Logged In: Transforming the Political Process in Russia

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In their book "Transforming the Golden-Age Nation State," Hurrelmann et al. build a framework for the analysis of the transformations that the state is undergoing in the context of the challenges posed by an increasingly globalised and interdependent world. They base it on the fundamental assumption that the existence of the modern nation state is legitimised by the provision of 4 core normative goods: peace and physical security; liberty and legal certainty; democratic self-determination; and economic growth and social welfare (Hurrelmann et al. 2007: 3). Given that the focal point of their study is the notion of transformation, the analysis requires a reference point for estimating the dimensions of change. A snapshot of what is referred to as "the Golden-Age Nation State" serves precisely this purpose by representing the modal Western state in the 1960s and 1970s, which "was not only fairly successful in fulfilling each of these functions, but also virtually held a monopoly with respect to all of them." (Hurrelmann et al. 2007: 3). In other words, the nation state in its zenyth possessed 4 core and mutually reinforcing attributes that it did not share with any other actor; it was a truly territorial, constitutional, democratic, and interventionist state.

What is of interest here is the democratic aspect of the golden-age nation state and the challenges that it currently confronts. The authors make the argument that the state aquired the democratic feature once the idea took root in Western society that "state institutions could only be considered legitimate if they guaranteed the citizens' self-determination by enabling effective participation in decision making on all issues of collective concern" (Hurrelmann et al. 2007: 5). An emphasis is put on the understanding that state governance should be representative if it is to claim legitimacy – a precondition that is only possible given that the *demos* is active in shaping the political agenda of the state. It is precisely the representativeness of the democratic regime that has increasingly come under fire, due to power shifts from the state to other international and/or private institutions. These changes are seen to pose a challenge to the citizens' participatory capacity and self-determination.

Taking the example of the spread of new technologies and more precisely the Internet in another section of the book, Benrath et al. argue that:

"the Internet is seen as contributing to the weakening of democracy by reinforcing the *incongruence* between the regional or global extension of social interactions and the national scope of democratically legitimized political decision making" (Benrath et al., 2007: 131).

Internet governance in the OECD world has become a policy field where the nation state has not only lost the monopoly over regulatory and executive powers, but is in fact in many ways pushed aside by other actors, namely international (OECD) and private (ICANN) institutions. As these agents are structurally detached from the political communities that are affected by their decisions, the debate about the inherent 'democratic deficit' of the new governance mechanisms comes to the fore. With reference to these developments, a warning is issued:

"the democratic nation state may become an empty shell as power shifts to the international level, threatening the citizens' self-determination unless democracy itself can be internationalized and incorporated into international organizations" (Hurrelmann et al. 2007: 9).

While Benrath et al. draw insightful conclusions about the spread of new technologies and their effect on the loss of democratic legitimacy, they do not extend their analysis beyond the OECD world. Of course, the "Golden-Age Nation

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State" framework was not designed to fit non-Western states: "We define four core functions that charecterized the *Western* [emphasis added] state in its golden age…" (Hurrelmann et al., 2007: 3).

This essay, however, will do exactly the opposite in an effort to find out whether the same line of argument holds true when applied to a different setting. It will look at the case of Russia and observe how the spread of the Internet has affected the characteristics of the domestic political process and more precisely the provision of normative goods pertaining to democracy, namely participation, self-determination, and civil association. A reference to Kalathil and Boas is instrumental here: "[t]he Internet, however, is only a set of connections between computers […]; it can have no impact apart from its use by human beings." (Kalathil/Boas, 2003: 2). With this in mind, the communicative functions enabled by the Internet, along with the socio-integrative capacities unlocked in the process, will be emphasised in an examination of the Russian blogosphere's characteristics in the context of its increasing significance. Thus the essay's research question is: What is the effect of the advent of the blogosphere on the political processes in the Russian Federation? The essay will argue that the spread of the Internet has had a positive impact on the provision of the normative good of democratic self-determination and participation through the advent of an active and independent-minded blogosphere. The essay's structure is the following: first, the meaning of the "advent of the blogosphere" is given expression; then the qualitative dimensions of change are more closely scrutinised; followed by an inquiry into government reactions and forms of control, before the arrival at the final remarks.

The impact of the online debating communities has been twofold: (1) it has established an alternative channel for the dissemination of news and information, thus allowing the political community to participate in the process of agenda setting; and (2) it has facilitated online social organisation in response to contentious issues. A valuable indicator for the extent of the impact has been the government reaction to the rise of blogging communities. State institutions tolerate the free exchange of opinion over the Internet and in some cases take into account popular critical messages generated in the blogosphere, but have been adamant in disallowing online to offline mobilisation transformations. Though the advent of the blogosphere in the Russian Federation has had an overall positive impact on the representativeness of the domestic political process, the effect remains limited in its capacity to usher substantial political changes, mainly due to government reluctance to accept a transformation of the blogosphere impetus into an offline upsurge of civil society organisations (CSOs).

The observation of the rapid spread of the Internet in Russia suggests the conclusion that it has paved the way for the development of a potent blogosphere. The latest studies show that the percentage of people using the Internet has increased sevenfold in a time span of 10 years. That share used to amount to a mere 6 % (6,5 million people) back in 2002 compared to 46 % (52,9 million people) only 9 years later (Sidorova/Petuhova, 2011: 4). Though this Internet penetration rate is far from the one of the global leaders (for instance Great Britain, Australia and Germany at around 80 % [Sidorova/Petuhova, 2011: 10]), it is nevertheless a very good result if compared to countries like Italy (52 %), Brazil (38 %), and China (32 %) (Sidorova/ Petuhova, 2011: 10). Another interesting feature of Russian web users is that they grow increasingly active – back in 2003 only 36 % of total users surfed the Internet daily, whereas the percantage for 2011 is double that – 73 % (Sidorova/Petuhova, 2011: 7). Etling et al. are also intrigued by this observation and even argue that "the percentage of active Internet users that blog and use social networking sites is consistently higher in Russia than in the U.S. and those who do use social networking sites are more 'engaged' than their counterparts in other countries" (Etling, et al., 2010a: 9). According to a recent study, the number of blogs in the Russian webspace is 7.4 million, though with a rather smaller share of active blogs at 12 %, which nevertheless amounts to an impressive absolute number of about 900 000 (Yandex, 2009: 2). It is precisely this group of socially active members of the RuNet that the essay will focus its attention to .

The remarkable quantitative spread of the Internet in Russia has resulted in a qualitative increase in the salience of the Russian blogosphere on the domestic socio-politcial scene. The first way in which the blogging communities have affected the provision of the normative good of democratic self-determination has been the establishment of an alternative channel for transmitting news and information. An overall consensus exists that traditional media channels in Russia are lacking objectivity in the selection of information that is disseminated (Alexanyan, et al., 2012: 3; Etling, et al., 2010a: 8). On the other hand, the government is generally refraining from exerting control over the online information flow, in the sense of filtering and blocking information and limiting the freedom of expression. According to Freedom House, "the internet became Russia's last relatively uncensored platform for public debate and the

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expression of political opinions" (Freedom House, 2012: 1). Though the government employs other tools in the endeavour to shape public discourse over the Internet, the blogosphere has established itself as an independent public media space where the low opportunity costs of participation enable politically active people to share opinions that do not necessarily converge with official government positions.

In fact, the blogosphere is more than a filter of information, it is also a producer of news. There are many instances of online actions that became a dominant theme for discussion in the Russian society and even in traditional media. A prominent example are the series of video appeals made by police Major Alexey Dymovsky targeting President Putin and calling for decisive actions to stop rampant corruption in the police station in Novorossiysk. The YouTube videos quickly gained popularity among bloggers and soon became one of the most discussed theme. Though Dymovsky was initially stripped from his official duties and had to face charges in court, they were later dropped and a number of his superior officers were discharged, once the story became so popular that even television channels included it in their broadcasts (Schröder, 2010: 4). The latter and many other examples show that the blogosphere has the capacity to shape public discourse by acting as a watchdog, revealing corruption practices and bringing them to the fore. It even has the potential to instigate the government to act according to public criticism, though the number of examples here is less convincing. Nevertheless, the blogosphere enhances citizen self-determination through allowing for active involvement in shaping the public discourse, thus improving the latter's representativeness.

According to Etling et al., "[t]he transition towards greater democracy is associated with expanding free speech*and rights of assembly* [emphasis added]." (Etling et al. 2010b: 4). Thus the second dimension of the blogosphere's impact on the provision of the normative good of democratic self-determination, namely its effect on social organisation, will be here brought into consideration. Alexanyan et al. make the observation that:

"[t]here are a large and growing number of examples of Russians identifying problems of common concern and coming together online to push back against abuses of the state or powerful corporate interests" (Alexanyan et al. 2012: 7).

Whether it is automobile owners rallying against increases in taxes on motorised vehicles or people outraged by unpunished hit and run road accidents involving high government or corporate officials, the blogosphere has provided a suitable locus for the establishment of societal groups pursuing a specific goal. This is an important function of the blogosphere, given that the freedom of civil association in Russia is generally limited (Etling et al. 2010b: 5). While the establishment of formal CSOs is a troublesome process, impeded by tight regulations and burdensome red tape, one can easily foster support and find like-minded individuals online, provided that one has the right cause.

The empirics show that the blogosphere has been a valuable tool for popularising ad hoc, issue-based social movements, which in some instances have also been transformed into offline movements (Alexanyan et al. 2012: 8). Illustrative examples include the Federation of Car Owners that successfully organised mass protests against tax increases on the possession of motorised vehicles, or the succession of Bolotnaya protests in response to suspected election fraud in the vote for the Duma in 2011, all of which were organised online without any TV coverage, yet attracted remarkably large numbers of people. It is events like these that confirm the view that the blogosphere is highly instrumental in the organisation of civil society, as it provides a tool for wide-ranging, bottom-up mobilisation of people where the agenda is a product of consent. This approach to civil association proves to be far more effective than the top-down, hierarchical model of traditional offline civil society organisations. Nevertheless, this has also come to represent the main impediment to long-term success of online-born social movements. The lack of a solid organisational structure has meant that the social impetus for change is lost once the issue is resolved, or the leader is discredited or has otherwise left the scene. While it is undisputable that the online civil associations have proven their capacity to improve the representativeness of the political process in Russia by means of effectively pushing for concrete actions on the government's side, an emphasis also belongs on the fact that the accomplished changes have not been substantial enough to affect the overall political system. Since the government has played a major role in securing this outcome, the presentation will now turn to the approaches employed by it in the process.

If Newton's third fundamental law of mechanics—to every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction—is

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borrowed and applied, though crudely, to this case, it would facilitate the attempt to provide an estimation of the blogosphere's effect on the domestic political processes in Russia by means of examining the government's *reaction* to this development. Three types of government responses will be here distinguished: (1) legislative; (2) online operational; and (3) offline operational. The legislative aspect consists in regulatory measures that have been undertaken by the state in the effort to contain the growing salience of the blogosphere. Though an overwhelming consensus exists within the Russian political élite that the webspace should remain uncensored (Fossato et al. 2008: 16), there have also been some successfully adopted measures pushed forward by security agencies that undermine the privacy of webusers. For instance, "[a] government decree requires all telecoms companies and internet service providers (ISPs) to allow the federal security service (FSB) unrestricted monitoring of all communications: phone calls, text messages and email." (Fossato et al. 2008: 16). This, however, does not undermine the general conclusion about the high relative degree of freedom online in Russia, if a comparison is drawn to other domestic media channels or to Western countries with similar privacy infringements, the United States for instance.

Although the governement refrains from filtering and blocking information over the Internet, there are some other online oprations that it does engage in. First, there is a large number of state-sponsored bloggers whose aim is to shift public discussions in a favorable direction. Second, online surveillance of active oppositional bloggers is considered to occur frequently, though "Russians do not seem to substantially alter their online behavior due to perceptions of government surveillance" (Alexanyan et al. 2012: 11). Third, the cyberspace in Russia has experienced a rise in Distributed Denial of Service attacks (DDoS), with news sites, watchdogs and popular blogs being the most common targets of coordinated action (Alexanyan et al. 2012: 12).

The third dimension of the government's response consists in various techniques of offline intimidation and exertion of pressure on online activists that are considered to represent a threat. An illustrative example is the ongoing trial against the prominent blogger, anti-corruption campaigner and political activist Alexey Navalny, whose charges in fraud and embezzlement are considered by many to be fabricated (BBC News, 2013). As a result from such offline actions directed at online activists and the administrative restrictions to the establishment of CSOs, the spread of broad-based, long-term social movements has been contained. On the other hand, it should also be noted that the essentialisation of the democratic character of bloggers is an oversimplification of the complex nature of the blogosphere, which at the same time also provides a locus for the dissemination of harmful nationalist and religious extremist slogans.

On the whole, interpreting the reaction of the Russian government to the advent of the blogosphere leads to the conclusion that it is generally not perceived as a threat to the existing political model, otherwise the legislative restrictions would have been considerably tighter. This does not mean, however, that the state apparatus is not exerting pressure on the blogosphere, so as to contain it—on the contrary, various online and offline techniques have been employed in the effort to guide political discourse and to prevent both the rise of popular opposition leaders and the spread of extremist ideas. Nevertheless, the government reactions have not neutralised the capacity of the blogging communities to participate actively in the shaping of the domestic political agenda and to serve as a tribune for the expression of popular opinion.

Taking everything into consideration, it was found that, contrary to Hurrelmann et al.'s line of argument, the spread of Internet can have a positive impact on the provision of democracy as a normative good if applied to a non-OECD setting, as in the case of Russia. The effect of the advent of the blogosphere on the political process in Russia lies in the increase of the latter's representativeness and in the enhanced self-determination of Russian citizens, achieved through the establishment of an alternative information source and a catalyst for civil mobilisation.

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