

POWER, OPPOSITION AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the relations and contradictions between the opposition, social media, and power in Russia are examined. These relations and contradictions were considered important in terms of pointing out the function of social media in authoritarian regimes. The article presents the subject from an objective point of view. First of all, the definition of opposition in Russia and the concept of ‘real opposition’ is discussed. Indeed, in order to understand what real opposition especially in Russia is, it is necessary to understand what it is not. Then, by using the descriptive analysis method, it is revealed what social media means for both opposition and Kremlin. Power categorically sees social media as an instrument of an ideological war against itself. According to the Kremlin, social media is an “American mischief.” On the other hand, social media is accepted as the only option for the opposition, who are almost completely devoid of traditional media opportunities. Therefore, social media discussions continue on the axis of westernism-Americanism in terms of power. In terms of opposition, social media discussions are handled within the framework of freedom of expression, and social media is seen as the ‘last castle’.

Keywords: Russia, Power, Kremlin, Opposition, Social Media.

RUSYA'DA İKTİDAR, MUHALEFET VE SOSYAL MEDYA

ÖZ

Bu makalede, Rusya'da muhalefet, sosyal medya ve iktidar arasındaki ilişkiler ve çelişkiler incelenmiştir. Bu ilişkiler ve çelişkiler, otoriter rejimlerde sosyal medyanın işlevine dikkat çekmek açısından önemli görülmüştür. Makale konuyu nesnel bir bakış açısıyla sunmaktadır. Öncelikle Rusya'da muhalefetin nasıl tanımlandığına değinilmekte ve ‘gerçek muhalefet’ kavramı tartışılmaktadır. Nitekim özellikle Rusya'da gerçek muhalefetin ne olduğunu anlamak için ne olmadığının anlaşılması gerekmektedir. Akabinde betimsel analiz yöntemi kullanılarak sosyal medyanın hem muhalifler hem de Kremlin açısından ne ifade ettiği ortaya konmaktadır. Buna göre kısaca Rusya'da iktidar, kategorik olarak sosyal medyayı kendisine karşı yürütülen ideolojik bir savaşın aracı olarak görmektedir. Kremlin'e göre sosyal medya bir “Amerikan fitnesi”dir. Geleneksel medya imkanlarından neredeyse tamamıyla yoksun olan muhalifler açısından ise sosyal medya tek seçenek olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu nedenle sosyal medya tartışmaları iktidar açısından batıcılık-Amerikancılık tartışmaları ekseninde sürmektedir. Muhalefet açısından ise sosyal medya tartışmaları ifade özgürlüğü çerçevesinde ele alınmakta ve sosyal medya ‘son kale’ olarak görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, İktidar, Kremlin, Muhalefet, Sosyal Medya.

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INTRODUCTION

After Putin's rise to power, most experts began to emphasize the opposition's disappearance in Russia (Gel'man, 2004: 53). The public was not uncomfortable with this situation. As a matter of fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin's democracy failed to meet the expectations of the people and made Russian people rue the day USSR collapsed. Most government institutions and factories were no longer in operation. It was not known who had the authority and how it would be used. Thus, these institutions began to be plundered. As the economic instability increased, the oligarchs were getting richer and the people were facing hunger. Crime rates were increasing. While the order in the country deteriorated, its reputation was diminishing abroad. This is how Russia met democracy. Therefore, when Russian people saw that the chaos in the country gradually disappears with Putin's government, stability was achieved and the country's reputation increased in the international arena, they began to think that democracy was not necessary for them. This, in turn, contributed to the Kremlin administration's absolute power, and with the pressure of the government, it became impossible to speak of opposition in the country.

As a result, for many years this trend has continued roughly in the same manner. Therefore, before the 2011–2012 elections, most experts thought that the Russian voters did not pose an existential threat to the country's political status (Gel'man, 2013: 6). The street protests that took place before 2011 were very weak, scattered, limited to certain regions, and narrow-scale (Evans, 2012; Koesel and Bunce, 2012). So, they were not seen as significant by analysts. However, the intense street protests after the elections were a surprise (Volkov, 2012: 55). The protests began after Putin announced (Sumskoj and Surnačeva, 2011) that he would be a presidential candidate again in 2012. During these protests “Social media gave the protesters a unique opportunity to connect with each other to articulate and discuss their ideas, particularly since the protests were spontaneous and decentralized and did not have clearly defined goals” (Ryabovolova, 2017: 123).

Since then, opposition and protests have increased. Social media played a major role in this rise. This situation is now considered as evidence of instability within the Putin regime.

The fact that social media plays an important role behind this rising story of the opposition leads to broad discussions in the power-opposition-social media trilogy. Thus, in this article, these discussions are examined in multifaceted ways.

1. Russian Opposition

The foundations of the opposition in modern Russia were laid with the declaration of “Glasnost and Perestroika” (1985). Thus, new mass movements (Moscow Patriotic People's Front, Russian People's Front et al.) occurred. Concurrently, new political parties (Democratic Union, Democratic Party of Russia, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, Republican Party of the Russian Federation et al.) appeared arising from the internal division of the Communist Party. These could be considered the first opposition groups. The collapse of the USSR and the dissolution of the Communist Party (1991-1993) created a new political power configuration and opposition began to develop. However, the democratic principles that were de facto declared were not yet adopted by the majority of Russian society. This, in its simplest form, caused a conflict between the government, the executive, and the legislative branches. Therefore, it became impossible for the opposition to influence the policy pursued by the government. The constitutional crisis in October 1993 and the adoption of the new constitution emerged as a new stage in the theorizing of the opposition (Stepan, 2016: 177-179). As a matter of fact, there were important issues regarding the opposition in the new constitution. Article 13 of the Constitution states that “political diversity and a multi-party system are recognized in the Russian Federation” (Konstitucija Rossijskoj Fedepacii,1993). Thus, the transition to the multi-party system was made. However, the elitism and differences of interests of political parties prevented the opposition from making a good connection with the society (Borisenko, 2008: 18).

The next stage of the institutionalization of the opposition developed with the political reforms put forward by the new president Putin (2000). In this period, the

opposition-power conflict took place at the legislative and executive levels. As a result, the government used the opposition's contradictions effectively and eliminated their political weight in the State Duma. In these years, the real opposition disappeared, the opposition has switched to loyalty and with the adoption of the new political parties law in 2001, it became very difficult to register socio-political associations as political parties. The defeat of the Russian political opposition during the 2003-2004 election cycle led to organizational efforts for a new non-systemic opposition. A significant part of the opposition was removed from the framework of representative power bodies, which gave a new impetus to the development of extra-parliamentary systemic opposition (Stepan, 2016: 115,178). Thus, there was an environment in which it was impossible to speak of real opposition in the country and this situation continued until 2010.

Before the 2011-2012 elections, Russian society was thought to be no existential threat to the country's political status (Gel'man, 2013: 6). The dominant opinion was that small protests before 2011 were insignificant. Intense street protests after the elections revealed that this opinion was quite wrong (Volkov, 2012: 55). "Putin, resign!", "Russia without Putin", "Freedom to political prisoners", "Russia will be free", "Putin's gang in court", "We are the power here" slogans were shouted in the protests.

According to Gel'man, in these protests, the opposition was "a victim of its own success". The opposition, without an effective strategy plan, was merely aiming at new protests and increasing participation in these protests. Actually, due to the rapid course of events and the lack of time and resources, the opposition had no other choice. In such a chaos, other leading actors opposed the idea of portraying Navalny as a presidential candidate in the 2012 elections. On the other hand, Yabloko's candidate Yavlinsky, did not receive the support that he expected. As a result, the opposition did self-harm. The demonstrations did not provide any concrete gains, the government realized that the potential power of the opposition could pose a danger for itself and forced the opposition to marginalize with criminal prosecutions and legal arrangements (Gel'man, 2015: 181-189). As a matter of fact, when the opposition leader Navalny was preparing for new demonstrations three years after

the protests, he said: “The rally movements of 2011-2012 came to naught, not achieving its goals. Now is the time to do everything three times better, fix all the mistakes and gather more people” (Kičanova, 2015).

In the protests, the opposition’s wish was the fair elections and “change of power” in this way. These demands continued in every subsequent election, but in the meantime, the opposition was divided among themselves. Initial demoralization led to a decline in opposition activities. Realizing what the opposition might be capable of, the government turned the situation into an opportunity for itself and took protective measures such as changes in the electoral system and the expansion of the loyal opposition (Taştanbekov, 2018: 113-114). Taking into account the Arab Spring, which started in the same period, the fear of the Russian power and the harsh measures taken by it could be better imagined.

Following this historical perspective, in order to understand the situation in Russia, it is necessary to have a clear idea of how the political opposition is classified (Sajfulin, 2014: 334). According to the general acceptance in Russia, this classification is defined through participation in elections. Thus, there are three classes of opposition: systematic opposition, non-systematic opposition, and marginal opposition. Systematic opposition is the opposition represented in the State Duma. The non-systematic opposition is the name given to the opposition that cannot be represented in the State Duma because it cannot exceed the 7% election threshold. The marginal opposition is a group of people that “cannot prove to the federal government that they can effectively fulfill the role” of their parties (Miroškina and Udalova, 2012: 59). After browsing through these definitions, it is necessary to clarify that “The lack of trust in institutions for governmental activities in the fields of governmental transparency and open data creates some oppositional networks with a radical policy” (Smorgunov, 2016: 226).

In short, the opposition can be classified as follows: a loyal opposition represented in the State Duma and regional organs, an opposition which is at the level of approaching representation in the State Duma which is likely to maintain a loyal line, and the so-called marginal or radical opposition, which seeks to position itself as a real alternative to these two types of opposition (Vilkov, 2015: 27). To this

kind of opposition to (opposition that is allowed to enter parliament or whose presence is not touched in the system) there are many analogies are made like “manual opposition”, “appointed opposition”, “alternative power”, “fifth column” “imitation opposition”, “pseudo-opposition” etc. The term opposition is “used in very different contexts in Russia and other non-democratic regimes.” The real opposition, on the other hand, is non-systematic organizations, movements, and politicians “who want to change the authoritarian regime” (Gel'man, 2015: 178). Besides mobilization capability is the “most determining characteristic in measuring the opposition’s potential durability” (Savage, 2019).

Thus, by adding mobilization capability and effectiveness to the definition, we can define the real opposition in Russia as follows: political entities that want the change of the authoritarian regime, carry out activities for this change and have the ability to reach and mobilize the masses.

The opposition types that do not comply with this definition are established or managed by the ruling class to create a democratic state appearance in the world, to prevent the emergence of a real opposition, to create an image as if there is political pluralism in the country or to discredit the activities of the real opposition (Vorob'ev, 2013: 104). As a consequence, the opposition movements that threaten the existence of power and which are supported by large masses are called marginal by the authority. Within Russia, a considerable segment is aware of this. In fact, this syndrome has progressed so much that the most obvious actors of the opposition, were put forward as Putin's men for some time. For example, during the first years of the recognition of Navalny, some people called him a “Kremlin project” and it was alleged that he worked with the regime and was used by Putin to divide and rule the opposition (Jarrell, 2012: 9).

Almost all modern autocracies hold elections, and most hold multiparty elections” (Reuter, et al., 2016: 663). Therefore, the fact that elections are held does not mean that a real opposition is allowed in the country. A real opposition cannot and should not be “artificially invented” to pretend that there is a democracy that does not really exist (Ndajišimije, 2017: 449).

Hereby, there is actually only two classes of opposition in Russia: loyal opposition (Soviet Nationalist Communist Party of the Russian Federation led by Gennady Zyuganov, Pan-Slavist and ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, left-wing nationalist A Just Russia led by Sergey Mironov, nationalist Motherland led by Alexey Zhuravlyov and liberal conservatist Citizens Platform led by Rifat Shaykhutdinov) and real opposition. The real opposition is composed of general liberal-democratic movements, rightist movements, left nationalist movements, other nationalist movements, and anarchist movements (Pimenov, 2016: 85). Indeed, these forces are the organizers of the 2011-2012 protests (Taştanbekov, 2018: 113). The loyal opposition did not support the demonstrations and even tried to prevent them.

Today, the Russian government has a complete monopoly in the administration. The real opposition is excluded from participation in politics and oppression methods are being used against the opposition (Čertova and Gorbačev, 2014: 22). Elections under current conditions are held to maintain and strengthen the positions of actors within the ruling and loyal opposition party (Lapin, 2017: 129).

According to Kara-Murza, there is “a seemingly legitimate dictatorship” in the country. The public demands the opposition in the parliament to express their views clearly. However, opposition leaders are aware that they can only say “things that do not really pose a threat to the regime”. They are allowed to say things that do not bring any real criticism to the government but contain hard words. Because hard words break no bones. Under these circumstances, the existence of a form of legal opposition that poses an alternative or real threat to the regime in Russia is impossible. The power does not have the capacity to prevent a real opposition to be formed by itself. In fact, the power does not have the capacity to prevent a real opposition to be formed by itself. The very slow development of the opposition is that the Russian people are used to “awaiting instructions from above”. What is necessary for the opposition is not to show a strong presence in the State Duma but to form resistance political forces that are organized from below (Kara-Murza, 2012: 13-17).

In fact, for the opposition parliament is a place where important information can be obtained that no one else can access. However, this information does not make sense because it is not used by the loyal opposition. Classic opposition leaders are aware that they are behind the events. They see this as the reason that the opposition does not have an ideology. However, according to Kara-Murza, what unites the opposition is the desire to change the existing regime and that is sufficient. The problem is not in ideology, but in the choice of “strategies and tactics of struggle”. Power, “a layer of crime” which is supported by the power and supports the power and the opposition came from the same culture and therefore, in fact, all of their flaws are manifestations of the Russian cultural type (Kara-Murza, 2012: 19,176).

From the power side, things are completely different. According to them, in Modern Russia, there are “efforts to develop a socio-political structure system that meets the demand of the society for democratization” (Tatarkova, 2014: 3). The opposition does not have an original doctrine of domestic and foreign policy, and their sole purpose is to make Russia a part of the western civilization. For this reason, they do not mind receiving any kind of support from the west against the power (Redčenko, 2014: 69). It should not be forgotten that this desire (to become part of western civilization) has been historically and culturally traumatic for the vast majority of Russian society.

In terms of Putin's statements:

There are no difficulties for the opposition in Russia... What is so difficult? If the opposition proves that they can achieve the solution of the tasks facing the district, region or country, I think that people will always notice it. The only question is their viability and ability to work with the electorate, the ability to work with citizens. (Petrov, 2015).

So much so that quantitative research with Russian “experts” confirms this and most popular opposition leaders appear to be the most unreliable people in these studies (Stepan Stepanovič and Andreevna, 2015: 32).

At this point, it is worth mentioning that the liberal opposition in Russia is indeed equated with distrust, high crime rates, and a low standard of living by a large

population (especially those over a certain age). The reason for this situation is the problems experienced in the 90s. Despite the fact that today's opposition leaders have nothing to do with those problems, even though those problems have begun before the collapse of the Soviets, the “suspicious reputation” gained by democracy and liberalism leads to a completely negative approach towards them (Pečenkin and Andreeva, 2015: 71).

In today's Russia, power perceives the real opposition as a kind of destructive force that cannot be negotiated (Mancurov, 2016: 44). The main reason for this is the claim that American capital directly or indirectly supports the opposition. Accordingly, US capital-based foundations and non-governmental organizations finance color revolutions and they are active representatives of US foreign policy. In Russia, “the so-called human rights organizations” were monopolized with the direct financial support of Western funds (Dzliev, 2017: 24). Perhaps that is why everyone who voices these “western discourses” (democracy, human rights, etc.), whether or not they really have a relationship with these organizations, should be agents of the West. Power and supporters cannot go further than treat the opposition as a Western agent because of the anti-Westernism that almost entered into the genetic codes of Russian society. This approach creates complete indifference to the problems voiced by the opposition.

For example, recently, in 2019, the Russian Ministry of Justice officially declared Navalny's anti-corruption foundation and his team as a foreign agent (Krečetova and Muhametšina, 2019). Kremlin and supporters think that the Russian opposition (unfaithful) is the actor of the ideological war against Russia, weakening the Russian national identity. According to this, the opposition is not against power or Putin as they claim, but against Russia and Russian society.

1.2. Is There Real Opposition in Russia?

It is possible to say that parties currently represented in the State Duma (Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party, A Just Russia, Rodina, and Civic Platform) are definitely not real opposition. Apart from these, there are many opposition groups such as the Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko, People's

Freedom Party PARNAS, and opposition leaders such as Nikolay Rybakov, Mikhail Kasyanov, et al. But Alexei Navalny is the only one that meets the definition of real opposition (Political entities that want the change of the authoritarian regime, carry out active activities for this change and have the ability to reach and mobilize the masses). Navalny and his audience are also the most effective users of social media since the beginning.

Navalny is a lawyer and economist. His first event that stands out is the Committee for the Protection of Muscovites, established by him in 2004. The committee brought together more than one hundred groups to finalize a series of construction projects that harm neighboring households. He was expelled from the Yabloko Party, where he carried out political activities for a long time, on the grounds that he was carrying out racist activities in 2007. (Various evidence is provided about this claim. For example, Navalny compares the Caucasians to cockroaches, and in a video, about individual armament, he says “Kill such an insect if they enter your home”. In some past rallies, “Hitler Salute” has been seen and repeats the cockroach analogy. “Nationalism should become the backbone of the Russian political system” he said in an interview. It is claimed that those who act with him are ready to kill people because only their eye colors or skin colors are different and Navalny wants to do ethnic cleansing) (Frolov, 2017). According to Navalny, the real reason is that he asked Grigory Yavlinsky, the party's founder, to resign (Moskovskij Komsomolec, 2011).

Navalny started to gain recognition throughout Russia after the documents he published in 2008 concerning the claim of embezzlement in large Russian state funds. He established the Minority Shareholders Association as a lawyer and initiated legal proceedings against the giant energy companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft, Transneft, and Gazpromneft to provide transparency to small shareholders. Navalny, whose name has started to be known as a fighter against corruption, established the RosPil project in 2010 to detect fraud and unfair competition in public tenders. The RosPil project is considered one of the important elements of institutionalized activism in Russia (Sidorenko, 2011: 8). Initially, what attracted

people to Navalny was efforts to create an audience, which could be described as attempts to make progress at the local level (Jarrell, 2012: 9).

In 2011, he established the Anti-Corruption Foundation. The FBK, which drafts laws against corruption and arbitrary practices of officials, publishes various documents on alleged corruption by Russian ministers, lawmakers, and bureaucrats. Protests started during this period and Navalny launched a public campaign called “Vote for any party excluding the United Russia” and formulated the slogan “United Russia- the party of scammers and thieves”. The campaign was conducted especially through social media and reached a wide audience. Therefore, Navalny claimed that the authorities had cheated the elections on a large scale so that the United Russia Party could obtain a majority in parliament (Navalny, 2019).

Navalny was arrested in December 2012 during the protest for fair elections and was held for 15 days. Shenderovich (Russian author and screenwriter), seeing his fame grow steadily, said: “He went to jail as a blogger, got out as a future president of Russia.” (Mokrousova and Reznik, 2012). So, he has become “the most visible oppositional figure in Russia since 2011–2012” (Lassila, 2016: 118). Navalny has been arrested dozens of times since the 2012 protests and has been placed under house arrest for various periods.

In 2013, Navalny ran against Putin's candidate in the Moscow mayoral elections and received 27.24% of the votes according to official figures. According to Orttung, Navalny conducted the most sophisticated election campaign Russia has ever seen (Orttung and Waller, 2013: 1). Afterward, several cases were opened against Navalny, he was declared a public enemy by the government and its supporters. The most important case is “Kirovles case” where he was accused of embezzlement. Navalny, a consultant for the Russian state-owned company Kirovles, was sentenced to imprisonment. The European Court of Human Rights has held that the proceedings were unfair. As a result, the Russian courts ordered a retrial. Navalny was retried and found guilty again. Navalny said that there was a conspiracy against him because of his anti-corruption projects. According to him, the lawsuit is unlawful and the case brought by Putin (Navalny, 2019).

In 2014, he launched a public legal initiative to ratify United Nations Convention Against Corruption Article 20 - Illicit enrichment. The initiative is heavily organized through social media and supported by over one hundred thousand Russian citizens. In 2015, he tried to form a party called Progress Party, but the official establishment of the party was not allowed (Bondarenko and Rustamova, 2015). In 2016, he published a series of documentaries on social media, allegedly high-level Russian officials such as prime minister Dmitry Medvedev and Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov were involved in bribery and corruption. In 2017, he announced his candidacy for the presidential elections in 2018. The main topics of his election program were the effective fight against corruption, the elimination of inequalities, the increase of minimum wage, the assistance to acquire housing, the increase of health expenditures made by the state, the facilitation of the work of small entrepreneurs, and the reduction of bureaucracy, and the redistribution of powers in favor of all regions of Russia. However, on 25 December 2017, the authorities announced that they could not run for presidential elections due to the conviction of Kirovles. Navalny claimed that this decision was political, not a legal one, and was contrary to the constitution. His appeal to the court was rejected. Therefore, he launched a campaign to boycott the elections throughout the country and not to participate in the elections (Navalny, 2018).

Again, the situation seems quite different in terms of power. According to Aleksander Klyukin, a member of the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation Navalny already knew that he would not be accepted even at the first moment he submitted his documents to run for president. Nothing else could have happened. This is the case for everyone who has been convicted of a “serious crime”. The central election committee obeyed the law and denied his application. He did what was expected of him. A mandatory law has been applied. But he claimed that his application was not accepted because of political reasons and tried to scandalize. Everyone is familiar with his similar attitudes. However, a second phase is planned. The European Union representative said that the rejection of Navalny's application for candidacy questioned the existence of political pluralism in Russia and the democratic nature of the 2018 presidential election. The Central Electoral

Commission responded to this claim in accordance with the spirit of the law. According to him, it is clear that this situation will be used to discredit the 2018 elections. Therefore, on behalf of the European Union, such statements are made about Navalny. Russia is trying to be dependent on the political games and scenarios of some focal points (Kljukin, 2018).

According to the official authorities, the reason for Navalny not being allowed to participate in the elections is definitely not political but legal. His candidacy was not accepted due to the prudent conviction (Grobman, 2017). The decision of the Russian Constitutional Court on 10 October 2013 limits the right of convicts to be elected for 10 years. Navalny was found guilty by the Russian courts because he was corrupt in the Kirovles case in February 2017, after the ECtHR's annulment decision, he was retried and found guilty again (Agamalova, et al., 2017).

Putin was asked regarding the rejection of Navalny's candidacy and subsequent criticism from Europe and the USA and he answered the question as follows: Nobody likes when others attempt to interfere in the country's domestic politics. Especially Americans. On the other hand, practically no one is allowed to participate in American election campaigns. Besides some members of the Russian media in the United States are prevented from doing their jobs during the elections. Spitefully they declare them as agents. But they think it is normal for them “to put their noses” in other country's jobs. “Said person” (Navalny) is not the only one who is not allowed to participate in the elections. But for some reason, the others are never mentioned. Thus, the preferences of the US and other European countries are evident. It turns out who they want to move to the political field of Russia and who they want to see as the leader of the country (Kommersant”, 2018). Thus, Putin addressed deep feelings that have been in the minds of the Russian people since the Cold War era and told his people that Navalny was a western and/or American project. After the elections Navalny tried to establish a new party called Russia of the Future in 2018, however, the authorities did not allow the establishment of the party again (Partii Progressa, 2018).

On 20 August 2020 Navalny fell sick while flying from Tomsk to Moscow. There were allegations that he had been deliberately poisoned in a cafeteria at the

airport just before boarding. The plane landed in Omsk urgently and he was admitted to a public hospital in Omsk. Russian officials denied the allegations of poisoning and declared that Navalny was in a coma. His family wanted to send Navalny to a hospital in Germany with an offer from a German non-governmental organization. He was not allowed to be transferred for the first two days, then transferred to a German hospital by ambulance plane on August 22. It has been claimed that he was not treated properly during the period when his referral was not allowed, and even the traces of the poison were tried to be erased.

He woke up from a coma on 7 September. German authorities announced that Navalny was poisoned with a nerve gas from the Novichok family, a military-grade chemical weapon class developed in the Soviets. Sergey Skripal, a former Soviet agent who was claimed to work for England, was also poisoned with the same chemical. Vladimir KARA-MURZA, who has an oppositional line and whose work is cited in this article, was similarly poisoned too.

While Navalny's treatment was continuing in Germany, he shared a video titled “The case has been solved. I know everyone who tried to kill me” (Navalny, 2020a) on his YouTube channel on 14 December 2020, claiming that the people who tried to kill him were FSB agents, and this order was given by Putin. In an hour-long video, Navalny shared the names and photos of the people he claimed to be FSB agents, their connections, how they followed him, poisoned him, and how they tried to remove traces of the poison after the incident occurred, in an investigative journalism-type study. The video was watched more than 20 million times in a short time. Putin said the following on the subject:

Look, we all understand what this is. Both in the first case and in this one, this isn't an investigation. This is the legalization of information from the American special agencies. Of course, we know they track the geolocations. Our special agencies know and understand it very well. Of course, special agencies should look after him. That doesn't mean he needs to be poisoned though. If we wanted to do it, we'd probably take it to the end.

After these developments, Navalny released another video titled “I called my killer. He confessed” (Navalny, 2020b) on 21 December 2020. Navalny pretended to

be a deputy of Nikolai Patrushev (Russian National Security Council Secretary) and called an FSB agent (military chemist) who claimed to be among those who poisoned him with a fake phone number mimicking a number used by FSB agents among themselves. Navalny said that he should write a report to his superiors urgently and talked to this person for about an hour. This person, who gave a lot of information during the conversation, said that if the pilot of the plane had not made an emergency landing in Omsk and the paramedics had not moved quickly after the landing, the dose used to poison him would have been fatal. The video was watched more than 20 million times in a short time.

Deciding to return to Russia after his treatment, Navalny flew from Berlin to Moscow on 17 January 2021 and was arrested as soon as he landed. The reason for his arrest was announced to be in violation of the terms of his 2014 conviction. While Navalny was under arrest, another video titled “Palace for Putin. The history of the biggest bribe” (Navalny, 2020c) was released on his YouTube channel on 19 Jan 2021. The video was produced while Navalny was in Germany, but according to his statement, he wanted the video to be published after he returned to Russia. Thus, he would have proved that he was not afraid of Putin. In the video, he claimed with the details and various evidence that Putin had been bribed throughout his life. Ultimately, he claimed that Putin had built a \$ 460 million palace for him and shared the details of this place. The video was watched more than 90 million times in a week. This has been the most-watched video in Russia's social media history.

On January 23, 2021, Navalny supporters held a nationwide rally for the release of Navalny. More than 3,000 people were arrested in the protests. Immediately afterward, it was announced that new rallies would be held for the release of Navalny. Calls to join the protest, the footage was taken during the protest, etc. grew like an avalanche on social media. Based on all these developments, it is possible to say that there is a breaking point in the country. However, there is very little chance of ending up in favor of the opposition.

2. Opposition and Social Media or Social Media Opposition

“Content is fire and social media is gasoline” (Baer, 2014)

Social media with its most classic and plain definition refers to “digital technologies emphasizing user-generated content or interaction” (Kaplan and Michael, 2010; Carr and Hayes, 2015: 47). However, the emergence of social media has not only brought some changes and innovations on the world wide web but has left deep traces on art, culture, daily life, politics, social sciences, human behaviors, etc. Especially the emphasis on the free movement of ideas, the ability of anyone to reach large audiences without any limitation and to share their ideas and the events happening around them has influenced the language and functioning of politics all over the world. In this respect, social media looks like a fascinating mechanism by which millions of people can be organized at the speed of the connection.

The advancement of communication technologies and the increasing importance of these technologies in politics are rising the discussions about how these technologies affect political behaviors. Hence, social media has become an important field of study for political and social scientists (Little, 2016: 164).

Social media has the potential to hit antidemocratic trends by increasing political participation. This situation caused an increasing symbiosis between the social media and the political world (Surowiec and Štětka, 2017: 1). Therefore, social media has become a very important area in the political communication of the opposition, especially in autocratic countries.

The Twitter Revolutions, including the Arab Spring protest movements, provided a fertile ground to examine how activists use social media for mobilization and organization. Social media revolutions are no longer considered a simple technology determinism. “Questions about the complex relationship between social media technologies and political actors on different sides of a conflict are” worth attention (Mejias and Vokuev, 2017: 1027). “Social media have often been described as the site for conflict between *good* democratic forces who use social media to make their voices heard and *bad* autocratic and repressive forces who aim to censor this channel to silence these liberal elements” (Tucker, et al., 2017: 47). However, things are not so simple in reality.

Today, social media is the most effective and relatively least costly tool to influence and mobilize audiences. Social media is now perceived as something almost equal to democracy and freedom of expression. However, nothing is good or bad in nature. As a matter of fact, social media offers the opportunity of freedom of expression as well as it offers manipulation, disinformation, and social engineering. Moreover, even with this aspect, a good-bad discussion is an ethical issue where it is not possible to give a simple answer. Therefore, without discussing this ethical issue, there are some issues that should be mentioned while examining social media in the ruling-opposition dilemma. First of all, it is necessary to mention why social media is not so much liked by the Russian power or other powers.

3. Kremlin and Social Media

It should be clearly stated that the Russian government thinks that an ideological war has been waged against Russia (Viktor Anatol'eviç, et al., 2017). In other words, Russia considers social media as a matter of national security. To understand this, first of all, the motto of social media=freedom=democracy should be questioned.

For example, unlike the general discourse the Arab Spring, in which social media played a big role, did not overthrow the dictators only. Everyone agrees that “extremist propaganda in social media is a threat to homeland security” (Erbschloe, 2018). Arab spring, brought an endless winter in the region (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Algeria, Jordan and Yemen, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iraq, Lebanon, and Morocco) where millions of people died, led to the emergence of dozens of new terrorist groups, and also new dictators. Many studies claiming that this unstable situation serves the interests of the USA. Besides, considering that emerging terrorist groups and new dictators also carry out propaganda activities mostly through social media, there are enough reasons for all nations to be skeptical of the promises of social media. Especially for The Russians who believe that they live in a bipolar world. For many years they have been shaping almost all their domestic and foreign policy on this contrast. Therefore, it is clear that Russia, which is a winter country both geographically and politically, does not want such a spring in its territory.

Wael Guneym, a Google employee who made the biggest contribution to organizing mass protests in social media, resulting in the resignation of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, said:

I want to meet Mark Zuckerberg one day and thank him ...] I'm talking on behalf of Egypt. ...] This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook. This revolution started ...] in June 2010 when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started collaborating content. We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people on their walls within a few hours. I've always said that if you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet. ...] (Smith, 2011).

However, others reject the role of social media and argue that the revolution will happen without the internet and has nothing to do with Twitter and Facebook (Rich, 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that anti-western powers see social media as an enemy for themselves, if some of the oppositionists who are capable of overthrowing power in authoritarian regimes are google employees and if they thanks to Facebook.

On the other hand, Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal has revealed some of the concerns that most people are already aware of regarding the reality of social media. The scandal makes it understandable why regimes such as Russia are reacting to social media, considering Zuckerberg's words at the Facebook Communities Summit held on 22 June 2017 (Harari, 2018: 91) Zuckerberg says that “the sociopolitical upheavals of our time – from rampant drug addiction to murderous totalitarian regimes – result to a large extent from the disintegration of human communities.” and promises “going to start rolling out some tools”, that “make it easier to build communities.”

To Russian leaders “the internet is a virtual extension of the United States under absolute US control.” On the other hand, “it has become part of conventional wisdom to consider cyberspace as an arena for strategic competition among states.” (Nocetti, 2015: 111-125) Even this is enough to explain the Kremlin's stance on social media. Besides;

Social media algorithms may be creating echo chambers in which public conversations get polluted and polarized. Surveillance capabilities are outstripping civil protections. Political bots (software agents used to generate simple messages and conversations on

social media) are masquerading as genuine grassroots movements to manipulate public opinion. Online hate speech is gaining currency (Wolley and Howard, 2018: 3).

According to Erbschloe social media warfare “provides equal weapons for all” (Erbschloe, 2017: 2). But it seems that some are more equal than others. If some political accounts can be stopped on Twitter, the trend list on YouTube is determined by a specific team, Google algorithms (as in the American election) include some politicians in their results, and removes some of them, it can be said that the freedom motto of social media is only an illusion. So social media is as libertarian as those who control it or as much as serving their interests. The fact that almost all of the social media originates in the US causes Russia (and other nations) to at least be suspicious of its promise of liberty.

On the other hand, the power of social engineering, which social media holds, makes especially authoritarian powers afraid of it and increases the desire to have their own alternatives. For example, WeChat, Sina Weibo, Tencent Video, etc. in China or VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, etc. in Russia.

4. The Only Option for The Russian Opposition: Social Media

For the opposition, the options are limited. It is a natural process that political entities aspire to government. For this, they need political communication activities. Today these activities can be carried out in two channels, outlined: traditional media and social media. “If Stalin was 80 percent violence and 20 percent propaganda then Putin is 80 percent propaganda and 20 percent violence” so media is very important to Putin's regime (Pomerantsev, 2015: 40). Therefore, although Kara-Murza says “Putin is not Russia” (Kara-Murza, 2017), “Putin is in fact quite popular” in Russia (Frye, et al., 2017: 10).

The cultural codes mentioned above affect this matter. But for the opposition, the real problem is that all media outlets are in power. Since traditional media opportunities are almost completely closed to the opposition, social media is much more important for the opposition than it is in democratic countries. Similarly, social media is much more dangerous for the Russian government than in democratic countries. Because social media promotes accountability in non-democratic countries

where offline media is often suppressed (Enikolopov, et al., 2018) and “social media have the potential to undermine authoritarianism” (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015: 30).

In recent years, the economic stability of the Russian media, especially television, has been steadily increasing under the direction of Putin. However, despite the growth of media companies, there is a marked decrease in media pluralism and diversity of ideas in Russia. Even if a top-down state censorship system does not appear, the media is not free to contribute to the democratic process due to a set of intertwined social factors. Thus, it is not possible to talk about objectivity in the media. The media appears only as “the voice of authority” (White, et al., 2014: 130-131).

According to Lipman, Russia still maintains its traditional order. The state has an overwhelming dominance over the people and the media “reduced to being a political tool of the state or marginalized to make no difference in policymaking” (Lipman, 2009: 3). There is no freedom of the press in Russia (Repucci, 2019). There is an increasing state pressure on the media (Roskin, 2016: 60). According to their ratings, all of the top 10 television channels are pro-Kremlin channels and most of them are public subsidiaries. Likewise, all of the top 10 radio channels are pro-Kremlin too. According to their circulation, 8 of the top 10 newspapers are pro-Kremlin. The state is a partner of most media outlets and almost all of them are unicentric. Therefore, in terms of the media system, Russian media obeys authority and there is a mixture of cronyism and nepotism in terms of media ownership (Temir and Ayhan, 2019: 67-71). “With no access to television or major newspapers, genuine oppositionists can no longer compete” (Motyl, 2016: 33).

But social media has the potential to break down “traditional hierarchies and communication barriers” (Gibbs, et al., 2015: 75). This potential was unveiled in the 2011-2012 protests, in a way that never seen before (Gray, 2016: 501). This aspect of social media is very important for oppositionists in countries like Russia where all other communication channels are under the control of power. Because traditional media ignores real opposition and not covering their activities (Kazun, 2019: 312).

The Russian government does not leave this area empty and they set up their own social networks. Of course, the purpose of this is not to get rid of the American monopoly and *suspicious* freedom. Russia and similar countries want the skills (intelligence, propaganda, social engineering, economic gains, etc.) that can be achieved through social networks to be in their own hands.

Therefore, Russian domestic social media is in the hands of the same group. All belong to those who have close relationships with Putin. For example, vk.com, mail.ru, ICQ Messenger, and odnoklassniki.ru belongs to Alisher Usmanov, gazeta.ru, lenta.ru, rambler.ru, liveinternet.ru, and livejournal.ru belongs to the joint partnership of Vladimir Potanin and Alexander Mamut (Navalny, 2019). The situation is quite grave for the oppositionists. For example, it turns out that the famous Russian search engine Yandex gave the list of Navalny's supporters to the FSB (BBC Russia, 2011).

The Russian government has a deep-rooted history in propaganda and disinformation, and it adapts this ability to the online environment (Iasiello, 2017: 51).

Non-democratic regimes have increasingly moved beyond merely suppressing online discourse, and are shifting toward proactively subverting and co-opting social media for their own purposes. Namely, social media is increasingly being used to undermine the opposition, to shape the contours of public discussion, and to cheaply gather information about falsified public preferences (Gunitsky, 2015: 42).

Thus, it is impossible for oppositionists to engage in political communication activities both in traditional media and in local social media. It is clear that the Russian oppositionists will not want all their information to be in the hands of the FSB. Therefore, the only alternative for them is YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Thus, a vicious circle begins. Automatically share data that you do not want to share with the authoritarian regime in your country, with external forces who may want to interfere with the internal affairs of the country. To exist thanks to them, to carry out political activities, and to stay on the agenda with their algorithms. Briefly, being caught between two fires. This dilemma is actually a dilemma that the opposition experiences not only in the use of social media but in all its activities. Therefore,

oppositionists are no longer able to avoid being accused of being a traitor or, more precisely, as an Americanist, no matter how sincere they are for their country and Kremlin knows how to use it as a propaganda tool.

Unable to find a place in traditional media and Russian social networks, Navalny uses interactive and sensational methods appropriate for the nature of social media and constructs its political rhetoric accordingly. Therefore, this rhetoric style differentiates it from other politicians and makes it relatively successful in terms of political communication. Navalny influences the youth that Kremlin's television propaganda cannot reach. He prepares his messages as internet friendly and he forms his rhetoric accordingly (Temir, 2019: 216-217).

Although the content he prepared is full of intense political criticism and accusations, his presentation style is more like a social media phenomenon than a politician. Navalny already has more than 6 million subscribers on YouTube, 2,5 million Twitter followers, and has more than 500 thousand followers on Facebook, which is not widely used in Russia. Navalny expresses corruption through investigative journalistic methods, which is one of the biggest problems of Russia. He knows how to create content in a way that can affect the young audience who use social media actively. Therefore, he has achieved gains that nobody has ever achieved in opposition and created a serious mass in opposition. His mass is not just a passive mass, it is a mass that has the capacity to transform into an influencer in accordance with the nature of its social media.

The potential of social media emerged in the 2011-2012 protests. In the future, Navalny knew well to use this potential effectively. For example, in 2016, he released a movie on YouTube about officials such as Prime Minister of the time Medvedev who was allegedly involved in bribery and corruption. The movie claims that Medvedev creating a network took billions of rubles from the oligarchs. The movie was watched more than 30 million times on YouTube alone. On March 26, 2017, protests related to this movie were held in 84 different cities across the country, and the government was requested to respond officially to these allegations and initiate an investigation (Navalny, 2018). Navalny has managed to create similar

effects with dozens of contents that he regularly publishes on social media. Now, this type of opposition (social media opposition) has become almost indestructible.

CONCLUSIONS

The Russian opposition is about to achieve a position they have never achieved, due to the maturation of social conditions and their ability to capture the spirit of the social media era. However, these advantages may present quite sophisticated problems for them on some issues. Even if the propaganda and oppression policies of the government are overcome, the Russian opposition is *western* (liberal) and social media, which is the only political communication tool that they use effectively because they are deprived of all other opportunities is also western. For most Russians, believing that they live in a bipolar world, being western is a sufficient problem alone. Therefore, studies on the opposition and social media should not bypass this deep rhetorical and philosophic problem.

Whereas Kremlin does not see social media as more than just an argument for an ideological war against itself. Social media is an “American mischief” according to them. So, if various American authorities think that “Russia weaponized social media” and “tried to influence the 2016 presidential election” (Kelly and Samuels, 2019) in the US, the Russian authorities think that these whole so-called social media are being used as an American weapon against Russia from the very beginning.

Especially in authoritarian regimes, social media offers the opposition a unique opportunity for political communication and organization. However, as long as doubts remain on social media platforms, the opposition will continue to be accused of being questioned at least locally in their activities and organizations carried out through social media.

For the dream of a fully democratic world today, social media should not appear to be under the control of giant companies, sovereign states, or intelligence organizations. Otherwise, dictators will continue to be justified for many. The opposition-social media-power triangle in Russia continues around these discussions.

Putin, who planned a constitutional amendment to be a candidate again before the presidential elections in 2024, is likely to face similar or even more violent

protests than 2011-2012 protests. Both parties have learned lessons from the past and are developing new strategies. However, the opposition has expanded its audience by using social media effectively since then. As a result of all these evaluations, it is more than an estimate to say that social media in Russia will cause great social events and that the government will take tougher measures. The fact that the Russian government has not brought strict access barriers to social media as it has been in China so far may be a hesitate of the reactions this may cause in domestic and foreign politics.

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