s goal was not only to publish information about political and economic inaccuracies but also to start actual legal actions against some companies like Gazprom

What made Navalny’s blog the most important in Russia in 2011 was the way he used to convince people to participate actively in the political protests that took place in Moscow and many other cities in Russia in 2011

¹⁴ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16057045>.

acceptance. Navalny was viewed like a “deus ex machina” but at the same time like a common citizen who wanted to change the political situation.

He used a low register during December 2011 in order to catch people’s attention and to give them the idea he was one of them. The language of “persuasion” during his illocutionary acts represents the main characteristic of Navalny’s blog. The blogger often compared “we” (referring to people who fight against Putin’s party) to “them” and he usually used imperative form of verbs in order to encourage protesters.

It is also important to consider how the power of speech and the blog was important to convincing people to move against Putin’s party in 2011 and 2012. In fact, the protesters were not moved by a political party, nor by an organization or institution. Blogs and speech were the only elements they could use to spread the information without censure, and users could remain anonymous and feel safe.

On his release on 20 December 2011, Navalny called on Russians to unite against Putin, whom Navalny said would try to snatch victory in the 4 March 2012 presidential election.

Navalny was sure that it would be reasonable for him to run in the presidential elections because the Kremlin would not permit them to be fair. On 24 December he organized a demonstration much larger than the post-election one. However, Putin was elected president and in March Navalny helped lead an anti-Putin rally in Moscow’s Pushkin Square, attended by between 14,000 and 20,000 people.

Unfortunately a great speech not supported by a focused political program can be in vain; in fact. It impacts people’s reactions but it does not create a chance to effectively change reality. This topic also concerns Russian political development: Russia was probably not ready to change its political situation because it had no alternative to Putin’s party.

Navalny often recommended voting for any other leader but not for someone in particular. Russian politics has been always based on “central” leaders and egocentric power and the system doesn’t seem mature enough to conceive of the possibility of voting for different parties and different candidates (considering also that there is no proper party system in Russia). When the speech and words are strong and all Russia can read it but there is no proper plan for the future, all the words used seem to be nonsense. In a country where the “individual” justifies the survival of a party the only way to change something is to move the country’s attention to another candidate. This is a critical consideration that only comes with hindsight.

While Gorbachev tried to change a country that was not ready to develop democratically because of the weaknesses of its political system and an

The blogger often compared “we” (referring to people who fight against Putin’s party) to “them” and he usually used imperative form of verbs in order to encourage protesters

economic crisis, Navalny's instead used Internet to join all the country in a single voice but Russia is not technically ready to modify its "status" and its political situation. Blogging permits users to share knowledge and discuss issues but the goal of finding a real political alternative was not achieved. Practice shows that there is a gap between words and deeds. After Navalny's detention many of his supporters changed their minds and stopped believing in his conduct.

Conclusions

The blogosphere is a phenomenon that was unexpectedly able to change the way of communicating in Russia. When Internet appeared for the first time in the country, many people started understanding the power this free way of acting and communicating could have to actually influence Russian social life. In this article it has been emphasized how difficult it is in the Euro-Asiatic country to communicate rapidly and efficiently. The effort Russia has made in creating a dense network of contacts and opportunities for exchange reflects its will to share not only information, but also knowledge. The Russian blog, which does not have just one topic (even if the main topic is politics), opened a new way of communicating. It became clear how a powerful speech could be effective in Russia, considering that its politics have been guided by strong and central leaders since the beginning of the last century. The scenario seems to be quite different now thanks to new means of communication and multi-directional ways of sharing information, which created a host of many new figures (bloggers) who promoted many different political, cultural and social positions. Even if the new concept of joining together looks different, the Russian habit of believing in strong speech continues to be unchanged. In fact, Aleksey Navalny created a real protest against "Edinaja Rossija" in December 2011 thanks to strong and effective dialectical techniques, furthermore with the denunciation of big companies like Gazprom.

It has been shown how the absence of a future plan can affect people's confidence and how strong speech without a solid base cannot reach the goal.

Focusing on the last years and on international political facts (not only concerning Russia but also many other countries like Turkey, Egypt and also Italy) it becomes clear how the blogosphere seems to be an effective phenomenon which influences people's way of thinking and will in future.

Navalny's instead used Internet to join all the country in a single voice but Russia is not technically ready to modify its "status" and its political situation

The blogosphere is a phenomenon that was unexpectedly able to change the way of communicating in Russia. When Internet appeared for the first time in the country, many people started understanding the power this free way of acting and communicating could have to actually influence Russian social life