THE INTERNET AS MEDIUM FOR ONLINE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CITIZENS AHD GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Assoc. Prof., PhD Tatiana Shirko[1]

Assoc. Prof., PhD Olga Matveeva[1]

Assoc. Prof., PhD Elena Rogotneva[1]

[1] National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, **The Russian Federation**

ABSTRACT

The article covers issues of arranging the communication interaction between Russian citizens and government authorities on the Internet during the period of 2000s–2010s. This period can be divided into four phases of arranging the network interaction between citizens and government authorities. The first phase covers a period of 2000–2003 when government authorities created their representative sites on the Internet. The main characteristic feature of this period is thought to be a control by regional government authorities over network communication channels.

During the second phase, 2004–2010, there was observed an active development of such social networks as Facebook, Twitter and their Russian counterparts as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and other, as well as the development of blogospheres. This resulted in increasing the citizens' social activity in the network when discussing socially important and political issues. Then the government authorities of Federal constituent entities appeared to be under fierce criticism by citizen and, in order to relieve tensions, they had to follow proposed citizens-authorities intercommunication options by creating both authority representative accounts and personal accounts of individual officials in social networks. There they could take part in discussions on key regional issues and problems. In 2011–2012, during the third phase, the mechanisms of citizens' network communication and collective discussions on key problems in the online mode were developed. There, being supported by regional government authorities, various online surveys and online offices gained widespread currency. During the fourth phase, 2013–2014, government authorities strengthened control over social networks, blogospheres and chat and discussion forums that has become the main characteristic feature of this period. Such a situation is mainly expressed in enhancing the legislative regulation of online activities and in narrowing a circle of discussion topics relating to government authority activities.

Keywords: Internet, communication, authorities, blogosphere, social network, online communities

INTRODUCTION

Current development of information technologies allows establishing active communicative interactions between citizens, enterprises, companies, countries and continents. Such an active communication cannot but transform different areas of human activities. First of all, it relates to a current problem of interaction between

Russian citizens and government authorities which, due to the Internet network development in the first decade of the XXI century, was given renewed momentum to its development.

As is known, such an interaction is distinguished by a high level of efficiency and allows improving a full-fledged dialogue, initiating discussions and debates of the most urgent social, economic and political issues, monitoring a public opinion and evaluating the quality of issues being solved by the Government. It also allows evaluating the level of interest of the civil society in governing the state and the participation of the citizens in solving local issues and problems. Thus, the Internet development, as indicated by many Russian researchers, is one of the most important factors of the development of a civil society, in opposition to a Western-European society whose main development factors are the private ownership and a high degree of common cultural and political development. Therefore, the dialogues of citizens on the Internet and non-governmental associations and government institutions created by citizens in various network media during the period of 2000–2010 have proven that such an interaction is characterized by extreme inconsistency and a random nature and it has showed a high degree of separation and rejection of government actions by citizens in various sphere of public life. The rollback of democratic reforms implemented in the Russian Federation and the constriction of action freedom of Runet users by both legislative and bureaucratic measures has separated the society and the Government even more.
Such unique traits of modern Russian public life surely require studying and analysing all the features of interaction between citizens, civil groups and government institutions of legislative and executive branches of both federal and local government.

METHODOLOGY

This article compiles and interprets obtained data using various theories and approaches. One of the most important theories used in the paper is a theory of modernization, a leading theoretical insight, which explains the unevenness of the society and civilization development in the course of transition from authoritarianism to democracy that is one of current public processes occurring in the Russian Federation. Following this theory, Russia belongs to the "second echelon" of modernization, being characterized by a leading role of the State Authorities in the process of historic development.
In addition to the theory of modernization there has been used a civilizational approach which allows describing the characteristics of modernization in Russia; using practices of the approach helps consider a certain society through the social and cultural features of its development. Note that one of the significant civilizational characteristics of the Russian society is its political culture, i.e. basic knowledge about the social life which is shared by most part of the society and which determines understanding of certain political situations by this part of the society and its behavior in such situations. Therefore, taking into account Russian political and cultural traditions is of great importance, especially when adopting Western-European-type institutions which the Russian Public Authorities system has not had before.
Using the theory of democratic transit that explains features of society transition from authoritarianism to democracy seems to be important when studying the issues of establishing and arranging Authorities in Russian regions. In this context many researchers attribute the post-Soviet Russia to a group of incomplete democratic transit countries where the hybrid political regime was formed; the hybrid political regime

allowed them to achieve stability but it neither lasts long nor provides conditions for intensive development. Russian modernization problems are mainly caused by the configuration of political institutions and, according to many researchers, they cannot be solved without democratic processes.

RESULTS

In Russia the Internet network and information and communication technologies started their active development in the beginning of 2000s. Initially the Internet functions were thought to provide various pieces of information to Russian citizens. The network environment was used as a medium to launch websites of different mass media including newspapers, magazines, news providers, TV and radio broadcasters and electronic publications of analytical and research companies. In 2001–2005, projects related to historical, literature and political topics became a widespread practice in the network; there was created various electronic libraries offering their users to read online and to download pieces of art, music and pictures. However, by the mid - 2000s, as the virtual space was getting full with the content, Internet users started actively exchanging information and thus they turned from passive users of information into active creators and translators of it [1]. In the Internet network there was created a new communicative and information exchange environment which was able to affect human perception of the world and himself/herself. Thus, the implementation of a communicative function of the Internet network developed a certain unique communicative model of online interactions between the society and the Government in the Runet, an Internet's Russian segment, with all the features inherent in the virtual space. Such a communicative model was being developed taking into account the characteristic features of the Russian legislation, political culture and traditional and cultural foundations of interactions between the society and the Government that were characterized by dominating Government institutions.

The development of communication in the Runet environment became a foundation for formation of a civil society in the Russian Federation and for implementation of major public initiatives. Unlike a Western-European civilization where public structures are based on real public activity of citizens, in 2000s Russian citizens carried out such an activity mainly in the Internet network. This resulted in creating virtual communities of various purposes including entertainment and interest groups and up to special websites monitoring work and activities of government authorities and local authorities in particular spheres of public life. All these afforded grounds for researches to speak about active part of Russian Federation's citizens in online political life and in using the virtual space as a tool for political communication.

Totally, during 2000s-2010s, there can be distinguished four major phases of establishing the network communication between citizens and government authorities. Each of the phases had its distinctive feature expressed by a leading force being alternately represented by citizens and virtual communities, created by them, or government authorities which tried to play a key role and to control the active interactive communication on the Internet.

Being on the World's virtual trend: the Internet as a tool for informing Russian Federation's citizens on activity of government authorities

In 2000–2003, formation of online representative offices by government authorities on the Internet was a main direction of interaction between citizens and government authorities. Over this period there were opened websites of the President of the Russian Federation, kremlin.ru, (in January of 2000), of the Government of the Russian Federation, government.ru, and websites of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation and of its two Chambers – the State Duma and the Council of Federation. Legislative and Executive Authorities of constituent entities of the Russian Federation including administrations of regions, autonomous entities and Federal cities – Moscow and Saint – Petersburg, Presidents and Governments of republics, regional Parliaments and administrations of towns and municipalities actively entered into creation of their own online representative offices too. A special part in the virtual political space was taken by sites of Heads of legislative and executive authorities of both Federal and local levels. In this period the official regulatory enactments of government authorities and bodies of local self-government, the structure characteristic of regional executive authorities and legislative establishments, news feeds and announcements of forthcoming events, press-releases were the main content of websites.

The main characteristic of this phase is thought to be a control over Internet channels of communication between citizens and authorities mainly by government authorities. Thus, such an online communication emphasized the publicity of government authorities, their focus on interaction with citizens and transparency of their activity. The E-mail became a main tool for communication with citizens, but government authorities and bodies of local self-governance had a task to elaborate a new strategy of interaction with Internet users, Russian citizens, by means of developing information technologies and opening online offices on Internet sites, that, could significantly speed up a process of addressing and handling citizens appeals to public officials, compared to addressing them in hard copies. Such a strategy was approved by the Government of the Russian Federation on January 28, 2002 and got its tangible embodiments as a part of a Federal target program "Electronic Russia"; the goal of this program was to speed up the processes of information exchange in the economy and in the society including the information exchange between citizens and government authorities, to improve the performance of public administration and municipal government and to create technological preconditions for developing a civil society on the basis of IT-technologies [2].

Simultaneously, in 2002–2003, there was started drawing up a "National strategy of information development of Russia" as a part of the target program "Electronic Russia" which provided for public Internet access outlets in local post offices of the "Russian Post". At the same time, creating conditions for development of the information environment on the Internet was accompanied with unprecedented, since the Soviet times, restrictions of rights and freedoms of the person and of the citizen in a political sphere of public life.

Growth of social activity of citizens on the Internet and development of blogospheres: trends and innovations

The penetration of social networks in Russia occurred in 2004-2010 following the world's trend of developing information and communication technologies connected with active development of them. First of all, chats as a tool for messages exchange on the Internet in the online mode gained widespread currency. Chats were distinguished

with anonymity of users, absence of pattern and a high efficiency of information transfer. In 2006–2010 there came an era of social networks in Russia; it was connected with penetration of American and international Internet companies into a Russian-language network segment. In January of 2006 an American company Coogle.inc opened its representative office in Moscow that marked the beginning of penetration of Russian-language counterparts of Company's information products mainly related to an IT sphere into the Runet. In 2008 there was opened a Russian-language version of the most popular American social network Facebook, and then of Twitter, LiveJournal and a number of other ones. Then there appeared VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and other Russian counterparts of international social networks; a blogosphere and various forums, being mostly public and allowing users to add records, pictures, multimedia, to arrange discussions on and debates about hot topics, to leave comments and to refer to other comments, were being actively developed. Thus, virtual discussion platforms for multilateral exchange of information emerged in the network and such discussion platforms themselves became sources of information.

As a result a complex communication process – expansion of a circle of people communicating online – was occurring in the Internet space; this led to the formation of a common social and cultural space and contributed to an attention focusing on one topic and on discussion of it that, it its turn, created an impression of common perception of an information flow and formed a global information environment of the network community and public opinion [3]. All these factors caused the increase in social activity of citizens on the Internet when discussing key social problems and public and political issues and increased the number of ru.- zone domains and the number of Internet and social networks users. In 2002 a share of active Internet users amounted to 16% of the Russian population, while this share was already 52% in 2007.

Taking into account a brisk growth of the number of Runet users, government authorities of constituent entities of the Federation appeared to be under fierce criticism by citizens and, in order to relieve tensions, they had to follow proposed citizens-authorities intercommunication options by creating both authority representative accounts and personal accounts of individual officials in social networks where they could take part in discussions on key regional issues and problems.

Forums of active moderation specially created to discuss local problems and to identify most painful issues which require legislative actions appeared on some sites of government authorities of Federal constituent entities. In this context one can mention a website of the Legislative Duma of the Tomsk region (www.duma.tomsk.ru) on the platform of which a forum was actively functioning during the period of 2005–2013. Discussions of forum users, their recommendations and suggestions repeatedly became the basis for draft Laws which then became the Laws of the Tomsk region. A sociological survey "the 43d Deputy" which fulfilled an important function in legislative activity of Tomsk local deputies was regularly conducted on the Tomsk Duma website. Furthermore, in 2006 a special public attention was attracted with a demarche by the Mayor of the city of Nizhny Novgorod who installed a web-camera in his office. As a result a working day of the Head of the city was reported on the website of the City Mayor's Office in the online mode.

Despite fierce criticism of the actions of government authorities in all the spheres of public life and deterioration of a political environment in the country, the development

of communication means and the importance of the Internet in public life prompted the Government to develop a new system of support of introducing modern communication means to Russian citizens. In February 2008 the Ministry of Information Technology and Communications of the Russian Federation announced a program «Communication means to each home» that provided the Russians with opportunity to get a broadband access to the Internet within 6 months and to order a personal computer by Mail. The program was started in the Arkhangelsk, Tomsk, Chelyabinsk and Krasnodar regions but a year later its implementation stopped not having reached its tasks and goals.

In spite of the failure, on October 20, 2010, the Government presented a new program "Information society" the tasks of which were to establish the electronic government focusing on providing administration services to citizens and to develop new communication technologies [2].

The Russian society on the Internet in 2011–2012: from criticism to actions

In 2011–2012 the interaction and communication between citizens and government authorities mediated the most important political events in the country. The Election to the State Duma of the Russian Federation, a lower chamber of Parliament, developing and adopting Laws took place on December 4, 2011. The Russian election legislation was purposely amended that significantly restricted rights of citizens of the Russian Federation to elect and to be elected. Seven political parties controlled by government authorities of the Russian Federation took part in these elections and only four ones out of the seven could overcome the required threshold.

The active use of administration resources, a desire of a pro-Government party "United Russia" to affect the election outcomes, reports of stuffing with false voting bulletins and improper removal of observers and journalists from polling stations were the reasons for experts to doubt the legitimacy of the elections. Furthermore, international PACE and OSCE observers said about numerous violations and government intervention in the voting process.

Social networks played a key role in exposing election frauds by spreading information about such numerous violations. On the Election Day, bloggers were actively exchanging information and helped to attract attention to the most problematic polling stations and cases of improper removal of election observers. Also, for example, after summing up the election outcomes, on the Internet there was launched a campaign of collecting copies of voting reports in all the constituent entities of the Russian Federation to identify election frauds and falsifications. As it was found, 10% of voting reports out of 520 ones sent by bloggers were rewritten in favor of the "United Russia". All such cases attracted great public attention and resonance [4]. Moreover, since December 5, 2012, under coordination of bloggers and active network users, protest actions took place across the country which lasted till the spring of 2012. All these attracted a special attention to the elections of the President of the Russian Federation held on March 4, 2012.

In order to avoid the situation occurred at the Parliamentary elections, the Government initiated the video surveillance over a process of voting and counting of votes during the Presidential Elections. For that purpose there was created a special website "Web – Elections of 2012". Nevertheless, election observers said about a big number of violations including mass removal of observers from polling stations and influence of administrative resources and called the legitimacy of the elections into doubt. Election

violations mainly included frauds with absentee voting certificates, stuffing with false voting bulletins and multiple voting of the same citizens using absentee certificates or uncertified lists of voters, a so-called "carousel". The day after the elections, on March 5, 2012, following an appeal of bloggers actively spreading information, a protest rally "For Fair Elections" took place in the Pushkin square in Moscow to protest against election frauds. By May 6, 2012 the situation had escalated and its active phase ended with breaking up the rally in the Bolotnaya square in Moscow, making search of opposition leaders A. Navalny, S. Udaltsov and K. Sobchak and others and launching criminal cases. In general, despite a complicated political situation related to restriction of political freedoms of citizens, on the Internet, with the support of government authorities, there appeared online survey and online offices and developed new mechanisms of network communication between citizen and government authorities and collective discussions of current issues in the online mode including the use of other network technologies.

From reforms to counter-reforms: strengthening a bureaucratic control in the network

The 4th period, 2013–2014, is mainly characterized with strengthening a control of government institutions over social networks, blogospheres and forums. This is expressed in enhancing legislative regulations of activity on the Internet and in narrowing an area of discussions related to activity of government authorities in the network. One should pay attention to a fact that limitation of government authorities in the network was accompanied by the increase in the number of Internet users. In 2013, a rapid growth of the Internet audience was gained in Siberia, South of Russia and North Caucasus, mainly due to rural population. And the daily Internet audience significantly increased in 2013–2014 as well. A share of users daily logging onto the Internet amounted to 80% and more. According to the results of the All-Russia survey conducted by the Fund of Internet Development at the Psychology Department of Moscow State University, with the support of the Google, 68% of Russian citizens over 18 years old regularly use the Internet and 50% of the Russians amounting to 58.3 million people use it daily. A share of the Russians at the age of 12–17 who use the Internet amounts to 89% [5].

In the light of worsening a foreign-policy environment and strengthening anti-American and anti-Western-European speeches of the Russian Government, the uncontrollability of the Runet virtual environment was thought to threaten the Russian statehood. Strengthening of the administrative and bureaucratic influence on bloggers and legislative regulation of their activity became ones of the main actions to strengthen control over the active participants and users of social networks. Therefore, the cases of blocking the websites and blogs of popular bloggers and opposition politicians became more frequent in 2013 and 2014. Finally, the Federal law "Concerning Amendments to a Federal Law "On Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information" dated May 5, 2014 and individual Legislative Acts known as the "Blogging Act" became a peak of strengthening a bureaucratic control on the Internet; the Blogging Act obliges authors of each Internet resource including websites and blogs having the audience of 3,000 users and more to be registered in the Russian Federal Service of Supervision of Communications "Roskomnadzor" and it imposes restrictions on the content of such Internet resources including comments left by the users.

Henceforth all the restrictions and limitations established in Russia for mass media should be applied to the owners of websites and accounts in blogs. Also the Blogging Act binds site owners on putting his/her surname, initials and e-mail address. Moreover, the owners of Internet resources must store all the information published on the Internet including personal data for six months; and such information must be provided to law-enforcement authorities on demand. The Russian Federal Service of Supervision of Communications "Roskomnadzor" has got a right to request personal information on resource owners and users both from them and from third parties. Moreover the "Roskomnadzor" has been vested with authority to maintain the register of websites, site pages and site owners. In accordance with the law any website or page on the Internet with daily traffic of 3,000 people and more should be listed in a relevant register. Administrative and criminal liability is provided for non-fulfillment or violation of articles of the Act. Also when using the Wi-Fi network one must log.

CONCLUSION

Thus, during 2000–2014, the development of information and communication technologies in the Russian Federation contributed to active Internet interaction and communication between the government institutions and the citizens. That interaction was implemented in two directions. First, during that period, the Government activity on the Internet was mainly focused on informing citizens about the actions of federal and regional authorities and on providing online public services. Second, the online activism was aimed at having influence on the mechanism of state administration and at monitoring government's actions. This activism was affected by the restriction of the civil rights and freedoms and by administrative reforms which significantly strengthened the government control over the public life. During the period, there was a clear tendency towards the increase in Internet user count; and the social significance of networks was growing up in the Russian society.

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