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Salikov, Alexey

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Politologija, vol. 99, núm. 3, 2020
Vilniaus Universitetas, Lituania

Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=694874464003>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2020.99.3>



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Socialinės medijos Rusijos politikoje

Alexey Salikov dr.alexey.salikov@gmail.com

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Federación de Rusia

Abstract: This paper considers the issue of the influence of social media on politics in Russia. Having emerged in the late 1990s as a tool for informal communication, social media became an important part of Russian socio-political life by the end of the 2010s. The past two decades are a sufficient period of time to draw some intermediate conclusions of the impact of social media on the political development of the country. To do this is the main goal of the paper. Its main body consists of three parts. The first chapter gives a general characterization of Russian social media, its significance in terms of influencing the formation of public opinion, public debate, and the socio-political agenda in the country. The second chapter examines the use of social media by the Russian opposition and protest movements. The third chapter analyses the use of social media by the Russian authorities.

Keywords: social media, politics, political communication, public sphere, Russia, Russian authorities, Russian opposition.

Summary: Straipsnis nagrinėja socialinių medijų įtakos politikai Rusijoje klausimą. Paskutiniame XX amžiaus dešimtmetyje atsiradusios socialinės medijos pirmiausia buvo neformalaus bendravimo priemonė, tačiau jau XXI amžiaus antrajame dešimtmetyje jos tapo svarbi Rusijos visuomeninio ir politinio gyvenimo dalis. Pastarieji du dešimtmečiai yra pakankamas laiko tarpas, kuris leidžia daryti išvadas apie socialinių medijų poveikį šalies politiniam vystymuisi. Tai atlikti ir yra pagrindinė straipsnio užduotis. Straipsnį sudaro trys dalys. Pirmojoje pristatomas bendras Rusijos socialinių medijų poveikslas, jų svarba formuojant viešąją nuomonę, viešosios diskusijos struktūrą ir šalies visuomeninę bei politinę darbotvarkę. Antrojoje parodoma, kaip socialinėmis medijomis naudojasi Rusijos opozicija ir protesto judėjimai. Trečiojoje analizuojama, kaip socialinėmis medijomis naudojasi Rusijos valdžia.

Keywords: socialinės medijos, politika, politinė komunikacija, viešoji erdvė, Rusija, Rusijos valdžia, Rusijos opozicija.

Introduction

The question of the influence of social media on politics has attracted scientists from its very beginning. Having emerged as a tool for semi-private, semi-public communication in small and relative closed communities, social media quickly became involved in politics on almost all levels, from discussions in fora to protest movements and election campaigns. Today, public political activity is difficult to imagine without social media: it is becoming an important communication channel between the government and society, and between professional politicians and citizens. Russia is not an exception. Like most other countries of the world, Russia is undergoing a social media boom with its total penetration in all spheres of human life, including politics. The

Politologija, vol. 99, núm. 3, 2020

Vilniaus Universitetas, Lituania

Recepción: 28 Junio 2020

Aprobación: 02 Septiembre 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2020.99.3>

Redalyc: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=694874464003>

extent of this influence is still difficult to fully assess, at least in the long run. Nevertheless, the past twenty-years-plus since the emergence of the first, new media in Russia is an adequate period of time to form some preliminary generalizations and to draw some intermediate conclusions of the impact of social media on the political development of the country. To do this will be the main goal of this paper.

Our research is based on existing empirical and theoretical studies on the impact of social media on socio-political phenomena and processes in Russia. To date, a number of studies have been published that consider some aspects of the impact of the role of social media in developing the public sphere in Russia,¹ the national specifics of the Russian cyberspace,² about the political role of social media in Russia: its usage by the protest movement,³ and by the Russian authorities⁴. However, the vast majority of these studies are focused on certain aspects of the influence of social media on Russian socio-political discourse, or they were written relatively long ago and, for obvious reasons, are limited to rather short periods of time. Most of them are not trying to consider the situation comprehensively, that is, to regard social media not only as an instrument for the opposition or for the ruling government, but as a new factor in the relationship between the ruling regime and society, and between politicians and citizens, which will cause significant changes in the Russian political landscape of the future.

The theoretical framework of this article is based on the combination of two paradigms; cyber-realism in the short-term and the mid-term, and cyber-optimism in the long-term. Cyber-realism, which, in the context of the question of the impact of social media on politics, means that social media is an extraordinary communications tool, but in itself cannot be a source of radical political transformations in the short-term or mid-term, such as democratization or authoritarianization, and “the same technologies which give voice to democratic activists living under authoritarian rule can also be harnessed by their oppressors.”⁵ At the same time, the question remains of whether the impact of social media on political development is by itself neutral in the long run. Of course, any tool in itself is just a thing, and its use depends only on a specific person and cannot radically influence such global processes as the political development of a country in the short run. However, the whole experience of the history of mankind shows that, in the long term, the invention and use of various instruments inevitably becomes a factor of human evolution, including the transformation of the socio-political sphere, as it was, for example, with the invention of the printing press. Therefore, in my research, I proceed from the assumption that social media as an instrument is an important factor of socio-political progress in the long term.

Another theoretical basis of this study is the concept of the authoritarian public sphere as developed in our earlier research on the digital transformation of the public sphere and its features in the context of various political regimes,⁶ as well as in the works of other

scientists,⁷ whereby the authoritarian public sphere is understood as “not the complete opposite of the public sphere itself in its most pronounced ‘ideal’ form described by Habermas (because the complete opposite of the public sphere would be its absence – as is the case with totalitarian rule) but as its special state in which public discourse in its classical democratic form is possible nonetheless, even if it is often problematic and may take forms deviating from classic democratic patterns.”⁸ Moreover, since all dissent and protest is marginalized and squeezed out to the periphery of socio-political discourse under the conditions of authoritarian regimes, social media essentially becomes the main platform for opposition-minded citizens, who form their own communities there. According to some researchers,⁹ these communities may form some kind of (counter)public spheres, eventually melting into a full-fledged (counter-)public sphere opposing the “official” one that is mainly controlled by the state. Thus, a characteristic feature of the modern authoritarian public sphere is the presence of two poles, one being pluralistic on the basis of new media, and the other being the “official” one, mainly formed on the basis of traditional media. The confrontation and interaction of these poles should, in theory, determine the political future of countries with non-democratic regimes. All this makes social media a decisive battlefield and an important factor in the political development in an authoritarian society. We will try to follow through with how this factor is actually manifested in the Russian case.

In order to get a more coherent and holistic picture of the impact of social media on Russia’s socio-political life, we will summarize all the relevant data for this period of time, as well as empirical and theoretical studies. Based on this picture, we will attempt to outline current trends and to make a forecast for the role of social media in Russia’s further political development. The main body of the paper consists of three parts. The first chapter gives a general characterization of Russian social media, its significance in terms of influencing the formation of public opinion, public debate, and the socio-political agenda in the country. The second chapter examines the use of social media by the Russian opposition and protest movements. The third chapter analyzes the use of social media by the Russian authorities.

1. Social Media in Russia: General Characteristics

In their early forms, social media networking sites arose in Russia at the end of the 1990s (the most significant of which were one of the first blogging platforms, LiveJournal, and the cross-platform messenger ICQ, still quite popular in Russia), and covered only a relatively small percentage of the total population of the country in the first years of its existence.¹⁰ However, since the mid-2000s, Russia, like the rest of the world, has experienced a boom in social media. At this time, both international (for instance, Facebook and Twitter) and social networks of Russian origin (such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki) appeared

and grew in Russia. In January, 2020, the share of social media users reached 48% of the Russian population.¹¹ According to data of Statista, as of February, 2019, “VKontakte accounted for the largest volume of a monthly audience in Russia, measured at over 38 million users. Instagram and WhatsApp made it in top three with 32.5 and 29.6 million monthly users, respectively.”¹² According to Statista, the following social media are also popular in Russia; Odnoklassniki (23.8 million active users monthly), Facebook (22.3 million), Viber (21.8 million), Telegram (11.3 million), and Live Journal (11.1 million).¹³ At the same time, according to the web-index of Mediascope (for March, 2019)¹⁴ and additional data of Statista, YouTube, with its more than 41 million monthly users, seems to be, in fact, the most popular social media platform in Russia, and “enjoys the highest penetration rate of any social network in Russia, with a rate of 87 percent.”¹⁵ Social media are quite diverse by their nature, with functions ranging from classic social media networking sites (VKontakte, Facebook), blogs (LiveJournal), and microblogging (Twitter) to instant messengers (WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram) and online video-sharing platforms (YouTube), each having quite different audiences and prevailing topics, even if there is a strong tendency in social media to hybridize and to expand its functionality.

At first (approximately until the second half of the 2000s), social media did not play a significant role in the socio-political life of the country: its reach and influence were negligible, and the content was dependent on professional media.¹⁶ According to the independent Russian non-governmental polling and sociological research organization Levada Center, Internet use in 2001 covered no more than 2–3% in all age groups.¹⁷ This means that the percentage of social media users in the country was even less than these low numbers of 2–3%. LiveJournal, ICQ, and other online platforms that were popular at that time represented a very small segment of Russian society. Social media started to play a more significant role in shaping public opinion during the process of the “socialization” of the Internet, which began in the mid-2000s due to the popularization of forums, blogs on the LiveJournal platforms Livejournal.com and Liveinternet.ru, and the appearance in 2006 of the first Russian social networking sites Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, as well as the gradual spread of the global social networks Facebook and Twitter, where Russian citizens massively rushed in search of new sources of information, bypassing those censorship restrictions that chained TV channels and mass print media at that time.¹⁸ Nevertheless, until the end of the 2000s, there was no significant political activity in Russian social media that would go beyond the limits of online community discussions and find manifestation in some actions offline (with rare exceptions, for example, during the protest against the planned logging of the Khimki forest). The Russian blogosphere remained a fragmented space consisting of many loosely connected publics, which, due to their limitations and small reach, were rather islands of fairly closed and homogeneous communities.¹⁹ So, for instance, the publics of Russian

Livejournal, the most influential social media platform in the early 2000s in Russia, were “more like a village than a megapolis: almost everybody knew one another (at least virtually) [...] The members of the community formed a unified group sharing the same basic values, cultural codes and implicit rules of conduct.”²⁰ Nevertheless, it was blogs that became the platform, those small islands of free public space, that has become a kind of “alternative” public sphere opposed to the “official” one, and fertile soil for a non-systemic and Kremlin-critical political activism in Russia. So, the civil and political career of the “main oppositionist of the 2010s,” Alexey Navalny, began precisely through blogging on LiveJournal.

The situation changed by the beginning of the 2010s. This was due both to political and economic circumstances, and probably even more as a result of the reaching of a certain critical mass of Internet and social media users in the country. By this time, Russian social media had “matured” and the platform, used by those small islands of free public spaces around which groups of politically active youth, students, and the so-called “creative class,” that is, all those who were not satisfied with traditional media and traditional methods of political communication and self-organization, began to consolidate. As the number of users and the penetration of social media in Russian society increased, its importance as a channel of communication grew, and at some point, the small and somewhat marginalized islets of politically active urban youth merged into a single conglomerate, which some researchers call the emerging Russian counter-public sphere,²¹ the first serious external manifestation of which was the “Snow Revolution” of 2011–2013.

At the present time (from the late 2010s to early 2020s), the use of social media has ceased to be a phenomenon exclusively used by the youth of Russia. Today, it covers (even if each to different extent) almost all age groups of the Russian population. In this sense, Russia is moving completely in line with the global trend, and in terms of prevalence and degree of coverage by the Internet and social media, it ranks above or at the world average.²² However, the country is quite unevenly developed, and the most urbanized regions of the country, such as Moscow and the Moscow agglomeration, St. Petersburg, and other big cities (see the concept “Four Russias” developed by Natalya Zubarevich),²³ in terms of education, living standards, media consumption, and social media penetration are comparable to the developed countries of North America and Europe, while the rest of the country is, in this regard, far from these modern standards. However, this initially comparatively-wide gap of the Internet and social media use between different regions of the country, largely based on the coverage and quality level of Internet communications, is actually getting closer quite quickly. This is especially due to the growth of mobile communications coverage, and the cheaper costs of mobile Internet and mobile gadgets, which today, given the fact that social networks are used mainly from mobile devices, eliminates the difference that exists in the quality of the Internet infrastructure in big cities and the rest of Russia.

Generally, the main trend regarding the share of various social media among sources of information in Russia coincides with the global one: the older generation is more focused on TV and the print press, while young people are more focused on the Internet and social media. The proportion is constantly changing, for completely natural reasons: the older generation, used to receiving information from TV news programs, has been gradually passing away, and the younger generations prefer the Internet and social networks as a source of information (in 2017, the share of social media penetration of the youngest age group reached 93%).²⁴ In a political sense, the peculiarity of Russian social media is that it has become a kind of watershed between the television audience and other traditional media; the 45+ age group is mostly loyal to the ruling regime, while the audience of social media users (45 and younger) is more critical of the regime. According to some studies, there is a special shape of the digital divide in Russia, formed by some correlation between political views and a media-diet²⁵ (even if this correlation is not always direct and gradually smoothed out with the growth of Internet penetration in Russian society), and this may be one of the reasons (in addition to economic and other reasons) for the growth of protest moods in the 2010s in Russia. In the future, this may mean a gradual reduction in the number of Russians with exclusively traditional media consumption, and consequently the reduction of the regime's "core electorate." In the last decade, an understanding of this situation seems to have been reached by both the opposition and the country's ruling political elite. This should turn social media in the coming years and decades into the most important field of political struggle for the minds of Russians between the various political forces of the country. The Russian opposition seems to be the first to have realized this state of affairs.

2. Social Media and the Russian Opposition

Since the very emergence of social media, cyber-optimists have seen it as a chance for a democratic transformation of authoritarian regimes and new opportunities for both the protest movement and the opposition. These hopes were partially justified in the 2000s and early 2010s under the conditions of some fragile undemocratic regimes,²⁶ but did not lead to any significant results in more stable political systems, such as, for example, Russia. Nevertheless, in these countries, the opposition, thanks to social media, received a tool that significantly expanded its capabilities in the fight against the ruling regime. How the Russian opposition was able to dispose of this digital instrument will be discussed in the following paragraph.

The very concept of opposition with regard to Russian specifics can carry different semantic meanings, and requires at least an explanation. The fact is that one of the characteristic features of the Russian socio-political landscape is the de facto division of the opposition into "systemic" and "non-systemic opposition." This difference, which

may not seem to be completely consistent with classical political theory, began to take shape in Russia after the enactment of extremely restrictive changes in election legislation (since 2002), especially during the second term of Vladimir Putin's presidency (2004–2008),²⁷ when a broad spectrum of political parties and movements appeared to be “marginalized” and “excluded” from the existing political system. At the same time, the Russian systemic opposition is completely integrated into the existing political system (including its own representation in the Duma where its candidates are allowed to participate in presidential, gubernatorial, etc. elections, although this representation and participation is mostly nominal), is largely financed from the state budget, and follows the ruling power's decisions in all key episodes (the Crimea situation, constitutional amendments, the retirement age, etc.) and thus is a part of the ruling regime (albeit with some special function). Thus, the term “non-systemic” refers not to a value-ideological confrontation with the ruling party of United Russia (which in reality does not have any clear political ideology, since it consists of the most diverse elements and is formed on the basis of personal and group loyalty), but lacks both a representation in the structures of state power, a negative attitude towards the political system and the authoritarian personality-based regime of Vladimir Putin, and an unwillingness to go by the rules of the ruling regime and collaborate with it.

The non-systemic opposition in Russia includes a wide range of parties, socio-political organizations and movements with a very extremely broad spectrum of political views, from nationalistic and right-wing socialistic, to social-liberal and liberal-democratic parties. Under the conditions of the authoritarian and personality-based Russian political regime, it would be logical to expect that social networks should become one of the main information and communication platforms for the political opposition in Russia, if not the main platform. However, due to Russian specifics, only the non-systemic opposition really opposes the ruling power, while the systemic opposition actually only formally makes itself out to be an antagonistic and real alternative to the government. This duality in the nature of Russian opposition leaves its mark on their use of social media in public politics.

The Russian systemic opposition is only nominally the opposition. Since in fact it represents the same party in power although with special functions and tasks, we will not devote much attention to its use of social media in this article, only the main functions. Due to its integration into the ruling regime, the Russian systemic opposition does not experience special problems with access to television and other traditional Russian media. Nevertheless, systemic opposition is used by social media, and its leaders (both federal and regional) have accounts in the most popular social networks. However, they do not show any significant activity in social media, with the exception of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and even in his case, it is more likely due to the brightness, charisma, and media personality of the Liberal-Democratic Party leader himself than to the real use of social media as a political communication platform. The

Just Russia Party, led by Sergey Mironov, is presented in social media even more poorly than the Liberal-Democratic Party, and does not have any significant influence on the formation of public opinion in the Russian digital public sphere. The leader of the Russian Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, is especially passive in terms of using social media. Systemic opposition parties and their leaders are certainly present on social media, but they do it rather formally, following the main trend and do not go beyond the formal style. Their accounts on social networks mostly constitute of the publication of dull press releases written in formal language. Even the young and most “advanced” in terms of social media use by young systemic opposition party leaders turn their accounts into reserved comfort zones, only using social networks by targeting that part of the audience, which, in principle, is already aligned to their parties.

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Unlike the systemic opposition, social media is perhaps the main communication platform for the Russian non-systemic opposition and the protest movement today. This is primarily due to the fact that traditional media in Russia is almost completely under the control of the state or pro-government structures (a curious fact is that even one of the largest opposition media in Russia – Radio Echo Moscow – belongs to the pro-Kremlin Gazprom-Media Holding, and this causes some suspicions regarding the real independence of this media).²⁹ Thus, access to traditional media is practically closed to the real opponents of the ruling regime. As a result, opposition activity (in its most diverse forms, such as protests and all public display of oppositional views and dissent in general, for instance) was practically pushed by the authorities themselves to the periphery of public space. According to a study published by the Berkman Center, social media should inevitably lead to the formation of alternative forms and spaces of communication and discussion,³⁰ and this is what ultimately happened. This observation is also confirmed by other experts who believe that a “nationwide public counter-sphere “reminiscent of the late Soviet times when ‘kitchen culture’ and non-censored literature and media created an alternative deliberation milieu for the dissident community”³¹ is being formed on Internet platforms in Russia in contrast to the “official” public sphere based on traditional media. At the same time, it becomes increasingly difficult for the “official” public sphere to ignore the “unofficial” one, which responds much faster to events and is significant to the people’s agenda, while the “official” model resembles the officialdom of the Soviet times more and more, thereby losing public trust.

For a long time, this phenomenon went unnoticed or was ignored by the authorities, who, apparently, were quite satisfied with the “marginalization” of oppositional moods on the periphery of social and political life. As a result, by the early 2000s and late 2010s, social media turned out to be largely the sphere of dominance of the opposition, bloggers, and public opinion leaders critical of the ruling power. Then, the Russian youth and growing knowledge-based “creative class”³² began to

group around them. This was not obvious for a period of time, but nearing the end of the 2000s and the early 2010s, the consolidating role of social media began to appear in external manifestations, the most successful of which seems to be the mass protests in the defense of the Khimki forest (2007–2012) and against the 2011 Russian legislative election results (2011–2013). At the same time, the role of social media was to break through the information blockade and fill the information vacuum, which, in the context of silence and ignoring many important topics in the central media, made it possible to easily find out about a large amount of important information. According to Alexander Morozov, the famous blogger on politics, “[s]ocial networks have played an enormous role in demonstrating just how the elections took place. If we didn’t have social networks, we wouldn’t have heard about the sheer quantity of violations. Thanks to social networks, election observers for the first time were able to speak widely about the violations and disgraces that they saw at polling stations.”³³ At this time, at the turn of the 2000s–2010s, social media became the same nutrient medium for the shaping of many modern Russian public opinion leaders. Some of them, like Alexey Navalny, Dmitry Gudkov, Ilya Yashin, Sergey Udaltsov, and others, became key opposition politicians by 2020 and will probably play an important role in Russian politics in the future. The most remarkable development in this sense is the political career of Alexey Navalny, who turned from an ordinary blogger and entrepreneur into perhaps the country’s main oppositional leader.

Alexey Navalny became famous after publishing documents on his LiveJournal blog concerning the numerous thefts in the Transneft company during the construction of the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline. Being a minority shareholder of almost all of the large Russian companies, Navalny regularly published disclosures of abuses, and filed lawsuits against their management teams, trying to achieve a disclosure of information on issues that directly affected shareholder earnings.³⁴ Gradually, as his popularity grew, Navalny assembled a whole team around him, essentially building a full-fledged media holding with channels and accounts in all popular social media in Russia, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vkontakte, YouTube, Telegram, LiveJournal, and Google+ (although the network ceased to exist in 2019), as well as a blog on a separate site in the Com domain. Thanks to this, he was largely able to compensate for the lack of access to television and the central mass media, and gained popularity and recognition in Russia. The growing popularity of Navalny is clearly visible with the help of a survey conducted in different years by the independent sociological service, Levada Center. So, according to opinion polls conducted from April, 2011 to June, 2017, Navalny’s recognition for this period of time (i.e., from 2011 to 2017) in Russia increased from 6% to 55%.³⁵ This dramatic increase of Navalny’s recognition by Russian citizens, achieved primarily through the active use of social media, indicates his transformation over these 6 years from one of the local leaders of public opinion (primarily in Moscow and some larger cities) to an oppositional leader of policy on the

Russian federal scale. However, will the Kremlin surrender social media to the opposition without a fight? As far as the analysis of the actions of the Russian ruling power in relation to social media makes possible to judge, it more than likely will not.

3. Social Media and the Russian Authorities

The emergence of social media and the following development of the digital (counter)public sphere that is a kind of the digital pole in opposition to the “official” one in the authoritarian public sphere presents a definite problem for any non-democratic regime. This problem essentially represents a special case of a “dictator’s dilemma” or “conservative dilemma.”³⁶ The solution to this dilemma in each case is individual and depends on the particular regime, but most modern authoritarian regimes prefer a more complex way of balancing between the Scylla of losing control over society and the Charybdis of a significant technical lag behind developed countries.³⁷ This path is also followed by the Russian ruling power.

There are several main factors that can be distinguished in the action of the Russian authorities in regard to social media. First, social media is an important source of information about public moods, including protest moods. Under the conditions of an authoritarian regime, when the communication between the ruling authorities and society is weak and disrupted, the Russian authorities need reliable information about the real public mood and a public assessment of their policies. Second, since the Internet and social media are turning into a significant political space – especially for the younger ages, but one which the older population is gradually embracing – the Russian ruling regime is certainly interested in keeping control of it to stop unwanted political activity. Third, the Russian authorities have gradually come to the realization that social media is becoming one of the main channels of communication with citizens as an important socio-political platform on which the formation of public opinion takes place, and a channel of communication on which a modern politician is simply obliged to be present.

Beyond all doubt, to one extent or another, Russian authorities started to use social media as a source of information and to monitor information from the very beginning of social media’s appearance in Russia. Nevertheless, until the turn of 2011–2012, the Russian authorities did not seriously perceive social media as an influential channel of political communication as having a significant impact on the formation of public opinion or as an excellent tool for consolidating protest moods and organizing street protests. According to Valery Solovey, at that time (late 1990s–early 2010s) its strategy in cyberspace was extremely simple, if not primitive: post positive materials about the authorities and negative ones about the opposition, and support pro-government sites and ignore (or attack, if necessary) the opposition.³⁸

However, the protest activity of 2011–2013 in Russia, as well as the Arab Spring of 2011, clearly indicated the important political role of social media, and the authorities simply were bound to respond to this circumstance. As a result, the attitude to social media has changed significantly. Russian authorities perceived social media as a strategically important space that should be taken control of. Therefore, not only was the monitoring of social media strengthened – for this purpose, an improved internal system was introduced for the monitoring of media, the blogosphere, and social networks, making it easy to analyze political processes, elections, and information risks³⁹ – but a number of measures were taken to establish control over a number of popular social media. So, according to the “information security law” in effect since August 1, 2014, social media in Russia has been obliged to provide information about its users at the request of the Russian security services. This law requires Internet companies, social networking sites, and bloggers with more than 3 000 subscribers to give Russian authorities access to users’ information and to utilize special equipment and software for the tracking of the users’ activities.⁴⁰ Some of those social media who refused to cooperate with the Russian authorities, such as LinkedIn and Telegram, were blocked, while others, such as large international social networks like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, refused (at least officially) to provide access to the personal data of their Russian users.

The coming of Russian politicians themselves to social media began a little earlier than they finally recognized its political importance. This seems to be rather a kind of tribute to fashion and following the trend of coming into politics after the success of Barack Obama in the 2008 US presidential election. The fashion for social media accounts among the Russian political elite arose during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012), who himself actively used social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), thereby creating a positive trend for using social networks in his environment (as well as, for instance, Arkady Dvorkovich, assistant to President Medvedev from May, 2008, to May, 2012) and among systemic regional politicians (and, for example, Nikita Belykh, then-governor of the Kirov region). This trend, having somewhat changed, continued after Medvedev’s and Putin’s “castling move.” Currently, the overwhelming majority of “systemic” politicians have at least one social media account, and often there is an entire press service that runs these accounts on behalf of their owners, who are the heads of some federal or regional administrative units (ministers, governors, etc.). Moreover, in the Russian regional administrations’ budgets allocated to the media coverage of these departments, part of these funds are allocated to work with social media, whatever this could mean.⁴¹ In general, if we take into account the attention paid by the representatives of the Russian elite to social media (monitoring, “working” with bloggers, maintaining their own accounts and channels, paid commentators and trolls, blocking and prosecution, and positive and negative responses to the most resonant publications in social media), it suggests that the Russian elite understands the importance

of social media in politics, and even tries to use modern methods of public communication play, at least formally, by the rules of the digital public sphere. However, according to the Russian media expert Maxim Kotlyarov, the majority of Russian “systemic” politicians are not yet ready to meaningfully change their style of communication, and their actions are more like mimicry under a new format (their behavior on social media turns often into either boring officialdom or, in rare cases, borders on being scandalous). It is unlikely that even the most sophisticated technologies for analyzing personal data and micro-targeting can change this approach.⁴² At the same time, however, the attention paid by the Russian ruling political elite to social media has a positive side, because it creates at least some kind of channel of communication between the government and society. As a rule, the authorities, in one way or another, react to all publications in social media that cause a massive public outcry, and this sometimes leads to a positive result.⁴³ Therefore, social media in Russia, in a certain sense, compensates for the lack of a free media, and serves as a kind of mediator between authorities and citizens.

A special and very remarkable case of the penetration of Russian authorities into social media to use it for political purposes is Telegram Messenger. According to some studies,⁴⁴ despite the official blockage, Telegram has become not only a phenomenon in the socio-political life of Russian society, but also a kind of a channel of political communication for the Russian elite “which are actively and diversely used by the Russian establishment and political interest groups.”⁴⁵ Telegram first appeared in 2013 in Russia, and until late 2015 was a little-known message service used mainly by advanced Internet users who were concerned about the confidentiality of their communications. However, when Telegram channels started to boom in 2016 in Russia, its growing influence on public opinion in the country was immediately noticed by the Russian authorities. Since that time, the authorities began to use Telegram as a communication channel. During the period from the beginning of 2016 until the blocking of Telegram in April, 2018, many Russian federal and regional government agencies had their own official Telegram channels (for instance, the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Press Service of the President of Russia, the Investigative Committee, and the United Russia Party). Even after the official decision to block Telegram was made, many members of the Russian establishment continue to use it (for example, Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov, Russia Today’s Editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, and the well-known pro-Putin TV host and one of the leading Russian propagandists Vladimir Solovyov). Another, and perhaps more common, way the authorities use Telegram channels has been the unofficial funding of individual anonymous channels, or payments to certain publications in the most popular political channels. So, for example, due to an independent media resource Project, which investigated the Kremlin’s influence on anonymous Telegram channels, the administration of the President has allocated a budget for the expansion into Telegram at the end of 2016.⁴⁶

Considering Telegram as an effective means of reaching out to difficult yet very important parts of the Russian population – the young, well-educated, and politically active urban dwellers – Russian authorities tried not only to influence public opinion through paid publications in popular channels, but also to learn how to use their own “unofficial” channels. So, since February 2019, one of the programs of the pro-government, but officially independent, non-profit “Institute for Internet Development” (“Institut razvitija interneta,” the IRI) has been training regional authorities to work with social media, including Telegram. As a part of this program, regional elites have learned how to start and develop anonymous Telegram channels. As a result, the teams of many regional managers now include specialists responsible for social media who monitor the main federal and regional political channels and maintain at least one own anonymous Telegram channel.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that the Russian political elite uses Telegram not only for communication with citizens and for influencing public opinion, but also for intra-elite communication. According to the Project investigation, many Russian political Telegram channels represent, in one way or another, the interests of certain Kremlin influence groups or regional elites, hired to spread the “right” kind of information.⁴⁸ Apparently, some political groups and security forces use Telegram channels to fight their rivals (leaking confidential information, mudslinging) and to promote their own position and political agenda. These separate groups, or clans, are also fighting over control of the information field and use Telegram channels to eliminate external and internal political rivals by publishing compromising material or rumors. At the same time, these different wings in the ruling elite need some channels for horizontal and vertical communication, which is difficult in conditions of a rigid power vertical and an extremely clear “friend or foe” behavioral pattern within the Russian elite. They “cannot openly express their opinions and discuss their differences and disagreements: they must show unity in the face of the ruling power [...] Therefore, they are bound to use some other communication channels, and Telegram is ideal for this.”⁴⁹ Perhaps this is precisely the main reason for the official lifting of the blocking of Telegram in Russia in June, 2020.

From a theoretical point of view, the actions of the Russian authorities completely fit into our theoretical framework: the Russian elite quickly realized the importance of social media as an important tool for shaping public opinion and, from that moment, began to take actions that prevented significant influence of social media on the political development of the country in both the short and medium term. Nevertheless, the very use of social media by the Russian authorities and the ever-increasing digitalization of the Russian (authoritarian) public sphere makes it possible to assume that the strong bias in it toward its “official” pole will be more and more balanced by the “unofficial” digital one, which means that, in the long run, it should lead to some smoothing of its authoritarian traits and hybridization, not only of the entire Russian public sphere, but also of the political regime itself.

Conclusions

As far as it is possible to draw conclusions based on the last 15–20 years, that is, since the emergence (in the late 1990s) and the wide expansion of new media in Russia (in the mid-2000s), social media has not become a decisive factor in Russian politics, at least not enough to radically influence the main vector of socio-political development of the country for a few decades. This is largely a confirmation of the thesis of cyber-realists that the Internet and social media in their nature are primarily tools that cannot alone radically change the political regime in the country and does not lead to automatic democratization (as the cyber-optimists think), or to automatic totalitarianism (as the cyber-pessimists believe) – at least during a relatively short period of time. At the same time, as our study has shown, social media certainly influences the nature of Russian public in the communication and political activities in the country. This applies to both the ruling authorities and to the opposition.

For the Russian opposition, social networks have become the main channel of communication with society. Under the authoritarian regime, when access to television and others traditional media is difficult or even completely closed, this channel is essentially the only truly effective platform for conducting public political activities for the non-systemic opposition. Undoubtedly, thanks to social media, the broad public has received many new public spaces for free and open discussions of significant socio-political issues, as well as a rather effective channel for bringing their opinions to the authorities (at least in the case of public outcry), which is very valuable in conditions of inefficiency and of the imitative nature of many democratic institutions in Russia.

As for the Russian ruling elite, its public policy and their presence in the public sphere, experience has shown that their expanded publicity due to social networks may not have a decisive influence on the political processes in the country in the short term, but it is gaining importance at least in several aspects of the relationship between society and the authorities. It is about the following. Firstly, for the authorities, social media serves as an important indicator of the public mood – the authorities closely monitor the most resonant public discontent and try to stop it from gathering momentum, which gives the citizens at least some kind of channel of communication with the authorities – which is important in conditions of broken traditional democratic channels of communication. Secondly, the use of social media gives Russian “systemic” politicians and administrators some real experience in direct (albeit limited) communication with citizens, since many of them do not have enough such experience due to the specifics of the political system in Russia, where a career in systemic politics is built, to a greater extent, on the system of vertical loyalty within the political elite, i.e., on intralite communication, and not on communication with voters. Through their accounts on social networks, systemic politicians receive certain feedback, and this also gives the citizens another, albeit weak, channel of communication with the authorities. In general, social media is not able to

have a decisive influence on the transformation of the public sphere and political regime in Russia in the short and medium term (a period of 15–20 years), but it can become an important factor in political development by introducing certain democratic elements into the socio-political life of the society by improving the feedback between society and power, thereby smoothing and softening the most prominent authoritarian features.

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- 41 See, for example, Vadim Khlebnikov’s journalistic investigation about the “work” of the Kaliningrad Oblast administration with regional social media: Khlebnikov V., “Ministerstvo trollinga: kak komanda alikhanova voyuet v internete” [The Ministry of Trolling: how Alikhanov’s team fights on the Internet]. Available at: <https://www.newkaliningrad.ru/news/politics/20351854-ministerstvotrollinga-kak-komanda-alikhanova-voyuet-v-internete.html> (accessed 8 June 2020).
- 42 Kotlyarov M., “Dinamika publichnoj sfery v fokuse tekhnologij analiza otkrytyh dannyh” [The dynamics of the public sphere in the focus of open data analysis technologies], *Neprikosnovennyj zapas*, No. 4, 2017, 67– 80.
- 43 One of the most vivid examples is the case of Ivan Golunov, a journalist of the Russian-language online media Meduza, known for his journalistic investigations on corruption in Russia, who was charged with drug trafficking by the Moscow police. It caused a massive public outcry due to the violations during the arrest and investigation, as well as due to subsequent protests. As a response to the authorities because of a widespread public outcry, Ivan Golunov was released in a few days after the arrest and all charges were dropped “due to lack of evidence of guilt.”
- 44 Rubin M., Badanin R., “Telega iz Kremlja. Rasskaz o tom, kak vlasti prevratili Telegram v televizor” [Telega (Telega is a colloquial name for Telegram and sounds like ‘cart’ in Russian – A.S.) from the Kremlin. A story about how the authorities turned Telegram into a TV set]. Available at: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/> (accessed 8 June 2020); Salikov A., “Telegram as a Means of Political Communication and its use by Russia’s Ruling Elite”, *Politologija*, vol. 95, no 3, 2019, 83–110.
- 45 Rubin M., Badanin R., “Telega iz Kremlja. Rasskaz o tom, kak vlasti prevratili Telegram v televizor” [Telega (Telega is a colloquial name for Telegram and sounds like ‘cart’ in Russian – A.S.) from the Kremlin. A story about how the authorities turned Telegram into a TV set]. Available at: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/> (accessed 8 June 2020).
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Khlebnikov V., “Ministerstvo trollinga: kak komanda alikhanova voyuet v internete” [The Ministry of Trolling: how Alikhanov’s team fights on the Internet]. Available at: <https://www.newkaliningrad.ru/news/politics/20351854-ministerstvotrollinga-kak-komanda-alikhanova-voyuet-v-internete.html> (accessed 8 June 2020).
- 48 Rubin M., Badanin R., “Telega iz Kremlja. Rasskaz o tom, kak vlasti prevratili Telegram v televizor” [Telega (Telega is a colloquial name for Telegram and sounds like ‘cart’ in Russian – A.S.) from the Kremlin. A story about how the authorities turned Telegram into a TV set]. Available at: <https://www.proekt.media/narrative/telegram-kanaly/> (accessed 8 June 2020).
- 49 Salikov A., “Telegram as a Means of Political Communication and its use by Russia’s Ruling Elite”, *Politologija*, vol. 95, no 3, 2019, p. 83–110. Here: p. 101.