

The Role of Internet Based Social Networks in Russian Protest Movement Mobilization

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One of the unmistakable characteristics of Russia's 'White House' uprising that led to the regime change in August of 1991 was its broad popular support. The political upheaval that initially found a buttress in Muscovite urban middle classes soon transcended all social strata and geography ending dominance of the Communist Party in Russia. However, the mass protests in opposition to authoritarian rule that gained energy in 2011 has failed to generate the same momentum necessary to unite diverse social and political classes and topple the ruling regime. In both cases, social Networks of communication played an important role in the evolution of contentious politics because they connected actors across space, facilitated communication, exchanged information on tactics and strategies, and produced new knowledge. However, it is not clear exactly how such social networks interacted with other contextual factors to bring about a national protest movement of sufficient proportions to topple an authoritarian regime. Drawing on evidence from the popular protests in the Russian Federation between 2011 and 2014, surveys conducted among quiescent citizens, participants in popular protest and digital activists, this paper argues that social media (1) allowed a "digital activists" to form personal networks that initially circumvented the national media narrative by brokering information for outside mainstream media; (2) helped to



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overcome the “free rider” problem of collective action by catalyzing anger-frustration and reporting the magnitude of protest events; and (3) contributed in the formation of a collective identity supportive of protest activity that transcended geographical and socio-economic disparities by providing a shared, mobilizing element of emotional grievance; (4) the internet based social networks have failed to produce results exemplified by Twitter and Facebook revolutions of the Arab Spring, and effect regime change in the Russian Federation or make tangible impact on domestic policies.

Keywords: information, communication, social networks, mobilization, protest, civic-activism

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Introduction

Since the beginning of this century, the role of Internet-based Social Networks (hereafter referred to as ISN), as a conduit for information has sufficiently preoccupied researchers as well as practitioners applying this tool to a wide spectrum of civic and coercive functions. From entertainment and education, to political communication and participation, from application to patterns of protest diffusion to application in unconventional means of compelling populations do one’s will, Internet-based technologies have proven to be indispensable. Those aspects have resonated throughout the research conducted primarily in the context of consolidated Western democracies and has focused on system-supporting forms of political participation activities designed to influence the action of governments. With the evolution of Internet-based technologies, special emphasis in political science literature was placed on the interaction between digital content and the political process at the micro- and meso- levels of individual and group behavior.

There is a broad scholarly consensus that the ISN not only influence political engagement of the individual consumer of digital content, but also expanded the collective action by organized groups.^{1,2,3,4} Nevertheless, difficulties associated with the impact of the ISN on political participation reside in our ability to separate its impacts from standard predictors, such as social capital, education, and political interest.^{5,6}

The impact of the ISN on the formation of social capital as a predictor of political participation has been covered in political science literature that emerged in recent years.^{7,8,9} A number of researchers reflect on the role played by ISN in the rise of a model of often leaderless networked organizations based on decentralized coordination among diverse and globally expansive collective actors.^{10,11,12,13} Political science literature presents compelling evidence for the role of ISN ameliorating in the mobilization of a social movement. However, meta-analysis by Boulianne points to a very modest impact of the Internet on political participation.¹⁴

The literature draws a clear distinction between protests in a democratic state and those occurring under authoritarian rule. Mayer and Tarrow stipulate that the protest under conditions of democracy constitutes a central element of mainstream politics for the purpose of voicing dissent from the political status quo.¹⁵ On the opposite side of the spectrum, under authoritarian rule civil protest is severely constrained. From the resource view of mobilization under authoritarian rule, discontents, unlike elites, have no access to utilitarian or coercive resources while subjected to repression and information asymmetries by autocrats, thus limiting the ability of discontents to advance their interests through collective action. Hence the opportunity-threat balance is consistently skewed in favor of elites and the only strength of the ordinary citizens resides in numbers.

The broad spectrum of literature infers that public protest under authoritarianism will be rare, spontaneous, politically and geographically isolated, and will largely occur without coordination through organized social movements.^{16,17,18} The political economist Geddes explains the breakdown of authoritarian regimes by pointing out the role of elites and ruling coalitions.^{19,20} However, McFaul stresses the occurrence of massive acts of civil protests as a distinctive feature of contemporary collective action that contrasts elite-driven waves of democratic transition.²¹ To discern the role ISN play in mobilization of anti-authoritarian protest and political engagement in the Russian Federation we turn our attention to literature that provides a glimpse into interaction between collective action and application of the ISN in massive acts of civil protests that occurred in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

In MENA states, continued support for authoritarian rule from conservative, risk-averse middle classes, especially state employees and small-to-medium business entrepreneurs has been interpreted as related to high levels of regional conflict, a perceived potential for democracy to lead to increased civil strife deriving from sectarian or religious cleavages, as well as fears regarding the potential empowerment of Islamist parties seeking to reverse liberal economic reform.²² In this respect, the perception of the MENA region's middle classes is congruent to the Marxist conception of the "petite bourgeoisie" – i.e. essentially a class averse to social change considering a vested interest in protecting its financial assets and its standard of living.²³ Despite this constraining factor, the Arab Spring was brought forth by a broad coalition of social forces ranging from uprooted and atomized intellectual elites and urban middle classes to the impecunious strata of the population. This broad coalition of forces greatly benefited from the Internet based technologies conducive to creation of digital convergence spaces, mobilization and dissemination of information.

At the time of the Tahrir Square Revolution, also coined as the Twitter Revolution, according to a report by the Dubai School of Government, only a marginal number of Egyptians had access to the Internet and actively used a Facebook or Twitter account.²⁴ The year of "Tahrir Square Revolution", at least for a time, Facebook posts and tweets created digital convergence space, place where social capital was created. In essence, ISN platforms became some of the most important sources of news in Egypt, as well a tool for coordinating activism and protest.²⁵ This despite the fact that the Mubarak regime interfered with dissemination of information by shutting down the Internet.

Before Tahrir Square, in Tunisia, under similar conditions, a negligible number of active Twitter accounts, handled by youth political activists, may have played a significant role in catalyzing events that led to Jasmine Revolution.²⁶ However, Beamont insists — "despite the claims of Tunisia being a Twitter revolution – or inspired by WikiLeaks – neither played much of a part."²⁷ That said, the scientific community appears united in assessing that role as catalytic at the very least.

Similarly, over the past two decades, the Russian Federation went through its own patch of increased political opposition and protest activity. However, unlike the Arab Spring scenario, the implications of

ISN for strategies of political mobilization, protest diffusion across the vast terrain of the Russian Federation and the influence it has for individual political engagement at the time of political upheaval remained somewhat timorous.

Drawing on research conducted at the Levada Center - a Russian independent, non-governmental polling organization - this paper seeks to test the ability of existing theoretical frameworks to explain popular protest under authoritarianism in the Russian Federation. The methodology will be addressed in the notes pertaining to data presented thereafter. To advance our understanding of this complex dynamical process, the remainder of this article proceeds as follows:

Part 2 provides a brief overview of the major theoretical approaches to protest mobilization and discusses how the Internet based Social Networks fit in with them.

Part 3 defines the political system in the Russian Federation as a fusion of managed democracy and authoritarianism.

Part 4 provides a descriptive account of the activities of networks of protest movements of Russian opposition and pro-government activists.

Part 5 combines individual data on media and Internet based Social Network use and political protest behavior gathered in a number of nationwide surveys conducted primarily at Levada Non-Governmental Polling Center.

Part 6 shows that ISN contributed to popular protest mobilization against the Russian authoritarianism in three main ways: (1) by facilitating the formation of networks of digital activists who challenged the regime's control of the public sphere; (2) by disseminating censored information on human rights violations by the state on the one hand and the magnitude of anti-regime protests on the other. This information enabled Russians to mobilize collective action on the basis of shared grievances and to overcome the barrier of fear associated with protest under authoritarianism; and (3) by enabling the formation of a national collective identity that facilitated intergroup collaboration between socially and geographically distant segments of Russian society by providing elements of emotional mobilization. However, despite considerable contributions to mobilization and operationalization of the opposition protest movement in the Russian Federation, ISN have failed to generate the energy and the spillover effect needed to achieve regime change or affect foreign and domestic policies.

A Brief Discussion of Political Activism Models and the Role of Social Networks in Opposition and Protest Movement Mobilization

Grievance and Relative Deprivation Models

No single political activism model possesses sufficient descriptive and explanatory power into the dynamics of civil strife. Innate and learned human traits assign anger to situations where individuals experience unresolved relative or perceived negative discrepancy between expectations and capabilities with respect to any collectively sought value — economic, psychosocial, political — namely relative deprivation.²⁸ Here, the Grievance and Relative Deprivation models offer a strong starting point for discussion of the mechanics that transform unfulfilled ambitions and material expectations into anger, frustration and resentment which may manifest themselves in an individual propensity to protest. As Gurr infers, 'If anger implies the presence of frustration, there is compelling evidence that frustration is all but universally characteristic of participants in civil strife',²⁹ ISN acts as a conduit for information that contravenes self-serving governments' official narratives and defies information asymmetries set forth by coercive groups; they possess the innate capacity to induce in vast audiences a vicarious distress that stems from the struggles and suffering of the few. Specifically, ISN act as a cognitive amplifier to reactive emotions that cause individuals to take part in civil strife.³⁰

Rational Choice Approach

An attempt by a group to exert influence over a government to achieve favorable changes in policies that address real or perceived inequalities meets the definition of a group's pursuit for a collective good. The Rational Choice theorist Tullock points out that rebellious activities are large scale phenomena, viz., the typical individual contribution is insignificant, and the expected value of the collective good accordingly goes to zero. Once we disregard private benefits, all that are left are the costs.³¹ Hence, the rational choice model challenges a 'grievance approach' already on the premise that grievances appear essentially irrelevant to a self-serving, risk-assessing individual's decision to take part in civil strife. The stipulation implies a lack of incentive for an

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individual to engage in civil strife where benefits for participation are not present; such an individual is expected to maximize his gains by making a rational choice to free-ride on the risks that comrades in strife are exposed to.³² The described phenomena, coined as Tullock's Paradox of Revolution, predict excessive absenteeism and therefore appear at odds with reality. Despite this, the rational choice approach offers a valuable perspective to social networks' application to popular protest mobilization:

For instance, the threshold model for participation in collective action in networks posits that the individual threshold of each person for taking risks depends on the perceived participation of others.³³ Today, information revealing individual decisions to take part in protest activity is disseminated via social networks. Here, those inside the network make their choices and by virtue of doing so encourage others to follow suit. Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni infer that such a precedent has information value that increases with the degree of repressiveness of the regime in power, and a protest's information-revealing potential is maximized as the cost of collective action increases.³⁴ In such an environment, they expect a protest to transmit a strong informative signal that is likely to induce many more citizens to take to the streets and cascade into mass disobedience. In this context, the social networks can influence the individual's cost-benefit calculus regarding protest participation in two ways: First, online content that documents past protest events may trigger informational cascades that lead to mass civil uprisings. Second, the event management features offered by some social network sites (e.g. 'Twitter Hashtag Campaigns', 'Facebook group events') inform users about the prospective turnout in upcoming events.

Resource Mobilization and Social Capital

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) corrects some shortfalls of Resource Mobilization by addressing the irrationality of the individual choosing to engage in collective action. It questions the 'grievance' approach, which emphasizes deprivation and frustration as the primary drivers of popular protest. Instead, resource mobilization and social capital approaches stipulate that open and affluent societies foster contention, thus making protest more common.³⁵ Furthermore, contemporary research in RMT integrates structural and motivational var-

ables. Classical resource mobilization and political process theories, preoccupied with structural characteristics, are complemented with social-psychological and “cultural” insights which give weight to motivational factors.³⁶ The fusion of structural and motivational aspects transcends the role ISN plays in Resource Mobilization and Social Capital. Where the economic development of a nation state is inseparable from the increase in density of communication infrastructure, ISN begins to mirror psychological factors that drive people to engage in contentious politics. In such cases, Internet use is expected to coincide with participatory dynamics that are characterized less by formal relationships in civil society than by spatially dispersed, loosely-knit personal networks that are heavily mediated by electronic communication.³⁷

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From the view of resource mobilization, the main challenge consists of the fact that, unlike the authoritarian state’s coercive group, citizens in opposition to authoritarian government are excluded from control over the coercive powers of the state. In fact, the potential of the opposition resides primarily with the ability to exercise mobilization within large segments of society. However, autocrats use repression and agitprop in countering opposition efforts, hence, citizens are confronted with information asymmetries and receive distorted portrayals of their fellow citizens’ attitudes toward the regime and their disposition to revolt.

ISN provide an invaluable platform for mobilization and operationalization of willing participants in networks with shared interests that facilitate cooperation within and between organized groups. We may surmise that preceding and following the parliamentary election (Duma) held in the Russian Federation in February 2012, given the highly developed Internet communication infrastructure, ISN provided an alternative communication realm which bred an opportunity for protest movement activists to create networks despite heavy state control over the public sphere and the media.

Structural and Network Approach

Critics of rational choice approaches submit its failure to embed the individual in relationships and group affiliations that are crucial in influencing human decision-making. Structural and Network theorists seek to provide explanations of activism that locate its roots outside

the individual, and as being strongly influenced by structural proximity and network connectivity.³⁸ Klanermans and Oagama introduce four successive steps toward successful protest mobilization.³⁹ First, the individual must belong to a mobilization potential, viz., belonging to a pool of people with shared interest and appreciation for a collective action by a particular social movement. It is about the formation of collective identity and a social and political consciousness that allows people to 'come ideologically closer to a given political issue'.⁴⁰ Second, the individual must be targeted by a mobilization attempt. The operationalization occurs as a result of interaction with a recruiting agent, such as an interested party acting on behalf of the social movement or a body of knowledge pertaining group's interests and plans for action. Here, our prospect is targeted by a mobilization attempt and will take part in protest activity if and only if he/she is informed of the upcoming protest event. Van Laer operationalizes mobilization attempts in terms of awareness of the upcoming event, leaving the question of a direct, interpersonal link open.⁴¹ Third, the individual must be a willing participant — this cognitive variable touches on the individual propensity to actively engage with a particular social movement. Lastly, the individual must be able to participate. All obstacles that could be preventing the individual from taking an active part in group's collective action — psychological as well as practical — have been removed.

Within a structural or network paradigm, the successful mobilization process leads to formation of CatNets, a term coined by Harrison White that attempts to describe a set of individuals as a group to the extent that it comprises both a category and a network.⁴² Here, categories are formed by sets of individuals sharing a collective identity and/or particular characteristic, such as race, level of education or affluence; network perhaps can best be defined by Manuel Castell as a set of interconnected nodes that facilitate communications and action.⁴³

As we have seen throughout this section, 'networks play multiple roles in the process leading to participation, and that they intervene at different moments along this process'.⁴⁴ The likelihood of the individual to become mobilized increases with their degree of embeddedness in ISN. Overlapping network memberships allow information about upcoming protest events to travel beyond the boundaries of a network of hard-core activists and spill over to networks of less engaged citizens.⁴⁵ Within a matrix of ISN proliferate categories of followers that share

a collective identity supportive of political activism; this is achieved through interactions with friends, family and other network members. Collective identities function as selective incentives that motivate protest participation by providing the potential participant with a sense of membership, in-group solidarity, and an oppositional sense of 'us' versus 'them',^{46,47}

As a medium for information dissemination, the Internet communication technologies have significant impact on the transaction cost of protest mobilization; the innate feature of the social network that allows information it transmits to evade government censorship or administrative pressures appears most conducive to its application in targeted online mobilization of protest activities. As individuals join a variety of online networks and begin forming multiple social cyber relations on those networks, the likelihood of their being targeted by an online mobilization movement for protest activity increases regardless of their pursuit of protest-related information circulated in those networks.

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In Conclusion

The social sciences continuously challenge established theories and scientific conjectures through targeted, in-depth studies of individual specific phenomena at the foundation of those theories and conjectures. Such studies enable the researcher to compartmentalize a complex system in which outcomes are determined by interaction of a number of variables, thus offering a plausible causal explanation.⁴⁸ In Russia, preceding and following the Duma and presidential elections of 2011 - 2012, the cost of collective action underwent considerable increase, yet mass protest's information-revealing potential has failed to maximize, and protest movement never evolved into widespread mass disobedience. In fact, we shall attempt to demonstrate antithetical phenomena — discernible signs of demobilization in protest activity. In Russia, where the Internet based technologies and social networks underwent robust advances, civil strife has expanded neither geographically nor socially, as such, the country provides an interesting case for exploring the contribution of social online networks to the process of nationwide political mobilization across social and geographical boundaries.

Russian Federation, State of Polity

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At the United Russia party congress in Moscow in September of 2011, the President of Russia at that time, Dmitry Medvedev, accepted the offer to head the Edinaiya Rossiya party list in the State Duma December elections. Medvedev also proposed that the congress support the candidacy of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for president of the Russian Federation.⁴⁹ The announcement sent ripples through the political landscape signaling a conclusion of the landmark consolidation of power by the leadership of the Edinaiya Rossiya party and the return of Vladimir Putin to the role of president of the Russian Federation.

As Ryabov reminds us, according to popular analysis, since the beginning of the new century the political system in Russia has remained monocentric, and the president is the principal political agent whose position largely determines the character and the thrust of political change.⁵⁰ Such a definition is largely supported by the observation that most systemic political movements and organized groups represented in Russia's political landscape in some form or another evolved from the organizational structure and mobilization capabilities of the institutional edifice that once was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, with the "Edinaiya Rossiya" party being the main beneficiary.⁵¹

Constitutional architecture allows the Russian government to control through legislation which parties have the right to exist and actively participate in public life, legally advance interests of constituencies, and which organized groups will not be afforded rights to legally pursue their interests in the form of a legitimate political party. Here, the polity, defined by Tilly as a collective action that consists of the members and the government, exercise a test for polity membership, for instance, their ability to mobilize or coerce significant number of people representing very specific segments of the society.⁵² Each entry into the polity redefines the criteria for membership designed to advance specific characteristics tied to the extent of common identity or organisational structure of the current set of members elected and represented in the Duma, establishing rules that advance the polity's tactical and strategic goals.⁵³

CatNets are essential to concepts of an organization or organized group; glaringly, the more extensive the common identity and internal networks, the more organized the group. Political parties that pass the test of Russia's modern constitutional architecture have been con-

structured from uniquely congruent CatNets whose leadership can afford to act collectively with the government as one coercive group. Perhaps the main benefit in the collective action of members and government aggregated into a coercive group lays in a group's routine low-cost access to mobilizable resources controlled by the government itself and consolidated control over concentrated means of coercion over relevant populations. Another crucial implication of such an arrangement is the extent of collective identity, multidimensional networking, and interpersonal bonds between actors comprising the coercive group. Here, horizontal linkages unite actors who increasingly share similar values, interests, or force (active participants in public life — members of the Duma); vertical laterals connect those actors to subject populations. As members of the coercive group, these actors coordinate their collective action with the government to advance what they deem to be in their common interest and for the benefit of the nation.

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In a feat of collective action designed to counteract challengers, the ruling political stratum expands control and influence through development and support for a rise to prominence of the unique category — professional, generational politicians — a massive segment within the society gradually metastasizing key democratic institutions. In this process, we recognize the rebirth of the genus *politica*, once amply represented by 'aparatchiki' — a powerful political stratum within Soviet society. Similarly, the ruling political elites use their low-cost access to state and local government resources, including international aid and credit, to expand their influence into the domestic economy, fostering conditions for a proliferation of economic elites with whom political elites have a symbiotic relationship. The product of this social engineering brought about the rebirth of the new bourgeoisie — the upper mildew of Russian society.

Etzioni postulates that all actors in a coercive group evolve committed to each other, but commitments of leaders and followers are asymmetric.⁵⁴ These asymmetries can and have been exploited by aspirants and challengers attempting to expand or achieve membership or prevail in exerting influence over the government. Contenders do not just receive an invitation to join a coercive group. It is the product of an amount of collective action by organized groups, the extent of organization, and opportunity to act, none of which is achievable without mobilization.⁵⁵ It can be inferred that all processes associated

with collective action by contenders and challengers in Russia must be viewed in conjunction with, but not limited to, the information and information services component of the utilitarian resources.

As described, the current state of polity in the Russian Federation is transitional authoritarianism or ‘a mixture of authoritarianism and managed democracy’.^{56,57} Judging by the aforementioned political science literature, we expect the ISN to play an increasingly prominent role in the mobilization of the antiauthoritarian protest movement.

Protest Activity in the Russian Federation

On October 12, 2011, a number of prominent public figures and opposition leaders called for a boycott of Russia’s parliamentary election in December, calling it ‘illegitimate and disgraceful’. Garry Kasparov, leader of the United Civil Front movement, appealed to the masses to ‘consciously ignore cooperation with the current authorities’.⁵⁸ Yet some in the opposition leadership suggested an alternative collective action — that voters participate in the election by ruining their ballot, or vote for any party except for the ruling United Russia group that Putin heads. The leader of the Left Front movement, Sergey Ulatszov stated: ‘Our goal is to invite people into the streets instead of the elections. We have no option left but to the streets’.⁵⁹

According to the Moscow Helsinki Group, in the first nine months of 2011, some 702 public actions were recorded with a number of participants reaching 97,043, of which 1,417 protesters were detained by authorities.⁶⁰

Organized groups exhibiting the most prolific protest actions at the time included ecologists, the Yabloko party, the United Democratic Movement Solidarity, the Left Front socialist movement, and the highly acclaimed non-systemic party Drugaya Rossiya. Names associated with the protest movement of the period included such prominent public figures as Alexey Navalnyi, Boris Akunin, and Vladimir Ryzhkov. The same set of organized groups and activists stood at the onset of the ‘Grazhdanskoe Deystvie’ movement created in January of 2012.⁶¹

All throughout 2012 the tendency for spontaneous unsanctioned rallies escalated. The increase in unsanctioned protest activity correlated with increasingly attenuated responses from law enforcement — a trend widely attributed to a highly unpopular MVD reform.⁶² Pro-

test activities escalated following the day of the Duma election.⁶³ Mass gatherings were becoming a staple in opposition collective action of the time.⁶⁴ Protests largely remained peaceful, though direct, violent confrontations with police did ensue when, for instance, on May 6, 2012 during a scheduled and authorized ‘Million Man March’ in Moscow, a group of activists attacked agents of the state.⁶⁵

May 9, 2012 marks a significant evolution in Russia’s protest movement. On that day, we observed the transformation of manifestation being organized in space to be about space itself. In this sense, the ‘Occupy Abay’ event became more significant than its derivative ‘Mobilnyi Lager’, or the more ephemeral protest movement ‘Narodnye Guliyaniya’, as it finally conveyed a message: ‘as of this moment, we, the opposition, possess this space; in this space, we are in control; we decide who is entitled to be present and perform what kinds of activities.’^{66,67} Here, on Chistoprudnyi Boulevard, the monument to Kazakh poet Abay Kunanbaiyev became a site of contested social and power relations, spatially facilitating an extensive political action. During its short existence, this convergence space experiment presented participants with an opportunity to attempt a different form of self-governance, the management of a space itself and, particularly while the physical occupation was overnight and continuous, of living together.⁶⁸ The convergence space provided for emergence of highly organized Cat-Nets — cohesion of diverse categories of participants, and facilitates development of social networks among previously atomized individuals and organized groups now sharing a common denominator — convergence space. Participants in the physical occupation of the terrain manifested a tendency to respond to external frustrations with greater hostility than randomly formed groups or protest marches.⁶⁹ Just as significant was the response by authorities countering occupier initiative, containing their actions.

Between 2011 and 2012, opposition and protest activity in Russia had reached its apogee. In that brief historic period, Russian organized political movement made substantial strides both in breadth and scope, boldly experimented with ways and means of mobilization, and proactively sought out an opportunity to act and advance collective interests while exhibiting tactically and strategically advantageous choices of locus, timing and message in an effort to influence political discourse in the country. Although in ensuing years opposition and

protest activity exhibited clear signs of demobilization, it revealed no remarkable novelty either in method or in the ability to expand the support base or opportunity.⁷⁰

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Countermovement

Authorities projected their engagement with popular discourse by seemingly encouraging collective actions by organized groups capable of mobilizing massive manifestations while inhibiting protest activities of smaller interest groups likely seeking to engage authorities in violent confrontations.⁷¹ It must be stated that on a number of occasions Vladimir Putin voiced determination to engage the opposition, as well as the active members of society, in direct dialogue. The most recent such statement he made at a meeting with representatives of ‘Silovye Structure’ on March 29, 2015. He reiterated his openness to constructive criticism that targets real or perceived ineptitudes on part of the government. He also stated ‘it doesn’t make sense to engage in discourse with those (in opposition) who act on a lead from outside (abroad) pursuing the interests of a foreign nation, not our own.’⁷² Since President Vladimir Putin’s re-election in 2012, a number of restrictive laws have been enacted in Russia. On July 20, 2012, Russia enacted the Federal Law Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations Performing the Function of Foreign Agents, which came into effect on November 21, 2012.⁷³ The law has severe repercussions, thwarting the ability of NGOs, both foreign and domestic, operating within national borders, to fulfill their intended educational and political missions.⁷⁴

A litany of data support allegations of polity exacting collective action to counter the breadth of protest activity and the threat it represented to the collective interests of the coercive group. On January 1st 2012, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) pointed to the illegality of the rejection to register the Republican Party of Vladimir Ryzhkov. Furthermore, ECHR alluded to coercive involvement by the government in the electoral process ‘on all levels’. ECHR notes that ‘the distinction between the state and the governing party was frequently blurred by taking advantage of an office or official position, contrary to Article 46(4) of the Law on State Duma Elections and paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.’⁷⁵

Scores of charges permeated independent press detailing cases of the ruling coalition and government infringement on the opposition's freedom of assembly and right to free speech.^{76,77} The ruling political coalition routinely countered opponents by contrasting its ability to mobilize significant numbers of people in competing events.⁷⁸ Amnesty International reports that, between 2013 - 2014, all protest activities planned and scheduled to be conducted in highly populated areas of Moscow were not approved by authorities. Instead, distant city squares unpopular with Muscovites were offered as alternatives. In the interim, sanctioned, pro-government demonstrations were held in the same areas, where the right to demonstrate was denied to the opposition. Amnesty International points out that pro-government manifestation was often conducted unimpeded in parts of Moscow that are legally closed to public meetings or marches. Such actions by the local authorities constitute serious interference with the right to assembly and attempt to silence the proposed discourse.

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The countermovement to opposition protest activity underlines the government, defined by Tilly as a centralized and differentiated organization, as it possesses not only control over the chief concentrated means of coercion, but also the capacity to assert collective interest of populations it represents by exerting its monopoly on media, including ISN, to mobilize popular support among the population.⁷⁹

A Snapshot of Participation and Support Base for Opposition and Protest Movement in Russian Federation

According to *Novaya Gazeta*, some 102,000 gathered on Sakharov Avenue in Moscow on December 24, 2011 to take part in the event organized and sponsored by the 'For an Honest Election' group.⁸⁰ Statistical data on protest movement and participation were collected by the Levada Analytical Center. A sample of 791, or approximately 0.7%, participated in the Levada poll. The poll revealed that males dominated the scene with 60% participation. The overwhelming majority of protesters were of working age (25 to 55 years old), with some 25% under 25 and 22% over 55 years old. The overwhelming majority of protesters have a higher education (70%), while only 13% had no college degree. Upwards of 68% of those questioned reveal that they are "well to do" and have routine access to certain luxury goods, while 28% identified themselves as sufficiently opulent, able to afford such luxuries such as

an automobile. 32% of those questioned did not, or do not, discuss political issues online, while 37% did so regularly.⁸¹ The event targeted by pollsters appeared dominated by Moscow's opulent middle class.

Furthermore, the Levada Analytical Center research conducted in 45 regions of the Russian Federation at 130 locations and gauging 1603 participants revealed a rather fascinating weakness in normative support for the opposition movement in Russia. 43% of citizens confessed they have never heard the demands or seen the banners calling for the ouster of Vladimir Putin and the ruling coalition. 23.8% 'definitely' do not support the opposition's call to oust Vladimir Putin, and 32.1% 'somewhat' do not support the opposition. 40.6% expressed their belief that the country and its leadership are on the right track. Only 6% expressed their unwavering support for demands by the opposition to oust Vladimir Putin. Some 79.7% of participants will definitely not participate in opposition protests, while 9.4% would join the ranks of protesters given an opportunity. However, when asked if they approve of the State *Duma* — 60.5% say the State *Duma* is doing unsatisfactory or poor job. At the same time 64% approve of the job Vladimir Putin is doing.⁸²

An estimated one-third of protest participants have been active in ISN, shared digital content and information, and actively interacted in their community. However, these digital activists failed to increase the value of information pertaining to protest movements they shared in ISN, to generate broader support base, and to undermine the popularity of the regime. In essence, their level of utilization was insufficient to allow the ISN to reach their full potential for mobilization of the opposition protest movement. Perhaps the cause of this phenomenon rests with the makeup of the "For an Honest Election" — an aggregate of loosely organized groups with often conflicting collective interests dominated by the risk-averse category of urban elites.

Media and Internet Based Social Networks in Numbers

Despite wide access to Internet and Internet-based content, the role of this utilitarian resource vehicle in a protest movement mobilization remains precarious at best. Between 2010 and present day, Internet availability and usage have been expanding in line with the betterment of the welfare of the population. If in 2010, the number of regular or habitual Internet users was estimated at 34%, with nearly half using

the Internet daily (47%), then by 2014 this number reached 67%, with just over a half logging-on daily (52%).⁸³ A study conducted by the Levada Analytical Center largely supports this assessment.⁸⁴ In 2015, the segment of the population with access to the Internet jumped to 74%, or approximately 46 million people. In Moscow the number of users registered at 79%.⁸⁵

Some 47% of internet users surf for information (covering an unspecified range of data), while 34% logon to social network sites - of that number, 5.26% do so for entertainment, and 23% spend their time watching movies. Only 17% went online to view news or personal interest related information, or learn about the situation inside the country and abroad.⁸⁶ In May of 2015, a majority of responders said they consider television to be the main domestic information content provider (62%). This number has grown only slightly over the previous two years (by 2%). In sharp contrast, only 16% of poll participants considered the Internet to be their main information resource on domestic events, and only 6% of responders draw information on domestic events from ISN.⁸⁷ Alarming, 5% of habitual Internet users and formerly active participants in ISN-life completely lost their interest in the Internet on the premise that ISN take too much of their private time, or represents a complete waste of time, while nearly a quarter of ISN users expressed their concern with a lack of privacy while on ISN.⁸⁸

According to research conducted by Russia's Public Opinion Research Center, 55% of the population exclusively trusts the information content delivered by Russian television, 15% trust only Internet resources and 8% trust exclusively ISN. According to the Levada Center, access to web-based news resources accounts for 24% of all Internet traffic in Russia (up from 15% as of June 2009), whereas ISN makes up 15% of Internet traffic. Television, as a traditional mass media platform, maintains its undisputed leading role as Russia's most trusted provider of news and analysis. Over the past 5 years, the proportion of Russians heavily relying on TV as their main source of news remains consistently high (90%).⁸⁹

The television audiences exhibit a propensity to support an official government narrative on politically pivotal events: 82% of television audiences support the reunification of Crimea with Russia versus 78% among active internet users; 64% of television audiences support economic counter-sanctions against the U.S. and European Union; 43% of television audiences would like to see Russian volunteers actively

participate in armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine; 41% of active internet users support this idea; some 43% of television audiences voted for the creation of the Peoples Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, with 41% of internet “dwellers” voicing their support for the endeavor. Lastly, more than half (57%) of habitual internet users confirmed their support for President Vladimir Putin and approve of the work he has done as the leader of the Russian Federation (among TV-audiences this figure only 5% higher - 62%).⁹⁰

Readily available access to the Internet does not translate to active participation in ISN.⁹¹ 71% of habitual internet users have registered and actively use ISN; another 13% have registered yet rarely use ISN; 15% of habitual internet users choose to never use ISN.⁹² Approximately 5% of Internet regulars profess to being attracted by the opportunity the Internet provides for active participation in popular collective action; 2% (or nearly 1 million nationwide) of habitual internet users take part in organized political action. 9-12% of habitual internet users express their interest in the Internet as a vehicle for searching and communication with politically like-minded individuals.⁹³ For those who are already politically-minded, social networks enhance their interest. A third of respondents (33%) report discussing politics with friends and family ‘very often’, and they are more likely to use ISN for political purposes.

Despite the aforementioned inadequacies, the prevailing contention remains that protest activities of the period, in sharp distinction with previous years, were defined by broader application of Internet resources, particularly social networks and P2P (Facebook, Вконтакте, Мой Мир, Twitter, 1СQ, LiveJournal, YouTube, popular Internet forums, blogs). But the Ukrainian Maidan Revolution had a distinctly adverse effect on the mobilization of protest movements in Russia, including the role of ISN sites as utilitarian resource. Many in Russia became extremely concerned with the prospect of escalation from peaceful protest to political violence and even armed insurgency with its inescapable internecine effects, as seen in Donbas and Luhansk. Russia’s coercive group effectively used the events in Ukraine, as well as real or perceived aggressive gestures by the U.S. and its European partners, to drive up the cost of opposition collective action. Thus, the winter of 2014 was marked by extraordinarily harsh punitive measures against defendants in ‘The Case of May 6’, sending a message to the opposition that their actions will no longer be tolerated.⁹⁴

Consequently, whereas in 2012 46% of Russians had a positive view of opposition protest activity, by March 2014 that number dropped to 32%. Those who identified themselves as directly taking part in protest activities during 2012 accounted for 7%, by 2014 this number dropped to 4%. The number of citizens indifferent to protests rose from 33% to 49% during the same period. This last indicator exposed a cognitive divergence in dynamics likely triggered not only by externalities, such as events in Ukraine, but also by a countermovement that protest activity triggered inside Russia proper.⁹⁵

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Despite wide availability of the Internet communication technology, its role in content development and dissemination remained exiguous. The vast majority of audiences continued to rely on television and printed press as a main source of information and analysis. One organized group, namely the government, maintained primacy in mass media and effectively used it to advance political interests, mobilize support in public opinion and collective action. Cyberspace remained largely outside the government control while it was not perceived as a threat to polity and collective interests of populations it represented. However, changes in opportunity/threat equilibrium triggered a countermovement in cyberspace that included application of the ISN, and digital convergence spaces that would counter opposition mobilization efforts.

Countermovement and Cyberspace

Since its inception, the Russian government has made timely and significant strides in the development and application of the informational instrument of national power in the service of its national security; there is a clear understanding of its complexities and diffuse nature. In the contemporary environment in Russia, information readily available from a plethora of sources influences both domestic and foreign audiences via a variety of delivery systems. The statistical data presented shows the unequivocal superiority the government maintains in mass media, including periodicals both in print and online.⁹⁶ Yet the most precarious vehicle for information remains the Internet, since until now it has remained largely beyond the control of the government. Hence, Russia's coercive group gradually ratcheted up policies designed to institute and guard constraints on public access to Internet-based resources under the guise of national security and in-

dividual privacy reasons. The Russian government is taking steps to monitor attempts by Internet-based actors to deliberately inform or mislead foreign and domestic audiences. The latest sign that Russia's coercive group is consolidating its control over the Internet is seen in the Presidential Decree of May 22, 2015 — 'On Some Issues of Information Security of the Russian Federation'.⁹⁷ The document confirms the multidimensional approach taken by the Russian government with respect to Internet content management.

It can be further surmised that three main dimensions are being explored in the targeting of the opposition and protest movements in cyberspace.

The first dimension is the introduction of an e-governance paradigm. This digital democracy experiment was designed to provide citizens with direct access to local and central government officials, establishing continuous dialogue on a wide range of issues of social significance.

The second dimension is manifested in an attempt to engage all strata of the population in ongoing cyber dialogue, viz., proactively competing with foreign and domestic adversaries for minds via development and dissemination of conservative leaning content, as seen in the case of the Olgino project, where a pro-government group and, possibly, government minders collectively develop and disseminate Internet-based content and directly engage citizens via P2P communications in support of the official Kremlin narrative.⁹⁸ The government is working closely with online publications like "Izvestia", "Komsomolka", nacanune.ru, "Regnum" (among others) in the development and promulgation of content and analysis favorable in view of the political establishment and their close allies in Russia's vast economic sector.

Back in 2011, Vladimir Putin contended in an interview with Vesty Television Program: '... if the authorities or someone else doesn't like what is [happening] on the Internet, there is only one way to withstand: by offering, on the same platform, different approaches, different solutions and do so with a greater creativity, making it interesting, (and by doing so) to generate a greater number of supporters'.⁹⁹

The Third dimension can be defined as censorship. The Internet Users Association has registered 11,448 cases of administrative pressure on Internet users and providers, and 947 cases of website access restrictions. Administrative pressure was applied to Web content and

ISN providers with demands to block or completely remove groups engaged in activities supporting opposition and protest movements.¹⁰⁰

The success of the countermovement and consolidation of government monopoly in cyberspace is evident and well documented in studies conducted by Russia's Public Opinion Research Center (VЦИОМ). In April of 2015, Dr. Valery Federov, the general manager of VЦИОМ, claimed 'The Kremlin has outfoxed the opposition-foxes' (paraphrasing the original 'The Kremlin has out-Interneted the opposition in Internet').¹⁰¹

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Conclusions

Statistical data on Internet communication technology usage by organized groups and protest activists supports the thesis that ISN offered a significant contribution to the mobilization of civil strife that transcended geographical and socio-economic boundaries. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that, at least initially, ISN were responsible for helping to remove one of the central obstacles of collective action under the post-Soviet monocentric political system, namely, the deficit of social interaction and elevating political discourse with a nexus on democratization and honest elections. In support of the different theoretical views of protest mobilization, ISN exhibited the following three dimensions of utility:

The First Dimension — Information Transmission. During the tumultuous month preceding and following the December 14, 2011 elections, digital opposition elites routinely circumvented constraints imposed on the media by the government, most notably, the Internet-based television channel Dozhd (Rain.Tv). This enabled Russians both with and without Internet access to mobilize collective actions around the material and moral grievances symbolically represented by the re-election of Vladimir Putin as president of the Russian Federation. Nationwide availability of information pertaining to those events significantly contributed to the 'Za Chestnye Vybory' movement's geographical and social expansion. During the escalation phase of the 'Bolotnaya Square', information about the extent of the protests, disseminated through the Internet, countered attempts by the state-controlled media to mislead the public or even conceal the truth concerning the size, breadth, and message of the protest. Hence, the function

of ISN as an information hub supports most arguments in both relative deprivation theory and rational choice theory as they pertain to protest mobilization.

The Second Dimension — the “Free-Rider” problem. By feeding the public with information about the magnitude of protest events, past and present, and projecting the extent of upcoming events, ISN helped citizens to mitigate the barrier of fear associated with risks of repression identified with protest under the post-Soviet monocentric political system. ISN have played a critical role in triggering the information cascade by the dissemination of information pertaining upcoming protest events and expectation for turnout. By doing so, this encouraged masses of activists to re-evaluate the cost-benefit calculus and commit to participation. Thus, ISN helped to vanquish Tullock’s Paradox of Revolution that predicts excessive absenteeism.

The Third Dimension — Collective Identity Formation. There is sufficient evidence that the politicization of the popular masses by means of social networking succeeded in transcending all strata of Russian society. This supports the arguments brought forward by structural and networking accounts of collective action, according to which overlapping membership in numerous networks leads to a spillover of information from activist networks to networks of less engaged citizens. It also illustrates the important function of social networks in building a collective identity supportive of protest action. Both opposition and countermovement explicitly demonstrated that on the one hand, by depicting the suffering associated with the regime’s response to the protests, and on the other hand by exposing the worst atrocities committed against ethnic-Russian diaspora in Eastern Ukraine, social media led to the emotional mobilization of politically apathetic and acquiescent segments of Russian society. However, in the case of countermovement, it caused considerable demobilization of the protest movement and a shift of the protesters’ collective identity’s nexus from ‘For Democratization and Honest Elections’ to a nexus on ‘Ultra-Nationalistic Patriotism’. ISN thus helped to connect frustrated street protesters, socio-economically and culturally privileged and highly motivated digital activists, and the young, urban middle class in the large cycle of protest that to this day fuel collective action in Russian society.

In the Russian Federation, the Internet facilitated the formation of personal networks of digital activists who challenged the regime’s con-

trol of the public sphere and offered an alternative discourse to the official political narrative. In line with the arguments of Resource Mobilization Theory, the Internet thus provided access to donors of mobilizable resources, as well as the resource of a partially uncontrolled cyberspace that undermined the state's strategy of social isolation and fostered solidarity among Russians on the basis of shared grievances. While the most proactive actors of this digital network typically came from the socio-economic and cultural urban elites, the relatively high degree of Russia's Internet based social network development made their dissident discourse accessible to all strata of Russian society. Internet based social networks are but one variable of many that govern the dynamic leading to revolution and regime dislodgment. In fact, amidst the turbulence of political upheaval it is often hard to discern hidden externalities associated with nation-state and non-state actors applying ISN to project their influence over relevant populations. This opens a vista on the need to assimilate new evidence into existing historical frameworks as we continue in-depth research on the causalities of political activism and the role that Internet-based social networks play in its mobilization.

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 70. In 2014, researchers at Levada pointed out divergence between a nation-wide sense of patriotism and opposition and protest activity. Published reports indicate the protest activity continued to plummet, reaching its lowest point since measurements were introduced. In 2015 pollsters cite consolidation of popular support for ruling political and economic elites triggered by events in neighboring Ukraine perceived as a threat to Russian National Security by the USA, fascists etc., as a dominant factor in low opposition and protest activity. Nationwide polls were conducted by researchers from Levada Analytical Center on 25-28 of April 2014, and 17- 20 April of 2015. A sample of 1600 individuals aged 18 and older were randomly selected from 130-134 towns and villages representing 45 regions of the Russian Federation (the expected margin of error stands at 3.4%). <http://www.levada.ru/old/11-11-2014/protestnaya-aktivnost>; <http://www.levada.ru/old/28-04-2015/protestnyi-potentsial>
 71. In this Op-ed. the newly appointed mayor of Moscow clarifies his position on protest activity. Sobyanin specifically points to the logistics of providing security and facilitating large demonstration, and comparatively articulates challenges in controlling small, often violent protests by “several dozens of rowdy activists”, as well as the destructive effect such belligerent activities bear on citizens engaged in everyday life activities. (Jun 6, 2011). Собянин объяснил, почему запрещает митинговать геям и несогласным. news.ru Retrieved from <http://newsru.com/russia/06jun2011/sobyanin.html>
 72. *Rossia-1* (2015), 26 марта президент Владимир Путин принял участие в ежегодном заседании расширенной коллегии ФСБ России. 26 March. Available at <https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/5206/episode_id/1185641/video_id/1154286/> (Accessed on 04 March 2016)
 73. ICNL (2016), *NGO Law Monitor: Russia*. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. Available at <<http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/russia.html>> (Accessed on 07 March 2016)

74. See also <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1981241>
75. OSCE/ODIHR (2012), *Russian Federation. Elections to the State Duma 04 December 2011. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Warsaw. OSCE/ODIHR, 12 January, Available at <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/86959?download=true>> (Accessed on 02 February 2016)
76. There are well defined procedures used by the coercive group through state security and designated non-state agents designed to terrorize, demoralize, and subvert the opponent. The government uses organized groups to conduct counter-protests, directly, at times violently, interfering with opponent's collective action. These organized groups resort to coercive means in their attempts to interfere with opponents' freedom of assembly and right to free speech. The state security apparatus engages opponents when all other means are unavailable or have been ineffective. See example as detailed in *Gazeta.ru* op-ed (Oct 16, 2011). Форум активистов в Краснодаре с участием Немцова и журналистки Романовой заблокировал ОМОН. http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/10/16/n_2054378.shtml
77. In a number of incidents, local government and the department of education acted in a concerted way to impede the ability of the student body to take a part in public opposition events. http://www.bbc.com/russian/mobile/russia/2012/01/120113_rally_moscow_school_test.shtml
78. Critique by *grani.ru* of the “*Edinaya Rossiya*” (United Russia) the event of December 13, 2011 must be viewed as exposing an aptitude of the ruling political entity for mass -mobilization of human and other resources; revealed lower mobilization and opportunity constraints on the ruling political entity; their higher potential to create and deliver highly specific collective product for consumption by target audiences. <http://grani.ru/Society/m.194012.html>
79. Charles Tilly (1984), p.170, *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*. In P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, T Skocpol (eds.): *Bringing the State Back*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
80. The data was collected by the *Novaya Gazeta* staff, interns and volunteers. The video record of the event is available from <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/50259.html>
81. *Levada* Analytical Center (Dec 26, 2011), Опрос на проспекте Сахарова 24 декабря. Retrieved from <http://www.levada.ru/old/26-12-2011/opros-na-prospekte-sakharova-24-dekabrya>
82. *Levada* Analytical Center methodology. (Jan 17, 2014). Poll «За Россию с Путиным». <http://www.levada.ru/2014/01/17/za-rossiyu-s-putinym/>
83. This poll was conducted between March 21 and 22, 2015. The poll was based on a random sample of 1600 individuals. Internet — The New Era of Mobil Devices. Пресс-выпуск ВЦИОМа No2836. 2015. Retrieved from <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115255>
84. The data was collected by TNS within the framework of a Web Index project from a sample of 20,000 Internet users ages 12 to 64 located throughout Russian Federation. Data is pulled directly from selected websites equipped with the TNS tracking application. A sample of 2500 people was used to gather internet traffic from smartphones and tablets. Audio Matching System (AMS) was applied to collect television usage data from markets selected by the project. The sample size of 100,000 guarantees good representation and low error margins. TNS conduct some 60,000 fol-

- low up phone interviews. Data retrieved from <http://www.tns-global.ru/services/media/media-audience/internet/description/>
85. *ibid.*
86. *Levada Analytical Center* (Nov 20, 2014), Интернет: Возможности использования. Retrieved from <http://www.levada.ru/2014/11/20/internet-vozmozhnosti-ispolzovaniya/>
87. Most data were obtained by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center via “Omnibus”, based on a sample of 1600 responses and stored on “*Archivarius*”. The data can be accessed from http://wciom.ru/database/baza_rezultatov_oprosa_s_1992_goda/
88. The data were collected and analyzed by *Romir Research Holding*. A sample of 1000 responders, ages 18 to 50, was drawn from a pull of centers with population exceeding 100,000, and representing eight federal districts. As such, this data represents adult city dwellers. Retrieved from http://romir.ru/studies/670_143215600
89. Denis Volkov and Stepan Goncharov (2014), Российский медиа - ландшафт: телевидение, пресса, интернет, *Levada Analytical Center*. RF, Moscow. Available at <<http://www.levada.ru/old/books/stal-dostupen-otchet-rossiiskii-media-landshaft-televidenie-pressa-internet>> (Accessed on 04 March 2016)
90. Study conducted by the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Science, in October of 2015, titled «Динамика социальной трансформации современной России в социально-экономическом, политическом, социокультурном и этнорелигиозном контекстах». This study represents a sample of 4000 adults, ages 18 years and older.
91. In July of 2014, *Levada Center* released analytical report “Authorities beat opposition in their own game — Internet”. Here, based on data collected, researchers conclude: « ... наличие Интернета не делает из гражданина оппозиционера или хотя бы человека, скептически воспринимающего дискурс власти». (“The Internet availability does not transform citizens into oppositionists nor does it entice an individual to view discourse by authorities with skepticism”. Retrieved from http://www.ng.ru/editorial/2014-07-29/2_red.html
92. *ibid.*
93. Data collected from a nation-wide poll, conducted in March of 2014, and based on a sample of 1600 individuals 18 years of age and older. Expected margin of error was estimated at 3.8%. The poll, «Гражданский активизм: новые субъекты общественно-политического действия» was conducted by a group of researchers affiliated with the Center for Integrated Sociological Research, and commissioned by the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research. Retrieved from <http://politanalitika.ru/upload/iblock/01b/01b21729d6e2cf25aofc50887b5d3e5a.pdf>
94. Case records indicate that on May 6, 2016, during an opposition -sponsored mass protest event on *Bolotnaiya Square*, a number of activists engaged agents of the state in a violent attack. A number of security personnel, responsible for keeping an order during manifestation, sustained injuries of varying severity. Individuals, responsible for an attack on agents of the state were detained and persecuted to the full force of the law. «Болотное дело» после 6 мая. *Gazeta.ru* Retrieved from <http://www.gazeta.ru/news/seealso/2411445.shtml>
95. *ibid.*

96. The Russian Government maintains its firm censorship grip on most, if not all, high profile periodicals currently in circulation. Some examples of controlled pro-elite base in the press can be found in digests with internet mirror-sites, such as “Izvestiya”, “Komsomolskaya Pravda”, nakanune.ru, “Regnum”, “Vzglyad”, “lenta.ru”.
97. Vladimir Putin (2015), О некоторых вопросах информационной безопасности РФ. R.F. Presidential Decree. Moscow, Kremlin, 22 May Available at <<http://pravo.gov.ru/>>
98. “*Olgino* system” was erected specifically to advance a narrative that favors and promotes the interests of the coercive group. It employs researchers, IT specialists, political scientists, and content developers able and willing to comply with requirements set forth by the management. Access to the facility itself is restricted as well as access to employees or content. Retrieved from <http://bolshoyforum.com/forum/index.php?page=768>
99. Vladimir Putin (2011), Разговор с Владимиром Путиным, vesti.ru, Available at <<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=661853&tid=94874>> (Accessed on 11 February 2016)
100. As an example of censorship and administrative pressure we may cite a collective action against Cable Internet tv providers resulting in the removal of the pro-opposition tv channel “*Dozhd*” (tvrain.ru). Administrative pressure was applied against groups involved in discussion of judicial sentencing of opposition and protest movement leaders — *Navalny Brothers*. «Свобода интернета 2014: Власти не оставляют интернету выбора». 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/temuchk/2014-44249413>
101. Ura. Ru (2015), Легитимных путей прийти во власть у оппозиции сегодня нет. Russian Information Agency ura.ru, 22 April, Available at <<http://ura.ru/articles/1036264628>> (Accessed on 07 March 2016)

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