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Capabilities and Limitations of Protest Mobilization Through the Social Networks

Abstract. *The subject of this research is the effect of Internet-based social networks upon the emergence, dynamics, and specificity of the process of protest mobilization. The object of this research is the mass mobilization during the course of revolutionary processes and massive antigovernment campaigns. The author examines the possibilities of political mobilization through the social networks in Russia based on the conducted research of user behavior of the popular Russian social network VK. A special attention is given to the problem of spontaneous occurrences of mass protests, as well as the modern dynamics of the events of “Arab Spring” and appearance of the “Occupy” movement within the context of political science. The empirical part of the research is conducting using the descriptive method and statistical analysis of media behavior of the VK users. The theoretical analysis relies on the results of modern research in the field of media and communication studies, social movements, and conflict politics. The main conclusions of this research is firstly, affirmation of limited influence of the social network VK upon involvement of the youth into a mass protest in Russia; secondly, the general supplemental role of the social networks into the process of protest mobilization in the cases of typical political conflicts. On the other hand, the conducted analysis allows us to substantiate the possibility of a quality influence of social networks upon the dynamics of mass protests in the case of emergence of exceptional events that are transgressive for public consciousness, where the “new media” instruments are able to rapidly synchronize local demands, change their scale, and involve broad social groups into the message of protest and the culture of social opposition. The novelty of this research consists in refutation of the thesis of exceptionally high influence of social networks onto the forming of mass protest the ideal-political perceptions within youth. Alternatively, the results of this analysis allow defining the future directions of research on the causes and dynamic characteristics of the mass protests.*

Keywords: *protest, mobilization, information, social networks, VK, youth, social movements, conflict politics, Arab Spring, revolution.*

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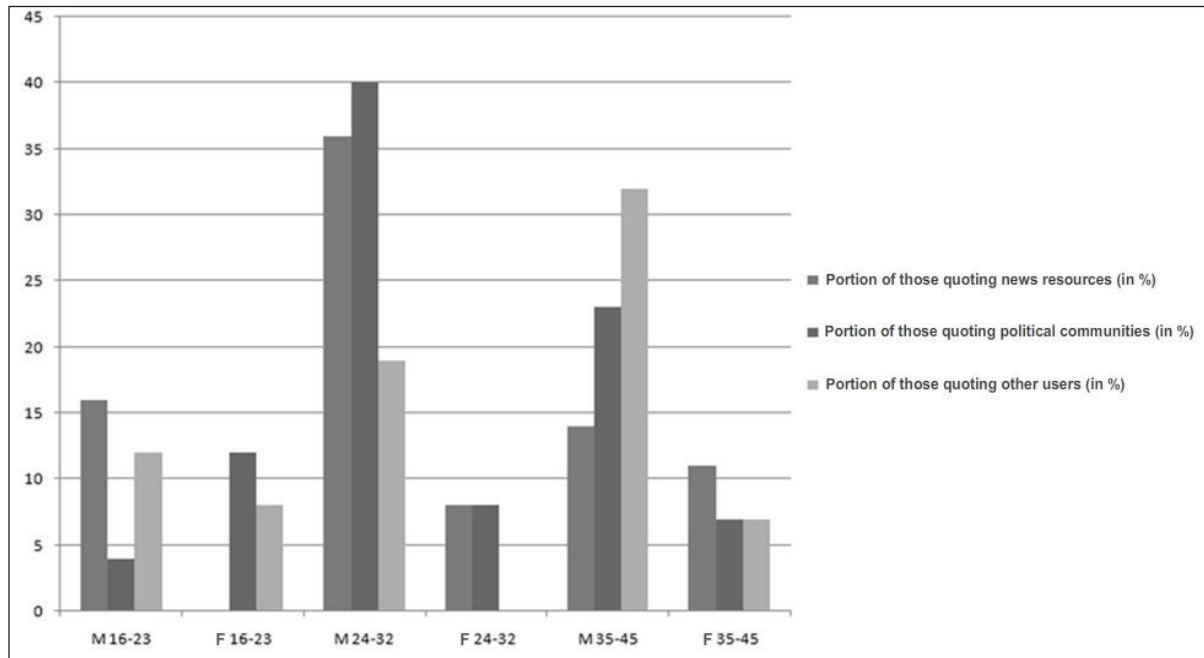
The social innovations can be fully demonstrated in the effect created by the social networks of the worldwide web. Using the services such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and a number of others, the “new media” illustrates the obvious changes in the methods of communication, when the interpersonal exchange of information grows in a qualitative measurement through the creation of informational stream out of massive amount of posts published to a network. In the case of the social networks the nature of the information society formed by Manuel Castells’ theory of network society, and Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “liquid modernity”, as well as approaches of many other sociologists, philosophers and culturologists, becomes evident in changes to the public and political activities.

The events of the “Arab Spring” raised a question about the political significance of social networks, their ability to provide a platform for forming the political agenda and general discourse of the protest [8]. On one hand, the role of modern means of communication and the Internet became the focus of researchers’ attention back in the end of the 20th century after the uprising of Zapatistas in Mexico in 1994 [13; 23] and subsequent growth in cyber activism among the members of the new social movements and local acts of protest. Howard Rheingold underlines a general though for many futurologists and researches about the effect of networking technologies upon social actions: “... The same combination of social networks, sophisticated communication technologies, and decentralized organizational structure was surfacing as an effective force in very different kinds of political conflict...” [7, p. 231]. The modern research demonstrates the impact of “new media” onto public politics and electoral process [14, 4, 5], transformation of social movements [11; 16], and political culture and identity [20].

On the other hand, the protest wave of a global initiative of the “Occupy” movement, political revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as demonstrations in other Arab countries has yet again raised the question about the political effect of information technologies of the social networks, which played a noticeable role in the mobilization of the participants. In the course of researching the acts of the “Occupy” movement, Jeffrey S. Juris notes that the previous logic of the network cooperation of the participants of the global equality of rights movement, based on the new social and cultural principles (creation of horizontal connections between various organizational elements; free circulation of information; decentralized and open concepts of solutions; self-forming nature of the web) transformed into the aggregation logic, where the cooperation with the social media allows forming a stream of virtual information and subsequently attract a great number of people into specific physical spaces [15, p. 266].

In this sense we see a certain dialectics of the transition of the multitude communicating in a virtual environment into an unfolding action in a physical realm (the counterpart of a qualitative characteristic). A protest involving the use of information technologies has a corresponding ideal-political measurement that was partially noted above. The assessment of the role of “new media” in the political revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt are not exhausted by the explanation of their causes. Report of the events of the “Arab Spring” reveals the link to the global narratives of revolution, as described in the concept of development of global revolutionary ideologies by Noel Parker [6]. On one hand, it is a classic narrative of the liberation progress; on the other — a narrative that resembles the ideas of opposition to the global Americanocentric domination of the world capital as in the case of Occupy Wall Street movement. The modern political

Graph 1. Portions of the politicized audience of the social network according to the sources of distributed information



Source: VK^[1] and author's calculations

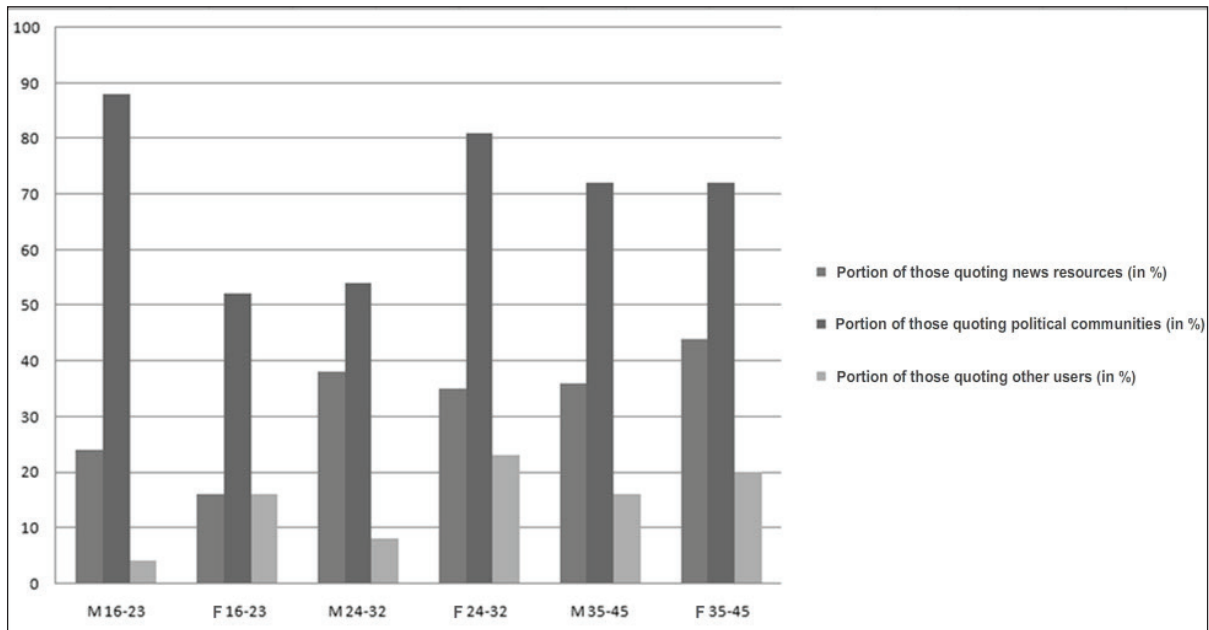
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theory gives a high humanitarian value to the implementation of collective communication in the area of formulating political decisions. In the context of online publicity we are talking about the theory of deliberative management practices of Jürgen Habermas, and in the case of political activism — the autogestion principles of Henri Lefebvre as a fusion between the collective knowledge and management for the general public. These modern examples specifically demonstrate how the internet services combine the public online perception about a protest and its participants with their collective cooperation in the course of the processes of mobilization within the cities. It is worth mentioning that the formally similar ethical value of new technologies can be attributed to the exports and executives of many IT companies, members of the corresponding professional society, as well as many other representatives of popular culture.

In this regard, it is natural that after the 2004 events of the political revolution in

Ukraine (the so called “Orange Revolution”) a protective political discourse was formed within Russia, which was based on the opposite metanarrative of revolutions as a social deviation and pathology that is characteristic to the political philosophy of conservatism. The similar events in the post-Soviet space in many ways gained grounds through the concept of “external factor” and “crowd manipulation” from the number of Russian researches (Sergey Kara-Murza, Georgy Pocheptsov, Natalya Narochnitskaya, and others). It is of no surprise that the events of the “Arab Spring” and the still ongoing revolutionary process in Ukraine lead to yet another layer of problems added by the members of the Russia’s political power to the new communication technologies in the terms of discourse of “threat to national security”, while a number of Russian scholars turned their attention to the manipulative role of social networks in the processes of protest mobilization and spread of extremism, especially among the youth.

Graph 2. Portions of the politicized audience of the social network according to the sources of distributed information



Source: VK [1] and author's calculations

The goal of this article is to define the actual capabilities and limitations of social networks in accommodating the process of protest mobilization. For this purpose, a comparative analysis was conducted among the Russian speaking audience of the most popular social network VK on the topic of spreading of political information by various user groups. Furthermore, the results of this analysis were reviewed in the context of research of the modern practices of mass protest mobilization (the "Occupy" movement, and the "Arab Spring") in order to conceptualize the interconnection between the protest mobilization and the influence of the social networks.

To conduct a comparative research two audiences of the VK users were analyzed ^[1]: 1) those who are interested in creating and promoting political information (politicized group), and 2) those who are uninterested in creating or promoting such information (regular group). In order to assess the online behavior of the users from each audience

150 people were analyzed from each corresponding user group, formed according to the criterion of having a subscription to an oppositional political community within the social network, or the lack there of. The selection into each group was carried out in a random fashion from the entire base of the participants of the political non-political communities in the social network. In addition to that, the accounts have undergone an evaluation to verify that they belong to real users in order to ensure a high level of validity of the data.

In each case the selection process included gender and age parameters, taking into account the nature of the audience of the social network and its age limits: 16–23, 24–32, and 35–45 years of age. The assessment of the online behavior of the users was conducted upon the posts of political or general character on their pages (for each group an equal amount of posts was considered), format of their presentation and sources. Certain limitations places on the

Table 1. The attitude of proactive users towards the general audience in distribution of information from various sources

	News resources		Political communities		User's information	
	Regular audience	Politicized audience	Regular audience	Politicized audience	Regular audience	Politicized audience
M 16–23	1:6.3	1:4.3	1:25.0	1:1.1	1:8.3	1:25.0
F 16–23	0.0	1:6.3	1:8.3	1:1.9	1:12.5	1:6.3
M 24–32	1:2.8	1:2.6	1:2.5	1:2.0	1:3.3	1:12.0
F 24–32	1:12.5	1:2.9	1:12.5	1:1.2	1:0.0	1:4.3
M 35–45	1:7.5	1:2.8	1:4.4	1:1.4	1:3.2	1:6.3
F 35–45	1:9.1	1:2.3	1:14.3	1:1.4	1:14.3	1:4.9
Average number	1:6.4	1:3.5	1:11.2	1:1.5	1:6.9	1:9.8

Source: VK ^[1] and author's calculations

interpretation of the acquired results, first and foremost pertain to the low number of users in the examined total; secondly, to the fact that all evaluated audiences belonged to one social network; thirdly, to the possibility of only a partial correspondence of the subscribers to the social network communities with the parameters of each of the specified audiences. The statistics represented in form of graphs and charts takes into account the data of the users who have posted materials of political or general character at least once, which corresponds to the minimal interest to this type of information.

The graphs 1 and 2 provide diagrams of the portion of the sources of promoted information within the social network by various groups of users.

Even if allotted with a significant margin for error, the data presented demonstrates the existence of a persistent trend in the information posted by the users, where the preference is given to the political communities and news resources, while only a minimal fraction of interpersonal public communication in a form of quoting other users can be observed. In addition to that, the youth shows a fair amount of political information activity only within their own politicized segment, exhibiting passiveness in the segment of regular users, which does not substantiate the thesis on a high rate of

influence of the social networks upon their political preferences. In analyzing the presented data it is also necessary to take into account the fact that the gap between the average number of quoting the sources of information and the audience and the number of quotes per each person quoting (a user being proactive) on average consists in: for the news resources — 6.4 and 3.5 times (for the general and politicized audiences); and similar for the political communities — 11.2 and 1.5 times; for information from other users — 6.9 and 9.8 times (see **Table 1**).

In other words, the users' interest and their participation in spreading the information are quite limited and is mostly inherent for the politicized audience. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the demonstrated insignificant level of spreading political or socially significant information via the interpersonal channel is present in all segments of audiences.

The acquired data allows us to conclude that the potential capabilities of the social networks to spread political information through the multitude of connections between users, a fact that would substantiate the common high value given to the activeness of the social networks in the process of protest mobilization, is not being confirmed by the actual practice of behavior of the Russian users. The potential for forming

public opinion within the social network using the general involvement into a problematic agenda in reality proves much more difficult due to the structuring of informational collaboration with the audience by the organized political communities, which act as mass media. A similar situation is closely linked to the predominance of a small number of authors of information and the phenomenon of an audience forming around them. However, in these situations we can observe a natural bonding of politically motivated and interested users around the corresponding sources of information within the social network. Both cases present a higher level of difficulty for spreading the new information, excluding perhaps the segments of entertainment, humor, and practical advices.

Similar conclusions are confirmed by the research dedicated to the analysis on distribution of highly demanded content (software, music, and video) ^[9]. The explanation of such segmentation and selective behavior of audiences with regards to information is based on additional significant grounds.

Firstly, even in a case of the open nature of the social networks many users demonstrate a model of behavior that is based on selective trust, which limits the information they intake to only a specific circle of sources. As we can see from the research on media trust within the Russian segment of the Internet, there is a presence of a fairly universal co-dependency of the “type of information and the strength of interconnection of trust in the information with media trust”, which in our case can be defined through the notion that in the case of “trust in information, the trust in the internet media source is more important than the trust in the internet reporter” ^[3, p. 504]. As noted by the researcher, this is explained by the fact that in a case of a magazine the source of information is viewed as a product

of multitude of specialists (a large organized system), which increases its reliability in the eyes of the audience, even though there are exceptions in the cases where the journalist is a famous media persona ^[3, p. 504–505]. These conclusions with regards to the perception of information are confirmed by the provided data on the high level of quoting of political communities that possess a number of characteristics that increase trust — impression of an information source as part of a system, or organization. In this regard the most relevant is the practice of quoting information from the LiveJournal service, where the authors are often the famous media personas (political figures, businessmen, and bloggers). However, there is phenomenon of quoting publications from this resource in social networks, but not the other way around.

Secondly, perhaps a more significant factor in distributing information and forming a stable audience is the technical realization of modern social networks related to the adaptive search of information matching the characteristics of separate users. The implementation over the last 5 years of the algorithm built-in to the programming code of the social network that provides information based on the principles of the social graph leads to an automated filtration of the feed based on the selected preferences or the behavior of a user, as well as the interests of their friends within the social network ^[21]. Although such solution is aimed towards acquiring user preferences and creating additional channels for marketing and promoting goods and services, this results in decrease of dispersion of information within the social network through fragmentation of the audience.

Therefore, the conclusions of the conducted research and the reviewed arguments point towards the currently present limitations regarding the use of the social networks as self-sufficient resource of a

political mobilization. This poses legitimate questioning of the impact of the recorded active use of social networks throughout the events of the “Arab Spring” and the protests of the Occupy movement. A conducted comparative analysis of the information streams within the internet and their sources throughout the course of the political revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt demonstrates that the main informational actors were the activists, journalists and bloggers, including the resources of online broadcasting [18, p. 1385–1393]. Another factor is demonstrated in the research of K. Wilson and A. Dunn [22]. Based on their analysis of the key sources of information in Egypt and their audiences among the protestors the social networks did not play such significant role in the protest mobilization, creating more of an effect of international involvement into the revolutionary process that can also be seen in many other cases of revolutions in the past (for example, the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986, and the political revolution in Ukraine in 2004). In these cases the media used by the general audiences and protesters varied, and people did use social media services simply to access the relevant audience, and sheer convenience. Nevertheless, among the key informational channels of mobilization remained the phone and personal communication, although Facebook turned out to be very capable in fulfilling the functions of mobilization, even if to a lesser degree [22, p. 1254–1259]. Coming back to the mentioned earlier conclusion of Jeffrey S. Juris, in the case of the Occupy movement we can see even a closer link between the use of the social networks and protest mobilization, which still leaves the question of existence of a hidden mobilization potential of the social networks.

Overall the above data and the results of research allow us to evaluate the impact of the social networks upon the process of

protest mobilization within the category of mostly coincidental and nonlinear effect. It would seem that the assessment of the impact of the social networks within the context of current historical aspects of mass protest mobilization is more valid, and can be defined in the terms of wave dynamics. Unlike the model of mobilization that is based on the work of classic type of organized social movements, the model of protest wave implies multilocationality, broad involvement of social groups, lack of a precise organizational core affected by the high level of uncertainty, and subject to circumstances that expand or limit the protest throughout its course [12, p. 65–66]. An evident weakness of the organizational component in this type of mobilization leads to the increase in the role of spontaneous ideas, self-organization, and use of informal channels of communication. In this regard the social networks are potentially most adept in this very type of protests, being able to provide alternative forum for direct actions through the cross-territorial collective participation in issuing demands and formulation of the protest agenda, as well as providing the information on its current status.

On the other side of the coin, the examples of spontaneous mass protest mobilization with the use of the social networks demonstrate that turning to these informational services did not precede, but accompanied protests, which allows us to correct the assessment of their potential role. The capabilities of the social networks mostly pertain to the process of problematization, change of its scale, informing and creating a network of trust among political activists and sympathizers. In this respect, the theoretical ability of the social networks to quickly inform and involve into the protest can only be legitimately considered in the context of another important phenomenon, to which the social networks may not have any direct connection — an exceptional event.

Such event acts as a trigger, launching the process of escalation and involvement into a conflict. This could be a heinous death of a human (self-immolation of the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia), use of excessive force by the law enforcement (the break-up of student demonstration by the “Berkut” in Kiev), public announcement or decision of the government (announcement of the plans for urban development of the Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park), confrontation with acts of unfairness or infringement on rights (local protests on urban problematics: protection of parks, historical buildings, etc.). As to defining the potential of the social networks, we are talking about their ability to discover such events and make them the key element of public agenda and an object of everyone’s concern.

Scientific theories of the first generation of revolutions were presented in 1920’s and 30’s and formed the concept of “The Natural History of Revolution” noticing the special aspects of the public awareness in a pre-revolutionary situation. One of the most renowned researches in this field — Clarence Crane Brinton notes that the revolutionary crisis itself is preceded by a certain situation that has an increase in awareness of social controversies, anger and overall aggravation with the reality; it is as if revolution could be felt in the air as an inevitable conclusion [10, p. 66]. Similar description of this situation can be found in many works written by different authors throughout different periods. The state of public awareness that corresponds to such intuitive feelings can be operationalized by determining a number of its key characteristics: presence of a common problematic agenda for the influential social groups, high level of politicization of this problematic agenda, high level of public discontent (a desire to resolve the problem by force), high psycho-emotional involvement into the problematic agenda (readiness to respond). The final circumstance is

the perception of the problem as extreme and deeply personal.

This approach however, does not address the complex problems with identifying the situations that are capable of leading to a spontaneous protest mobilization, as well as a way to determine the relevant problematic agenda that would provide a sufficient attention of the social groups and their emotional tension. On one hand, it is possible that these situations emerge in the course circumstances coming together and are not determined, especially in the cases of a significant, revolutionary scale. In this regard the closest socio-psychological interpretation of political protests through the phenomenon of relative deprivation in Ted Robert Gurr’s approach [2] discovers the inability to explain the lack of public unrest among the low-income population in the conditions of prolonged crises and the decrease of the living standards. In our interpretation it is the initial collision of the social groups ready for protest and have a bitter negative experience with deprivation can mostly contribute to the mobilization effect.

On the other hand, in the case of problematic agenda a dilemma exists of its assessment. Often the situations are present, where corresponding problems are recognized, but do not result in a protest even though they can be recorded on the level of opinion polls and public discourse. One possible explanation can be the fact that the changes in public awareness and public discourse that are inherent to the spontaneous mass protests carry a transgressive character stepping outside the personal and group concord, creating the effects of polarization, labeling, certification and change of scale that forms the frame of an unstable and conflicting cooperation. In other words, such changes in public awareness possess the features of a “transgressive imagination” or “walking on the edge” as noted by

the researches on criminal psychology and violation of public norms [19, p. 2-9]. Such comparison should not lead to a confusion, since transgression and its inherent destruction of norms fully relates to social innovations, which pave the way for historical progress.

In this case the potential of social networks can be attributed to the dynamic characteristics, which provide mobilization in the course of the wave of protests. It would seem that in this case the theory of resource mobilization (Joseph McCarthy, Mayer Zald, and Charles Tilly) is not as productive as the approach of Ruud Koompan, which combines this conceptualization with practical data of multiple known instances of spontaneous mobilization. As the researches notes, even the lack of resources among actors does not always become a cause for decrease of the protest wave. The conclusion of his analysis states that the drop in the dynamic of the protest mobilization is rather the result of stabilization of relations between the actors themselves and other (potential) participants; when the actions undertaken no longer disrupt the balance and remove the possibilities for further development of the process of political polarization and involvement of new groups therein [17, p. 40-41]. In other words, the driving force behind the spontaneous and weakly organized protests is their ability to disrupt the balance of the existing social groups and organized political actors to assess and respond to the situation; create a list of public demands that attracts the involvement of new participants; make the use of routine means of normalization of situation and implementation of repressions against the demonstrators impossible.

In this regard, the recorded aspects of the social networks allow their users to unite with the event/incident, not only informing them, but also providing perception on different levels, including personal. However, fixating themselves on one problematic

agenda or event, the social are able to create an information stream with return response, which includes eyewitness accounts, reports from mass media, photos and videos. As a result the involvement of a participant into the process of protest mobilization can be achieved through the informing the network of his personal contacts, forming a circle of possible sympathizers or participants of the protest from the corresponding part of the audience, even if it is very limited.

Based on the results of the analysis of this problem the following conclusions can be made regarding the possible influence of Russian social networks upon the process of protest mobilization. Firstly, Russian users of social networks demonstrate very limited susceptibility to political information; at the same time the distribution of such information is not linked directly to the user's activity, but rather with the publication activity of the network communities that act as mass media. Secondly, the low level of politicization of the youth audience as compared to the older generations allows us to speak about a fairly low influence of social networks upon the political and idealistic preferences of the youth groups (high school and college students), as well as potentially insignificant degree of their involvement into mass protest, excluding the politicized groups, which have a predisposed tendency for a closed circle of information exchange.

The analysis of the modern practices of protest mobilization allows us to note their predominantly weakly organized nature, which makes the protest dependent on the character of the movement, circumstances and their positioning within the public space. In this regard the Russian social networks as in many other countries with a high level of internet usage can play an instrumental role in informing and bringing the citizens closer to the problem by providing the movements with a public arena, and carrying out the transfer of information

from the “bottom” to the level of major mass media networks. As to the involvement into protest, the social networks have significant limitations, as they are a secondary channel of mobilization.

The conducted analysis of the practices and capabilities of the social networks for mass involvement of broad groups of population into a protest allows us to conclude that the effectiveness of realizing their potential is associated with the presence of very specific circumstances. Firstly, it is the emergence of an irregular event that carries a transgressive character for the influential social groups, which invokes the initial low-level protest mobilization. Secondly, it is the presence of actualized discontent on both, the local level and the level of broad social groups. Thirdly, it is the concentration of information stream in the social networks upon the current event and with a personal involvement of active users with a wide network of personal contacts into this event. In this case the social networks are potentially able to provide a platform for a quick spread and synchronization of the protest agenda, formation of common protest framework, and the culture of the social opposition.

It is important however, to note that the modern waves of protest mobilization while

lacking the organizational component have a tendency to decline within a short or mid-term timeframe, and the emergence of the necessary exceptional events is difficult to forecast, which reduces the capabilities of the social networks in the process of protest mobilization and makes them short-term and uncertain in their end result. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that although the wide and successful use of social networks in the process of protest movements is capable of providing mobilization effect, it also creates additional limitations for the forming of organized social movements or protest mobilization on the regular basis in the mid and long-term perspective. This is linked with the fragmentation of the audiences of participants and sympathizers, dilution of the initial protest agenda, and the transfer of the protest activity from the physical arena back to the discursive. At the same time this conclusions are of mostly conceptual nature and require further verification within the framework of additional research. In this regard the social networks are currently providing and empirical ability to conduct research on the cases that are connected to the emergence of events of transgressive nature and the corresponding spontaneous protest mobilization on a local level.

References (transliterated)

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