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## Social Network Sites and Political Governance in Russia

Markku Lonkila

Introduction: Social Media in Russia – Tools for Protest or for Control?

Social media has become part and parcel of social movements' arsenal for resisting power holders around the world. Examples of social media's role in protests range from the Arab Spring in the Middle East to Occupy Wall Street in the United States, to Los Indignados in Spain and to the Russian protest wave of 2011–2012. The use of social media applications in disseminating information and organising demonstrations has elicited a considerable discussion on their role in protest movements (Gerbaudo 2012; Caren & Gaby 2011; Postill 2013; Etling et al. 2010). More specifically, the role of social networking sites, notably Facebook, has been studied extensively (e.g., Gladarev & Lonkila 2012; Vissers & Stolle 2014; White & McAllister 2014). While useful tools in mobilising opposition against repressive governments, social media and social networking sites also have a more sinister side: data accumulated in various social media applications can undermine the privacy and security of individual citizens, with potentially grave results for opposition protesters in authoritarian countries.

In this article I will address both the empowering and controlling aspects of two social media applications: the social network sites VKontakte and Facebook in the struggle over the political governance of Russia. My aim is to reflect upon their role in Russian democratisation based on the secondary literature regarding on and offline political participation in general and in Russia in particular. My main argument is that social media, and specifically social network sites (SNS), paradoxically enable increasing political awareness and new forms of mobilising opposition as well as formerly unimaginable forms of state control and monitoring of citizens.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of this section I briefly discuss the notion of social media. In the next section I address some particularities of the Russian-language segment of the Internet and the role of social media and television in the political governance of Russia. I also briefly depict the role of social media applications during the Russian protest wave of 2011–2012 and the ensuing increase in Russian state control over social media. Then I describe the social network sites Facebook and its Russian analogue VKontakte<sup>2</sup> and review two recent studies investigating the political impact of social network sites in Russia. The results of these studies will be complemented with a more detailed reflection on the structure and features of social network sites which make them useful for political purposes. Particular stress will be laid on what Eranti and Lonkila (2015) dub 'nano-level' activities on social network sites, such as using the Facebook Like and Share buttons. I will address the use of social network sites as tools for *both* opposition protests as well as for purposes of monitoring and controlling citizens. The concluding section presents a reflection upon the particularity of the political impact of social network sites in Russia.

Much ink has been spilled to define *social media*. Lietsala & Sirkkunen (2008, pp. 25–26) distinguish, for example, six genres of social media (in parentheses some selected examples): content creation and publishing tools (blogs, video-blogs), content sharing (YouTube, Flickr),

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<sup>1</sup> In the post-Snowden era it is clear that the spying of citizens by state organs is not confined to Russia only. However, with diminishing freedom of the press and a weak civil society the global trend is even more dangerous in authoritarian states.

<sup>2</sup> In this text I don't address LiveJournal (*Zhivoi Zhurnal*) which has a special role in Russian-language social media.

social networks (Facebook), collaborative productions (Wikipedia), virtual worlds (Second Life), and add-ons (Google Map, Slide Share). Despite researchers' attempts at definition, social media remains an umbrella notion for very different software applications. The smallest common denominators for social media applications include three features: they are web-based (vs. stand-alone computer software); they include user-generated content (vs. web publication of traditional journals); and they contain one-to-many or many-to-many communication (vs. e-mail exchange). Due to rapid technological change, however, all strict definitions, dichotomies and clear borders are quickly dissolving.

Because of the inherent vagueness of the notion, any text claiming to analyse 'the role of social media in politics' is doomed to fail: various social media apps have very different features and different functions for protest movements, for example. Studies of the impact of social media should therefore take into account these particularities. This is why, after a brief general overview of the social media landscape in Russia, I will focus on the *social network sites* Facebook and its Russian analogue VKontakte in the remaining text.

Ellison and Boyd (2013), cited in Lampinen (2014) define social network sites as networked communication platforms in which participants have uniquely identified profiles containing user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; where they can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and in which they can consume, produce and interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.

Though differing in some features, the basic structure, functionalities and even the visual appearance of VKontakte have been borrowed from Facebook, making it logical to discuss them together. As I will show later in this text, these functionalities (e.g., liking and sharing) are useful for protest movements in Russia and elsewhere. Simultaneously, however, they enable collection of great amounts of private data on citizens' behaviour and opinions.

### Social and Traditional Media in Russia: Particularity of the Runet

The visible role of various social media applications in the protest movements around the globe may create exaggerated expectations of their potential. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Internet is not a homogeneous global sphere where everyone can freely connect to everyone else. Rather, the Internet is divided both nationally, linguistically, culturally and structurally into fractions whose connectivity with the global Internet varies (Rohozinski 1999).

In particular, the Russian-language segment of the Internet (dubbed Runet by the Russians), is a prime example of the cultural and structural divisions of the global Internet. This specificity includes, among other things, a strong growth in Internet access, devoted social network site audience and popularity of Russian-made software and social media applications (e.g., Yandex vs Google, VKontakte vs. Facebook, mail.ru vs. Gmail), (cf. Lonkila et al. 2015).

Russian-language social media have provided an important and, until the protest wave, weakly regulated alternative to the biased broadcasting of Russian national TV channels. Their role is particularly significant under the conditions of 'half-freedom of speech' in Russia (Gel'man 2010), where national TV channels are under state control and can set political agenda, but at the same time small liberal or opposition-minded media outlets are allowed to function.

However, in terms of information diffusion the Russian language social media is second to national TV channels. As pointed out by Toepfl (2013), according to the polls most Russians still get their information from TV news, though they also surf the Runet for information.

## Social Media Applications, the Russian Protest Wave, and Increasing State Regulation

Prior to the protest wave of winter 2011–2012, Russia had at regular intervals witnessed the rise of protest movements in various parts of the country, some of them gaining nation-wide visibility. However, before the first mass demonstration in December 2011 the biggest street demonstrations in Moscow during the first decade of the 21st century had gathered at best a few hundred people. On 10 December 2011, frustrated by the falsification of duma elections and the swapping of chairs between the Russian president and prime minister, tens of thousands of protesters gathered on Bolotnaya Square in the centre of Moscow, sending a strong message of discontent to the Russian political elite. Before Bolotnaya and the ensuing wave of protests, the Kremlin had not understood the power of Russian language social media and Internet, having rather relied on the control of national TV channels.

Both domestic and global software applications had various functions in the mobilisation of the protests: already years prior to the protests, Russian citizens had published *YouTube* video clips revealing various misbehaviour and corruption cases concerning the Russian elite and state officials. The blogging platform *Live Journal* functioned as the main platform of political discussion and debates. The social network sites *Facebook* and *Vkontakte* were used both for socialising and on the eve of the mass demonstrations as mobilising platforms. (Lonkila 2012). According to recent research (see below in this article) Facebook and Twitter, however, were more significant in terms of increasing awareness of the protests than the Facebook analogue *Vkontakte*.

Shocked by the protest wave, the Russian government started a consistent series of actions to regulate opposition and civic activities both on and offline. These actions contained a great amount of new legislation, including law on ‘foreign agents’, an increase in fines for illegal demonstrations and several laws tightening the control over the Russian-language section of the Internet, but also harassment and suing of activists for both their on and offline actions. (Lonkila et al., 2015).

Internet regulation in general and in Russia in particular is not limited to censorship but is a multi-faceted phenomenon which may involve various actors, from states and international organisations to private corporations and individual citizens. It may happen both on and offline (e.g., blocking websites or suing individual bloggers) and it can be defensive (censoring contents), pro-active (paid pro-government bloggers) or ‘neutral’ (monitoring traffic without taking action). Regulation can also be implemented ‘in disguise’, e.g., by passing bills about other topics which can nevertheless be used to regulate the Internet. Finally, steps towards Internet regulation may include obtaining shares in relevant Internet and social media companies ‘just in case’. (Lonkila et al., 2015)

All these forms of regulation have been or are being used in Russia. According to Deibert & Rohozinski (2010), the Russian combination of robust and more subtle forms of Internet regulation may even exemplify more generally ‘the future of cyberspace control’. Recent examples of new forms of Runet regulation have been the politically motivated blocking of some Facebook pages due to manufactured complaints by users<sup>3</sup> and paid pro-government trolling.<sup>4</sup> Particularly the functioning of the ‘troll factory’ on Savushkina Street in

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/27041462.html>, accessed 28 June 2015. An example of a direct censorship effort was the blocking of a Facebook page founded for mobilising a demonstration in support of the opposition leader Alexey Navalny in December 2014: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-blocks-navalny-facebook-protest/26754483.html>, accessed 9 August 2015.

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trolls\\_from\\_Olgino](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trolls_from_Olgino), accessed 9 August 2015.

St.Petersburg has gained much publicity due to former employees who have spoken publicly about their duties inside the factory.<sup>5</sup>

Proof of the government's involvement in these new forms of regulation is difficult to obtain. However, in the upsurge of nationalist sentiments related to the annexation of Crimea and aggravation of fighting in eastern Ukraine, all the above forms of regulatory efforts over the Runet are likely to increase as Russia slides towards a harsher version of authoritarianism. In the remaining text I will focus on the role of VKontakte and Facebook in the present-day Russian political landscape, and then discuss their relevance for the political governance of Russia.

### VKontakte vs. Facebook

With its 1.44 billion monthly users in March 2014<sup>6</sup> Facebook, launched originally at Harvard University campus in 2004, is after Google the second most popular website globally based on its web traffic.<sup>7</sup> In the words of the company itself, 'People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them'.<sup>8</sup>

Though constantly changing and adding new functionalities, at the heart of Facebook is a *social network*. In the jargon of social network analysis, an individual Facebook user is a central node ('ego') in a *personal or 'ego-centric' network* consisting of the user's Facebook friends ('alters'). The user can, among other things, post text or pictures on his/her own timeline, and comment, 'like' or 'share' posts by her Facebook friends. Facebook users can also regulate the visibility and the reach of their posts. In addition to personal Facebook sites, the application allows for creation of groups and public pages for the use of both business and civic and political activities. As a result, establishing a Facebook page or group has become a standard procedure in organising a social movement or demonstration. Moreover, Facebook also contains a chat feature which allows for one-to-one private messaging.

Russia is, however, one of the few countries worldwide where Facebook is not the most popular social network site but clearly second to its Russian analogue VKontakte (In contact), founded by the St.Petersburg State University graduate Pavel Durov in 2006. According to comScore data from March 2015, VKontakte was the third most popular web application in Russia after mail.ru and Yandex with 56 million unique monthly visitors, whereas Facebook was ranked 24<sup>th</sup> with a bit less than 10 million monthly unique visitors.<sup>9</sup>

The user interface and the overall design of VKontakte is a close copy of Facebook. As Facebook, it is built on the model of an ego-centric network but in contrast to Facebook, VKontakte allows for detailed searches for persons based on various criteria (not available on

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/27043750.html> and <http://www.rferl.org/content/how-to-guide-russian-trolling-trolls/26919999.html>, accessed 28 June 2015.

<sup>6</sup> As of 31 March, 2105, reported by Facebook <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>, accessed 10 May 2015.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>, accessed 9 May 2015.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/facebook/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/facebook/info?tab=page_info), accessed 10 May 2015.

<sup>9</sup> ComScore MMX 2015. During the same period VKontakte had 17.9 and Facebook 1.1 million average daily visitors. These figures are difficult to ascertain and other companies analysing the popularity of websites may end up with different figures (e.g., see Brand Analytics 2015, available at: <http://www.slideshare.net/Taylli01/2014-43472028>, accessed 14 June 2015)..

Facebook). This makes it, among other things, a handy tool for dating services<sup>10</sup> and due to its feature for streaming of films and music it has a competitive advantage over Facebook.<sup>11</sup>

## The Dual Nature of Social Network Sites as Tools for Both Opposition and the Government

Despite the popularity of VKontakte, according to recent research it was Facebook that played a more significant role in Russian post-election politics. Two fresh studies have directly addressed the political impact of social network sites in Russia with concordant results.

Reuter and Szakonyi (2015) focus on the effect of social networking sites on political awareness in Russia. The authors argue that in electoral authoritarian regimes the perception of electoral fraud is among the most significant factors in delegitimising and sometimes bringing down these regimes. They investigate the impact of global (Facebook, Twitter, Live Journal) and domestic (Moi Mir, Moi Krug, VKontakte) social network platforms on the awareness of fraud in the 2011 duma elections in Russia. On the basis of a nationally representative post-election survey conducted in 2011 they find, first, that only 'politicised' network services, namely Facebook and Twitter significantly increased the probability of an individual to perceive electoral violations, whereas domestic applications such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Moi Mir and Moi Krug had fewer political contents and no significant effect on awareness. The authors remark, however, that the smaller popularity of Facebook and Twitter in Russia curbs their actual potential.

Reuter and Szakonyi claim further that social network sites are effective in spreading information on electoral fraud because their algorithms bring users information from various sources and discussion streams. In particular, users do not need to specifically search for information on electoral fraud to be exposed to it.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, information on fraud coming from an old social network site friend or from a well-known opposition figure such as Alexey Navalny, for example, is likely to carry more weight than that obtained from anonymous sources.

These findings are lent credence by White and McAllister's study (2014) based on another nationally representative post-election survey in 2011. The authors investigated the role played by social media in spreading dissatisfaction with election results. The results confirmed the significance of the Internet in general in shaping opinions about the fairness of elections. The authors found that more television watching was associated with the perception of election results as fair, whereas greater Internet use was related to seeing elections as unfair. Moreover, they found, similar to Reuter and Szakonyi, that Facebook, unlike VKontakte or Odnoklassniki, had a major impact in sharing demonstrators' demands and disseminating anti-regime information. (White & McAllister 2014, pp. 80–81)

Both of the studies referred to above thus lend credence to the claim of Facebook's political importance in Russia. As useful as they are, these studies stress the empowering aspect of social network sites as tools for opposition, and the posing of the study questions and the survey methods used fail to address some specific and politically relevant functionalities and features of these sites.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://gawker.com/5909410/ukrainin-men-how-american-men-are-using-the-russian-facebook-to-find-brides>, accessed 10 May 2015

<sup>11</sup> There is a considerable overlap between the audiences of the two social network sites. According to a 2012 study, only 0.7 million Russian Facebook users did not also have an account in VKontakte, see <http://www.russiansearchtips.com/2013/01/russian-social-networks-in-numbers/>, accessed 29 June 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Counter arguments stress the homogenising tendencies and the filter bubble create by social media and social network sites..

In the remaining text these results will be complemented first by a more detailed reflection on the structure and features of social network sites, particularly Facebook, which make them usable for political purposes. I will distinguish between explicitly political actions conducted on public social network site pages on the one hand – such as the event page for a street demonstration – and ‘nano-level’ actions comprising seemingly minor but in actuality important new forms of political engagement on the other hand, with my focus on the latter. Second, I focus on the dual character of social network sites as tools *both* for opposition protesting as well as for purposes of monitoring and controlling citizens.

### Politics on Public Social Network Site Pages vs. ‘Nano-Level’ Politics of Personal Pages

In order to understand the politically relevant utilisation of social network sites one has to pay attention to two interrelated aspects of their structure. The first and most self-evident aspect is related to *public social network site pages and groups* such as ‘Meeting for honest elections’, which are used for explicit forms of political activism and which were vital for organising the street protests in Russia. These public social network site pages and groups are indispensable for mobilising opposition in authoritarian regimes since they offer an arena for debate and information diffusion, empower the participants and help to organise mass protests. Simultaneously they are vulnerable to state control since the organisers and participants may be identified and pressured and pages can be closed down. VKontakte founder Pavel Durov was, for example, approached during the winter demonstrations by the FSB asking him to close down some opposition groups. Durov refused but due to continuing pressure was finally forced to sell his shares and emigrate in 2014, leaving the VKontakte database potentially vulnerable to government monitoring.

However, there is a second and thus far neglected political aspect of social network sites. This aspect consists of what Eranti and Lonkila (2015) dub *nano-level actions* conducted by individual social network site users. With this notion Eranti and Lonkila refer to minor, fleeting and almost indiscernible activities conducted frequently on social network sites, e.g., using social plugins such as the Facebook Like or Share. These nano-level actions can and are being conducted on explicitly political and public social network sites and groups but their overwhelmingly more frequent and more significant use takes place on the personal pages of the users.<sup>13</sup> These nano-level actions are generally neither considered as serious political activities nor registered as such in surveys on political engagement. Nevertheless, they may have significant economic, social and political consequences.

### The Facebook Like Button as an Example of Nano-Level Politics

The Facebook Like button is a prime example of nano-level activity on social network sites. Liking posted objects, such as profile pictures, videos and posts is probably the easiest and most often used feature of these sites. In May 2013, Facebook users liked an astonishing 4.5 billion objects daily.<sup>14</sup> Liking an object on Facebook has several important consequences. In *economic* terms, a Facebook Like starts a two-way exchange between the application and the company that has a Facebook Like button on its website. In this exchange Facebook sells the users’ data to the firm for marketing purposes. In their study of the *social* significance of the

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<sup>13</sup> Due to their nature, public pages and groups can to a great extent be conceptualised and analysed with the help of traditional social movement theories such as frame analysis and resource mobilising. In contrast, analysing the nano-level politics of personal pages needs to draw on Goffmanian impression management and social network analysis (Eranti & Lonkila 2015)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151908376831729>, accessed 20 June 2015.

Like button Eranti and Lonkila (2015) showed, among other things, how the users have developed various ways to use the Facebook Like button to accomplish a great number of tasks very likely not imagined beforehand by the Facebook developers.

Finally, and for this article most importantly, in *political* terms the Facebook Like button (and the corresponding *Mne nravitsya* button on VKontakte) is also used to communicate, among other things, one's political views on both public and personal pages. Thousands of likes on Alexey Navalny's public Facebook page, for example, are a strong political statement as are sharing and liking Navalny's posts on one's personal social network site page.

Among other things, a great number of likes on a political comment or other object, e.g., a photo or video has an empowering effect both on the poster of the object and on the likers many of which, prior to liking a sensitive object, scan the names of the previous likers in order to find support for their own nano-level action (cf. Eranti & Lonkila 2015; Egebark & Ekström 2011). In a recent study Gerodimos and Justinussen (2015) investigate the political relevance of Facebook social buttons including the Like button, but rather as a response to Obama's 2012 presidential campaign than as a multifaceted and complex sign of meaningful communication. Reflecting upon the use of the Like button the authors note:

'Little research exists on the motivation behind why people like on Facebook, but the intuitive assumption is that the number of likes implies exposure, attention, and some sort of affirmation, ratification, or endorsement of what is posted' (...) 'Further qualitative research is needed into the motivations, meanings, and significance of a Facebook interaction (like/comment/share) to the platform's users. For example, does "like" only express positive sentiments? How much affinity or endorsement is usually a prerequisite to liking content (merely superficial and impulsive response or significant and meaningful agreement)? And how does an individual decide what to share and what not to?' (Gerodimos & Justinussen 2015, pp. 117, 129)

In a like manner Max Halupka (2014) in his essay on 'clicktivism' wants to bring the thus far ignored use of social buttons to the forefront of studies of political engagement. He argues that online participation by clicking a social button is a legitimate political act which has been regrettably marginalised in mainstream political science literature. However, similarly to Gerodimos and Justinussen, Halupka considers the use of social buttons rather as a reactive and unproblematic action while Eranti and Lonkila (2015) emphasise more proactive, versatile, and meaningful motivations and uses of the Like button, some of which had very little if anything to do with the actual content of the liked object:

'Our results show that though the Like button was designed to allow users to express their positive evaluations of the contents of Facebook posts, comments, and pictures, it was in actual fact used for a wide variety of purposes, from dating efforts to conversation regulation and maintenance of social ties. Our results also reveal that the networked Facebook audience affects the users' liking behavior, and that users reflect their liking based on previous likes'. (Eranti & Lonkila 2015)

If these economic, social and political aspects are important for Facebook users, they should be *mutatis mutandis* applicable to VKontakte. However, I am not aware of research into the VKontakte economy or of studies of the political or social significance of the social plugins such as '*Mne nravitsya*' button on VKontakte.

### Sharing Internet Memes as a Mechanism of 'Connective Action'

Closely related to observations on the general importance of Facebook social plugins and nano-level actions, Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012; 2013) have proposed that 'digitally networked media' enable completely new forms of 'connective action' vis-à-vis

traditional collective action analysed by social movement scholars prior to the era of social media. To their mind, in a traditional *collective action* an existing organisation, e.g., political party, tries to convince its followers of the relevance of the already existing ideology. In *connective action*, the action is either self-organised by the people connected through digital media or, in case an organisation is involved, it may voluntarily stay in the background to give the main role for people. In this kind of horizontal, self-organised grassroots action the activities themselves are gratifying and often fun, enabling the participants to find their own angle on political events. In their study of online organising in Spain Anduiza et al. (2014) found that the 15M movement corresponded well to the basic idea of connective action. Much in line with the connective action paradigm, instead of the traditional organisations such as unions and parties, the organising forces were recently created, without formal membership and had a mainly online presence; instead of traditional media, personal contacts and online networks were strongly involved in mobilisation and the protesters were younger, more educated and less politically involved.

Russian protests during 2011–2012 seem to share similar characteristics of connective action, one mechanism of which according to Bennett and Segerberg consists of creating, reworking and *sharing internet memes*. Sharing of memes indeed flourished during the wave of protests in Russia when the social media and Runet were filled by various memes making fun of power holders. One of the many political memes circulating on the Runet during the protests built upon Vladimir Putin's remark concerning opposition street protesters who according to him had Russian passports but acted in the interest of foreign states. Putin asked rhetorically what one could say to these people, and answered his own question with a phrase from Richard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*: 'Come to me, Bandar-log [ape folk]'. In *the Jungle Book* this phrase is uttered by the yellow Python Kaa, who invites the brainless ape folk to walk straight into his mouth (Treisman 2013, p. 252). This public statement prompted a number of Runet memes showing various satirical relations between ape folk and Putin in the role of the python.

In another public statement Putin confessed having mistaken the white ribbons – an opposition symbol that street protesters carried on their chests – as 'condoms' of an anti-AIDS march. This statement provoked a wealth of condom memes, in one of which Putin poses ceremoniously in an official photo with a text wishing a happy New Year to the Russian citizens – with a condom hanging from the chest of his black suit.

Sharing is closely connected to liking since a shared object can be and often is liked by other users. In political terms, sharing a post by a well-known opposition figure such as Alexey Navalny is a sign of stronger engagement than 'mere' liking. Moreover, the user sharing an object also runs the risk of being accused of dissemination of 'extremist' materials, that is, materials inciting ethnic hatred, or promoting fascism or Nazism.

### The Dangers of Liking and Sharing

Thus far I have in this article mainly addressed those features of social network sites which can be used by the opposition against authoritarian governments. However, two points have been raised which cast doubt on the democratising potential of social network sites. First, it is claimed that these sites have a negligible or even detrimental impact on offline political activities and second, it is claimed that social network sites may increase possibilities for the state to control its citizens.

Due to the complex nature of the relationship between on and offline forms of activism, and differing study questions and methods, the vast research on the subject has not produced much cumulative knowledge. Summarising the on/offline debate on a general level Christensen (2011), however, found no evidence to suggest that Internet activism is replacing

traditional political participation. Rather, he contends, it is helping mobilise citizens by increasing awareness of political issues.<sup>15</sup>

Christensen's results are supported by the research on the impact of the social network sites in Russian politics presented earlier in this text (Reuter & Szakonyi 2015; White & McAllister 2014). Another recent study claims that online engagement may even be the first step towards deeper involvement in politics. According to Cantijoch et al (2015, p. 3), browsing for information and news online seems to trigger offline participation such as voting and act as 'a gateway' for other forms of political engagement in the UK.

Discussion about the *detrimental impact* of online activity to offline actions readily evokes the debate on slacktivism, a combination of the words slacker and activism, according to which the easiness of online participation only buys a good conscience or ego-boosting for the participants without any offline consequences.<sup>16</sup> One critique of slacktivism is related to Malcolm Gladwell's (2010) slogan 'the revolution will not be tweeted'. To Gladwell's mind revolution is high-risk activism (he takes examples from the US civil rights movement, and this kind of activism, he maintains, demands strong ties which are formed in face-to-face situations, not in social media.

Gladwell's argument has been contested on several grounds. Leo Mirani, for example, notes that Gladwell ignores the ability of social media to rapidly spread alternative information that might otherwise not reach a large audience (Mirani 2010). Gladwell seems to be right in the sense that no government has thus far given up power due to purely online protests. It is also true that few of our strong ties have been formed solely online. But a revolution also needs weak ties in order for information diffusion to increase political awareness, the formation of which is much enhanced through online social media.

In terms of the *controlling and monitoring aspects* of social network sites in authoritarian states, explicitly political public social network site pages or groups may be identified and closed, and their organisers may be arrested. Consequently, the 'nano-level' politics on personal SNS pages may take on a specific importance in the form of creating, reworking, liking and sharing memes; employing satire, irony and parody; and using double speak and constantly changing meanings to express political opinions. For the government it is much more difficult to carry out censorship on this type of political activity due to its ambiguity, frequency and the great number of personal sites.

But a move to nano-level opposition activism may also be countered with the intensification of the monitoring and controlling of these nano-level activities by the state. During the past few years more than 20 people in Russia have already been convicted or punished for their actions on online social networks: people have been fined for retweets and have had their homes searched because of likes on social network sites. In 2012, for example, a Kazan resident and the head of a nationalist political party was fined because on VKontakte he liked

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<sup>15</sup> In general, the terminology using the notions of on/offline or virtual/real runs the risk of dividing reality into separate spheres of which the 'virtual' sphere is doomed to be subordinated to the 'real reality'. This distinction is doubtful since 'real' actions, such as donating money or signing petitions, may well be conducted on the Internet. Moreover, actions conducted online – such as mobilising street demonstrations – may have real consequences in terms of overthrowing governments. In all, the increasingly ubiquitous mobile communication is rapidly dissolving the boundaries of distinct spheres. Rather, the on/offline -debate deals with various modes of communication which intertwine with one another and merge into a state of affairs where dichotomies such as virtual and real lose their meanings.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion on pros and cons of slacktivism, see Christensen (2011).

a still from a scene in the film *American History X*, where the actor Edward Norton stands with his arms outstretched and a swastika tattooed on his chest (Mostovshchikov 2015).<sup>17</sup>

Although thus far mainly scattered forms of control of the use of social-plugins have been effectuated in Russia, nano-level politics may in the future be countered by a 'nano-level control' of the population. A recent study of Facebook users in the United States revealed how users' likes allow the prediction of their ethnic origin, party affiliation and religion with accuracy between 80–90% (Kosinski et al., 2013). Another study showed that Facebook can be used to manipulate the moods of its users (Kramer et al., 2014). If this is possible on Facebook, it may also be possible on VKontakte, thus offering unimaginable possibilities for monitoring the opinions and moods of the Russian population.

### The Specificity of the Political Impact of Social Network Sites in Russia

So far I have argued that social network sites do have political relevance in Russia and dealt with both the empowering and constraining role of social network sites for democratisation, stressing the growing importance of nano-level politics and control. But is this dual role of social network sites particular to Russian context and if so, how?

A good quality comparative study of the political impact of social network sites should pay attention simultaneously to a wide variety of factors, such as the general economic and political situation, the freedom available for printed media and the Internet, the state of civil society, and the particular Internet culture of the countries in comparison. Lacking such comparative data I can below only offer some tentative reflections on the matter: clearly there is a need for comparative studies of the issue in the future.

In their study White & McAllister (2014) ponder why the coloured revolutions failed to materialise in Russia. Their explanation is first, that the Russian elections were not rigged enough: in contrast to other coloured revolutions, the rigged results reflected by and large the overall sentiments of the population. Second, the Russian government took decisive action both on and offline to curb the protests, for example by encouraging pro-regime actions and demonstrations and discrediting and arresting protesters. Moreover, Putin's popularity was backed up by the absence of clear divisions among the leading elite or law enforcement apparatus.

In addition, the weakness of civil society also played against a colour revolution taking place in Russia. It is possible that the absence of well-functioning civil society structures (partly due to increasing state control) forced the mobilising and organising activities to be transferred online. Online tools are handy when criticising the government and mobilising protests, but they cannot build lasting offline structures or transmit opposition demands to the political apparatus. Consequently, with undeveloped forms of offline activism, civil society organisations and movements, the government has an easier job in effectuating political control online.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, as mentioned above in this text, social network sites are structured around the model of personal or ego-centric networks. It is possible that their importance may have to do with the central role of personal networks in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia (Lonkila, 1999). In order to cope in the Soviet society, personal networks were much needed in most spheres of life, for example to obtain consumer goods, decent medical care or exemption from the army. In the turmoil of the transition period, networks were partly transformed, but partly survived the system change, compensating for citizens' lacking confidence in formal institutions. In a

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<sup>17</sup> Other examples include, for example, a criminal charge for sharing the appeal of the Ukrainian Right Sector on VKontakte.

<sup>18</sup> I thank Vladimir Gel'man for pointing this out to me.

similar vein, in international comparison Russians are particularly active and engaged social network site users.<sup>19</sup> Time spent on social network sites may further sensitise Russians to the opinions of their trusted significant others, this time in a virtual environment. This increasing 'network sensitivity' may also have an impact in the political and offline spheres of life (cf. Karakayali & Kilic 2013).

As noted above in this text, according to recent research, domestic network site use did not have an effect on perceived election fraud. In Reuter & Szakonyi's (2015) investigation the reasons for this state of affairs remain unclear: it may be due both to the organisers' habits of social media use and the wish to remain outside the reach of Russian security services, or other factors. One may add that compared to an average VKontakte user, a Facebook user is probably more likely to have travelled more, have more friends abroad and be more connected to non-Russian debate on political matters, which perhaps makes them more responsive to critical views of Russian TV biased broadcasting.

In this article I have claimed that social media applications are significant for the political communication and governance of Russia. I have been focusing on two social network sites, VKontakte and Facebook, and analysed their relevance and ambiguous role in Russian politics, paying particular attention to the pros and cons of 'nano-level actions'. For the opposition, these sites are important as tools for mobilising, networking and debate, whereas for the government they offer an opportunity to 'keep a finger on the pulse' – that is, to keep up to date with the mood of common citizens. At the same time, they enable tracking down of opposition networks and even allow identification of potential opposition supporters based on their non-political activities on social network sites. In this sense, whoever controls these sites, has powerful tools for controlling Russia.

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<sup>19</sup> [http://rbth.co.uk/business/2013/07/03/russian\\_workforce\\_stuck\\_on\\_social\\_networks\\_27723.html](http://rbth.co.uk/business/2013/07/03/russian_workforce_stuck_on_social_networks_27723.html), accessed 29 June 2015.

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