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FRAGMENTATION OF SOCIETY AND MEDIA HYBRIDISATION IN TODAY'S RUSSIA: HOW FACEBOOK VOICES COLLECTIVE DEMANDS

Current social structures can be described more effectively with reference to value orientations, consumer patterns and Internet use rather than classic demographics. This approach to social stratification results into the idea of *social milieus* more flexible than the picture provided by rigid class categorisations. Social milieus differ in many respects; we argue that they also differ in their media diets. In the 21st century, Russia is a fundamentally fragmented society with post-industrial, industrial, rural and migrant communities showing divergent relations to state social policies as well as varying patterns of public deliberation and consumption, including media use. Social fragmentation is, thus, mirrored in the fragmentation of the media systems; moreover, one more dimension, namely media hybridisation, intervenes and influences the formation of closed-up communicative milieus based on both social patterns and digital divide. Of the several societal milieus observed by social scientists in Russia, some are seriously under-represented in the media system; and deep differences in media consumption, agenda setting, and public deliberation exist between all of them. Recently, a major value-based societal cleavage was revealed during the 2011–2012 protest rallies within the "For fair elections / white-ribbon" movement. Our research in to the media consumption patterns of the participants shows a correlation between media use

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patterns in the post-industrial urban "public counter-sphere" (consisting of the intelligentsia, the "creative class", students and other white-collar workers) and their perceived political freedom and self-reported online political behaviour. The research is expanded through searches for echo chambers and/or opinion crossroads in Russian Facebook vs. its Russian analogue *Vkontakte*. Results of an online survey with participants of the protest rallies (N=652), 11 in-depth interviews and 5 expert interviews were used to interpret the relations between self-reported media consumption dynamics and perceived political behaviour. The results show that the media diet of protest participants indicates a strong preference for several media clusters, especially social media, oppositional, and alternative-agenda media, while the consumption of traditional media and video is either plummeting or irrelevant. Facebook is flagged up as an echo chamber facilitating the protests.

Keywords: Hybrid media system, public sphere, media use, Russia, Facebook, echo chambers, protest

With the growth of Internet penetration around the globe over the 2000s and 2010s, traditional interpretations of mediated / media-based public sphere and its potential to engender democratisation, including deliberation practices, have undergone several significant changes. To conceptualise the qualitative shifts that media systems are passing through in terms of their shape, borders and relations with outer society, including the political sphere, we deploy the concept of hybridisation of media systems (Chadwick 2013). This concept contains two important inter-related interpretations relevant for this research: (1) the growing transformation of offline media into "convergent" media with multiplatform production and multichannel content delivery; (2) the growth of a new segment of the media sphere, namely online-only professional media outlets and web 2.0 aggregated individual media. These two phenomena are causing new cleavages in societies. In other words, media hybridisation means not only tech-based changes in the structure of media systems and growth of online segments but also numerous social and political consequences of these technological advances, including horizontalisation, a higher degree of audience participation in political discussions, the formation of online pressure groups and the growth of political movements. As a concept, media hybridisation allows us to make flexible connections between research on the technological and structural aspects of transformations in media systems and media-political research, which includes areas of digital divide, agenda setting, the efficacy of the public sphere, and political involvement through media (Bodrunova, Litvinenko 2013a).

Most of these issues are united in the idea of closed-up communicative milieus as distorted mirrors of social milieus; such communicative milieus have been called "echo chambers", "public sphericules" (Gitlin 1998), "enclaves" (Sunstein 2007), or "filter bubbles" (Pariser 2011). German authors have stated that media hybridisation trajectories are context-bound (Adam, Pfetsch 2011). In other words, media hybridisation depends on the national socio-political context and societal patterns

more than on universal factors (e.g. on the nature of transnational media platforms). In line with this, Elena Vartanova (2013) sees the national context as the primary definer of hybridisation. This idea shows that media hybridisation research has a comparative aspect, as we speak of national hybridisation trajectories that are understood as the parallel development of temporally or causally correlated changes in media systems and political sphere. We will consider how, in Russia, social macro-stratification, political polarisation of social groups, and media use may intertwine. We will analyse the 2011–2012 "For fair elections" protest movement in Russia in order to assess representation of social milieus and media in the communicative space of the conflict. We are particularly interested in whether "echo chambers" exist on several platforms (*Facebook*, *Vkontakte*) and whether we see a "national pattern" in their formation, or platform-bound factors dominate.

Hybrid media for a fragmented audience: Russian society and media in the 21st century

Today, Russia is a fundamentally fragmented society. Sociologists speak of "multi-speed Russia" or "several Russias" in one. As the late-Soviet and post-Soviet modernisation of the country was misbalanced and fragmented (Kangaspuuro, Smith 2006; Vartanova 2013), it brought with it a new form of value-based societal cleavages that today only partly mirrors those of thirty years ago. These cleavages, to our mind, are based more upon non-material factors (like values and attitudes) than on traditional demographic stratification variables.

In her influential work, Natalia Zubarevich described "four Russias" based on population concentration, habitat, income and work status, lifestyle and behaviour patterns, and developmental potential. The "First Russia" comprises 21 % of population if cities with over 1,000,000 inhabitants (*millionniki*) only are considered, and *maximum* 36% if smaller cities are included. The "Second Russia" (around 25% of population) is industrial land made up of cities with 20,000 to 300,000 inhabitants whose main occupations are either blue-collar industry or state-funded jobs. It is here that Soviet patterns of social life prevail; its protest potential is reduced by state funds that support employment and social spending. The "Third Russia" is rural: vast but devastated, depopulated, and depoliticized zone making up 38% of the population. The "Fourth Russia" is formed by the North Caucasus and migrants (4/5 of whom are concentrated in Moscow and St. Petersburg); this Russia is approximately 6% of population and is focused on in-community struggles for resources and depends largely on Moscow for financing (Zubarevich 2011). A similar division was drawn by Alexander Auzan, who described Russia as of "a country of managers, security men, migrants, and pensioners" (Auzan 2011).

Throughout the 2000s, within the "first Russia", a particular stratum was forming, which later acquired popular names such as the "creative class" and "angry city dwellers" (Dubrovsky 2014). Sociologically, their key characteristics included the intellectual nature of their work and their preference for values of

self-expression and freedoms over the values of stability (WCIOM 2012). Politically, the national leadership and top executives suffered the lowest levels of legitimacy and prestige in this social milieu (Kachkaeva 2013). In terms of media, they began to form as a new audience of urban, cosmopolitan, highly educated, technologically advanced and creative stance.

This fundamental audience fragmentation has produced new cleavages in media consumption, from newspapers to Internet. Several distinctive cross-platform and cross-demographic media clusters may be spotted in today's Russia that differ in audience niches, agendas, media use patterns and the degree of support on display to the ruling elite. There is also variation in media industry concepts, including professional norms, production cultures and understanding of newsworthiness. Moreover, media use itself has become a social stratification variable in Russia: today, exposure to technology (Galitsky, Petuhova 2012), media diets and media use patterns, is not less important than your income or job status in assigning membership to a certain social milieu.

Florian Toepfl (2011) outlined official, mainstream, liberal-oppositional, and social media clusters in Russia. But this division does not fully correspond to the "four Russias" by Zubarevich. The "third" and "fourth" Russia are heavily underrepresented in national and even regional media, which creates "silent zones" in the public sphere, as the mainstream media (mostly federal TV channels and tabloid nationwide newspapers) is oriented to the "second Russia".

Concurrently, the hybridisation of the Russian media system in late 1990s – 2000s had several stages and several peculiar features. The early years of Runet were marked by a sense of freedom, as the Russian internet owed its origin not to any efforts of the late-Soviet authorities but emerged as a collection of networks initiated by private forces (Rohozinski 1999: V). As it is evident from Georgy Bovt (2002), of the first three pioneering phases of Runet media, the third (1999–2000) was already politically-oriented, as new media outlets like Gazeta.ru, SMI.ru, Utro.ru, Lenta.ru appeared in between State Duma and presidential election campaigns. The next phase includes the "fat years" 2001 to 2007 when the main growth of Runet could be observed, with offline media gradually appearing online; the blogosphere, especially the Russian *Livejournal*, being the main communication milieu for the Runet elite: IT workers, students, urban office-based employees and the creative intelligentsia (Alexanyan, Koltsova 2009). Internet penetration reached over 30% in *millionniki* (Vartanova 2013), with the Russian social networking platforms *Vkontakte* ("In contact") and *Odnoklassniki* ("Classmates") blooming. These years saw the formation of the first online close-up communication milieu, namely the Russian *Livejournal* (Gorny 2004), while web 1.0 remained practically non-regulated.

The next two phases, we argue, are those of 2008–2011 and since 2011 on, and they are clearly politically shaped in their beginnings and ends, as the 2008–2011 phase begins with the first "rokirovka" ("castling" between Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev) at the elections and ends with the outburst of the street protest of December 2011 in Moscow. It is when Internet use in Russia

grew rapidly (from 20,8% in 2007 to 27% in 2008 and 44,3% in 2011, according to Internet World Stats).

The distinct features of the Runet of 2000s were, firstly, the special shape of the digital divide in and beyond the journalistic community (Anikina et al. 2013) which practically pushed older-generation journalists out of online-only media production. Secondly, there was a low parallelism between offline and online media (Bodrunova, Litvinenko 2013b) and, thirdly, social networks enjoyed a special role within the online community. Thus, by September 2011, there were over 50 million Russian users online, or just over 1/3 of the population (Ioffe 2010). There remained, however, a sharp division between the big cities of the "first Russia" where the average Internet penetration level was already over 90% in 2012 (Vartanova 2013: 86), and the "third" Russia. Today, this difference is gradually diminishing, as over 50% of today's users do not belong to the cities of over 100,000 inhabitants. Nearly one half of the online audience in Russia, though, is aged from 25 to 45, thus taking the Internet use profile far from normal distribution. It is these "young but experienced users" that drive the development of Internet projects, according to Rambler Rumetrics.

An important feature of the Runet media was low structural parallelism between online and offline media (Litvinenko 2013). On one hand, the top ten Runet media sites, included only one or two web portals of the major offline outlets, according to the monthly figures of the media monitoring agency Medialogia (ibid). On the other hand, in provincial Russia a large amount of online media merely contained homepages with greetings editorials and scanned front pages online with no clear purpose (Bodrunova 2013). Surprisingly, TV portals were underdeveloped as well.

Another national feature in Russia is the peculiar configuration of the social networking websites market. With over 110 million Russian-language users, *Vkontakte* functions as a home for the younger part of the "second" Russia, while *Odnoklassniki* represent its older part with significant representation from the "third" Russia. *Facebook*, a relative newcomer from 2009 onwards, attracted the advanced audience from *Livejournal* and other communicative spaces reaching circa 9 million users by 2011. In 2010, ComScore ranked Russia in first place worldwide in monthly time spent in social networks per visitor (9.8 hours vs. worldwide average of 4.5 hours per visitor, with these figures rising up to 12.8 and 5.9, respectively, in 2012). But this audience seemed to be using social networks mostly for fun rather any political interests (Etling et al. 2010). This led some Oxford and Harvard researchers to call Runet "the web that failed" in terms of political expectations (Fossato 2008). As later events showed, these assumptions underestimated the crucial potential of Runet.

According to many scholars (Alexanyan 2009; Gorny 2004; Schmidt, Teubener 2006) Runet media and blogs, in terms of content, were influenced in the 2000s by both nation-specific societal structures and journalistic traditions, which reproduces "social atomisation, negative attitudes to official institutions... and a strong dependence on personal networks as a source of information, opinions and support" (Gorny 2009: 8). Since 2009, however, a new cluster of hybrid media with alternative

agendas has begun to form (Openspace.ru, *Bolshoy gorod*, Snob.ru, Slon.ru etc.) that unites sharp social critiques with professional and/or cultural criticism.

Hybridisation has brought a new dimension into societal borders. The communicative split between the "first" and "second" Russias that began to form coincides with the splitting of agendas between federal TV, state-owned and pro-establishment newspapers as opposed to business papers, online-only news agencies, and alternative-agenda media (both online-only and hybrid). This split was still latent towards the end of the 2000s but has already started to cut through online/offline divisions, being shaped not by this digital divide but by age, gender and class cleavages in Russia's media audience.

Research findings

In 2012–2013, we conducted research upon the media diets and media consumption patterns among Russia's protest community (Bodrunova, Litvinenko 2013b). Short history of the Russian "For fair elections" movement of 2011–2012 included protest rallies from December 2011 to May 2012 in 39 cities all over Russia. In summer 2012, we conducted an online survey among the rally participants. The questionnaire had 29 questions, we received 652 responses, of which 424 were full (and over 500 completed more than 3/4); thus, the full response rate was close to 2/3. We also conducted 11 in-depth interviews with senior media managers, political analysts, and representatives of the "white-collar", "online aborigines" and "TV oldies" (as defined by Vartanova (2013)) audience strata to cross-validate our results. Five media experts also provided us with their views on media use patterns in the times of the protests.

According to our findings, the social milieu involved in protest activity varies significantly from the average Russian socio-demographic spread. Our respondents are over 30 (32–36) years old mainly, over 70% of them have higher education and 10% have an academic degree. Vkontakters (those who predominantly use *Vkontakte*) are, on average, older than the Facebookers. The respondents mainly work as hired professionals (40%), including upper levels of management (15.6%), and the number of students, pensioners, and non-workers is not higher than 5%, while the number of self-employed and freelance workers who depend on themselves in financial support amounts to 25%. Our figures are in line with the general image (WCIOM 2012) of the Russian protests: it is really dominated by the creative and managerial class of Moscow and St.Petersburg (3/4 of the respondents), successful people with high self-esteem and who perhaps offer a plea for change, thus reflecting the "four Russias" division. As to the political activity of the respondents, it was remarkably low before the protests started, roughly 1 on (0; 3) scale.

In accordance with this, the media diet of the protest movement contrasts sharply with the average one, where TV is the main news source for up to 98% of population, according to various polls by WCIOM and Circon from 2004 to 12. The news diet of the protests consisted to a large extent of new media (online

media, social media and blogs almost equally) and of radio (mostly oppositional, and of those – mostly *Ekho Moskvy*).

The overall preference of online information sources to offline ones is 4,2 for Facebookers and 4.0 for Vkontakters on the scale of (1; 5). No surprise, then, that respondents generally perceived social media as a very influential trigger of the protests (1.53 on the scale of (0; 2)). The preferences towards web 2.0 media are also supported by the fact that social networks, blogosphere, and online media compete very closely within media diets of the rally participants: our results showed correlations in common use of these three media types.

Traditional politically relevant media, like TV and print, remain relevant information sources for not more than 25 % of the respondents in terms of regular news supply. This provides new input for re-consideration of political influence of various media segments. The growth in consumption of online media naturally suggests their growing influence, but cases of street protest demand a closer look at the thresholds of their political impact.

The protests seem to have really influenced the media diets of the respondents. Around 40 % of the respondents noted at least some changes in their media consumption. When asked which exactly media they abandoned or included in use, 16 % refused to say and 24 % pointed to a growth in the use of certain media outlets; but these two groups partly overlap, and thus, altogether, less than one-third of the respondents could reflect on their changed media consumption patterns (29 %). Nonetheless, this figure suggests significant changes in perceived media consumption within a short time period. The decline in consumption was in 2/3 of cases connected to terminating further consumption of pro-establishment media (82 of 120 that were mentioned), of which over 90 % concerned no longer watching the federal television channels. In in-depth interviews, two respondents who used to watch TV regularly admitted to have quit doing so since autumn 2011, as "*the political information one gets on television is one-sided*" (Konstantin, 55 years old). The protesters not only refused to consume pro-establishment media but also consumed in larger shares three other media clusters, namely oppositional, alternative-agenda, and social media. In general, the protest movement seems to have fostered the consumption of "media junctions" of the "parallel" public sphere constituted mainly by the three latter media clusters.

But, more or less unexpectedly, 15 % of rejections were exactly in the three above mentioned clusters. This may be explained by two factors: 1) general disappointment over the protest movement cast a shadow on the media supportive to the movement; 2) politicisation of content that could seem overwhelming to some parts of the audience. The second suggestion is supported by our data on mean perceived political bias in the media consumed by the protesters, which is 2.7 (1 – pro-establishment, 2 – neutral, 3 – oppositional).

An interesting finding is that, despite the vital role played by social networks in effectively spreading information on the protests, it was still journalists who played the role of opinion leaders and formers. But these were journalists from

online media, not traditional journalists. Another curious finding was that the "For fair elections" movement was not at all video-based, unlike the Arab spring protests or other protest movements around the globe.

At the same time, our findings suggest a much bigger role of oppositional media and lesser role of alternative-agenda media than it could be expected after in-depth interviews with media professionals. Radio (predominantly *Ekho Moskvy*) proved to be the most relevant offline information source for the respondents, perhaps due to the pro-Moscow bias in sampling, while social networks were perceived as the main (and practically only) media triggers of the protest. Radio, user-generated content/blogs, and online news portals all lag behind; newspapers and alternative media were considered triggers of the protest by 1 out of 10 respondents only.

It seems that the very existence of alternative-agenda media was more important than their direct impact, as it widened the borders of the possible in media space and demonstrated the existence of media agendas not located within pro/anti-establishment bipolarism. If recalculated, the relevant media clusters range in importance in the following way: social media, oppositional media, UGC and blogs, news portals and business media, alternative-agenda media.

When a rally participant changed his/her media diet, it is likely that he/she would feel freer in acting politically in social networks. Perceived change in media diet weakly but positively correlates with perceived changing political behaviour online. Both perceived change in media diet and perceived changes in online political behaviour correlate with the proportions of traditional / web 2.0 media in individual consume. The more web-oriented the diet was, the more it tended to change and the freer political behaviour online became; this provides new input for the discussion of democratic role of media segments, especially new and web 2.0 media, in transitional democracies.

In our sample, there was predominance of Facebookers (N=340) over Vkontakters. On one hand, this lead to a certain bias in the results, but on the other hand it clearly reflected the fact that the Russian *Facebook* has since 2009 played a significant role in building the online public sphere. *Facebook* turned out to have all the necessary features for the rise of an online communicative milieu for the "thinking community", similar to the one in *Livejournal* in the early 2000s. Thus, we can observe the phenomenon of the Runet intellectual elite searching for spaces to build closed up discussion milieus and abandoning them once they become "too popular". "Migration to *Facebook*," as it became known, happened relatively quickly, just before the protest rallies and took around a year; many *Livejournal* users first used two platforms and cross-posted but then gradually left *Livejournal*.

Facebook was perceived by the respondents as the main information tool for the protest, getting 38,6% of all responses on information sources, the closest competitors – *Twitter*, *Ekho Moskvy*, and *Livejournal* – receiving 4,4 times lower popularity altogether (cf. Panchenko 2012). *Facebook* has played an important role in cultivating the pre-protest anti-establishment consensus, thus playing a

significant role in political and deliberative polarisation of the online audience as well as in consolidation of the protest nucleus, whereas *Vkontakte* seemed to play a less important role in political mobilisation for the anti-government rallies.

Our survey also marked difference in micro-networking patterns depending on the type of the respondent's basic social network: thus, *Facebook* showed higher independent and horizontal-networking participation, while *Vkontakte* showed the importance of inter-generational and ideologically-aligned networking. It is also worth noting that, for Facebookers, the alternative-agenda media cluster appears to be almost two times more important than for the *Vkontakte*-based protesters.

Both from in-depth interviews and from the survey results, it can be concluded that the Russian *Facebook* can be seen as an echo chamber with the predominance of the anti-establishment discourse whereas *Vkontakte* is more depoliticized and has less potential for creating an alternative discussion arena.

Discussion

Our results reveal ambiguity of political roles of hybrid media. Social networks and several media clusters have shown significant potential for rising political involvement, cultivating an anti-establishment consensus, and fostering street protest by spreading information and performing organisational roles. But at the same time latent societal cleavages showed up to such a serious extent for the first time in post-Soviet Russian history, and this could not have occurred without the help of media.

This ambiguous communicative and behavioural split between the "first" and "second" Russias was vividly reminiscent of the late Soviet times, when "culture of kitchen discussions" substituted public debate. This is why we have come to an idea of a nationwide public counter-sphere – to our mind, this is the most suitable notion to interpret our findings. Not being the first to coin the term "public counter-sphere" for Russia (Schmidt, Teubener 2006), we argue that our understanding differs from earlier works.

In the liberal theory of public sphere, counter-spheres are believed to form against the oppressing nature of mainstream public spheres (Fraser 1990; Fenton, Downey 2003; Wimmer 2005), as the sought after social consensus is perceived as "temporary hegemony or instant stabilisation of power" (Karpinen et al. 2008: 10). But counter-spheres are usually studied on the level of a community or even one media outlet as the bearer of a counter-mainstream culture (Mitchell 1998; O'Donnell 2001).

Our findings support the idea of the emergence of a counter-sphere on a much bigger scale. Structurally, it was used *Facebook* as its nutritional source, oppositional media, business and news outlets, and alternative-agenda media; all the most successful media in these clusters used multichannel content delivery strategies, thus being hybrid. The counter-sphere did not belong completely to Runet; the public sphere cleavage cut through online/offline divisions to replicate the societal

fractions. The counter-sphere existed within certain social milieus, rather than everywhere, and within a nationally bound political-communicative situation. The counter-sphere as a multi-faceted space of both discussion and action prepared the ground for the protest rallies, becoming a factor with a double role: firstly organisational, in spreading information and coordinating participation; and secondly cultivational, in helping create a shared consensus on protest. This hardly resembles the ideal public sphere; it was neither activist nor platform-based like the counter-spheres of earlier research (see above). It tended to form quite a closed discussion, just as predicted for a counter-sphere, but had no clear centre.

The formation of the public counter-sphere also showed that "segment-oriented thinking" in discussing the political role of media may be losing its relevance, as hybrid media gains a leading role in shaping public discourse. It was hybrid media who most successfully reached the protesters in a whole range of democratic roles. The political relevance of national television and national newspapers as traditional politically influential media segments is gradually shifting to new media, and of them – to hybrid and web 2.0 media, especially social networks.

Thus, the thesis on national limitations of hybridisation trajectories is supported only partly. We would argue that national socio-political conditions shape the hybridisation process "from outside", creating only outer limitations. One clear dependence that we spotted was that the new media mirrored neither the offline media market with its dominant positions nor information patterns from "old" media, but the complicated societal stratification based on several factors of various nature. But within the hybrid system, platform limitations and average user profiles (caused exactly by the platform peculiarities) play a huge role, perhaps bigger than the national context.

Facebook, along with the alternative-agenda media, became the fertile soil for the protest community. The Russian *Facebook* segment formed an echo chamber with, on one hand, evident mobilisation potential but, on the other hand, low capacity for "opinion crossroads". There was also clear evidence in how *Facebook* differed from its local competitor *Vkontakte* in both what for it was used and how Facebookers and *Vkontakte* users networked within the protest rallies. This provides input for future comparative studies (*Facebook* vs. local networks) to see whether in other countries *Facebook* plays a similar role for the local and national intelligentsia. If a more universal pattern of use of *Facebook* in, say, post-communist countries or other transitional democracies is discovered, this would be a sign of the national contexts giving up to international conditions of hybridization of media systems in the new, more flexible social circumstances.

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