UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Social media in civic and political activism in Russia

28.2.2020

Markku Lonkila,
Professor of Sociology,
University of Jyväskylä,
Finland

Larisa Shpakovskaya,
Researcher,
University of Helsinki,
Finland

Philip Torchinsky,
Independent IT consultant,
Finland

Social media applications have played an important role in uprisings from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street and to the anti-Kremlin protest wave of 2011–2013 in Russia. In an authoritarian country with state-controlled national television, social media offers the most

important tool for the opposition to mobilize nation-wide protests. The significance of such a mobilizing tool in Russia has grown with the proliferation of Internet access and indeed by the very size of the country, covering one eighth of the planet's land surface.

Social media applications allow the Russian opposition to organize and share information, but also enable the Kremlin to monitor citizens' opinions and behavior more closely than ever before. While the combination of social media data, cellphone logs and credit and paycard transactions let all states trace and locate individuals – whether consumers, criminals, terrorists or opposition activists – in Russia privacy intrusions are not balanced by strong and independent media.

Until late 2011 the Russian-language sector of the Internet remained largely free from state regulation and the ruling elite relied on nationwide television channels in implementing political control. This changed when tens of thousands of Russians gathered in the Bolotnaya square in central Moscow in late 2011 to protest against rigged elections and the swapping of chairs between Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. Social media applications were decisive both in exposing the vote rigging and in mobilizing the protest.

Bolotnaya and the ensuing wave of opposition protests in 2011–2013 showed the power of social media and provoked a concerted Kremlin campaign to curtail civic freedoms and the freedom of Internet in Russia. Numerous bills were passed and actions taken to obstruct and harass opposition actions on- and offline. The campaign rendered protests risky, spreading an atmosphere of fear among Russian Internet users.

Yet the protest wave also raised to prominence the young lawyer Alexey Navalny, whose anti-corruption foundation published a YouTube video "Don't call him Dimon" in 2017, accusing Prime Minister Medvedev of corruption. The video gathered more than thirty million viewers, prompted another wave of nation-wide protests in Russia, and confirmed Navalny as the most credible opposition counterforce to Putin.

The ban from state television channels has forced Navalny to develop a multi-platform social media strategy. These platforms include his blog, Facebook, its Russian clone VKontakte, Twitter and notably YouTube. Navalny and his allies in the regional offices of the anti-corruption foundation publish weekly several videos commenting social and political events in Russia and exposing abuses of power by Russian officials and elites.

Another recent online challenge for the Kremlin has come from Pavel Durov, founder of the leading Russian social network site VKontakte. Compelled to sell his VKontakte share and emigrate, Durov founded Telegram, a messenger application which is said to be immune to state surveillance. Despite the Kremlin's efforts to block the service, it remains accessible in Russia.

In addition to political online challenges, Russian grass-root activists commonly rely on social media to mobilize people around local conflicts. These range from social and cultural issues to environmental concerns such as protests against landfills in various localities in Russia. From the viewpoint of the Kremlin these conflicts risk being seen as results of bad governance and consequently becoming politicized.

The latest additions to the long list of Kremlin attempts to regulate Internet in Russia include preparations to isolate Russia from the global Internet in case of emergency, a bill to install state-made software in cellphones sold in Russia, and a plan to replace global platforms like YouTube with domestic solutions.

Thus the Kremlin tries to emulate the Chinese model of political control of the Internet. The differing historical development of the Russian-language section of the Internet leaves the outcome uncertain. Unlike in China, Russian people and businesses have habitually used YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, for example, and depriving Russians of these popular applications may cause social and political unrest.

The struggle for control of social media in Russia is likely to continue both on- and offline. The increasing repression, police violence, and prison sentences imposed on street protesters and innocent bystanders have recently sent a clear warning to Russians. Whether they will obey remains to be seen.

Email: markku.lonkila@jyu.fi

Expert article 2664

> Back to Baltic Rim Economies 1/2020 (https://sites.utu.fi/bre/bre-1-2020/)

Categories: BRE1/2020
Keywords: Larisa Shpakovskaya, Markku Lonkila, Philip Torchinsky, Russia

Share