

## Public video applications of citizens and development of digital democracy in contemporary Russia: a case of Alexei Dymovskii

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Many foreign researchers argue, that the new virtual public space promotes discussions and exchange of ideas and views. At the same time, “internet public space, but does not constitute a public sphere” (Papacharissi 2002:13),<sup>1</sup> and, accordingly, does not guarantee a democratic way of solving problems.

Distribution of Internet technologies in contemporary Russia generates development of public applications as tools of digital democracy. A complaint published in the open virtual space is visible not only for the addresser and author, but also for the other users, and this fact turns the complaint to one of the mechanisms of democratic control, inherent to the "network public spheres" (Benkler, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Such resources as <http://democrator.ru>, <http://change.ru> are positioned as digital democracy tools.

Appearing in the public space, the complaints of citizens perform a routine function of monitoring "from below", and turn into the catalyst of the practices of deliberative democracy (Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Potentially, public appeals and discussions arising about them, can become one of the tools of e-democracy and an important component of "counter-democracy" (Rosanvallon, 2012)<sup>4</sup> in Russia.

Complaints and applications of citizens to the authorities is a traditional way of solving problems in Russian society. An extensive administrative apparatus receiving and processing citizens' complaints is available nowadays in Russia. Several Internet resources provide citizens' applications to the top of hierarchy of executive power – to the President and Prime-minister of Russian Federation (<http://medvedevu.ru>, <http://letters.kremlin.ru/>, <http://moskva-prezidentu.ru/>, etc.). Also, direct official video applications of citizens to the President have become popular in recent years.

From the one side, submission of a video on the web-recourse, which is free of charge, and accessible for everyone, delivers the problem to the unlimited number of customers, and makes it public. Knobel and Sanders (2012) compare this practice with the soviet Samizdat.<sup>5</sup> Although, no doubt, possibilities of dissemination of information through the Internet are much richer.

The most-known public applications, that caused a wide resonance in the society, have been analyzed as cases of civil activism or scandals, which, according to Markovits and Silverstein (1988:8) “can only occur in liberal democracies”. Meanwhile, the video applications reproduce a traditional for the Russian society model of solving problems through complaints, addressed to the authorities, especially when the addresser is the President of the country. This way of solving problems is absolutely legitimate in the contemporary Russian society, and supported by the Federal Law No 59-FZ on the Procedure for Consideration of Public Appeals in the Russian

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<sup>1</sup> Papacharissi Z. 2002. The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere. *New Media & Society* 4:9-27.

<sup>2</sup> Benkler Y. 2006. *Networks. How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

<sup>3</sup> Benhabib S. 1996. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton University Press; Cohen J. 2009. *Philosophy, Politics, Democracy: Selected Essays*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Rozvallon P. 2012. Kontrdemokratiia: politika v epokhu nedoveriia. *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*. 4:84 - 94

<sup>5</sup> Knobel B., Sanders J. 2012. Samizdat 2.0: The Dymovsky Case and the Use of Streaming Video as a Political Tool in Contemporary Russia. *International Journal of E-Politics*. 3(1):26–41.

Federation of February 5, 2006.<sup>6</sup>

In the result the public applications are existing today both in institutional settings of digital democracy, and traditional hierarchical system, controlled by the government, which leads to confusion and substitution of terms of public discussion, civil activism and democracy.

In the report I represent an analyzes of Dymovskii case and its consequences in terms of the conception of digital democracy, taking into account authoritarian context of contemporary Russia. During the research I used methods of discourse analyses of video applications and website <http://dymovskiy.name/>, internet publications and online discussions.

On 5 November 2009, Mr Dymovskii, a police major from Novorossiysk (in the Krasnodar Region), posted two appeals to the President Putin: one on his personal website, [Dymovskiy.ru](http://dymovskiy.ru/),<sup>7</sup> and another on YouTube.<sup>8</sup> In the videos, he criticized his own police department for corruption and inefficiency. The posts seemed to serve as a tipping point for widespread public discontent with corruption and violence in the law enforcement system. In the course of just one day, nearly 300,000 people watched the posts. Dynamic of visits is available on the Figure 1.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1. Mentions of the term Dymovskii in the sphere of Social media**



The video also sparked a flurry of comments in both traditional and online media. The respected weekly magazine *Russkii Reporter* made Mr Dymovskii's appeal top in its rating of the 100 most efficient and effective political acts of the year in 2009. The magazine considers his posts the starting point of police reform in Russia: Several weeks after Mr Dymovskii's video address appeared, the Head of the Interior Ministry, Rashid Nurgaliev, had to change the discredited system of collecting crime statistics. Then, on 24 December 2009, the Decree of the President No. 1468 On Measures to Improve Police Activities appeared, scandalous resignations of senior police officers followed, and finally the draft bill On Police was made public.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Law No 59-FZ on the Procedure for Consideration of Public Appeals in the Russian Federation of February 5, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Later it was renamed as <http://dymovskiy.name/>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G3KbBfpg24> (Retrieved May 18, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Toepfl F. 2011. Managing public outrage: Power, scandal, and new media in contemporary Russia . *New Media Society*. 13:1310.

<sup>10</sup> 100 political gestures. 2010. *Russkii Reporter*. 40:14–21

On 7 August, the draft bill On Police was posted on the website<sup>11</sup> <http://dymovskiy.ru>, original mission of which was a monitoring of responses of the authorities on the applications of citizens. Besides, Dymovskii has opened his own Public Reception, receiving applications from citizens and policemen who's rights have been violated.<sup>12</sup>

Between 7 August and 15 September, when the discussion was closed, 1 304 347 people had visited the site and left 21 000 comments.<sup>13</sup> The amended bill was introduced in Parliament on 27 October 2010 and came into force on 1 March 2011.

As for Mr Dymovsky's own fate, soon after his online addresses appeared he was discharged from police service, a criminal investigation on charges of fraud was initiated against him, and he spent over a month in pre-trial detention. The charges were dropped in April 2010, because the time limit had expired.<sup>14</sup> At this moment his website, accumulating the main discussion of Dymovskii's followers, seems decaying; the forum of the website has 5 216 registered users, and only 49 of them have participated in a discussion.<sup>15</sup>

The research is still in progress, and my preliminary conclusion is the action of digital democracy, initiated by Alexei Dymovskii, and its consequences were determined in a large scale by the authoritarian regime and official rules of the citizens' complaint procession. The channel of communication with the authorities was regulated (and limited) by the format of complaint. The Dymovskii's application itself reproduces the hierarchical model of communication between citizens and authorities. I suppose, that the case of Dymovskii caused such a powerful resonance exactly because it was addressed to the President, and expressed in the form of an official application.

According to the Law No 59, mentioned above, the authorities are obliged to give response on the citizens' complaints. Public and resonance applications require compulsory and conspicuous responses. It seems, the more painful problem raised, the louder the reaction of the authorities. The sequence of events allows suggesting, that the application has gotten an additional stimulus for beginning of the reform of police. Although, the reform has not solved the main problems of corruption and inefficiency, mentioned by Dymovskii in his application.

Almost all the results of the Dymovskii's speech had a short-term effect. It gave birth to the public discussion for a short time, and even contributed organization of the initiative group, which is partly effectual today, although it is hardly noticeable and marginalized. At that very moment the video application of Dymovskii has not realized one of the main feature of digital democracy strengthening of the Rule of Law. According to Toepfl: "the perceived outcomes of this scandal, very likely, did not deter government officials from taking bribes and were even detrimental to the belief of common Russians in the 'rule of law'" (1312).

So, supporting the mechanism of complaints, the authority establishes a way of solving problems, which is legitimate in authoritarian society. Like in the Soviet period they discuss democratic roots of this mechanism, although, it can hardly be regarded as such, being controlled and managed by the state. The mechanism neither involves solving problems by means of discussion, no strengthens the rule of law. The case of Dymovskii shows, that some public space is available for the civil statement, although, not being supported by the public sphere, it becomes marginal very quickly. With increasing control over the Internet, digital democracy will more and more turn to the project, regulated by the authoritarian state.

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<sup>11</sup> The website for public discussions on draft legislation is <http://www.zakonoproekt2010.ru> (Retrieved August 26, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> <http://lenta.ru/news/2009/11/18/priem/>

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G3KbBfpg24> (Retrieved August 26, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Dymovsky calls 'his victory' settlement out of court with investigation. 2010. *Gzt.ru*. April 6

<http://www.gzt.ru/topnews/accidents/-maior-dymovskii-poshel-na-mirovuyu-so-sledstviem-/300262.html> (Retrieved June 1, 2011)

<sup>15</sup> See <http://dymovskiy.name/forum.php> (Retrieved August 26, 2014).