

Movement for Fair Elections in Saint Petersburg:

From Connective to Collective Action

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Over more than two decades researchers from various fields explore how the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) influence politics of the modern societies, how they contribute into democratization and increase in political participation. Latest advancements in ICTs have had a considerable impact on society and especially on the development of civil society. In his classical book, Sidney Tarrow claims that “new forms of communication and new forms of association endowed challengers with resources”. Social movements, as a special dimension within a broader sphere of civil society, have been particularly affected by latest advancements in ICTs.

The role of ICTs for social mobilization has been analyzed from various perspectives. Some argue that new information and communication technologies help to overcome such obstacles of participation as decentralization and distance costs, time constraints, low income and lack of skills (Rohlinger & Bunnage, 2012). The most prominent social movements and citizens’ political campaigns of the past decade were born digital. *Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, los indignados*, to mention few of them, make the best examples here. On-line groups can be effective in different ways: they spread ‘uncensored messages’ and alternative views (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005), teach their supporters new political skills and create new forms of contentious politics to surprise their powerful opponents (Stein, 2009). ICTs revealed themselves as a powerful tool, which can endow even comparatively loose social networks with significant resources to challenge structure of dominant political settings, which has important social and political implications for those countries with tight press regulations and suppression of the independent mass media. John Reuter and David Szakonyi argue that “social media usage can, under certain conditions, increase political awareness in authoritarian regimes <...> Public awareness of fraud is uniquely important in electoral authoritarian regimes because of its potential to ignite anti-regime mobilization” (2013).

Social movement and social media studies represent a very new field of scholarly investigation. Communication and social scholars make just first steps developing theories to explain new phenomena. In this paper authors will draw on a theoretical framework developed by Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg in their article “The Logic of Connective Action” (2012) which, as we believe, provides promising base for analysis of ICTs utilization by new social movements.

As Bennett and Segerberg put it themselves, the article “examines the organizational dynamics that emerge when communication becomes a prominent part of organizational structure”. They argue that understanding variations in large-scale action networks “requires distinguishing between at least two logics of action: “...the familiar logic of collective action ... and the for-

mation of collective identities, and the less familiar logic of connective action based on personalized content sharing across media networks” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: p. 739). The logic of collective action performed by social movements’ actors is the logic of conventional actions organized by various movement groups, non-governmental organizations, transnational organizations or even political parties with more or less strict membership. They need “joining with established groups or ideologies” that may require more resources than just communication technologies. Typically actions organized in this logic place greater demands on participants to share particular repertoires of contention and common identifications of political claims. Scoring high on commitment of the personal costs of civil society disobedience, this logic of action emphasizes the problems of getting individuals to contribute to the collective endeavor. This raises classical “free-rider problem” articulated by Mancur Olson: “rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests” (1971, p.2). That is why the formal organizations with resources are “essential to harnessing and coordinating individuals in common action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: p. 750).

Despite the apparently clear logic of the collective action theory, empirical data on activities of many of the nowadays social movements often make social movement students to question its premises. Authors believe that such movements as *Put People First*, *los indignados* or the *Occupy* groups performed different logic of action, as they all were not centered around formal organizations, but rather relied on various technical platforms taking the role of established political organizations. This new pattern presents the connective action logic characterized by weak ties networks and personalized action formations. Actions confined in this framework might be organized “differently in different societies, but they all develop flexible political identifications based on personal lifestyles”. There are two key elements of this “personalized communication”: (1) political content “in the form of easily personalized ideas” and (2) “various personal communication technologies that enable sharing these themes” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: p. 744). Political changes brought by these social movements all over the world clearly show that “the logic of connective action applies increasingly to life in late modern societies in which formal organizations are losing their grip on individuals... These networks can operate importantly through the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: p. 748).

Our goal here is to place one of the most interesting cases of social movements in Russia within this theoretical framework. The case of *Observers for Fair Elections Movements* presents a very good example of how mode of the connective action can evolve into pattern of collective behavior and interaction. Authors believe that the case investigation will help to understand better the development trends of social movements and civil society in Russia. To collect empirical data for this study both quantitative and qualitative techniques were employed. At the first stage of our research project, we have conducted a social network analysis of the activists’ on-line community based in Russia’s largest social network platform *Vkontakte*. At the next step, we interviewed core activists of the *Observers for Fair Elections Movement* focusing on questions concerning social media and on-line and off-line activities of the Movement. At the same time, we analyzed the data available at *Observers’* on-line community (wall posts, likes and comments).

The impact of the Internet on mass mobilization all over the world is still debatable. In Russia, where, as a part of a broader authoritarian electoral regime strategy, mass media were brought

under the state control Internet and social media are crucial in terms of providing an alternative to mainstream state-controlled media information and official propaganda. Therefore, it is quite natural to suggest that in Russia on-line platforms would play highly instrumental role in social movement activists' mobilization. The recent statistical data on the Internet usage strongly supports this assumption. According to the Levada-center opinion poll, in 2013 40% of the Russian population surfed Internet every day, in June 2014 already 46% of respondents reported usage of Internet on daily basis. At the same time, most of Internet-users tell that they follow news on the Internet (30%) and try to understand the political situation at home and abroad with the help of Internet sources (19%). In addition 34% of users report that they visit social network sites (SNS) every day and 19% several times a week. Moreover, in 2014 some 33% of all users registered at least in one SNS claimed that they read political news in social networks from time to time and more than 10% mentioned that they used social media platforms to find political news very often (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014). It is worth mentioning that Levada Center added the last question in opinion polls just recently following increase in politicization of social network sites in Russia.

Both Russian and international experts put a lot of effort in explaining social movements which came into being in Russia during the 2011-2012 electoral circle. This "Snow Revolution" was often compared to Arab Spring or a series of the Post-Soviet "color revolutions". This outburst of contentious collective action in the country where civil society remained hibernating since late 1990-s was often connected to proliferation of new communication technologies that allowed rapid dissemination of information about electoral fraud. "Protesters were mobilized mainly via social networks sites such as Vkontakte and Facebook – a fact that finally demolished the argument that the Russian web was ineffective at mobilizing citizens" (Litvinenko, 2012). The Internet and social media in particular have been considered as a new tool of social consolidation and control over the authorities. This 'Internet-enthusiasm' did not last for a long time: already in 2013, some scholars claimed that "the Internet may impact protest activity through interaction with other variables rather than directly" (Snegovaya, 2013).

Looking at the development of Observers for Fair Elections Movement in Saint Petersburg through the prism of Bennett and Segerberg's theory, we can clearly distinguish two patterns of ICTs utilization at the different stages of the Movement's evolution. The first step starts with the rapid self-organizing 'digitally networked action' centered on main social network sites in Runet. At the second, more recent stage, we observe growth of social movement organization that implies group membership and facilitate creating of the common identity. The Internet technologies step back and take function of a social action tool, not a core organizing structure of the social action.

The movement for fair elections in Saint Petersburg started in digital media that allowed citizens to express their frustration openly and in the way they felt most comfortable: through photographs, cartoon pictures, statistics that they collected on polling stations or just angry blog posts. An Observers for Fair Election on-line group in Russia's most popular social network Vkontakte was established on December 4, 2011. During the first week, people only shared their stories and experiences and called for the mass actions to make the State Duma dissolve. On December 12, the group administrator reported incredible membership growth: from few hundred to more than 5 thousand in less than one week. Up until present time the total number of members varies from

about 9 500 to 10 500. At the same time district, groups were established to make coordination of actions easier and faster. These smaller groups still exist, but they have lost their importance and rarely produce original content. Despite this, the main group of Observers for Fair Election has evolved from a meeting point for those who had been frustrated with electoral fraud in 2011 to a social platform for all opposition-minded people in Saint Petersburg. The utilization of this on-line tool is exactly what Bennett and Segerber call “personalized action formations” that enabled easy expression of ideas and views through digital social network platforms.

The analysis of Observers’ on-line group ‘wall’ also revealed the central organizing function of digital technologies in the very beginning of the movement. For example, 10 top most shared (>200), commented (>200) and liked (>500) posts were created in December 2011-January 2012 when the protest activity was the highest. Neither later political developments, nor even discussions on Ukrainian crisis or local elections attracted so much attention. This clearly corresponds to Bennett’s metaphor of a “digitally networked action”: “we all have the same story, we share the same problem” (Lance Bennett, 2012).

The Observers have just conducted a mobilization campaign for the local and governor’s elections that were held on the 14th of September, but their on-line community does not enjoy as much popularity as it used to in 2011-2012. Bennett and Segerberg noticed that “sustainable and effective collective action from the perspective of the broader logic of collective action typically requires varying levels of organizational resource mobilization deployed in organizing, leadership, developing common action frames, and brokerage to bridge organizational differences”(2012, p. 751). The Movement has a street address, contact details and a bank account. At the same time, activities of the Movement become far less spontaneous. As the time passes, the movement does not cease to exist after the first emotions stirred by elections calmed down, but their activities have grown more structured and formal. More than 2000 former observers became members of local electoral committees to prevent fraud from within. In addition the Movement managed to mobilize and train 200 hundred new observers within a month before the local elections. For the elections day they organized a press center to give regular information updates and provide contact details of the Movement’s official representatives as well as a call center to track fraudulent actions and provide legal advice to observers at the polling stations. The work of these centers was well organized and all activities were divided between participants by several core activists. The Observers still leave lot of space for the individual self-expression, but they gradually move towards more and more organized structure. However, according to the information from interviews, this development into a well-ordered organization clearly has its limitations. For example, the Movement refused to register as an Organization to avoid bureaucratic difficulties and control from authorities.

It is obvious that movements are acting in particular political and social contexts that often do not allow development of oppositional organizations. The mobilizing effect of the new information and communication technologies varies greatly from country to country and from one political context to another. As we saw in the case analyzed in this paper, they start as a strong wave of a digitally-driven mobilization and later turn into more organized and structured associations. In this part of the research in progress we tried to explain what kind of relationship exists between on-line activism and the “real world civil society” activities applying the concept created by W. Lance Bennet and Alexandra Segeberg. As they put it, digital media enabled two forms

of social movements' action – collective action and connective action. Considering case of the Electoral Observers movement in Saint Petersburg we can conclude that these two logics of social action are deeply interrelated and the connective action might be considered as a forerunner of a collective action mode as the movement evolves.

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