Social Media and Political Dissent in Russia and Belarus: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

The special issue focuses on the roles of socially mediated communication in expressing, aggregating, and shaping political dissent and discontent in Russia and Belarus at the borderline between the 2010s and 2020s. Lately, these post-Soviet countries have demonstrated the growth of restrictive trends in both politics and the public sphere reciprocated by increasing street protest and online polarization. The six papers of the special issue come from the Seventh Annual Conference “Comparative Media Studies in Today’s World” of April 2019. They address the differences between autocracies and democracies in the impact of social media on protest participation, appearance of critical publics, and new media-like gatekeepers on YouTube, Instagram, VKontakte, and other platforms, and cumulative patterns in socially mediated deliberation. The papers demonstrate various manifestations of political disagreement, critique, and moral struggle, including politicization of the mundane, accumulation of self-criticism, and alternation of media consumption habits, thus uncovering the post-Soviet public spheres as vibrant and diverse, even if polarized and constrained.

Keywords

political dissent, Russia, Belarus, cumulative deliberation, authoritarian publics, YouTube, Instagram

Introduction

In summer 2020, two major political events have drawn international attention to Russia and Belarus. In Russia, a referendum on amendment of the Constitution of the Russian Federation has taken place. The changes it introduced were fundamental to the political system and included, i.a., the so-called “zero-ing” of the presidential term, establishment of a new “coordinative” organ called State Council, and diminishment of autonomy of local authorities (State Duma, 2020). The State Council, with its yet unclear place in the political system, is intended to ensure coordinated action of the state institutions and determine directions in both domestic and foreign policy. The right of the Russian President to directly or indirectly nominate its members makes, as Russian and international analysts note, “the whole system of separation of powers depend[ent] on only one person” (Shashkova et al., 2020, p. 81). The clauses on patriotic upbringing of children and “protection of historic truth,” and restrictions on applicability of international case law, were also introduced. Despite the signs of voter fraud (Kobak et al., 2020), the results were claimed “triumphant” by Dmitry Peskov, the official spokesman of the Russian President.

For some observers, the constitutional amendment has become a logical acme of the development of the Russian political system of the 2010s. The amendments, though, have further explicated the fundamental values-based cleavages between more post-Soviet and more pro-Western strata of the Russian society, with circa 60% of the population supporting the changes (Levada Center, 2020; WCIOM, 2020). Street protest after the vote has been scarce and soon faded—unlike in Belarus where, after the presidential elections of 8 August 2020 at which Aliaksandr Lukashenka has, by official count, regained his post for the fifth time, nationwide protests spread to towns and villages and continued till early 2021. During the Belarusian protest winter 2020/2021, the necessity of a constitutional referendum was pushed many times into the public discourse by the Lukashenka administration but not yet happened.

The two countries have a lot in common in terms of political culture and communicative practices. They are part of the Union State, with no formal border between them, and share tightly interconnected recent history and spoken language; to
some extent, they can be viewed as a unified context. A debate on potential tighter unification has intensified after the Donbass crisis erupted, and, as for today, a “roadmap” of the future rapprochement has been agreed. As scholars argue, in the 2010s, some measures aimed at diminishing protest activity and overall social dissent were first piloted in Belarus and then implemented in Russia (Gel’man, 2015). In general, being an “older brother” in bilateral relations, Russia has been shaping many aspects of Belarusian life, from policing in international relations to news supply and social media platforms, such as Odnoklassniki (“Classmates”) or VKontakte (“InContact”). However, in 2020, as it is clear from what we have said above, the reaction of the respective societies to political (non-)change has been vividly different, which makes exploring the period immediately before 2020 especially important.

It is clear that political differences between the two states are just as significant. Despite the widespread view on Russia as a country heading to a full-fledged drawback of the Soviet Union, it has been described by the Polity IV project as anocracy, or hybrid regime, throughout the recent decades. Belarus, on the contrary, has been recognized as an autocracy. Paradoxically, one of the widespread opinions in Belarus is the one on the regime in Russia being more restrictive than in their home country. The intermediary territorial position of Belarus between Russia and Western Europe has defined Belarusian “politics of maneuvering,” just as Russia’s being the largest world country and a space between Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions, just as possession of nuclear power, provided for remaining one of the poles of the multi-polar world attractive enough for small old and newer allies. International relations and public attitudes related to them, though aiming at very different goals, have played an active role in preservation of both incumbent presidents in power.

**Social Media and Growth of Control: Runet and Bynet at the End of 2010s**

Patterns of (semi-)autocratic ruling in both countries included growing attention to the online realm. With time, in both countries, the elites have realized there was a connection between online discussions and protest activity. Thus, an increase in control over online speech has been noted by experts in both countries.

The Russian segment of internet (Runet) has, for many years, remained a communicative milieu substantially freer than the traditional media, due to the absence of restrictive regulation to which online platforms would be subjected (Vendil Pallin, 2017), non-entrance of major state-affiliated media players to the online markets, and diversity of social media platforms. As to the latter, Russia is one of the most diverse social media markets in the world on which, in the 2010s, Livejournal, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and later Telegram successfully competed and co-existed with the global Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and later Snapchat and TikTok. This high-choice market structure has, at least partly, been responsible for the platform-wide echo chambering effect (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016); but anyway, before 2014, Runet had shaped itself as a constellation of platforms all in all allowing for discussing public agendas (Koltsova & Koltcov, 2013). Just as everywhere else, communication on Runet, mainly on social networks, was not deprived of user polarization (Bodrunova et al., 2019), a rise of extremist talk (Salimovskiy & Ermakova, 2011), or verbal aggression. The latter, though, as we showed earlier, may play constructive roles in restrictive contexts, such as discussion fueling, marking group belonging, contextualization of dissent, and demarcation of the very online space as free (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, et al., 2021).

The field of restrictive regulation on internet communication has started to grow in the aftermath of a major protest wave of 2011–2012 (Kharuk & Litvinenko, 2016). This field was composed of several branches, all equally opaque and controversial, based on equivocal definitions interpretation of which varied from case to case. One branch was laws on extremism, including the Yarovaya package of laws and amendments that has established banning of websites without court decisions and cutting access to Russia for the platforms which do not store user data within the country. According to the statistics by Agora, an independent NGO, hundreds of legal cases have ended up by jailing for (re)posts on social networks in the recent years because “extremism” could also imply criticism of authorities or police. Another branch was a range of protective laws, including the one on “propaganda of homosexualism” (spun to the public as a law that protects children), the one on public offense to civil servants, and the one on public swearing (including that in media texts). The third branch targeted the media themselves: the laws on, i.a., foreign ownership of media, on fake news, and especially on foreign agents have created the atmosphere of uncertainty and a ground for mistaking journalism for political activity based only on financial sources and disregarding the journalistic standards. Taken together, these laws have given rise to the rise of self-censoring on social networks and partly diminished the space for free public dialogue.

However, the response to this range of laws was not only self-censorship (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, & Nigmatullina, 2021) but new regulations introduced by the platforms and their cooperation with the authorities, and extreme weakening of financial positions of oppositional and alternative online media. There have also been acts of solidarity, like in case of arrest of a Moscow journalist Ivan Golunov on a proved-to-be-fictitious accusation or a petition by 100+ media and NGOs against the law on foreign agents. There also was an outburst of Aesopian language and creativity in bypassing the automated search of swearing and political talk, clearly reminiscent of the late 1980s when the same was practiced in oral speech. It is not that the public discussion faded; it is...
only that it could not have impact on policing and electoral results beyond the co-opted minimum.

In Belarus, legal restrictions on use of internet have been much higher from the very beginning. They, i.a., included online access from internet cafes by passport only or, later, restricting the citizens to having just one account in any social network, as the accounts had to be clearly linked to users’ identities. Yet, despite the restrictive atmosphere, social media, including Odnoklassniki (Herasimenka, 2019), Facebook, where many Belarusians started to use Belarusian instead of Russian, YouTube, and later Telegram, have given shelter to political criticism and connective activities of opposition. During the protest time of 2020–2021, Telegram channels (both oppositional and pro-establishment!) have spilled through to tiny communities, such as streets, schools, or single blocks of flats, becoming a vascular system of the protest.

Activities on social networks are only one sign of what the divided and clientelist societies of the post-Soviet space have, in theory, been long denied—critical publics and their constellations that form the bulk of public dialogue, embody both consensus and dissent, and articulate discontent to the powerful in the absence of strong independent media systems; vibrant even if separated from decision-making to the extent that is still to be assessed. Conditions for their formation and dissolution within the anocratic/autocratic environment, their democratization and stabilization potential, their discursive nature, normativity, and efficiency are still significantly under-researched. Just as well, the roles of new (and not so new) actors that shape such publics, including platforms, legal systems, social groups, and media, need to be seen in a more complex and multi-faceted way than the dichotomic “power versus people” or “power versus opposition” lens habitually adopted in evaluations of non-democratic public spheres.

Public Spheres in (Semi-)Autocracies and Cumulation of Political Dissent on Social Media: A Research Agenda

Earlier, the functionality of non-democratic public spheres has been assessed from the perspectives of liberation versus control (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Rød & Weidmann, 2015; Svolik, 2013), legitimation (Dukalskis, 2017), direction and potential of criticism (Toepfl, 2020), and a range of others. In many of them, social media and online platforms play a decisive role, as, for example, the Chinese social networking services and regional publics residing on them which play a noticeable role in (de-)legitimizing local authorities (Dukalskis, 2017). Yet, there are key questions that still are to be reflected in the relations between functioning of social media and cumulation/resolution of political dissent in flawed democracies, anocracies, or full autocracies. Here, we outline some of those, which one may also trace in the publication of the special issue to which this introductory paper belongs.

If in the Arab countries before the Arab Spring public spheres existed and gradually gained relevance “underneath authoritarian structures” (Salvatore, 2014, p. 381), in the post-Soviet Slavic countries of relatively secular civic cultures, authoritarianism before Donbass allowed for the formation of “parallel” structures of public dialogue (Kiriya, 2012), including NGOs, alternative-agenda media (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016), social network communities, and academic discourse. Theorizing on the diversity of public arenas in (semi-)autocratic states, Toepfl (2020) has recently suggested a typology of publics as combinations of environment (e.g., platforms), participants, and discourses. He has divided such publics into uncritical, policy-critical, and leadership-critical. How he interprets this classification implies that leadership-critical publics are the most critical and criticize both policies and leaders. This may be put under question (see below), both because of lacking traditions of public discussions on policing and frequent attribution of either all achievements or all mistakes in the country to one person, without even clarifying what policy position he stands on. Nonetheless, it is hard to question what Toepfl argues further. It is that presence of criticism and active publics is even plausible for autocracies, as it allows for venting anger, assessing oppositional discourses, getting feedback from the population, and selective use of anti-oppositional tactics, including partial co-optation of oppositional elites. Indeed, in both Russia and Belarus, the political regimes of the late 2010s combined increasingly restrictive and intentionally equivocal legislation on public communication with “gardening” strategies based on co-optation of quasi-oppositional political parties and seizure of civic and communicative initiatives (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019). Thus, non-democracies use nuanced enough tactics in both political and communicative realms, which allows for, with the help of Toepfl’s conceptualization, posing wider questions on the three elements that form a public.

First, the participants. What unity of people makes a public within a non-democratic setting, and what does it take to become a public in an autocracy? How do the roles of the three elements stated above, like platforms and discourses, combine with high external pressures and weak traditions of civic engagement, journalistic standard, and transparent politics? How does the structure of communities already limited by affordances of communicative milieus relate to the (post-) authoritarian nature of social grouping? Scholars need to address the problem of becoming a public in a society not only restrictive in terms of freedom of expression but deeply fragmented and much more atomized than those in the West (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The post-Soviet publics’ conditions for solidarity, political relevance, and potential influence on “the system” (Ledeneva, 2013) through either co-optation or hard opposition remain heavily understudied, both in relation to social media and beyond.

Formation of public opinion, which anyway develops in various publics even under higher legal control of online communication and in absence of trusted institutional
players, puts forward questions on the nature of public deliberation. Thus, our previous research (Bodrunova, Blekanov, & Maksimov, 2021) points out to cumulative effects in how public opinion forms. We have suggested a concept of cumulative deliberation that sees effects like the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and the silent majority (Nichols, 1973) on social networks, aggregation of publics on ad hoc (Bruns & Burgess, 2015) and affective grounds (Papacharissi, 2015) as a part of a large-scale process of constant opinion accumulation and dissipation (Bodrunova, Blekanov, & Maksimov, 2021). Such an approach allows for recognizing tiny acts of online communication (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2015) as tiny communicative actions (Habermas, 1990) and, thus, to partly abolish normative demands attached to rational and consensual institutionalized deliberation when ordinary people are actors of public communication. At this point, the difference between less and more restrictive regimes comes into play, as, in non-democracies, there are dangers associated even with such tiny actions. Thus, the thresholds of entering cumulative deliberation differ in democracies and non-democracies—see, for example, the statistics by a Russian NGO called Agora which reports hundreds of legal cases for (re)posting on social media annually. Thus, patterns of expression and cumulation of dissent, disagreement, and discontent are expected to vary depending not only on platform affordances, immediate circumstances of speech, and deeper-going political cultures but also on social context that includes political and social pressures and reciprocal creativity of social media users to avoid them (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, et al., 2021).

Within this complicated picture, the second element—environments, that is, platforms—becomes actors, and on-platform activities and communities gain agency, even if limited. The structural and strategic roles of platforms in opinion formation in non-democracies in agenda discussion remain under-researched. It is crucial to know how various environments fluctuate between coordination/compliance (such as YouTube or VKontakte), silent disobedience (such as Facebook or Twitter), active resilience (such as Telegram), and acceptance of blockage (such as LinkedIn), and how such arenas overlap within publics-at-large, reconfiguring the socially mediated public spheres in their relations to the state. Moreover, the roles of the new social media-enabled actors within the liberation versus control and legitimation versus control logics are calling for exploration.

Third, the discourses. What also provides for new research themes is the pervasive nature of the political within socially mediated discourses. If “a public sphere is more likely to emerge in a society as a result of people’s dissatisfaction with matters of economics or day-to-day governance than from their embrace of abstract political ideals” (Shirky, 2011, p. 34), this dissatisfaction might be more pressing in the countries where venting anger is less possible. Politicization of discussing mundane experience which stays equally far from the state-controlled agendas and the political issues on oppositional media may clearly become a new platform-assisted grassroots source of political will and self-organization. Yet, we know nearly nothing on the linkages between modes of discourse politicization and cumulation of dissent or political differences on social media.

The special issue “Social media and political dissent in Russia and Belarus” touches on these issues, adding to our knowledge on autocratic publics on social media and actors that shape them. It features a selection of papers presented and discussed at the Seventh Annual Conference “Comparative Media Studies in Today’s World.” This conference, held on 16 April to 18 April 2019 in St. Petersburg, Russia, had “Communities, Audiences, and Publics” as its main theme. During the conference, it became particularly evident that countries, which are denied the very possibility of having a public sphere by many scholars in the (post-)Habermassian tradition, demonstrate active presence of political publics. However, conversion of this presence into impact on decision-making is complicated by the framework factors—that is, restrictive political regimes, weakness of participatory cultures, civil society, and deliberative traditions, and media consumption patterns that correspond to deep values-based social fragmentation.

The special issue has two foci, based on what is said above. Three papers explore the structural elements of online communication, while three others investigate the nature of publics and their discourses in Russia and Belarus.

**The Roles of News, News Gatekeepers, and Platforms in Reshaping the (Semi-) Autocratic Public Spheres**

As stated above, our knowledge on the linkages between consumption of information online, political behavior, and contextual factors is scarce. However, it is often believed that the impact of online news consumption, especially that on social media, on protest participation is higher in the countries where the mainstream media are subjected to government control and/or state-affiliated production. The paper by Kirkizh and Koltsova (2021) looks at whether this assumption is confirmed and whether it can be generalized across various non-democratic states. Exploring the relationship between self-reported online news consumption and participation in street protest actions across 48 nations in 2010–2014, the authors hypothesize the varying discrepancy between old (traditional and/or state-controlled) and new (online and social) media which fosters protest participation. They expect it to be the highest in anocracies/non-full democracies, lower in democracies, and the lowest in full autocracies where oppositional views are oppressed. Contrary to expectations, autocratic states with high control over the whole communication systems have shown higher
effects than hybrid regimes. This might be partly explained if we take into account Toepfl’s idea on policy-critical and leadership-critical publics, as countries where these are not found are extremely rare, and at least some publics which consume news alternative to the state ones do have a spillover potential. Thus, interestingly, elites in both Russia and Belarus that have recently moved further on their way to restricting internet freedoms might be fostering intensification of the linkage between online news and protests instead of inhibiting it. If combined with the idea of environment-bound publics with varying directions of criticism, the paper by Kirkizh and Koltsova allows for further research on the consequences of news consumption for publics within transitional/hybrid/semi-autocratic and autocratic public spheres.

In both countries, the major share of news consumption still belongs to TV, a major share of which, in its turn, is directly state-owned or state-affiliated through ownership by state-owned companies or mechanisms of control. Yet, this dominant position has, in the recent years, started to be challenged by political YouTube channels (and, later, Telegram channels). The papers by Litvinenko (2021) and Bodrunova and Blekanov (2021) tell how important YouTube has become for the landscape of political commenting and, to a certain extent, political news in both Russia and Belarus. On the example of Russia, Litvinenko even calls YouTube an “alternative TV” for Russians. Indeed, she shows that, during the presidential elections of 2018, oppositional discourse was more prominent within the popular videos on the Russian-speaking YouTube than the pro-state discourse, and alternative and non-professional channels were more popular than the mainstream channels with professional video production. The latter ones, limited in the possibilities for “gardening” on an international platform, tried to capture the discourse from within by imitating user-generated videos in their style, very much in contrast to the democratic contexts (May, 2010). However, the democratization potential of the “alternative TV” tolerated by the state, as Litvinenko argues, has turned out to “play into the hands of the state” (p. 7), as the oppositional players promoted abstaining from voting, which, in the end, has led to one-sided mobilization and prevailing of pro-incumbent forces. Thus, the “gardening” strategy appeared to be failing on the level of individual channels while was highly successful on the level of the all-country public space. This creates a view of platform impact as multilevel and multi-directional, where not all the directions support political diversity and free news production.

While platform-wide publics may be viewed as national gatekeepers of political opinion, on the regional level, a range of “new gatekeepers in town” (Dovbysh, 2021) have appeared who challenge the dominance of state-affiliated or loyal news flows. Local news ecologies in Russia are quite peculiar and different from those in big cities. On the one hand, they provide well enough for involvement of citizens into political communication (Litvinenko & Nigmatullina, 2020). On the other hand, registered media in the Russian regions, especially beyond the Urals, are highly dependent on the local administrations and hardly survive if they deny signing so-called “state contracts for information support” (Ademukova et al., 2017)—that is, grants in return for constant and favorable coverage of the activities of local authorities. The paper shows how local newsgroups on social networking sites, mostly VKontakte, become not only new local gatekeepers with normative stance in the making but also an arena where, due to its higher freedom from state impact and high popularity among citizens, political dissent accumulates.

**Political Publics in the Russian-Speaking Space and Cumulative Patterns of Dissent**

Cumulative patterns can also be traced in how publics form and people participate in discussions, including how they (re)construct community borders and practice othering. The papers of the special issue that are dedicated to exploring communities as publics—and, thus, give input to the discussion on how groups of people become publics and live such as on the Russian-speaking socially mediated environments.

One type of such publics is platform-based virtual diasporas—or more vague groups that come from one host country/region, live around the world, and reassemble on social media constantly re-accumulating and reconstituting themselves. Russian-speaking female “InstaMigrants” are the focus of research by Smolarova and Bodrunova (2021) who demonstrate the globality of this newly discovered type of public and their politicization potential. The authors show how everyday experience of Russian-speaking female immigrants becomes a ground for solidarity and gradual formation of politicized agendas systematically overlooked by the mainstream media too deeply rooted in the respective host cultures. This makes mundane practices a source for political discontent, while cross-country comparisons contribute to more realistic evaluations of host societies, thus turning the community of “InstaMigrants” into a public with potentially strong political demands extremely close to everyday reality.

Criticism of everyday life also played a major role in how commenters on Belarusian political YouTube channels formed a critical public. Bodrunova and Blekanov (2021) have found that, in pre-protest Belarus of 2018, a self-critical public existed around a constellation of oppositional YouTube channels. Its criticism toward Lukashenka and his close circles was harsh but lacked substantial assessment of policies and linking bad policing to particular political figures or institutions. The place of policy criticism, though, was taken by self-criticism, including criticizing oneself, the people as “us,” and Belarus as a country, and expressions of
readiness to contribute to political change in the “if-not-then-who” manner.

The differences in how Russia and Belarus reacted to the major political events of the summer 2020 mentioned above may, at least partly, lie in the combination of these two factors—readiness to act and feeling of own responsibility and guilt, equally widespread in Belarus and mostly absent in Russia. While the oppositional publics of the two countries shared aggressive criticism toward the respective presidential incumbents, formal and informal elites close to them, and security services without critical assessment of policies, self-criticism was still largely absent in the commenter community on the Russian YouTube (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, et al., 2021). The authors underline the absence of policy-and-leadership-critical publics in both countries, while their appearance could mean the growth of grassroots deliberative cultures. This, in the end, could even be beneficial for the political elites, as the alternative would be self-criticism, a marker of the future political unrest. Developing traditions of open policy criticism and creating online spaces for it may, in theory, even add to political stability in autocracies while liberalizing them from within—which might, at some point, be an acceptable compromise for both the elites and the people.

Within the political public on Belarusian YouTube, several core commenters have demonstrated cumulative deliberation tactics on the personal level—that is, they left only short supportive comments throughout the year of 2018 and did not enter polemics. Nonetheless, they have become part of the discussion core and have fostered cumulation of opinion under the oppositional videos. The same discursive patterns, though, may be used for exclusion, dehumanization, and othering, as well as for radical self-representation. Mikhaylova and Gradoselskaya (2021) show how, in a hostile anti-LGBTQ setting, radical lesbian feminism online discursively poses itself on “deep, even denialist contraposition toward the state and the dominant culture” (p. 9). The paper clearly demonstrates that the publics intended to advocate diversity and tolerance may instead become hermetic, further radicalize, and gradually shift to “internal migration” and self-conscious separation from the public-at-large.

Conclusion

The special issue has touched on several themes within the studies of public spheres in countries with no established democratic tradition. In such societies, the online realm, and first and foremost social media, often become a shelter for political opposition, radical views, or new gatekeepers challenging the dominant state-affiliated discourses of divisive unity.

The papers of this issue create a ground for stating that the (semi-)autocratic publics on social media may be as vibrant as their counterparts in democracies. The differences lie in how efficiently the state systems may be pressured for change and how they turn pressure to their benefit; in how platforms give rise to new gatekeepers and politicized publics where older gatekeepers are distrusted and agendas are overlooked or hushed; in how values-based restrictions foster self-reflection and limit empowerment. However, the processes of becoming a public, including those of cumulative nature, make each comment matter even in the regimes that do not imply that online communication may influence political decision-making.

Taken together, the papers add to Toepfl’s concept of three types of publics in non-democracies by showing that, in Russia and Belarus of the late 2010s, “normal” policy criticism was not complementing leadership criticism and has given way to self-critique, new mundane political agendas, and ring-fencing of vulnerable social groups from the dominant public-at-large. The subsequent events in Belarus, though, have shown that suggestions on policing were a weak spot in the oppositional discourses when policy elaboration came on agenda. Publics and cultures of political discussion on social media in the two countries, being an environment for accumulation of political dissent, demand further attention, in order not to miss the moment when they give birth to substantial criticism linking policing to political responsibility.

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Note

1. https://www.systemicpeace.org

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