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The Logic of Virtual Protest: The Week After the 2011 Elections

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It is frequently argued that the post-election protests in Russian in December 2011 are linked to the Internet, including social networks. At the same time, there has been a good deal of heart-searching over whether this activity is genuinely a 'national' initiative, or stimulated by some internal or external political force for its own ends.

Circumstantially, the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, the use of online technology for political or marketing purposes is a well-known fact (see, for example, [Popov 2007]). On the other hand, the Russian-speaking Internet saw a series of mass activity that arose without the intervention of external agents: numerous charitable and social initiatives and collective activities aimed at mitigating the aftermath of forest fires in 2010. The Internet allows groups of all different sorts to share their identity and communicative practices, including those relating to political activity or partiality [Kahn, Kellner 2003]. Although previously the ability of the Internet to influence 'real' political life, and particularly the formation of civil society, has been doubted (see: [March 2004: 370; Levin 2006; Galston 2006]), the events of recent months have compelled us to find a new approach to studying online activity from the perspective of its civil and political potential.

The aim of this research is to reveal the logic of virtual protest and the mechanisms of its change

from expressing dissatisfaction on the Internet to real, politically significant actions (including street protests). The object of our research is a corpus of texts that were posted on the Internet in the period between the State Duma elections and the first mass protest (4–10 December 2011). This 'adjustment' period saw the formation of ideas and clich s which would be used in the ensuing stage of the development of the various protest moods — from 10–24 December 2011. Our tasks included creating as precise a study of virtual activity during this period as possible, so our research included different types of texts (from written texts to videos) which were most popular within the community and which influenced the subsequent offline activity: these include popular blog posts discussing the elections and protest activity, spam texts and indicators of 'virtual participation', as well as humorous texts responding to the events of the week and serving as a basis for the protest statements on 10 December.

Key events and the logic of the protest

Studying online activity *post factum* undoubtedly comes with a whole series of difficulties, from the impossibility of indexing certain resources, to the disappearance of some significant texts from open access. However, this approach has its advantages, in that it allows a very reliable assessment of the logic of how events developed by juxtaposing things that took place on fundamentally different online platforms.

Informational tension online began some time before the elections: late November was marked by campaigning about electoral participation. Different ways of disrupting the electoral process and social control as a means of opposing this were discussed. The events that followed from 4–9 December took the form of a curious but very intense polylogue in which the government, the opposition and the online community (including representatives of the first two groups), as well as 'unidentified forces' (such as those who organise spam and DDoS attacks), to whom various groups ascribe differing goals and motives spoke in turn. In response to information about violations of electoral procedure, texts and videos were produced and circulated online, while the opposition was organising a protest demonstration designed to include not just members of oppositional movements but also 'lay' people. The government, in its turn, announced that the proofs of electoral fraud uploaded to the Internet were fake, and the Nashi youth movement organised demonstrations. Meanwhile the most active online opposition resources were attacked by unknown forces. The online community reacted by creating jokes offering support to the opposition's initiative of arranging a larger-scale protest. On the other hand, demotivating rumours about planned provocation and the suppression of the protests by force were circulating on the web (see table).

Events from 4–10 December 2011 and the Internet response

Date	Political Events	Official statements and opinions of key figures	Rumours and trends	Internet attacks	Online events
Before 4 December	Preparation for the 'Nashi' forum of civil activists at the All-Russian Exhibition Centre in Moscow			28 November: DDoS attacks begin on LiveJournal and other sites	Discussion of the forthcoming elections and potential rigging. Recruitment of observers. Posting of photos of Nashi (All-Russian Exhibition Centre)
4 December	Elections			DDoS attacks on LiveJournal and other sites	Discussion of the electoral process. Posting of observers' reports and screenshots of TV news programme with election results from Rostov region — 146 % (night)
5 December	Protest at Chistye Prudy in Moscow, activists arrested	Announcement of election results, particularly good results in Chechnya. Putin makes an appeal 'not to rock the boat'. Medvedev gives a sceptical assessment of video on YouTube		DDoS attacks on LiveJournal and other sites, spam attacks on Twitter and Facebook	Discussion of election results and facts about rigging; photo and video reports posted. Preparation for the protest at Chistye Prudy and discussion of its consequences and arrest of protesters (incl. Alexei Navalny)

Date	Political Events	Official statements and opinions of key figures	Rumours and trends	Internet attacks	Online events
6 December	Protest at Triumphal Square in Moscow (demonstration by Nashi movement and opposition)	'Solidarnost' coordinates a protest of 300 people on Revolution Square in Moscow. Medvedev calls Churov "a wizard"; Churov asserts that videos about violations are fabricated	Armed forces including heavy tanks were seen entering Moscow	Spam attacks on Twitter and Facebook	Discussion of election results, protest at Chistye Prudy and arrest of protesters. Discussion of demonstration at Triumphal Square and arrest of Bozhena Rynska. Medvedev's controversial retweet (night)
7 December			Chechen special force regiment in Moscow. Construction of the Christmas fair pavilions and repair work begun at Revolution Square	Spam attacks on Twitter and Facebook	Discussion of election results and arrest of protesters. Idea of white ribbon (symbol of peaceful protest). Discussion of whether to go to the protest on 10 December. Search for constructive ideas. Attempts to understand the current political situation

Date	Political Events	Official statements and opinions of key figures	Rumours and trends	Internet attacks	Online events
8 December		Coordination of transferring protest from Revolution Square to Bolotnaya Square. Putin makes a statement on protests; Medvedev talks about investigating elections' violations	Helicopters in Moscow	Spam attacks on Twitter and Facebook. Threats made to founder of VKontakte Pavel Durov	Discussion of protests in support of United Russia and arrest of those protesting against unfair elections. Discussion of whether to go to the protest on 10 December, attempts to understand the current political situation. Discussion of coverage of current events in the media. Discussion of transfer of protest from Revolution Square to Bolotnaya Square
9 December		Onishchenko announces epidemic risks of the protest. 10 December is declared an obligatory school day	Possible provocations during the protest. US Department of State is supposed to be involved in organising protests. Bolotnaya Square as a trap	Increased spam attacks on Twitter and Facebook	Protest transferred from Revolution Square to Bolotnaya Square. Attempts to understand the current political situation. Discussion of whether to go to the protest on 10 December. Number of those intending to go to the protest is (approx.) 30,000 on Facebook and (approx.) 18,000 on VKontakte
10 December	Protest on Bolotnaya Square. Series of protests in Russian cities and abroad			Spam attacks on Twitter and Facebook	Discussion of the protest on 10 December, posting of photo reports

This active exchange of expressions (by expressions we mean not only texts but also actions designed to express a particular position) loses tempo only on 10 December, when the main forces were concentrated on the scenes of protest. After the success of this action, a new wave of interaction began.

The government's reaction to the protest mood from 4–10 December 2011 can be objectively assessed as sluggish, but even this kind of response was important for the Internet community, in so far as it confirmed the importance of what was happening. The online community was yet again convinced that the government had noticed its activity and reacted to it, albeit it not to the extent or in the way in which many would have liked. This gradually led to an understanding that online activity is not enough: real action is necessary.

Informational activity 4–10 December 2011

One of the most important reasons for so many people taking to the streets is the information-rich online environment that influenced, directly or indirectly, political activity (fig. 1). During this period, bloggers on LiveJournal and those belonging to protest groups on VKontakte and Facebook actively created and re-posted their own texts and articles from online media distributing news and analysis of electoral procedure and protest actions.[1]
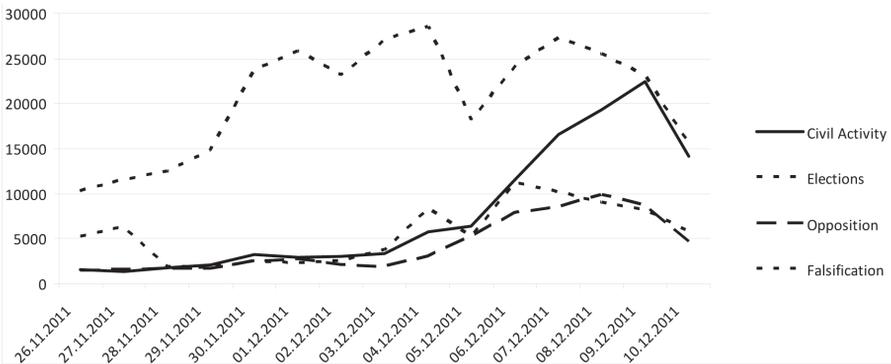

Fig. 1. Key topics in the Russian blogosphere 26 November — 10 December 2011

According to Yandex's Pulse of the Blogosphere[2], interest in elections over the last decade has not risen significantly — with peaks rising from 0.983 % in 2003 to 1.106 % in 2011.[3] Nevertheless, this means that in December 2011 more than one in every hundred posts

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[1]   Including the magazines Snob <http://www.snob.ru> and Bolshoi Gorod <http://www.bg.ru>, the television channel Rain <http://tvrain.ru>, etc.

[2]   'Pulse of the Blogosphere' <http://blogs.yandex.ru/pulse/>.

[3]   The percentage of posts containing the key word 'elections' from all posts in blogs indexed by Yandex Blog Search <http://blogs.yandex.ru> on a set day.

contained the word 'elections'. In comparison to previous State Duma elections, the frequency of mentioning electoral fraud is almost twice as high for the same number of posts from the end of November to the beginning of December. We can suppose that it is the discussion of 'unfair elections' that caused the expression of protest. However, interest in the initial cause — the elections and the falsified results — begins to fall by 6–7 December. From 7 December there is talk of a fundamental opposition between the government and society (which in many respects was provoked by the results of the protests on 5 and 6 December). Mentions of the protests increase up to 9 December (with the protest on 10 December 2011 being positioned as 'nationwide' rather than an 'opposition' action), predictably falling on the day of the protest — a significant part of the community was in Bolotnaya Square at the time. Furthermore, the decreased activity in Internet communication at weekends is typical (due to many participants involved only when using corporate access to the Web). From 6 to 10 December the word 'protest' was mentioned online more than 65,000 times — a fact which corresponds to the high turnout at Bolotnaya Square.

The blogosphere

In contrast to the social networks Twitter and Facebook, which were used both for the direct recruitment of protest participants and for the rapid distribution of information, LiveJournal was at first a platform for the 'confirmation' of the electoral fraud. After 7 December 2011 it was used as a space for creating and sharing in-depth texts in support of the protests and debates about the possible political future of the country. Characteristic of this period are posts by bloggers who previously showed no sign of interest in civil activity embracing the campaign for this kind of activity along with the politically mobilised (borisakunin, drugoi, radulova).

To study the discursive strategies of political mobilisation within the virtual space of LiveJournal during the period under examination, we selected 46 posts from 10 popular blogs and a further 49 popular posts[1] from LiveJournal and a small number of other sites — with a total of 95 texts.

The peak of activity of popular bloggers and the authors of popular posts discussing the election results on LiveJournal comes on 5 December 2011, when the main issue is electoral fraud. During the first few days after voting a significant number of texts were posted which contained observers' reports from polling stations and evidences of the results being rigged — from video clips and documents about

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[1]   Based on the post rating system <http://yablor.ru/> and the 'snowball sampling' method.

forgery to mathematical proofs.[1] Each of them spread rapidly (appr. 500—600 quotes over the research period).

Interest in these texts is explicable within the context of online culture: although the 'uncensored' information that the Internet presents is normally perceived as trustworthy [Kratasyuk 2009: 49], the community strives to test it and to oppose possible manipulations.[2] All these texts are united by an extremely detailed and meticulous description of events, mentioning as many objective facts as possible: polling station numbers, commission members' surnames or specific numbers of votes cast for or against different parties. Their reliability is confirmed by photographs, scanned documents and video recordings from polling stations.[3] The videos and witness reports contributed towards these posts getting many hits and moving up in the rankings; re-posting them was one form of virtual protest.

Observers emphasise that the main kind of violation was not the anticipated issues of 'ballot stuffing' and 'carousel voting' (which they nevertheless recorded), but the distortion of the final results — when votes were being counted or logged. This fact gives rise to an unpremeditated 'suspense' in these texts. After a long drawn-out wait and the lively conflict between voting commission representatives and the observers, the final events of the day brought no visible results: the observers cannot lay their hands on the election protocols, and obvious violations remain unpunished.

Therefore the texts about rigging do not just contain facts about violations of the electoral procedure. They demonstrate the incomplete nature of the situation and its possible development, and the necessity to take further action to re-establish 'fairness' (this became the basic official concept of the protest on 10 December entitled 'For fair elections'). At the same time, they stimulated subsequent activity both online and offline.

On 8 December online activity was growing on account of the increasing propaganda advocating participation in the protest (see fig. 2) and discussions about the effectiveness of this kind of protest action. Simultaneously video broadcasts and photo reports from

[1]   See, for example: 'How it really went on. Polling station no. 6, Moscow. Chronicling one day.' <http://cifidiol.livejournal.com/1600.html>; 'I don't even know what to put as the title' 2011. 5 December. <http://tarasfedoseev.livejournal.com/2510/html>; 'Citizen observers on the elections' <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/836395-echo/>; 'The elections. How it was really' Part 1 & 2 <http://www.pravmir.ru.vybory-kak-eto-bylo-na-samom-dele-chast-1>, <http://www.pravmir.ru/vybory-kak-eto-bylo-na-samom-dele-chast-2>; 'An analysis of the election results in Golyanovo' <http://easyneuro.livejournal.com/1206.html>; 'The carousel has broken down' <http://www.lenta.ru/articles/2011/12/04/carousel> (this report was re-posted on blogs) and others.

[2]   For more detail on this, see: [Radchenko 2011: 170–171].

[3]   'Rigging, Dagestan, stuffing' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVc2qc0lRyM&feature=fvst 05.12.2011>; 'Eraser pen' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rISCbRgTnwQ&feature=fvst>.

	5 Dec.	6 Dec.	7 Dec.	8 Dec.	9 Dec.	10 Dec.
White ribbon				2		
Elections	12	1	1			
For the protest			2	8	7	1
Arrests		3	1	1		
Internet events				2		
Protest summary 10/12/11						6
Transfer of protest location				1	1	
Political situation		1	1	4	1	
Provocation			1		2	
Against the protest			4	2	3	
Protester advice			1	3		1
Coverage of events in the media						1
Engagement of military technology		1	1	1		
Demonstration 6/12/11		3	2	2		
Protest 5/12/11	5	3				

Fig. 2. Distribution of issues in popular posts from 5 to 10 December

the protests on 5 and 6 December (including reporting arrests that took place during them) were spread online, as well as posts with personal reflections from the protest on 5 December, the 'stories' of people whose relatives had been arrested, offers of help and accounts from the court room. Videos provoking the spread of rumours and reinforcing the enmity between the opposing sides also actively circulated in the Web; key topics were the reinforcement of security measures in Moscow and the actions of 'Nashi' members. From 7–9 December, a number of publications about the behaviour of the provokers at the protests emerged. All these texts set a specific mood and disposed people to feel a sense of active opposition to the government.

Despite being the initial premise of the events in December, the vote-rigging was starting to get lost in the background. The texts of blogs on the theme of 'why we SHOULD go to the protest' and 'trying to understand the political situation' pointed to 'deeper' layers of motivation among protesters. Such texts were in part a personal apologia,[1] and partly an attempt to communicate the political mood of Russian society.[2] The most widely spread text in this category was bocharsky's 'Why we should go to the protest',[3] Its popularity was in

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[1] See: <http://nomina-obscura.livejournal.com/855998.html>; <http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/45529.html>.

[2] See: <http://oleg-kozyrev.livejournal.com/3861637.html>.

[3] <http://bocharsky.livejournal.com/475531.html>.

many respects linked to the simple and sober interpretation of the idea of civil society that the author put forward.[1]

In the texts that appeared after the election results had been announced there were emotional comments expressing indignation, resentment and spite, and ideas about how the so-called 'orange' revolution might develop. By 8 December the 'revolutionary' scenario, having gone no further than debates about the political experience of various countries over the last decade and about nominal constructions, gave way to the idea of peaceful civil protest (see fig. 3).
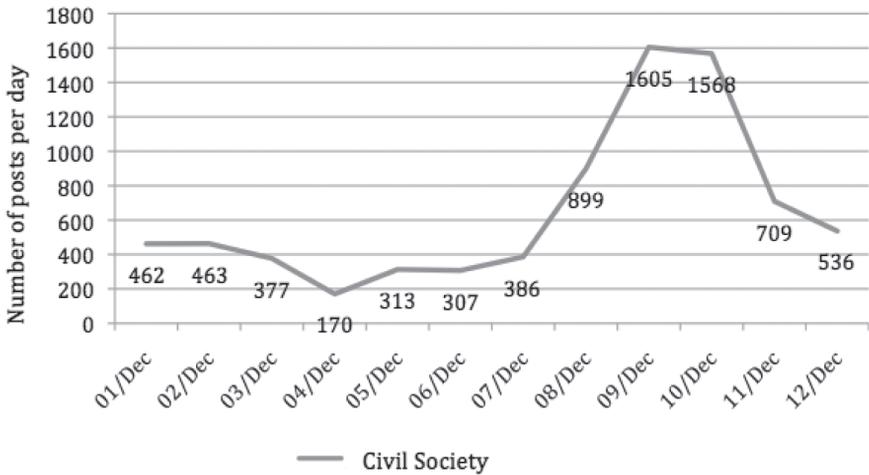

Fig. 3. Distribution of posts containing the key words 'civil society' (data from Yandex's Blog Search)

In texts trying to understand the current protests there are attempts to identify its premises and excellent new opportunities for forming civil society.[2] The previously little-used and unclear concept of the 'civil' is formulated and the model of the behaviour of a 'citizen' is proposed as the most adequate in the current situation.[3] Authors emphasise that both the protests and protest activity in general is primarily a civil act, not an oppositional one.

During this period texts with titles such as 'advice to protesters'[4] emerged and began to spread (up to 95 posts during the peak period), emphatically indicating the peaceful nature of the protest and the need to behave entirely within legal margins. These instructions were

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[1] Blogger bocharsky argued that the frame of action for those in power was set by society generally, and that it was time to make this clear by social protest. [Editor].

[2] E.g., 'Special opinion', 7 Dec. 2011. <http://oleg-kozyrev.livejournal.com/3861637.html>.

[3] E.g., [Untitled] 8 Dec 2011. <http://nomina-obscura.livejournal.com/855998.html>.

[4] E.g., 'To all protesters' 8 Dec. 2011. <http://lady-spring.livejournal.com/75168.html>.

circulated in graphic form (as leaflets) as well as written texts.[1] They were intended primarily for those who were attending this kind of civil event for the first time and were interested in its peaceful nature. During the first few days, detailed texts about the rules of behaviour at the protests in general[2] were spread, and immediately before the protests (8–9 December) various sources gave brief instructions summarising the rules of behaviour in thesis form,[3] with telephone numbers for legal aid or simply the contact details of volunteers and lawyers prepared to provide legal support to protesters who have been detained. Alongside this, the number of authors writing to dissuade people from going to Bolotnaya Square increased, citing various arguments and images including using the image of the 'opposition for sale', 'financed by the US Department of State'.[4]

Based on the content of the most viewed texts during the period, we can suppose that the aim of the protests was not only and not entirely an instrumental 'restoration of stolen votes' but the opportunity to 'protect one's dignity'[5] (see fig. 4).
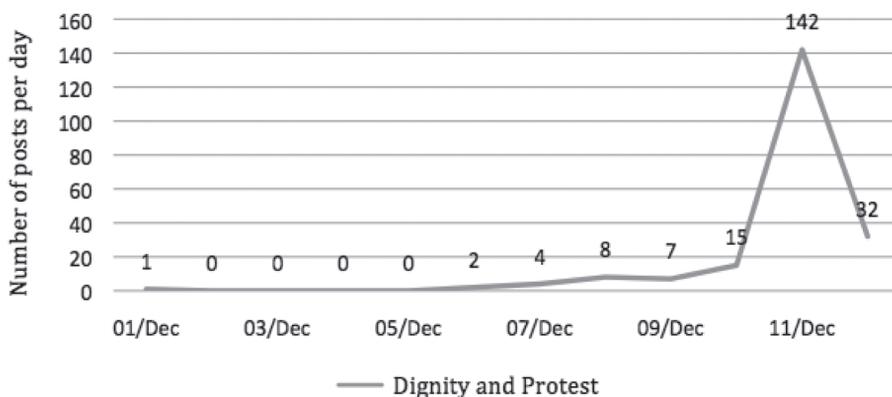

Fig. 4. Number of posts simultaneously containing
the key words 'protest' and 'dignity'

[1]   See: 'How to survive at the anti-government protest'. 9 Dec. 2011. <http://botalex.livejournal.com/91806.html>, Olga Romanova. 'To Protestants. Instructions for use' <http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/47264/>.

[2]   See, for example: 'Legal advice to protest participants + documents for court' 7 Dec. 2011. <http://users.livejournal.com/_falkon_/514483.html>.

[3]   See, for example, 'The rules of a good protest/What to do if you are arrested' by the group iHelp. 9 Dec. 2011. <http://rhunwolf.livejournal.com/408391.html>. This document was spread primarily on LiveJournal, but it gradually filtered through onto other sites.

[4]   For example: 'The Russian revolution needs bodies'. 9 Dec. 2011. <http://fritzmorgen.livejournal.com/450727.html>; 'On the snow revolution and the lord of the sheep'. 9 Dec. 2011. Cached version of the page <http://wild-che.livejournal.com/127833.html> can be found using Blog Search, using the key words *lord of the sheep* and searching for the author *wild-che*.

[5]   For example: 'My dear Muscovites'. 10 Dec. 2011. <http://drugoi.livejournal.com/3665579.html>; 'Congratulations'. 10 Dec. 2011. <http://hgr.livejournal.com/1958519.html>; 'My tweets'. 10 Dec. 2011 <http://jenya-khimles.livejournal.com/60175.html>.

Over the week of 4 to 10 December 2011 popular blog posts shifted from a direct reaction to a specific political event to a much broader analysis of the political situation in general, from an expression of lively negative emotions to an emotionally-neutral discussion of 'dignity', from mood of confrontation to strategy of peaceful civil expression, from the concept of 'opposition' to the concept of a 'common cause'. This shift made the virtual (and later the real) protest so inclusive — dozens if not hundreds of thousands of people, those who came to the demonstrations and those who stayed at home, could identify with the protesters.

Spamming

However, consolidation during this period was complicated by regular mass spam and DDoS attacks on various online resources. During 2011 the online community had adopted the idea that these attacks were often linked to political 'put-ups'.[1] This idea was strengthened significantly during attacks on blogs and a series of other pro-opposition resources in the pre- and post-election periods (on 4 December there were problems on the official sites of the Central Electoral Commission and United Russia Party [Ser'gina 2011], but these passed unnoticed).

Of particular interest are the spam attacks that took place on the social networks Twitter and Facebook. Most often these spam attacks took the form of identical messages repeating with great speed[2], unequally spread over the course of 24 hours (which corresponds to the key signs of spam activity observed by [Cheng et al. 2011]). The intensity of the attacks coincides with general online activity — the peak came on 7—10 December 2011. The most heavily attacked were the hashtags #10дек, #10dec and #митинг [protest] — i.e. those which were directly linked to real-life activity.

In terms of content, the spam texts can be divided into two groups: (a) messages with no information content, including anecdotes, jokes and status updates unrelated to the protests, on the social network site VKontakte, etc, and (b) inflammatory/informational. The first of these appeared in the form of spam attacks (characterised by being carried out almost exclusively in the evening and during the night with sharp peaks of emergence and disappearance), while the second imitated the natural activity of users — their re-posting is not as numerous but constant, and the activity is 'smeared' over 24 hours.

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[1] <https://twitter.com/#!/adagamov/status/141111088820404224>.

[2] For example, overnight from 9–10 December 2011 with a frequency of 1 spam message every 10 seconds (Twitter, #10дек).

The aim of spreading the first type of messages was to 'drown' important informative messages in a mass of incoherent text and thereby hinder discussion of the upcoming protest. The strongest spam attacks were observed on the official page of 'Protest for fair elections' on Facebook[1] dedicated to organising demonstrations (up to 10 December 2011). The second group contains information linked in some way to the election results / those preparing for the protest / aspects of the protest; the aim of these attacks was to hinder communication and users searching for information, as well as in certain instances deliberate disinformation (particular messages about possible provocation). Apologetic tweets about the authorities, details about the involvement of the US Department of State and disorientating information about where protests were to take place also fit into this category.

In this way spamming, which, as a rule, is used for commercial purposes, acquired a 'political' overtone. However, the supposed aim — hindering the recruitment of protest participants — was hardly achieved. Rather it had the opposite effect: limiting the freedom of speech online intensified the dissatisfaction and confirmed the opinion of members of the relevant communities that the government had noticed the online activity and was willing to use force to suppress it. Consequently this activity had some real meaning.

Forms of expressing virtual protest

During the researched period two texts were spread which called for real protest to be substituted for online protest (as a safe simulation of participation). The first was 'If you think that the #elections were UNFAIR, retweet this'. It was retweeted en masse on 5 and 6 December, after which it disappeared: the community had stopped using forms of participation which did not lead to any real result. In response, another text, which actually appeared on LiveJournal before the beginning of the elections, was brought to light. It proposed the re-posting of the number 632305222316434 as a sign of disagreement with the government's actions and acknowledgement of the rigged elections, so that the number of protesters could then be determined using search engines. This kind of rationalisation seemed adequate to the online community and the text was actively spreading. Unlike the first text, which appeared suddenly and just as suddenly disappeared, the second text remained online until at least 15th December (see fig. 5), demonstrating a dynamic typical of online memes [Jang, Lescovec 2011].

If we work from the hypothesis that these texts were posted with the aim of diagnosing the mood of the online community or channelling

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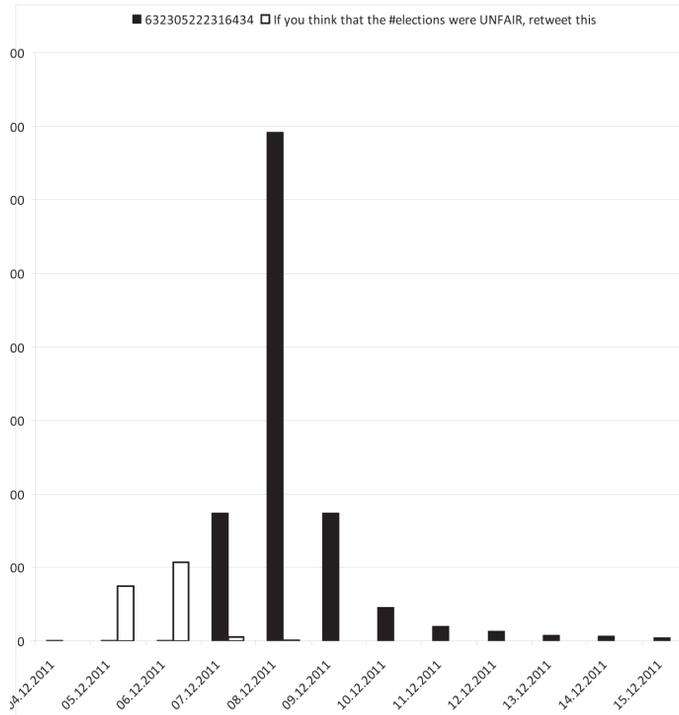[1]   <http://www.facebook.com/events/198328520252594/>.

Fig. 5. Expression of virtual protest

the protest mood towards simulation activity, these aims failed; interest in both texts was at the same level as interest in anecdotes about the elections, and several times lower than the number of 're-posts' of current information and reflections on the theme of the elections and civil activity. The community was (uncharacteristically!) willing to engage in real action and rejected the online game of protest in favour of preparing for real activity.

Humour in post-election week

Humorous texts are a reaction to current events rather than their driving force. Nevertheless, it is necessary to analyse them to assess which ideas and concepts were the most popular. The brief period between the State Duma elections and the protest at Bolotnaya Square gave rise to around a hundred jokes. However, the fact that there was a significant number of these texts by no means indicates that all of them were equally active in cyberspace: over the period in question only 39 jokes were shared more than 100 times, and only 8 between 400 and 2500 times. Five texts had greater variation — these spread simultaneously online and in oral communication.

The development of the range of 'post-election' jokes is closely related to the information processes taking place during this period.

From 4–6 December the number of jokes on electoral fraud was growing, and texts linked to the statements of key political figures were beginning to go into circulation. 5–6 December saw the spread of demotivators[1] on the same theme, based on documentary photographs. After a temporary fall, on 7 December folklore activity begins to increase sharply, driven by preparations for the protest at Bolotnaya Square. At the same time, the creation and spread of jokes from 8–10 December is linked mainly to the analysis of the preceding events. In conclusion, during this whole period jokes relating to the elections and protests are cited no fewer than 14,000 times.[2]

Three key platforms were responsible for the dissemination of jokes in this period: Twitter (56 % of entries), VKontakte (30 %) and Live-Journal (12 %) (Facebook, where jokes were also circulating is almost impossible to index). In these texts, the dominant issues were the rigging of elections and distorted information in the media (33 %), the opposition of the government and the people, including brutality and arrests at the protests (16 %) and the use of Internet technology by the government and other opposition forces (11 %). While the highest number of opposition texts spread on LiveJournal, Twitter focused on the idea of distorted information, while the jokes on VKontakte were virtually all on the topic of Internet technology.

During this period a significant amount of activity took place on social networking sites and microblogs, allowing a quick reaction to events and up-to-date information in a very compact form, although Facebook and Twitter were very much subject to the influence of spam attacks and 'forcing' (this was manifested particular in the sharp drops and peaks in folklore activity on Twitter). The traditional blog service LiveJournal, where groups most strongly opposed to the government are found, was less active, perhaps as a result of DDoS attacks. There was relatively little folklore activity on VKontakte, but on the other hand it was not subjected to any serious external influences. The processes of this service can therefore be viewed as natural and consequently very revealing.

Which slogans were the most used at Bolotnaya Square? An analysis of the 89 placards from the protest on 10 December which were most frequently published on the web (i.e. most carried the most popular messages) showed the significance of the issue of electoral fraud (which was predictable given that the protest was called "For fair elections") — it is present on half of all placards. More than a quarter (!) of placards cite Internet memes ('Sveta from Ivanovo', 'angry

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[1] A demotivator (or a demotivational poster) is a widespread form of online folklore that consists of a picture on a black background with a caption, usually humour of absurdist in content.

[2] The collection of anecdotes 'Elections, elections…' 8 Dec. 2011. <http://teh-nomad.livejournal.com/1076314.html> — has been cited more than 100 times.

face', 'Putin the crab' and so on), along with subjects also linked to the elections that had specifically spread online ('146 %', 'Churov the magician', 'Gaussian curves', 'voting sheep' and others). The prevalence of criticism addressed to Putin on placards corresponds approximately to the data regarding jokes, at 12 %, and the same is true of the theme of the opposition between government and society (16 %); references to Churov were present in 15 % of placards and 11 % of jokes. The range of jokes and placards was fairly large, so it is possible to assert the statistical reliability of these coincidences, although the proximity of meanings in both allows a thorough assessment of the process — people are inclined to retell and re-post jokes containing the ideas that would later give them cause to take to the streets.

Some conclusions

Overall, the hypothesis that the protest at Bolotnaya Square was in many respects brought about by the activity of the Internet community has been borne out. The mood of requiring real rather than online activity arose thanks to the combined effect of different texts — both on account of the quantity of them and the features of their structure and content. It seems that the key 'driving forces' behind the shift from online to real activity were the concepts of a 'convincingly established deception', an 'incomplete process', the inclusive nature of the protest's values ('for dignity', 'for honesty', 'for fairness'), and a focus on mildness. During this period, a process emerged which updated the concept of 'civil society' both as an explicable model of behaviour for protesters and as an ideological vector.

The existence and nature of the polylogue between various social and political forces during this time (including striving to hinder online communication and the various 'stuffing' of information) demonstrates that attempts at manipulation through Internet services undoubtedly took place, and moreover it is highly probable that they played a key role in the process. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the texts designed to limit online and real-world activity were either insufficiently effective, or they played into the hands of the opposing side. The scale of the protests was the largest for many years, it has been established as one of the key political events of the last two decades.

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