

@Russia.com: Online & Offline Protest

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Abstract

As online activism in Russia has combined with offline activism in the form of street protests, questions have been asked about whether we are witnessing a societal awakening that will result in widespread political and social change. More questions remain, however, about how representative protest has been or whether it is restricted to the comfortable urban middle classes. In the meantime, the state response has been swift and repressive, instilling fear amongst ordinary Russians and demonstrating capacity to extinguish the reformist agenda. This article looks at online demographics in Russia and what they mean for offline protest and political reform.

In the years since the so-called Arab Spring, the role of social media in bringing about social and political change has been much considered. Questions have also been asked about the likelihood of Russia undergoing the same kind of transformation, symbolic of widespread disappointment in the West about the trajectory of Russia's political development. Such questions have become all the more salient since the autumn 2011 announcement of then Prime Minister Putin that he and President Medvedev would be switching places in the next electoral cycle. This was the catalyst for the well-organised and well-attended street protests that took place in December 2011 following parliamentary elections, in March 2012 following presidential elections and on the eve of Putin's (re)inauguration as President in May 2012. Crucial to organising and gaining momentum for all the protests were the tools provided by social media, particularly Twitter and the very popular Russian equivalent of Facebook, VK. But to what extent can social media really act as tools of change in Russia and how deeply does their usage penetrate into Russian society?

This article identifies the range of social media available to and in use by the protest movement in Russia, looking particularly at demographic data in order to determine the extent to which online activity is representative of the Russian population as a whole. Such an analysis is necessary if we are to understand the likelihood of protest leading to long-term change in the political and social life of Russia.

Theorising Online Activism

The internet's main contribution for social movements lies as a source of information, especially on less mainstream media issues. Additionally, it provides a forum through which protest can be organised and political views expressed. The communicative and mobilisation potential of the internet for social movements is undisputed. Equally referenced but more problematic is the identity-building capacity of the internet, important

if protest is to be sustained and consistent. The internet now performs the same function as urbanising processes did in previous eras, bringing together seemingly unconnected groups of people into a single space, facilitating the building of an understanding of the extent of shared situations and concerns. There are limits to the internet's potential, however, it is not an effective tool for building trust or resolving conflict: vital functions if divisions between groups are to be overcome.

While the internet is often seen as ungoverned (and ungovernable), in fact, various societal groups—government, NGOs, researchers and private businesses¹—compete to determine the types of rules and norms that will preside. Russia is currently negotiating this space, but operating under high levels of state interference and in an environment where the government has a deep interest in ensuring its domestic digital divide is maintained. In the battle to shape the governing rules and to establish a firm presence online, finance is an important variable for it is often the wealthier organisations that use online potential most effectively. Again, theoretical arguments about the importance of finances to effective use of the internet and social media are supported in the Russian case where it has been the relatively well-off, urbanised middle classes who have been the voice of online (and offline) protest to date. However, this is a fact that has not gone unnoticed and unmanipulated by Putin and his supporters.

Where online activities are designed to bring about political and social change, they must be supplemented by offline activism that brings groups together in person. This appears to be well understood by Russian activists. Protests in Moscow and St Petersburg and beyond were largely organised and advertised online but had their greatest impact in respect of the numbers they drew and their sustained (between December 2011 and May 2012) nature. As a result, images of enormous (uncharacter-

1 Ernest J Wilson (2005) 'What Is Internet Governance and Where Does it Come From?', *Journal of Public Policy*, 25 (1) 29–50.

istically so for Russia) numbers were conveyed—often via social media—to the world for a number of months.²

The BBC News Correspondent in Moscow at the time, Daniel Sandford, referred to the December 2011 protests as being “in many ways a political reawakening” for Russia. The real questions, though, were *who* was awoken and what would the government do about it? This political reawakening, after all, actually had roots in the online world of blogs and tweets of government opponents, long prior to the December 2011 street protests. However, these opponents were, and are, not necessarily representative of Russia as a whole. Digital divides exist across borders certainly but also within them and they are not restricted to differences in wealth. Demographic data on use of social media reveals other cleavages too in respect of which parts of society are online or not, effectively suggesting the online world is a divided and elitist one.

Online Demographics

That there is a digital divide in Russia becomes very clear from even the most cursory review of relevant data. June 2012 figures for internet usage in Russia show a penetration of 47.7%.³ This is low compared to European states such as Germany with 83% penetration and Poland with 64.9%. Overall, Russia accounts for just 13.1%⁴ of internet usage in Europe, unimpressive considering relative population figures. It is worth remembering, however, that Russian use of the internet has undergone exponential growth in the twenty first century. In 2000, only 2.1% of the population were internet users, by 2007 that figure had risen to 20.8%, 32.3% in 2009, and it is now near the 50% mark.⁵

Within these figures, there are large societal divides. 2011 data shows that only 20% of VK users are women, the vast majority of users are between 25 and 44 (approximately 80%), approximately only 11% earn under \$25,000 and 40%+ are educated above high school, with over 90% educated to high school level.⁶ Educational divides can be overcome; there is much evidence to show that organisations can function as educators

for the use of digital media but there is not an obvious way of overcoming the other aspects relating to lack of properly representative online activity without political will on the part of the government.

Further limits to a fully representative protest movement exist inasmuch as the internet may be most useful as a source for mobilising those who are *already* interested in politics and activism and has little utility in turning people *towards* that area of interest and activity. This is extremely significant in the context of a state like Russia where a civil society is in the early stages of emergence. It is for all these reasons that it is common to refer to a “digital divide”, a divide which is as evident in Russian society as elsewhere. While it is true that this divide should not be seen as insurmountable, the chances of the divide being closed at all swiftly in the Russian case look slim.

Notwithstanding recent growth, and bearing in mind potential discrepancies in statistics, it is safe to say that half of the Russian population currently does not use the internet. Given the state monopoly of the press and television, the lack of connectedness of so many ordinary Russians creates enormous problems for any opposition movements that: seek to elicit wide-ranging support for political change; offer alternative sources of information; or try to counter mis-information and government propaganda. Even when considering the percentage of the population that *is* connected to the online world, the numbers who rely on the internet as their primary or even secondary source of reference for news is very low. Television remains, overwhelmingly, the most important source of information. 84% of those polled for Levada Centre’s annual report for 2010–2011 cited either Russian state or private television channels as their first main source of news.⁷ Only 6% first cited the internet. Figures for the internet rose to 11% when respondents were asked for their second reference but this still compares unfavourably to a combined second reference for state and private television of 46%.

The digital divide is highly significant in that it gives room for the government to argue the opposition movement in Russia is not representative of the population and therefore lacks legitimacy. This has carved out room for a harsh response.

Protest and the State’s Response

The state response to street protest has been swift and repressive in nature. It has acted to deter protesters from mobilising by detaining large numbers of them and then undertaking judicial proceedings against small

2 Numbers are notoriously difficult to verify but for the December 2011 protests, for instance, *theguardian* reported protest organisers as saying 120,000 participated, the police as saying 29,000 and Security sources 80,000. The BBC reported an estimate of 50,000, calling it the largest protest since the fall of the Soviet Union.

3 Internet World Stats (2013a) *Internet Users in Europe*. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>. Data collected from Nielsen Online, ITU, Facebook, GfK and “other reliable sources”.

4 *ibid*

5 *ibid*

6 Ignite Social Media (2012) <http://www.ignitesocialmedia.com/social-media-stats/2012-social-network-analysis-report/>.

7 Levada Analytical Centre (2012) *Russian Public Opinion 2010–2011*. <http://en.d7154.agava.net/sites/en.d7154.agava.net/files/Levada2011Eng.pdf>.

(to date) numbers of protestors in a fashion reminiscent of the show trials of the soviet era. The recent conviction and then unexpected release on bail of opposition leader Alexei Navalny is only the most high profile case. Other well-known names against whom cases have been brought include Sergei Udaltsov and Leonid Razvozhayev. A case more calculated to scare ordinary people into silence, however, is the Bolotnaya trial, brought in June 2013 against twelve ordinary protestors for their part in the May 2012 Bolotnaya Square protests. Legislation has also been pushed through the Duma that effectively criminalises protest.

The state has reverted to other methods familiar from soviet times, salami tactics to divide the different parts of society in an attempt to isolate and neutralise the opposition. These latter methods so far seem to have real potential for success. With the digital divide, and protests largely restricted to western Russia and its big metropolises, Putin has gone on the offensive, characterising opposing voices as belonging to an ungrateful middle class, hypocritical in their protest against their privileged lifestyle itself paid for by the conscientious working classes and by a government against whose policies they now protest.

The response to online protest has been more complex. Authoritarian states have largely elected until now to try and limit the penetration of external actors into their own states, including shutting down access to the internet at key moments in an attempt to close regions or even the entire country to outside communications.⁸ Citizens of certain states are, however, more vulnerable than others to their state being able to “pull the plug” on their online activities. Most cited as a key factor here is the number of internet providers, and mechanisms for connecting to the outside. However, a far more important consideration in assessing the capacity of any state to adopt a wholesale closure of the internet is the number, diversity and security of physical paths.⁹ In fact, Russia looks fairly resilient on both counts, which may explain the relatively sophisticated strategies that the state has undertaken to date to control internet usage. Rather than the heavy repression undertaken by its neighbour, China, it has opted largely for “second- and third-generation techniques such as legal and technical instruments and national information campaigns to shape the information environment and stifle dissent and opposition”.¹⁰

8 China 2009, Iran 2009 and 2012, Syria 2012 and 2013, to name but a few.

9 Richard Chirgwin (2012) Internet shut-down easier than you think in some countries *The Register* http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/12/04/kill_switch_analysis_renesys/.

10 OpenNet Initiative (2010) *Russia* <https://opennet.net/research/profiles/russia>.

The latter have extended to somewhat mischievous tactics being employed: for instance, Navalny was in early 2012 a victim of a fake interview with Voice of America, during which he was quoted as making derogatory comments about opposition activists. Speculation has been rife that this was a state-sponsored fake, engineered by the FSB.

The internet can therefore be as effective a tool for the incumbent administration as for opposition activists. But it is not only the internet, more traditional forms of communication are also susceptible to attack. Open Democracy has speculated widely that the FSB and other pro-Kremlin groups have intercepted telephone calls and made illicit recordings of anyone suspected of being unfriendly to the Kremlin. Indeed, SORM (System for Operative Investigative Activities) gives a number of intelligence and law enforcements agencies in Russia a right to intercept information. Experiences include the tapping of Gennady Gudkov’s, Deputy Chair of the Duma’s Security Committee, telephone; Boris Nemtsov, transcripts of whose private conversations have appeared online; as well as those of diplomats from the UK and USA, the UK’s Deputy Consul General in Ekaterinburg being forced to resign after footage of him with prostitutes was made public. It has been widely speculated that the FSB was responsible for the filming and circulation of such footage.

Concluding Remarks

The benefits of the internet and social media for social movements are clear and largely unarguable. They provide a platform for dissemination of information, for organising offline protests and can be used to build a sense of shared identity, the latter extremely important in divided societies. Social media and the internet play a vital role also in publicising any state activities that breach internationally agreed principles of what constitutes appropriate state behaviour. Coupled with offline activities, online activism can be an important step in the road to achieving desirable change, even transformation.

But major problems exist for those seeking to bring about change in Russia. Most effective, perhaps, is the fear generated by the state clampdown on street protest and protestors, which deters dissenters from publicly showing their dissatisfaction. The appearance of only small numbers of protestors in turn legitimates state discourse which argues the vast majority of the population is content with the status quo. Even where more orthodox routes to change are followed by individuals, the state moves quickly to make an example of them, the case for the popular Mayor of Yaroslavl, Yevgeny Uralshov, who in July 2013 was arrested on corruption

charges. Such arrests cannot fail to have their effect on ordinary people, forcing them to question their own vulnerability to arrest if even prominent activists and politicians are not immune. The second problem is one of disinterest. So far, the opposition has remained largely confined to the middle classes and there has been a failure to unite the majority of Russians behind a single cause. The digital divide (with little prospect for bridging this in the short term), coupled with a continued reliance on state-monopolised media for news means the galvanising benefits of social media are not felt nearly widely enough. Thus, fear, apathy and disinterest combine to work against the opposition's reforming agenda.

For reform-minded Russians, therefore, offline activism might not be the immediate answer. To date, the larger street protests have been successful in raising awareness externally of Russia's domestic problems. But they have also provided an opportunity for the Russian state to send a message about what happens to those who dare to protest openly. It is far less clear that the same tactics will work with online activism. Certainly, a range of remedies is available to the Russian authorities and they are using some of these. However, a sustained attempt to restrict services internally is particularly dif-

icult, except for the big market leaders, which explains the 'accidental' Kremlin blocking of VK recently. But otherwise, monitoring and reacting to an increasing number of websites and other online sources will require the state to direct a good deal of its resources that way for a sustained period of time. In any case, in imposing restrictions, Russia leaves itself open to a good deal of attention and criticism from domestic and foreign critics. That it is sensitive to this issue is demonstrated by the rhetoric of justification employed, essentially a discourse of securitisation, which points to the need to provide a secure online environment to protect vulnerable groups in society and to counter terrorist and extremist threat. Apart from the threat to its legitimacy that such criticism brings, the government runs the risk of alienating the kind of market entrepreneurs that the country needs and which it has begun to attract. After the Navalny verdict, for instance, the Russian stock market suffered major losses. While such dips are often short-term, any pattern of losses inevitably affects the attitudes of investors and the market. Online activism may therefore continue to be the best tool available to reformers in Russia.

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