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抗議的年代: 數位媒體對俄羅斯青年的影響

The Age of Protest: Digital Media Effects on the Russian
Youth

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摘要

數位媒體正在改變當前社會在各個層面和領域的運作方式。本文以俄羅斯為例，以威權政權下傳播政治經濟學為理論背景，探討俄羅斯青年如何在政治活動中使用數位媒體作為資訊來源並參與集體行動。其中，本研究將反對黨領袖 Alexei Navalny 發起的智慧投票(Smart Voting)活動視為具有影響力的事件。

在這項研究中，我對參加今年競選活動的年輕人進行了一系列深度採訪，主題是他們的媒體使用情況以及其對 Navalny、智慧投票和俄羅斯政治其他方面的想法。總體結果與媒體使用的全球趨勢相符，但有幾個例外。

關鍵詞：數位原住民，新媒體，專制政權，數位媒體，傳播政治經濟學。

Abstract

Digital media are changing the ways in which our society functions at all levels and in all spheres. Politics is not an exception. This thesis contributes to the study of the political economy of communication in authoritarian regimes, taking Russia as an example, and aims at identifying how Russian youth use digital media in their political activities. For this purpose, the Smart Voting campaign initiated by the opposition leader Alexei Navalny is analyzed as digital media affecting people's voting behavior.

In this research, I have conducted a range of qualitative interviews with young people who are participating in this year's campaign on the topics of their media usage and their attitude towards Navalny, Smart Voting, and other aspects of Russian politics. The overall results correlate with global trends in media usage but with several exceptions.

Keywords: *digital natives, new media, authoritarian regimes, Navalny, political economy of communication.*

Disclaimer. The FBK (Anti-Corruption Foundation) and Navalny's regional offices mentioned below are labeled as extremist organizations and designated as foreign agents in Russia. This thesis is not aimed at advocating for or urging to any kind of extremist activity and solely pursues academic goals.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Russia is a very specific media environment with a high degree of government control and a lack of plurality of ideas and narratives. The majority of the traditional media outlets are owned by the government or the businesses affiliated with it. Therefore, the content produced by the traditional media is strictly controlled by the authorities. However, the emergence of the new media seems to be bringing about a significant change to this equation. In other words, the new media platforms and mediums are influencing the behavior of the Russian population including their political, economic, social, and cultural decisions.

Moreover, the extent of the freedom of expression in these media remains to be relatively high as they are more flexible and more difficult to be controlled by the officials. Therefore, we see a twofold media reality in Russia: on the one hand, there are strictly controlled and mostly state-run traditional media, from the other, there are new emerging and rapidly developing online media platforms beyond the government's control.

In this research, I am going to study Russian digital media from the political economy point of view: how new media are changing the balance of power within the existing system (authoritarian regime with low opportunities for wide political participation). For this purpose, I am analyzing Smart Voting as a digital media influencing the new wave of young voters and changing their attitudes and behavior.

Smart Voting is one of the numerous media channels created by Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). Navalny is one of the most

prominent Russian opposition leaders and a very vocal Kremlin critic. Since the beginning of the 2010s, he has been a defendant and witness in a number of criminal, administrative, civil, and arbitration cases, which Navalny himself and his supporters consider politically motivated.

Navalny, FBK, and the media established by them are the center of all protest activities in Russia as they provide news and political information for opposition-leaning citizens. As of May 2021, Navalny has 6.51 M subscribers on his main YouTube channel and 2.46 M on the online streaming channel. The most-watched videos on his channel are the investigations with President Vladimir Putin's and ex-president Dmitry Medvedev's corruption schemes with over 116 and 34 million views respectively and sparked a wave of mass protests all over the country.

In 2018 Navalny and FBK started the Smart Voting campaign aimed at depriving the ruling party of votes in federal and regional elections. For this strategy, they are using the method of tactical (strategic) voting where a voter supports a candidate who differs from their real preferences since they estimate this candidate's chances of winning as higher. Tactical voting is a way to avoid an undesirable election outcome, that is, the coming to power of a candidate whom the voter sympathizes with the least (the United Russia party). Smart Voting is a website (IOS/Android app) where a voter leaves his/her personal information, and during elections, it sends him or her a notification urging to support a candidate who is most likely to win in his/her particular constituency.

1.2. Research Motivation

In 2020, Russia received a Democracy Percentage 7 out of 100 according to the Freedom House *Nations in Transit 2020* report. This is one of the reasons why I am motivated to conduct this research. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the new era of democracy and freedom was supposed to have started in my country. However, the situation turned out to be different as we witness numerous attempts to crack down on democracy by the Russian authorities, including their fight with the independent media.

Overall, the Russian state controls the main TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers and therefore has a chance to use traditional media which are still widely used all across the country and sometimes are the only source of information available to people living in the remote areas with no access to the Internet as a tool of political propaganda.

In this regard, it is important to notice that the scope of censorship in Russia is continuing to grow, leaving no place for an alternative point of view. A part of Russian society finds itself in a certain information vacuum with only one media outlet (television or radio which are both easily accessible) imposing a certain narrative on them and forming their picture of the world according to the official Kremlin ideology.

My interest in this topic comes from my personal experience of having conversations with people who consume the news produced by the state-run media as it is the only source of information available to them, including my friends and members of my family. For instance, my grandmother does not use online media in

her daily life, she receives all the information about what is happening in the world from the federal television.

It is important to mention that people of her generation tend to have a different attitude towards this media: when it first emerged in the Soviet Union, television was not used as a medium to convey certain messages and news but as a tool of ideological propaganda supporting the existing regime and informing populations' views and attitudes. Therefore, when referring to the Soviet television and any other media, my grandmother always says that they used to "only tell the truth" as opposed to spoiled and corrupt media of the 1990s and early 2000s. As a result, she has a set of certain values and views that correlate with the official Kremlin ideology with regard to Russian actions in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea (which she refers to as "reunification"), Russia's relationship with the Western countries and Russian domestic politics which is reflected in her voting behavior.

However, people of my generation living in the big cities almost never use television, radio, and newspapers as their source of political news and therefore are exposed to a wider variety of viewpoints and political ideologies resulting in their further opposition towards the ruling elites as they cannot express their dissent through fair and transparent elections. They turn to the protest activity but the recent demonstrations have been brutally suppressed by the authorities and lead to numerous arrests and further tightening of the regime aimed at ceasing the protest activity in Russia. Smart Voting is seen as an alternative in this regard: an opportunity for those who disagree with the existing regime to express their objection without threatening their personal safety.

1.3. Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to identify the main trends and similarities in Russian youth's usage of digital media in their political activity, and the connection between this media usage and their involvement in the political processes both online and offline. For this purpose, I am investigating the main sources where my respondents gain information about the political events that happen in Russia as well as the level of their online activity such as sharing, reposting, donating money, and whether they express their views publicly or only in conversations with close friends and family.

Another important aspect I am analyzing in this research is the offline political activities of the Russian youth. These include protest participation, voting, election monitoring, and running for office, and usually mediated and communicated via online media and social networks.

With regard to the Smart Voting, the main research objective is to understand young Russians' perception of SV as an internet-mediated protest voting practice as well as their own evaluation of its effectiveness and the ability to influence the current political situation in Russia. Their assessment of the importance of Alexei Navalny's participation in this process is an additional factor to be included in this research design.

It must be noted here that the term "new" or "digital media" is referred to as any media that uses the Internet to deliver information to consumers. The rest can be referred to as traditional media: newspapers, radio, and television.

1.4. Thesis Structure

This research is presented in five chapters. Chapter one is an introduction where I outline the background and motivation behind this study as well as state the main objectives of my research.

The second chapter a literature review that provides a detailed discussion of the studies in the field of the political economy of communication and media ecology with a closer emphasis on the research of media bias, ownership issues, and censorship in different media environments around the world but especially in Russia. The literature review also includes the debates on the power relationship within the media sphere and the network society. Finally, I lay down the main areas of research on the effect of digital media on citizens' political behavior and how Smart Voting as an Internet-mediated protest voting platform influenced the outcomes of the local elections during the 2019 and 2020 campaigns.

Chapter three presents the design of this research where I state my researcher positionality and review the methodology I utilize in this study. In the fourth chapter, I answer the research questions and outline the overall results of this research. Finally, chapter five concludes and outlines the main limitations of this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Russian Media Environment and the Emergence of New Media

2.1.1. Evolution of the Russian Media System

The structure of the media system in Russia is unique in several aspects but especially in terms of its relationship with the central government. The first Russian newspaper was established in 1703 by Peter the Great who took an active part in its drafting and editing which reflects the historically rooted unequal and complicated relationship between the Russian state and the media that remained unchanged throughout Tsarist Russia and the Soviet period (Vartanova, 2017).

In the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union the government and the Communist Party directly owned all the print and broadcast outlets in the country and therefore exercised unlimited control over the content of the entire media system through pre- and post-publication censorship and direct supervision and oversight of all hiring decisions. Thus, the media system that existed in the Soviet Union before 1985 can be referred to as totalitarian or post totalitarian (Becker, 2004).

Following Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the majority of media outlets in Russia became private and started to compete in the market conditions. During Yeltsin's presidency, the Russian government passed several laws on media including provisions on censorship. Finally, in 1993, the Constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted where freedom of speech is guaranteed and censorship is prohibited (article 29, p.5:

“The freedom of the mass media shall be guaranteed. Censorship shall be prohibited”).

During Gorbachev and Yeltsin’s presidency, the media enjoyed much more freedom, as opposed to the strict censorship that existed in Russia before glasnost. The government’s control over the media was relatively limited even in the state-run press, the authorities tolerated media pluralism and wide criticism of their policies by the independent journalists. Therefore, it can be argued that the late 1980s - 1990s Russia had an emerging democratic mass political media system. However, Becker (2004) argues that we should not romanticize Gorbachev and Yeltsin era in terms of media freedom as it was extremely fragile due to the absence of a strong independent judiciary. Moreover, both Gorbachev and Yeltsin would occasionally use their authority and political power to threaten independent media.

Finally, Vladimir Putin’s accession to power in 2000 marked the dramatic change in the relationship between the state and the media. In his 2000 state of the nation address, Putin emphasized his commitment to the principles of freedom and democracy, including freedom of speech:

Freedom of speech has been and remains an unshakable value of Russian democracy. This is our principled position. Without truly free media, Russian democracy simply cannot survive. Therefore, we are obliged to guarantee journalists real, not ostentatious, freedom.

(kremlin.ru, 2000)

However, soon after this speech, the Russian government started to crack down on democratic freedoms especially with regard to the freedom of speech and independent media. Under Putin’s control, the authorities began to take over the main

TV channels and the majority of the independent newspapers – either directly or through state-run companies or businessmen affiliated with the government.

Therefore, the Russian media system under Putin can be classified as Neo-authoritarian with the government tolerating opinion pluralism to a certain extent but this tolerance is limited especially concerning issues that the regime finds sensitive such as elections and national security. In the neo-authoritarian media system, private media ownership can be tolerated but state-run media are prevalent and more powerful, thus, the state can use affiliated media as a tool of political propaganda and a weapon against its rivals, both domestic and international. In order to silence its critics, the government utilized more indirect and discreet tools as opposed to the totalitarian system. The list of such tools includes legal and economic pressure with broadly worded laws on issues such as slander, public insult of state officials, security and national interests (Becker, 2004).

2.1.2. Media Usage Trends of Russian Citizens

Nowadays, television remains the most used source of information for Russian citizens (74%). The downward trend in its use has slowed down. The use of Internet sources (38%) and social media (39%) is steadily increasing. The growth in the utilization of social media by older people continues. Thus, over the past year, the use of social media to receive news has grown by 10% in the 40-54 age group (Levada Center, 2020).

The frequency of consumption of information on all popular channels of obtaining information (television, Internet publications, video blogs) is growing,

which means that the immersion of respondents in information flows is growing. 44% of respondents watch television every day, 36% read news on the Internet every day. The following three categories are the most popular ones in terms of video consumption: films and cinema (43%), news in Russia and the world (38%), and humor, entertainment (34%). The number of users of social media continues to grow. The number of those who use social media every day is also increasing (Levada Center, 2020).

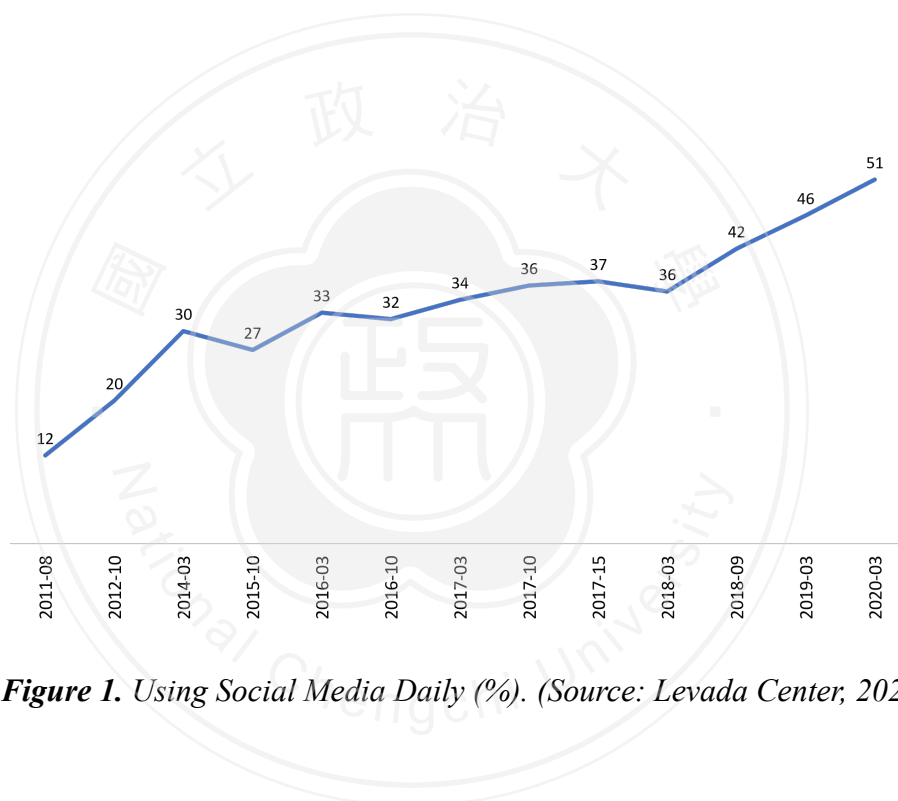


Figure 1. Using Social Media Daily (%). (Source: Levada Center, 2020)

In 2020, The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) political foundation published a big comprehensive report on their study of young Russians’ values and attitudes (Russia’s “Generation Z”: Attitudes and Values). In one of the sections, they asked Russian citizens aged 18-35 about their sources of political information. Most of the respondents named the Internet their main source of political news, public events, and activities (84%). Among the reasons for their preference, they name the abundance of different ideas and narratives and the ability to opt for the source that correlates with

one's own views even if they are opposed to the position of the authorities. However, TV remains the second most important media for young people in Russia (50%), despite the fact that they associate it with Kremlin dominance and consider Russian TV too dull and forcefully imposing official agenda.

Older and lower-income respondents, especially residents of rural areas, are more likely to name TV as their main source of political information (5-6% above the average). Interestingly, only 31% of young Muscovites consider television an important source of information. The report concludes that there is no reason to believe that the Internet is replacing television, rather, the two media coexist and complement each other (FES, 2020).

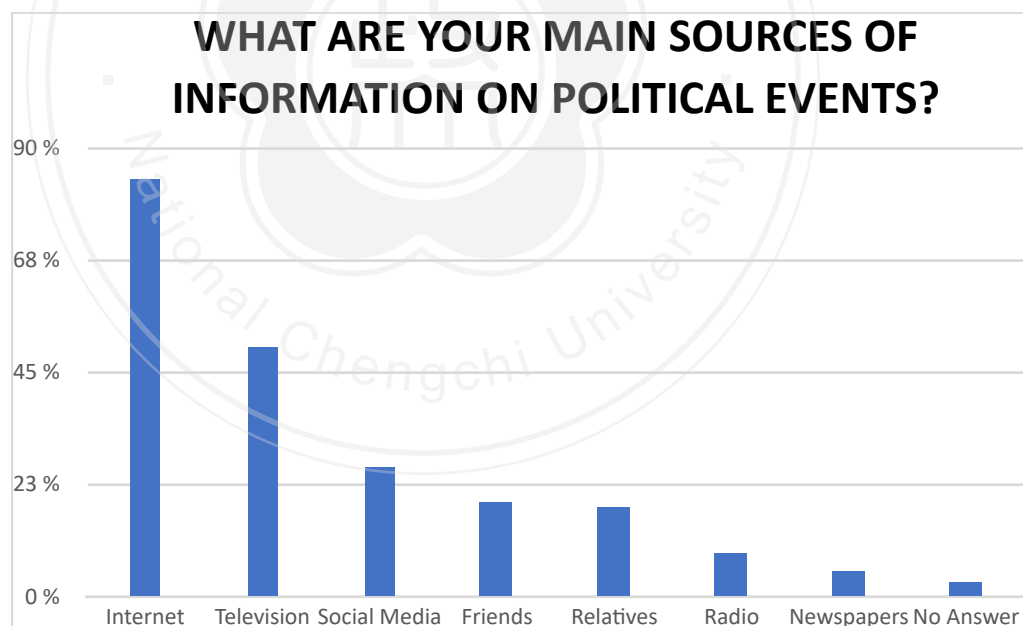


Figure 2. *What are your main sources of information on political events?*

(Source: FES, 2020)

In order to understand the Russian media environment, the theory of media ecology can be applied: a study of media as environments. In this theory, scholars are using terms and concepts from a different field of science (natural science) and use it in the context of media studies. According to media ecology, media are like species that live in the same ecosystem (Scolari, 2012) and interact with one another and with humans (McLuhan, 1964). In analogy to the natural environments, a new medium changes the balance within the ecosystem, therefore new technologies create environments that affect people who use them (Scolari, 2012).

Continuing this analogy, we can apply the concept of evolution to the study of media and communication: new media emerge and they fight for survival and sometimes become “endangered species” on the brink of extinction. However, McLuhan argues that media do not become extinct, rather, they evolve and adapt to survive in the context of the emerging new media (McLuhan, 1964).

In order to describe the modern media environment, Levison (1979) is using the term of punctuated equilibrium with regard to the evolution of media. Nowadays, new mediums are arising at an increasing speed. For instance, Telegram is gaining more popularity among Russian users due to its mechanisms of protecting the privacy and avoiding censorship. Telegram is a messenger app created by Pavel Durov in 2013 and used in many authoritarian countries as an encrypted communication channel.

However, over the past few years, Telegram evolved from a simple messenger into an independent media platform. Many famous Russian influencers, political leaders, and news agencies started their own Telegram channels: a hybrid format of a blog and a chat with a creator that a user follows. In this case, the concept of

hybridization can be applied describing the interpretation of one medium by another (Scolari, 2012; McLuhan, 1962): Telegram, which was initially created as a messaging app, now is being actively used as a source of news about politics, economics, cultural life, etc.

Many scholars see the modern media environment as a predator-prey interaction between new digital and traditional broadcast media (see Scolari, 2012; Levinson, 1979). This metaphor is currently used in relation to cinema and streaming services (Netflix, HBO Max, Amazon Prime), or television and the Internet. However, the situation with the latter is more complicated. YouTube audience is indeed increasing and the numbers of TV viewers are dropping but, according to Russian polls, many respondents opt for online platforms not because of the different content but due to the convenience of YouTube (available to watch at any time, in any place with Internet connection), and some of them, especially older respondents, watch the same shows that they did not have time to watch on TV (Levada, 2020). The situation is different with young people, particularly in the big cities like Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, or Ekaterinburg. They opt for the online video-sharing platforms (primarily YouTube) for their variety of content and opinion pluralism (FES, 2020).

2.2. Political Economy of the Russian Media

Most of the research in the field of the political economy of media and communication has been focused on the Western markets, taking the United States of America as the main point of reference. The present paper is contributing to the study of the political economy of the new media from the Russian perspective.

Wasko et al. (2011) argue that critical political economy is vitally important for interpreting the modern developments in the global system of capitalism and globalization of markets including communications and creative industries as the most crucial aspects of the global economy. They identify four typical aspects of the critical political economy approach to the study of culture and communication. First, they emphasize a holistic nature of the critical political economy approach as it is primarily based on the interaction between “economic practices and social and political organization”. The second feature of this approach is its historicity: political economists argue that the analysis of immediate events must be conducted through the lens of changes, developments, and events that happened over long periods of time. Furthermore, critical political economy mostly focuses on the organization and dissemination of culture and communications, and aims at creating a “good society” by promoting social justice and democracy, as opposed to economics that claims to be an objective science. Finally, critical analysis requires its researchers to adhere to the logic of their approach by acting to bring an actual change (Wasko et al., 2011)

Mosco (2009) provides an overview of the early development of research in the field of the political economy of communication. He defines the initial stage when the political economy of communication was established between the end of World War II and the early 1980s. Mosco also identifies three directions in which the political economy theories developed. The first is the North American region with Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller as the most prominent researchers in this field. Smythe’s central work is *Dependency Road*, a study of the US-led system of economic colonialism established after World War II and based on monopoly capitalism exemplified by the US dominance in the Canadian economy and media

sphere. In this book, he refers to Canada as the United States' "largest and most loyal colony" (Smythe, 1981). His other works include the theory of the audience as a commodity and studies of communication policies and practices in different parts of the world (Mosco, 2009).

Herbert Schiller's numerous works provided a definition of the political economy of communication and had an important impact on the development of this field both in the United States and worldwide. For instance, in *Mass Communication and American Empire* (1969), he follows the development of broadcasting in the United States including radio and television, and studies the relationship between private commercial networks that dominate the broadcasting market and governmental sector (Schiller, 1969). In *Information Inequality* (1969), he focuses on the impending issue of the "digital divide", the increasing gap in access to information linking it with the growing gaps in economic and political resources caused by the ongoing race and social class divides in America (Schiller, 1996; Mosco, 2009).

The second direction of the research in the field of the political economy of communication has emerged from European communication research. Here, Mosco emphasizes the work by James Halloran in Britain and Kaarle Nordenstreng in Finland who contributed to the research on the political economy of communication both in their respective regions and internationally by bridging Smythe's and Schiller's research on the United States and Canada to Europe (Mosco, 2009).

The third area of research in the field of the political economy of communication identified by Mosco is "the rest of the world" or "political economy approach to communication in the developing world" (Mosco, 2009). The main theories in the area are the modernization theory (Pasquali, 1967; Veron, 1967) and

the dependency theory (Beltrán, 1976). However, in this chapter, he mostly focuses on postcolonial world Latin American countries. In this research, I use the existing research framework on the political economy of communication and apply it to the Russian media environment. To that end, I focus on three specific areas in this research field: media ownership and its concentration, media bias and factors causing it, and censorship.

2.2.1. Ownership Issues

The scholarship in the field of the political economy of communication provides different approaches to the study of organization and ownership of the media. The debate about media concentration and ownership involves optimistic and pessimistic views.

The main proponent of the pessimistic view is Ben Bagdikian. In his book *The New Media Monopoly* (2007), he argues that there are five global media conglomerates that control the majority of the media outlets in the United States: Time Warner, The Walt Disney Company, Murdoch's News Corporation, Viacom, and Bertelsmann. The main feature of their ownership model is that they do not simply control one single medium but rather concentrate their ownership by having major holdings in all media spheres:

No imperial ruler in past history had multiple media channels that included television and satellite channels that can permeate entire societies with controlled sights and sounds. The leaders of the Big Five are not Hitlers and Stalins. They are American and foreign

entrepreneurs whose corporate empires control every means by which the population learns of its society. And like any close-knit hierarchy, they find ways to cooperate so that all five can work together to expand their power; a power that has become a major force in shaping contemporary American life (p.14).

He then links these recent trends in media ownership to the shift in the country's political life. For instance, policies that were previously portrayed as liberal by the American media are now labeled "radical" and "unpatriotic". Another issue emphasized by Bagdikian is that media mostly quote members of the ruling elites and neglect the voices of less powerful people. Finally, he refers to the young people as the "voices of hope" and notes that the unlimited and uncontrolled power of media conglomerates urged the younger generation of Americans to protest and create their own alternative media both online and offline (Bagdikian, 2007). Therefore, according to Bagdikian, the American youth is the main force for political and social change. Many activists and politicians in Russia share this point of view.

Djankov et al. (2003) hold a more optimistic view. In their study *Who Owns the Media?* they collect data on media ownership in 97 countries around the world and analyze them using two theories of government ownership of the media. The first theory examined by them is public interest theory which establishes that increased government presence in all aspects of social, political, economic, and cultural life enhances the welfare of the citizens.

According to the second theory – the public choice theory, government ownership over the media undermines democratic institutions as it enables authorities to manipulate and slant the narrative in order to strengthen the ruling regime and

preclude voters from making informed decisions. The theory emphasizes the importance of private and independent media in democracies as they provide an alternative point of view to help the citizens decide on candidates, parties, and policies. Another crucial aspect is competition between independent media outlets which leads to more unbiased and accurate news produced by the journalists. Furthermore, in modern democracies, the media play the role of the “fourth estate” stabilizing the checks-and-balances system.

Djankov et al. find that media around the world are mostly owned by the state or by concentrated private owners with the government ownership higher in less democratic regimes or autocracies. They argue that greater state ownership of the press leads to worse outcomes for the freedom of speech, political and economic rights of the citizens:

We found that countries with more prevalent state ownership of the media have less free press, fewer political rights for citizens, inferior governance, less developed markets, and strikingly inferior outcomes in the areas of education and health. <...> Government media monopolies are associated with particularly poor outcomes, especially when we focus on social outcomes, but we also saw some evidence that various outcomes deteriorate more generally as state ownership increases. Finally, there is no detectable evidence of any benefits of higher state ownership of the media (p. 29).

Finally, they conclude that all the above-mentioned arguments speak in favor of the public choice theory of media ownership re-emphasizing the significance of the free and independent media (Djankov et al., 2003).

Who Owns the World's Media by Noam et al. (2016) is a large and comprehensive study of media concentration and other ownership trends in different countries around the world. The book analyzes different media markets country by country in order to identify common features and differences among them. Their main conclusion is that empirical data is in favor of the pessimistic view on the media ownership trends in the case of the content media (media that produce content), and the optimistic on when it comes to the platform media (those involved in the distribution of already created content). However, nowadays, some media platforms combine these two functions. The most example of this can be Netflix, a platform that distributes the content produced by other studios as well as their own movies and TV shows. At the same time, the situation with the current level of media concentration is much more complicated and requires further investigation (Noam et al., 2016).

Another finding of Noam's study is that drivers behind media concentration are far beyond states, institutes, and interpersonal relations as the main reason are "the fundamental economics of media". They name seven main characteristics driving media concentration. First, media production usually requires high fixed costs. These are the expenses that remain constant regardless of the number of units produced. The marginal costs, that is, the cost of distributing the next unit, are typically lower. Therefore, "media content is typically expensive to produce but cheap to reproduce".

The second characteristic is the network effects of the media that involve individuals gaining profit while sharing information with each other. In the case of the platform media, bigger networks create more profit for those who use them, at the same time these networks become more valuable. Content media, however, benefit those users who share their content with others.

Third, the existing gap between the creation of content and its consumption leads to excess supply that influences the processes of marketing and styling of a product. The fourth economic driver of media concentration is price deflation as a result of price competition with low marginal cost. The fifth characteristic is the high risk of media combined with the high level of market competition.

The sixth driver is linked to the economies of scope followed by the synergies of technology in content production combining several lines of business for the sake of cost-efficiency. Finally, the seventh economic characteristic of media is the fact that information is a public good that is not easy to charge for. This leads to certain types of content being neglected by the public and as a result not produced by the media companies, which in turn urges the government to involve in order to ensure equal distribution of information (Noam et al., 2016). All these drivers have an enormous impact on the level of media concentration and thus influence information diversity, opinion pluralism, and equal access of all citizens to free and transparent media.

In the case of Russia, this hypothesis is supported by evidence of increased government control over the media narrative during the past decade. Voters have only one source of information about the political situation in the country with no place for an alternative point of view which in turn affects their behavior in the electoral process. Therefore, young people who are active internet users are searching for an alternative platform to express their political attitudes and change the status quo.

2.2.2. Media Bias

It is widely acknowledged that free media play a vital role in democracy as the main tool of the authorities' accountability providing voters with information about government policies and views and ideologies of candidates. Various theories on the political economy of communication show that the wide availability of information enables voters to make informed choices and control politicians more efficiently (Besley and Prat, 2006). However, in many cases, the quantity of political information may prevail over quality which leads to the emergence of different kinds of media bias.

The recent literature on the political economy of the news media shows that in poorly institutionalized regimes with low levels of political participation, independent media are more likely to be captured by the politicians. For instance, Besley and Prat (2006) in their study of the political economy of media capture develop “a model of democratic politics in which media capture is endogenous”. They argue that media can opt between two sources of income. The first is commercial, which is mostly audience-driven and comes from advertising, sales, and subscription. The second source is profits from collusion with the authorities which also comes in different forms – direct monetary payments (bribes) or a more subtle and indirect interference such as a political decision or legislation that benefits a certain company. The endogenous media capture in this model influences voters' awareness and therefore their voting behavior and strategy, linking media capture and government accountability (Besley and Prat, 2006).

The model of media capture developed by Besley and Prat provides a theoretical framework for the study of media bias. However, their work mostly focuses on the media bias caused by political capture. In reality, the media environment in many places and Russia, in particular, is much more diverse and complicated, therefore media bias can be induced by various factors.

For instance, Gentzkow and Shapiro build a model of media bias in which the primary focus is put on the media outlet's reputation for quality. In this model, media companies intentionally bias their reports towards readers' expectations and beliefs and thereby create an image of a trustworthy news resource. However, when readers have access to a media that provides post hoc verification of the real situation in the world, media companies have a weaker motivation to slant their reports, and the amount of bias in the media decreases as the likelihood of a post-factum evaluation about the information reported by a media improves. Therefore, their model anticipates less bias in reports with specific predictions and obvious outcomes, such as weather forecasts, sports matches, or equity returns, whereas, in contexts with less predictable contexts in which the results are only realized long after the report is made, more bias is expected. These contexts include war coverage, protests and demonstrations, controversial policies, or news about climate change, etc. (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006).

Dyke and Zingales (2003) explain the media bias by linking the journalist and the sources. To encourage a source to disclose information, the journalist provides a positive turn to stories to reward the source for the information provided. This positive spin should be stronger, the higher the demand for information about the

source and the more limited are the alternative sources of this information (Dyke and Zingales, 2003).

Another theory of media bias was developed by David P. Baron and is based on the personal bias of the journalists. Some reporters may have personal reasons to publish or not publish their news reports or provide a certain context or additional information to create bias. Such reasons may include preferences for influence or concerns about their career that may be damaged by publishing certain information. However, such concerns can be diminished by different factors such as professionalism and reputation as well as specific regulations established by the news companies (Baron, 2004).

In Russia, starting from the early 2000s, traditional media became subject to the capture by the incumbent politicians, namely Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party, and the concentration in the hands of government-controlled or politically loyal businesses (Gazprom-Media, VCTRK). At the same time, the number of media outlets that are directly owned by the state and receive significant financial subsidies from the government is increasing. Particular priority is attached to the state news outlets such as TASS and Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today) as well as the national public broadcaster VGTRK. Therefore, the Government of the Russian Federation acts as the main driver and decision-maker in the sphere of traditional media which in turn leads to an increased level of bias in the content produced by those media (Noam, 2016).

However, political capture is not the only factor that causes media bias in Russia. Reputation for quality is also of extreme importance especially for the independent media with small audiences and a high level of readers' involvement as

they face increasing pressure from the authorities and their followers. Personal bias is another essential factor due to the fact that many journalists in Russia have concerns not only about their careers but also about their life and personal safety.

2.2.3. Censorship

There are two major media conglomerates in Russia today: the first, Gazprom Media, belongs to the energy company controlled by the government; the second, VGTRK, was established and is directly owned and regulated by the state. Another big information network, Channel One Russia is also partially owned by the Russian government. Therefore, the absolute majority of all news media networks are under the direct control of the authorities. The rest are rather minor networks specialized in entertainment, such as movies, series, or comedy, and do not have political news or talk shows on their agenda (Noam, 2016).

At the same time, the few remaining independent media face an extreme amount of pressure from the government on both national and local levels. For instance, the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta (A New Newspaper) is constantly being subject to different attacks from unknown actors, none of which are ever investigated by the authorities. In March 2021, after their publication about numerous extrajudicial executions in the Russian region of Chechnya, Novaya's editorial office was hit by a chemical attack. In 2006, one of the leading investigative journalists Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead. Overall, since its establishment in 1993, six journalists from Novaya Gazeta were assassinated or died under unclear circumstances (Castells, 2013).

The authorities use all kinds of bureaucratic pressure on independent journalists and media outlets. If their publications do not correspond with the official agenda, the editorial office of a newspaper or a TV channel can be subject to an inspection by the fire department, or the public sanitation agency followed by the prohibition to operate in the office. Another consequence can be a visit of tax inspectors with an investigation on the company's "financial irregularities" (Castells, 2013). Hence, many Russian independent media relocate their headquarters to the neighboring countries: online news resource Meduza's office is located in Riga, Latvia. However, their journalists still have to work in the field all over Russia and very often deal with the government's pressure.

In June 2019, Moscow-based Meduza journalist Ivan Golunov was stopped and searched by the police officers who planted drugs in his backpack and claimed that they found more in his apartment. He was beaten and arrested which sparked a wave of protests in the Russian capital city. Golunov's lawyers and colleagues argued that the drugs were planted and all the charges against him were fabricated as a result of his well-known investigations of corruption in the Moscow government. These events were followed by the unprecedented solidarity and collective actions of support from the Russian media community, and mass protests in Moscow organized by independent journalists and opposition politicians - including Navalny who was arrested the moment he took to the streets. Faced with unprecedented pressure from the public, the authorities were forced to release Golunov and drop all the charges against him. The case was celebrated as a major victory of Russia's civil society, however, the question of how many other people all over Russia are imprisoned on false accusations remains unanswered (BBC, 2019).

The Echo Moskvy radio station is considered one of the most important independent media outlets in the country. It is well-known for its objectivity and openness for dialogue: the radio hosts regularly invite members of the ruling elite and the opposition leaders, cover anti-government demonstrations and rallies, corruption scandals, and other controversial issues. However, the station's objectivity and independence are compromised by the fact that it belongs to the state-run Gazprom-media and many journalists, including the head of Echo Alexei Venediktov, refer to it as "freedom of speech showcase" meaning that Echo Moskvy is under direct and constant control of the authorities and can be shut down at any moment (Noam, 2016).

Given the above-mentioned circumstances, the direct interference and management from the government are not necessary as the system is controlled by the mechanism of self-censorship: if a journalist wants to keep working in Russia, they have to rely on their own judgment and government's regulations on what is right and wrong. For instance, many independent politicians and journalists are not covered by the mainstream media: the name Navalny has been banned on Russian television for years. This is not a coincidence as well: according to the TV journalist Vladimir Pozner there is an informal blacklist of people who are not welcome to be invited and interviewed by the Channel One hosts:

For example, I know that there is a certain number of people whom I cannot invite, the Channel will not let me, Channel One buys my program, so, they have the right to ask: «Whom are you going to invite?» I believe that sometimes a journalist has to make

compromises to save the program or prepare the material
(znak.com, 2014).

Another mechanism that the Russian government is using in order to exercise pressure on the independent media is various legal tools. As mentioned before, the Constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees universal freedom of speech and bans all kinds of censorship. However, during the last two decades, the government passed several laws and regulations limiting the freedom of speech of Russian citizens on the grounds of national security and the fight against extremism (Castells, 2013).

The main legal basis for government control over the Internet and independent media is the so-called Sovereign Internet Law: a set of amendments to already existing laws on information and communication. The law obliges telecom operators to install state equipment at traffic exchange points for analyzing and filtering traffic (Deep Packet Inspection; DPI) within the country and communication lines crossing the Russian border. It also establishes the Russian national Domain Name System (DNS). The Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) is put in charge of a «centralized management» of the Russian Internet and has a right to restrict access to the websites banned in Russia (Epifanova, 2020).

Epifanova (2020) argues that the state's goal of implementing such laws is to become the main lever in regulating Russian Internet traffic. The «Sovereign Internet Law» provides the authorities with all the necessary mechanisms and tools to exercise surveillance on the internet users within Russian borders which is a violation of the basic human right to privacy. According to the law, the state also has the ability to prevent the dissemination of undesirable information, such as investigations on

corruption and other illegal activities of the elites. Furthermore, the amendment providing the establishment of the DNS could in theory separate the Russian segment of the internet from the rest of the world. In other words, it gives authorities the ability to isolate Russian cyberspace by building the analog of the Chinese Firewall, which would probably require the use of Chinese equipment and closer cooperation with China (Epifanova, 2020).

The 2013 Gay Propaganda Law is widely used by the authorities in order to silence civil society and human rights organizations: the law prohibits the dissemination of information about “non-traditional sexual relations” among minors. The prohibition of “gay propaganda” applies to information disseminated through the press, television, radio, and the Internet, in which relations between LGBT people are presented as normal or healthy (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Another set of amendments to the Russian Federal law provides labeling media, NGOs, and individual activists as “foreign agents”. The law about the NGOs - foreign agents was adopted in 2012 and applies to organizations that are engaged in “political activities” on the Russian territory: in “organizing and conducting political actions in order to influence the adoption of decisions by state bodies aimed at changing their state policy, as well as in shaping public”; and receive “money and other property from foreign states, international and foreign organizations, foreign citizens and stateless persons” (Federal Law N 121-FZ). The list includes organizations such as Memorial that deals with political repressions in the Soviet Union and modern Russia and promotes moral and legal rehabilitation of people who suffered from those repressions; as well as [Nasiliu.Net](#) (No to Violence) that fights

with domestic violence and supports people who experienced it. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) is also recognized as a foreign agent.

On November 25, 2017, as a response to the requirement of the US Department of Justice to register Russian media Russia Today and Sputnik as foreign agents, a new amendment to the Law on Mass Media was adopted, introducing the concept of a media - foreign agent. According to the new edition of the Law on Mass Media, the Ministry of Justice can label any media a foreign agent if it receives funding or property from foreign bodies or citizens directly or through Russian legal entities. As of March 2021, there are 12 media outlets in this list, including Meduza, VTimes, Voice of America, Radio Freedom, and its divisions in different regions of Russia (Federal Law N 426-FZ).

In January 2018, the Parliament adopted amendments providing for the recognition of individuals as foreign agents when they distribute materials to an unlimited number of people and receive foreign funding. Thus, journalists who work in the media already recognized as foreign agents in Russia can be labeled as individual agents. As of May 2021, this list includes 5 people: human rights activists, journalists, and artists. According to the law, foreign agents must register as such with the Ministry of Justice and indicate their status in all publications in the media and online (Federal Law N 481-FZ).

In March 2021, the State Duma adopted the law on educational activities, which is opposed by many scientists, bloggers, and authors of educational projects throughout the country. According to the text of the bill, the government will develop forms of control over the activities of people and organizations involved in education (Federal Law N 85-FZ). The text of the bill lacks a clear definition of "educational

activities”, so it is not yet clear which projects will fall under its influence. However, many educators took the amendments sharply negatively already as it can potentially affect all the content creators: journalists, bloggers, entrepreneurs (See Appendix 1).

The main feature of all the above-mentioned legislations is their flexibility and vague wording which means they can be used in a way that the law enforcement sees fit. And, as the Russian system lacks an independent and transparent judiciary, it becomes extremely difficult for the media, NGOs, and individual journalists to stand their ground.

2.3. Power Relationships and the Network Society

A wide variety of literature is dedicated to power relationships and their role in media production. For instance, Wolfsfeld (2011) among his five principles in political communication mentions the following one: “political power can usually be translated into power over the news media” (p.9). This can be explained by the fact that those in the higher ranks of power can influence the life of the society both domestically and internationally and therefore have more chances to get into the news. A president of a country will always receive daily news coverage regardless of his/her activities and relationships with the press. However, local politicians however popular they are in their constituency, may not be considered as newsworthy as a central government. This does not only apply to politicians and may include businessmen, companies, countries, and influencers.

Wolfsfeld (2011) describes the relationship between journalists and politicians as a “competitive symbiosis”. It is a symbiosis because media and political leaders need each other in order to achieve their goals: politicians need news coverage, journalists need something to write about. The competitiveness of this symbiosis lies in the desire of both parties to get the most from the other while giving back as little as possible.

According to Wolfsfeld (2011), the alternative way of getting into the news for weaker political actors is through “the back door”. The powerful politicians do not have to do anything and they will still be covered by the media but the “less important” actors have to do something deviant in order to attract journalists’ attention. In 2012, the Russian activist group Pussy Riot performed “A Punk Prayer” at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow as a sign of protest against Vladimir Putin’s 2012 re-election as a result of vote-rigging and massive electoral fraud. The group members faced criminal charges and received real prison sentences which attracted wide media attention and made them famous both domestically and internationally with Amnesty International labeling them as “prisoners of conscience”.

Another way to bring media attention to your cause according to Wolfsfeld (2011) is civil disobedience as a tool of expressing disagreement with a current political course without sacrificing the legitimacy of a movement. This can be exemplified by the peaceful protests in Belarus in the summer of 2020. The non-violent protests against the ruling regime of Alexander Lukashenko took place all across the country but were brutally oppressed by the authorities. However, even when police used violence against the protesters they would not respond in the same

manner, and pictures of this violence lead to a more sympathetic coverage by the independent media.

Generally speaking, these rules provide the powerful with constant coverage from journalists as they are seen as more influential and more important, and, therefore, the power in society is maintained and intensified by the news media.

However, today, the new media are bringing significant change into this equation as it gives the weakest groups the opportunity to convey their message and be heard by a wider audience. Wolfsfeld (2011) names political movements as the main beneficiaries of these changes as new technologies provide them with the potential to increase their membership and resources but it does not necessarily mean that the new Internet media will bring all the underground political movements on the political scene. It is still extremely hard for independent political movements to have a real impact on politics. This is true for both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Alexei Navalny has managed to mobilize his numerous supporters by creating a network of regional offices all over the country, the FBK corruption investigations attract millions of viewers on YouTube who become more sympathetic with the cause of the movement. Recently, he even appears on state-run television even though the coverage is predominately negative. However, it remains difficult for his political movement to have a direct influence on elites and their decisions as the government controls the repressive machine of the law enforcement and can influence the public opinion using state-run media as a tool of political propaganda which the new media are trying to break but they may not be strong enough to actually outweigh the agenda on the mainstream media.

In conclusion, Wolfsfeld argues that to some extent digital media brought a significant change to the relationship between political and media power. However, they are still struggling to challenge the mainstream media, plus, the authorities also have the ability to use new media to achieve their political goals. Therefore, the powerful still have more influence over the political processes and the news agenda (Ibid, 2011).

Castells (2013) also focuses on political power, even though in his definition, politics is only one dimension of power. He argues that humans' thoughts and emotions determine their individual and collective actions and thus the power to shape the human mind is the most crucial form of power. This is the fundamental hypothesis of his book *Communication Power*. Power relationships within society are based on the "business of media and the politics of state" and are the main force shaping mass communication. According to Castells, on both micro and macro levels, power is rooted in the authority over communication and information. He provides the following definition of power:

Power is the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor's will, interests, and values. Power is exercised by means of coercion (or the possibility of it) and/or by the construction of meaning on the basis of the discourses through which social actors guide their action (Castells, 2013).

He points out coercion as an important source of power, however, insufficient to establish a socially institutionalized power — domination. If a government is aiming at imposing its rules and regulations on society and its institutions, it needs to

consolidate society over the existing order using persuasion or by instilling fear or some degree of tolerance towards the regime.

One of the most essential concepts in Castells' theory is the network society which is "a social structure constructed around (but not defined by) digital networks of communication". The rise of the global digital network of communication brought a significant change to the balance and the power relationships within the society. In the network society, power is exercised through the operation of socialized communication which includes all the content forms embedded in multimedia as well as different from interactive communication enabled by the emergence of the Internet.

According to Castells (2013), power is asymmetrical meaning that one actor will always have more influence over the other. However, there can be no unlimited power of the powerful over the weak. Power relationships can always be questioned or resisted by those subjected to this power. Therefore, at least some degree of consensus is required in order to legitimize the existing order (political regime).

Castells (2013) argues that the historically established sources of power over society - violence, discourse, coercion, persuasion, political domination, and cultural framing - remained the same and have not changed significantly over time. The most fundamental change happened in the ground where power relationships operate; from single units to networks, articulating between the global and the local. Despite the diversity of power relationships within networks, one form of exerting power is common to all networks: exclusion from the networks.

He identifies two ways of exercising power that are specific to the global network society: switching and programming. Switching involves the ability to organize a common cultural interface, create a common language or medium,

providing support of a universally accepted exchange value (money). The networks programming capacity relies on the ability to create, disseminate, and alter the discourses that shape the public mind and action with the use of socialized communication:

Resisting programming and disrupting switching in order to defend alternative values and interests are the forms of counterpower enacted by social movements and civil society - local, national, and global - with the difficulty that the networks of power are usually global, while the resistance of counterpower is usually local (Castells, 2013).

In Russia, the networks of power are mostly national, and the counterpowers that are trying to challenge it are usually regional or local. This can be exemplified by the case of Nasiliu.Net (No to Violence): an NGO fighting domestic violence which is a very urgent and controversial issue in Russia, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization is involved in a set of different activities aimed at supporting the victims of domestic abuse including legal and psychological help, work with abusers, and educational activities. Nasiliu.Net has its own online media aimed at raising awareness of the scale of the problem with domestic violence within the country. The head of the organization Anna Rivina also participates in the advocacy for the adoption of the federal law on domestic violence. The organization can be considered local: their office is located in Moscow where they can provide victims with targeted aid. However, the scale of their educational work and their fight for new legislation reaches far beyond the Moscow region.

Nevertheless, the message and the objectives of the organization do not fall in line with the conservative ideological framing of the family relationship and the so-called «traditional values» that are actively imposed on Russian society by the authorities. Therefore, the proponents of the law on domestic violence have to face opposition from the conservative majority in the government and parliament as well as the Russian Orthodox Church. In December 2020, [Nasiliu.Net](#) was labeled a foreign agent, which means that the NGO cannot participate in political activities including initiating the legislation. In February 2021, the Ministry of Justice drew up a protocol for the organization for violation of the law on foreign agents. According to the Ministry, the organization's support for the law on domestic violence and their petition to criminalize abuse within the family are considered political actions and contradict the law on foreign agents. In 2021, they were forced to leave their office in Moscow and pay a fine for a law violation (Time, 2021).

As this case shows, the independent actors are not strong enough to challenge the dominating power in the society and are only able to exercise their influence locally. The “traditional values” discourse created by the Russian elites together with the Orthodox Church is still capable of shaping public ideologies and affect their action which shows that the powerful are still in control of public minds.

2.4. Smart Voting as an Internet-Mediated Voting Tactic

Existing literature on the effect of new media on voters' behavior assumes that the traditional media may be replaced by the Internet which in turn may influence voter turnout and the results of the elections at all levels. However, the extent of this

effect varies, for instance, Liebowitz and Zentner (2009) find that the crowding-out effect of the Internet on television viewing in America is different in every age group. Thus, the effect is most evident among young Americans but shows no impact on the TV consumption of senior US citizens.

The main benefit of the Internet over the traditional media that affects voters' behavior is its ability to provide direct and fast access to information and avoid editorial filtering which leads to another issue. According to Sunstein (2007), the increasing consumption of the news on the Internet may cause wide fragmentation and ideological polarization within the society threatening the foundations of democracy. Therefore, he suggests that "people should be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance". Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of common experiences as a way to facilitate mutual understanding among citizens in order to address social problems more effectively (Sunstein, 2007).

Digital media can play a significant role in protest participation as shown in Enikolopov et al. (2020). They study social media penetration (namely – VK, the most popular social media in Russia) and its effect on the protest activity in Russia in 2011 caused by massive fraud during State Duma elections. It is worth noticing that the founder of VK Pavel Durov did not express any political affiliation, however, during the 2011-2012 protests he was pressured by the FSB (Federal Security Service) to ban oppositional content and expose users who share anti-government posts. In 2013, he claimed that FSB had demanded access to personal information about Maidan protests participants in Ukraine. Finally, in 2014 he sold his share of the company, quit his position as a CEO of VK, and left the country as "unfortunately, it is impossible to do Internet business in this country".

Enikolopov et al. (2020) conclude that online media consumption had an impact on both the spread and the size of the protest activity in Russia in 2011. However, their data shows an increase in support for the government due to the wide use of social media. This is explained by the fact that “social media-induced protest activity by reducing the costs of coordination rather than by spreading information critical of the government (Enikolopov et al., 2020).”

Campante et al. (2013) analyze the impact of broadband internet on political participation in Italy: a country with a relatively strong democratic tradition but strongly monopolized media that belong mostly to the government or big private owners. They find that the effect that access to the Internet has on the political activity of the citizens varies according to the time period and type of political activity. When it was first introduced, high-speed internet had a decreasing effect on turnout in national parliamentary elections between 1996-2001 and 2006-2008. However, this result was significantly reversed in the 2013 elections. The authors attribute this to the increased abstention of ideologically extreme voters. Meanwhile, they document an increase in other forms of online and offline political engagement, namely the emergence of the local grassroots protest groups. Thus, the diffusion of broadband internet is beneficial to different online-based political movements as it turns them into real electoral force (Campante et al., 2013).

However, the results of their research are not universal and not applicable to the situation in Russia despite the fact that the structure of media ownership in Italy is similar to the Russian one. The crucial difference is a political regime: there is no strong democratic foundation in Russia. Moreover, there is an evident tendency towards authoritarianism and concentration of power in the hands of the incumbent

president. Therefore, online political movements leaning towards opposition have much more limited political force and influence as they face constant pressure from the authorities and are not allowed to participate in real elections.

Smart Voting is entirely based online — it has a website, an IOS/Android App, and a Telegram channel. When they register, the users need to leave their permanent residence address and email (to receive the name of the candidate they have to support in their constituency, plus the newsletter about the progress of SV), as well as some personal information, such as age and gender (for statistics). Before the election, all the registered users will receive an email with all the information on the candidate who is most likely to win over the United Russia candidate.

Smart Voting is actively promoted by Navalny and his entire team. All the corruption investigations, streams, blogposts, tweets, etc, end with a link to the Smart Voting website as the only way to defeat the United Russia which they usually refer to as “the party of swindlers and thieves”. They also encourage their supporters to share the posts with other people, especially the older generations who may not have access to the alternative sources of information. Starting from May 2021, as a result of the increased pressure on Navalny and his supporters, they urge people to follow the Telegram channel or download the app as the website may be banned by the authorities which already happened to most websites related to Navalny (votesmart.appspot.com, 2021).

The advantage of Smart Voting over all the previous oppositional campaigns in Russia as well as its potential flaw are the candidates that Navalny and his team select and promote among their followers. The majority of them are from the so-called “systemic opposition”: the parties represented in the State Duma which are de jure

oppositional, but de facto loyalist (i.e. the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and A Just Russia party). Thus, the candidates from those parties are allowed to participate in the elections but are very likely to support all government initiatives.

Smart Voting was launched in November 2018, almost one year before the 2019 Russian Regional Elections Day. During the first 24 hours, more than 95 thousand unique users visited the website with over 409 thousand overall views. Furthermore, 33,227 people filled the form and 25,645 confirmed their email addresses. The last two numbers, that represent the conversion rate, are specifically unusual for Navalny and FBK: 33% of people who visited the website were willing to join the campaign and fill a very long data collection form with 27% completing the entire registration procedure. Those were the biggest numbers in the entire history of FBK and other Navalny's projects (Navalny, 2018).

There have been two Smart Voting campaigns so far: 2019 and 2020 Regional Elections. In an interview with online media Znak.com, Navalny's campaign manager Leonid Volkov revealed some numbers about the results of 2019 Smart Voting. According to his data, around 20% of Muscovites followed the recommendations sent to them by FBK during the 2019 Moscow Duma election (Moscow City Parliament) and more than 300,000 people visited the website to check the recommendation. At the same time, only 2% of voted supported the project in Tatarstan. The reason for this, as stated before, is a significant difference in media consumption across various regions of the Russian Federation, plus residents of the big cities (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Ekaterinburg) tend to vote more for the opposition rather than people living in the province.

According to Volkov, another reason could be the unwillingness of Navalny's supporters to leave their personal information in the Smart Voting system, or only one member of the family registers but all of them vote according to the recommendation. There is an option to visit the website on the election day to see the candidate that a person needs to support in his/her constituency without registration. Thus, only 100,000 people registered online but 300,000 voted in line with Smart Voting. Volkov concludes that the number of people registered to vote "smart" is a significant but not the only exact indicator of the campaign effectiveness (Znak.com, 2020). Moreover, in July 2021, after all the sanctions imposed on Navalny's resources by the Russian government, a new feature of Smart Voting was introduced: now the users do not have to register and leave their personal information if they use the app or the Telegram bot.

Golosov and Turchenko (2020) analyze the effectiveness of Smart Voting in the Saint Petersburg municipal election, the findings are the following:

1. Voters did vote according to the Smart Voting (SV) recommendation
2. SV support gave a candidate an additional 7% of the vote
3. Candidates supported by the SV performed better than the ones without SV support
4. SV did reduce the United Russia electoral results (Golosov and Turchenko, 2020)

In a year (2019-2020), the number of voters who registered on the Smart Voting website doubled (from 7% to 14% nationwide) (Znak.com, 2020). According to FBK, increased attention to the project has been recorded in the weeks leading to

the elections due to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny during one of his campaigning tours in one of the key regions of Siberia. He collapsed during his flight to Moscow from the Siberian city of Tomsk and spent more than two weeks in a medically induced coma. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed that he was poisoned with a Novichok-type nerve agent, and Navalny himself openly accused President Putin of the assassination attempt in order to remove the threat Smart Voting is posing to the United Russia Party in the upcoming State Duma elections.

On September 13, 2020, FBK used Smart Voting for the second time. According to their official statistics, they supported 1171 candidates in 39 regions of Russia. In a number of regions, United Russia lost many mandates, and, more importantly, lost its majority in three large cities: Novosibirsk, Tomsk, and Tambov. Some of them were not from the systemic opposition: Sergei Boyko, coordinator of the Novosibirsk staff of Alexei Navalny, became a deputy of the city council of Novosibirsk, and in Tomsk, staff coordinator Ksenia Fadeeva and a staff member Andrei Fateev received mandates in the city duma. In both Tomsk and Novosibirsk, United Russia has lost its majority in the municipal assembly, which opens the way for political competition and a potential victory over the ruling party in these cities.

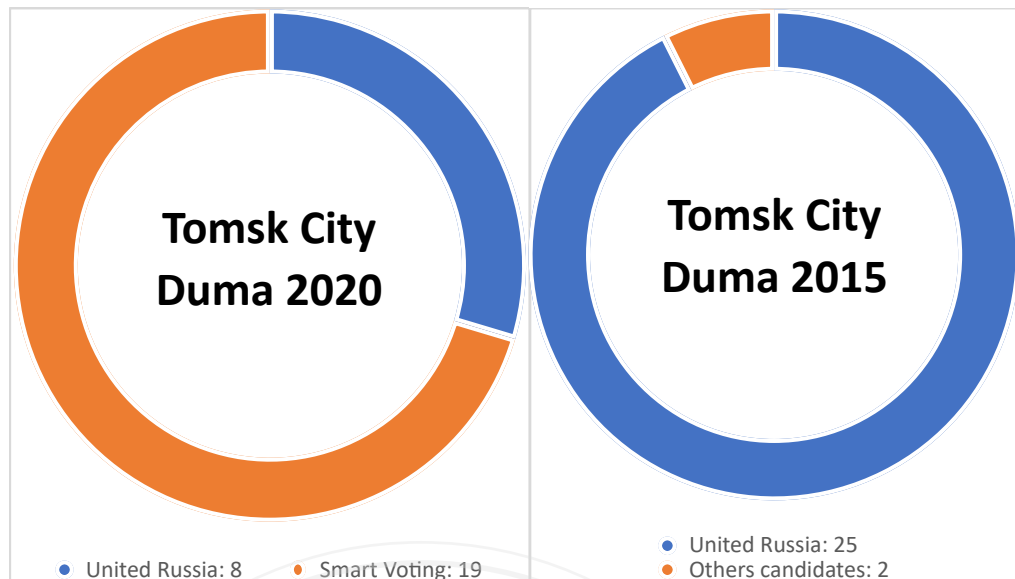


Figure 3. *Tomsk City Duma election results* (Source: votesmart.appspot.com)

However, the Smart Voting strategy has its flaws and discrepancies. As mentioned before, many candidates supported by the SV are from the systemic opposition and belong to the corrupt regional authorities. For instance, the SV candidate in Novosibirsk Rostislav Antonov is a member of a right nationalist group that was involved in the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine (Echo of Moscow, 2020). The controversial results of the 2020 campaign elicited mixed reactions from both supporters and opponents of Alexei Navalny. The majority of tweets and Facebook posts (around 80%) express support for the Smart Voting campaign: people posted pictures of their ballots with captions encouraging others to come and “vote smart”.

The main concerns of the people who were against or cautious about Smart Voting are first, the numerous election frauds that make all the efforts of Navalny’s team meaningless, and second, the quality of the candidates supported by the SV. Therefore, Smart Voting can only be effective in constituencies with at least some

degree of transparency and the rule of law, otherwise, the whole procedure is simply impossible.

In his blog post about the results of the 2020 campaign, Navalny addressed all these concerns by stating that there is practically no alternative to Smart Voting, notwithstanding its numerous issues: “Normal parties are not registered. Normal candidates are not allowed to participate in elections. Let's start with at least the first step: we will try to deprive United Russia of the majority in those places where it is objectively supported by a minority of the population, even at the expense of a cowardly systemic opposition. You will see, after getting more votes, they will stop being so cowardly”.

Thus, the assumption is that in a situation where a person can only be elected to a higher office if he/she shows his/her support for the policy of the ruling authorities, the candidate has no other choice but to follow the existing rules. However, if the situation changes and a person gets more freedom to express his/her views freely without being threatened to lose the post, he/she may start acting differently and bring significant change to the balance of power within the system.

2.5. Summary of Reviewed Literature

In this chapter, I have reviewed the existing literature on different aspects of the political economy of communication, media ecology, power relationships, and the effects of media on the voting behavior of citizens. All the sources mentioned in the present literature review provide a theoretical basis and context for further research.

Nowadays, Russian Media exist in the neo-authoritarian system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian people were optimistic about the emerging democratic system and free media. However, under Vladimir Putin's rule, the government started to gradually crack down on democracy and freedom of speech which eventually led to the media system strictly controlled by the authorities with few remaining independent media that face with constant pressure.

The existing studies on Russians' media consumption assume that there is an ongoing trend for increasing usage of online media across all age groups. However, television remains the most utilized media, especially among senior citizens.

According to the media ecology theory, new and traditional media interact with each other as preys and predators do in the natural environment. This metaphor is widely used in relation to television and the Internet. Nevertheless, the studies show that there is no reason to believe that television is going to be replaced by new media. They are more likely to coexist as television may evolve and adapt to the changing media environment.

The situation with media usage is rather different among urban youth as they do not consider television or other traditional media important sources of information

and opt for internet-based resources, such as social media, streaming services, or messengers due to their convenience.

In the next section, the research on the political economy of communication is reviewed, with the focus on three specific aspects of it: media ownership, media bias, and censorship.

Several studies show high levels of media concentration around the world: most of them are owned by the state or by big media conglomerates. Greater government ownership of the media is more typical for authoritarian or hybrid regimes and eventually leads to the deterioration of freedom of speech and other democratic foundations of society. In Russia, the government has been consistently concentrating ownership over the media for the past two decades. As a result, the Russian state exercises almost unlimited control over most legacy media. This is one of the reasons why younger citizens prefer new media as an alternative platform with a relatively low level of censorship.

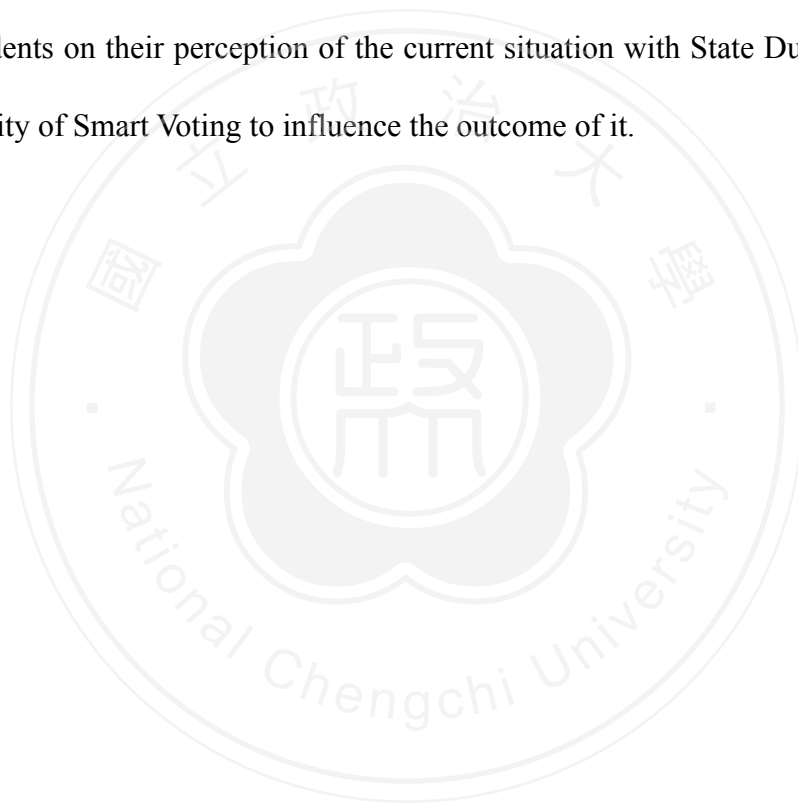
Political capture of traditional media is also an important factor contributing to media bias. Nowadays, most of the traditional media outlets are owned by the state — directly or through politically loyal businesses. Consequently, the Russian government becomes the main decision-maker that influences the content produced by the media in question. The power over the main sources of information also gives the authorities the ability to pressure independent journalists and different online media platforms. The state's control over the media agenda is also supported by legal tools that limit the freedom of speech and impose censorship on all media outlets in the country.

It is evident that the dominant power in the Russian media environment is the state, and, therefore it can widely influence the media production in the country. The news media intensify the power of the elites in all regime times, as the powerful attract more media attention. Therefore, the wider public can use alternative ways to promote their agenda, such as civil disobedience. Some studies argue that new media can give more power to the underrepresented members of society, however, they are still not capable of challenging the traditional media. Moreover, power is asymmetrical (Castells, 2013) which is why one agent will always have more power over the other but the balance of power can always be questioned or altered.

Finally, the studies on the effects of digital media on voters' behavior demonstrate that they are beneficial for grassroots, internet-based political movements as new media can provide these movements with real electoral potential, which is exemplified by the case of Smart Voting. The initiative is entirely online-based and functions under severe pressure from the authorities. Nevertheless, Smart Voting manages to change the outcomes of regional elections by depriving the ruling party of the majority in local parliaments.

The upcoming State Duma election in September 2021 is going to be the first federal election since the establishment of the Smart Voting platform and an opportunity for Navalny's team to test its effectiveness at a national level. However, the situation has changed dramatically with Navalny being in prison and all his closest allies prosecuted by the authorities and not allowed to participate in elections. Moreover, after two Smart Voting campaigns, the government is better prepared to face it: many independent candidates are being banned from joining the election, many experts expect mass falsifications and other violations of the law.

Therefore, the questions is whether Smart Voting is going to succeed in these circumstances, especially now that Navalny is imprisoned. It worked in regional election in 2019 and 2020 but will it still has to challenge the United Russia's dominance in federal parliament (State Duma). Without Navalny and without the local offices it will certainly be much more difficult for his team to mobilize the protest electorate all over the country as they are facing with the increased amount of resistance from the government. Thus, in this research, I am going to ask my respondents on their perception of the current situation with State Duma election and the ability of Smart Voting to influence the outcome of it.



3. Research Questions and Methods

3.1. Research Questions

Based on my research motivation and the backgrounds of this study, I propose the following research questions:

RQ1. *How do young Russians utilize digital media in their political activities?*

RQ2. *How do young Russians perceive Smart Voting's potential to change the political situation in Russia?*

RQ3. *Why do young voters decide to support the Smart Voting candidates?*

3.2. Research Method

The qualitative research methods are applied in this study in order to identify the main features of the Russian media environment and the effects of the emerging new media (Smart Voting in particular) on the balance of power within the existing system.

First, I am analyzing the existing literature on the political economy of communication as the main theory I use in this study and apply it to the existing media system in Russia. Second, the media ecology approach is used to examine the impact of the new media on the Russian media environment. The next section presents a review of the literature on the issues of media bias and media ownership in the context of an authoritarian regime with a low level of public political participation. Finally, I focus on the effects of digital media on citizens' political behavior including their protest activity and electoral participation.

Another method utilized in this research is in-depth interviews with people who used Smart Voting to express their political views. In qualitative studies, interviewing is one of the most efficient ways to receive the necessary data directly from people involved in the phenomena under study. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research method where small groups of participants are interviewed individually on their views, perspectives, and opinions. The main advantage of interviews over other ways of collecting data from respondents, such as polls and surveys, is that they provide a researcher with more detailed information and allow them to see an issue in question from different perspectives (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

The structure of qualitative interviews varies; from a completely unstructured conversation with no predetermined questions to a highly structured interview where all the questions are carefully planned in advance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the purpose of this research, I utilized semi-structured interviews as they allow the participants to express their opinions freely without interruption from an interviewer but at the same time stick to a predetermined topic of a conversation.

In this study, I utilized a snowball sampling technique to recruit the interviewees. The first participants were selected from friends and acquaintances whose views I am familiar with. I conducted a poll in my Instagram Story asking my followers who are mostly my friends and family on whether they participated in the Smart Voting or are willing to participate in the next campaign. The ones who agreed were asked to participate in this study. The first participants were asked to invite their friends, colleagues, or classmates to take part in these interviews. The main difficulty I faced while looking for participants is that not everyone is willing to publicly share

their political views even though their anonymity was guaranteed. Many people feared that the authorities would somehow find out that they participated in this study.

All the interviewees are Russian citizens aged 19-26 and residing in urban areas. Nine of them currently live in Russia while the other four moved abroad. Out of thirteen participants, eight identify as male, and five as female. The main criteria I applied while searching for interviewees is that they should be aged 18-30 and be a participant, or be willing to participate, or somehow support the Smart Voting. The interviews with those living in Taiwan were conducted in person, others were interviewed via Telegram and VK. There was no remuneration provided.

No	Age	Gender	Education	Residence	Family	Ethnicity
11	26	Male	Master (pursuing PhD)	Moscow	Father is a businessman, mother is a psychologist	Russian
12	24	Female	Master	Elista (capital of the province)	Both parents are engineers, mother is retired	Kalmyk
13	24	Male	Master	Moscow	Both parents are state security workers	Russian
14	25	Female	Bachelor	Moscow Region	Father is a police officer, stepmother works in regional ministry of education Mother and stepfather are businesspersons	Russian
15	24	Male	Master	Saint Petersburg (lives in Taipei)	Upper-middle class, parents involved in business	Russian
16	24	Female	Master	Elista	Mother is a doctor in a state hospital, father is a businessman	Kalmyk
17	24	Female	Bachelor	Moscow (lives in Tbilisi, Georgia)	Parents are involved in private businesses, father used to be army officer	Russian

No	Age	Gender	Education	Residence	Family	Ethnicity
18	23	Male	Master	Ekaterinburg	Parents are involved in private businesses	Russian
19	23	Male	Bachelor	Saint Petersburg	Mother is a state worker, father is a businessman	Russian
110	23	Male	Bachelor	Saint Petersburg (lives in Brazil)	Parents work in private businesses	Russian
111	18	Male	Bachelor student	Vladivostok (lives in Moscow)	Mother works in private business	Russian
112	19	Female	Bachelor student	Moscow	Father is a businessman, mother is a housewife	Chechen
113	20	Male	Bachelor student	Moscow (lives in Taiwan)	Both parents work in private businesses	Russian

Figure 5. List of participants

Prior to the interviews, all the participants received the interview invitation letter (see Appendix 2) in order to provide them with information on the purpose of the present research, interview guidelines, and a list of exemplary questions. All the interviewees were ensured that their responses to the questions would be kept confidential as each interview would be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

All the interviews were conducted in Russian via Telegram and VK (Russian messaging and social networking apps). Each conversation took 30 to 40 minutes depending on the participants' willingness to give detailed responses. The interviewees were asked questions on the political content they consume and their political activities, both online and offline, as well as the political views within their social circle and whether they argue with those they do not agree with politically.

They were also asked to reflect on what in their opinion is the best way to influence the political situation in Russia and whether Smart Voting is a better alternative to all the previous attempts to challenge the existing regime. Furthermore, we talked about Alexei Navalny and his importance in the Smart Voting campaign. Finally, they were asked to talk about their personal information and background (age, education, place of birth and residence) as well as their family's occupation and political views.

However, some questions were altered or added during the interview process depending on the responses given by the participants. For instance, some of the interviewees reflected on their identity (ethnicity, gender) and how it impacted their attitude towards the ruling regime and the political activities they participate in.

3.3. Reflections and Positionality

It is widely acknowledged that a researcher's background and position in society have a direct influence on the way they approach, conduct, and interpret their research. Ormston et al. (2013) argue that one of the main characteristics of qualitative research is "a reflexive approach, where the role and perspective of the researcher in the process are acknowledged" (p. 4). Being aware and reflexive about our social identity provides us as researchers with a tool to analyze the social reality around us and our participants as well as power relationships embedded with it through the lens of lived experiences of researchers and their participants thus helping us reduce bias in the research process. Therefore, I find it crucial for my work to identify and explicitly articulate my positionality and its impact on my research.

My reflexivity with regard to this research is based on the Social Identity Map provided by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019). The map is aimed at visualizing and analyzing how various facets of a researcher's social identity can influence or challenge their work as well as their interaction with participants of the research. The Social Identity Map includes three tiers:

Tier 1: broader aspect of social identity (class, citizenship, race, gender, age, sexual orientation)

Tier 2: how aspects from the first tier affect their lives

Tier 3: further details/interpretations

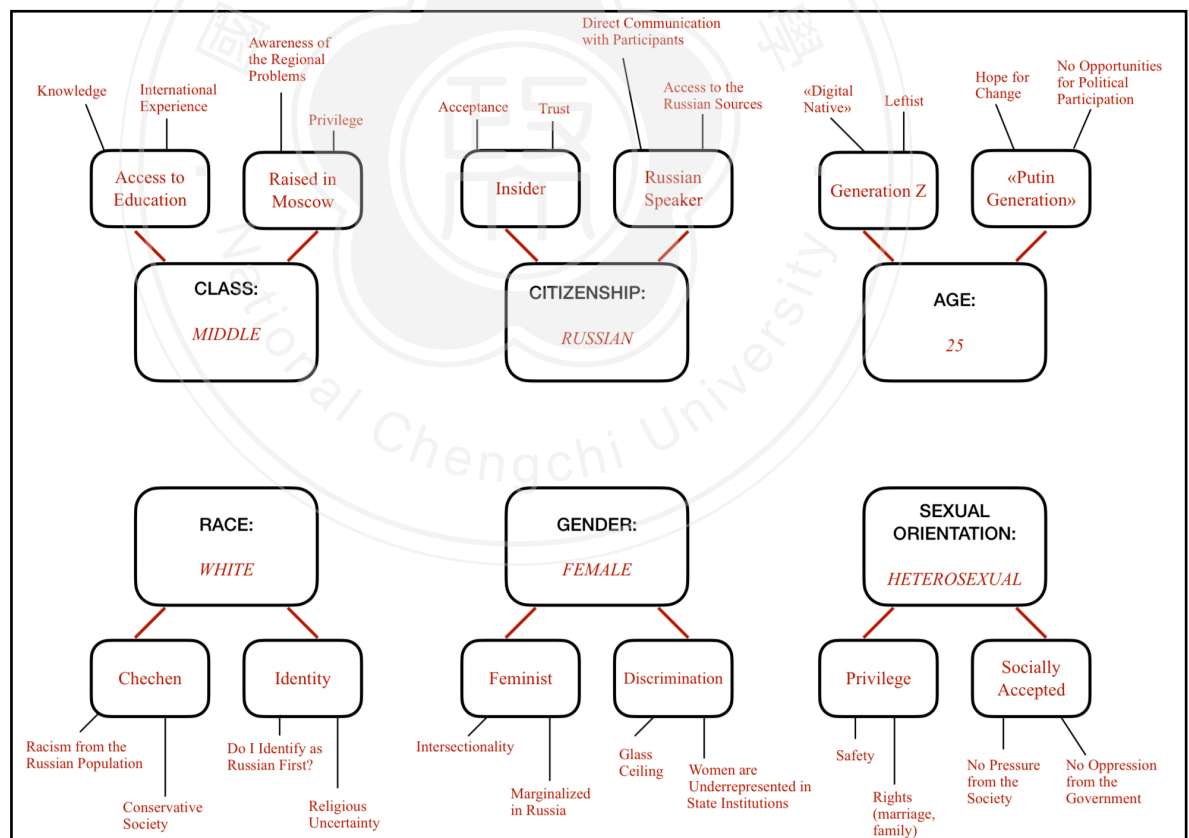


Figure 4. Social Identity Map (based on Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019)

All of the aspects included in my social identity map (see Figure) have a direct influence on how I as a researcher collect data, choose my methods and research design, communicate with participants and analyze and interpret my findings. Therefore, positionality can be considered a research tool (Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019). However, it is important to emphasize that positionality is never predetermined but rather depends on the context and surrounding condition as our views and values change over time (Holmes, 2020).

One of the most important debates in the researcher positionality discourse is the insider-outsider perspective. These two terms refer to the position of a researcher as an insider or an outsider to the society, culture, or the environment being studied. Generally, insider positionality is usually defined as an emic perspective as opposed to an etic account of an outsider. However, Holmes (2020) argues that these ontological positions are not fixed and both insider and outsider can operate from an emic or etic position (Holmes, 2020).

There are several advantages of a researcher being in an insider position. First, having a priori knowledge of the society under investigation provides a researcher with a deeper understanding of an issue and the ability to ask more thoughtful and sensitive questions and describe the reality in a more authentic and precise way. Second, an insider researcher may enjoy more confidence from their participants and thus receive more direct and sincere answers (Geertz, 1973). Finally, being a native speaker gives a researcher the ability to directly communicate with participants and better understand the slang language and non-verbal cues (Holmes, 2020).

However, being an insider to the culture under investigation may bring several disadvantages. First, the researcher may be overly sympathetic to the object of

investigation or have an unconscious bias towards it or tied by tradition and custom which in turn may preclude them from covering controversial topics and asking more sensitive questions. Second, an insider may not be able to see a broader picture as sometimes they lack the ability to approach the situation from an external perspective. Third, the participants may assume that, as an insider, the researcher is well aware of the issue under investigation and thus not articulate the facts that are presumably obvious to both parties but crucial for the research (Holmes, 2020).

However, all the above-mentioned factors are not predetermined and do not lead to one position being more advantageous over the other. Rather, depending on the research objectives and perspectives, the disadvantages can be viewed as advantages and vice versa (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this work, I approach the issue from an insider perspective, which is why it is crucial for me to be reflexive about my position in this research. As a Russian citizen, I am well aware of the situation in the Russian media environment and all the freedom of speech issues in the country. I also have a deep understanding of the political, economic, and social crises the country is facing at the moment. I am deeply sympathetic with the cause of Alexei Navalny and his team as well as all the independent journalists and activists struggling under the increasing amount of pressure from the authorities. However, being reflexive in the research work also means trying to avoid possible biases and conflicts of interest, that is why I want to explicitly state that my positionality as a Russian citizen and an insider as well as my personal views and attitudes will not affect or distort the research process and the results of the present study.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Media Consumption

All respondents (13) named the Internet their main source of information, including political news, and none of them mentioned any traditional media: TV, radio, or press. When asked about traditional media, two interviewees mentioned that they only watch television for entertainment (sports or late-night comedy), and several watch independent TV channel Dozhd (also known as TV Rain) but only online (Twitter, YouTube) as it is not available on the federal television.

Two people said they use news aggregators on the daily basis: for international news, they search in Google, and they go to Yandex for news about Russia. 12 out of 13 participants mostly use social media to learn about the events in Russia and the world. However, I3 (24, male), a journalist from Moscow, noted that he only uses news aggregators as he believes that social media are for entertainment.

10 respondents read news through the Telegram channels: a microblog that is not based on the algorithm and is designed as a chat; if there is a new publication, a subscriber receives a notification. Most of the interviewees praised Telegram for its respect for privacy and information security. Moreover, 7 interviews for this research were conducted via Telegram as the participants considered it the safest and most convenient option.

8 interviewees use VK to read about politics in Russia. VK, or V Kontakte (Russian: “in contact”) is a Russian social media founded by Pavel Durov as a Russian equivalent of Facebook. The interviewees mentioned that they use “VK publics” to read about the politics in Russia. A public is a group where a creator,

whether it is a person, a group of people, or a media shares posts with text, pictures, or videos. Thus, most of the respondents follow official “publics” of different media or individual journalists.

YouTube journalism is very popular among Russian Net users, especially younger ones. 10 participants frequently use YouTube but for more analytical content. They watch interviews with politicians, activists, and other popular people who talk about politics, news reports and opinions, and more educational content on history and politics. For instance, 4 respondents mentioned Maxim Kats — a journalist and a politician who makes daily videos on different issues in Russian and international politics. Other 5 said that they were frequently watching Yury Dud’s channel. He is a famous journalist who interviews both the opposition politicians and members of the ruling elite he also makes documentaries on issues such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia or political repressions in the Soviet Union.

7 participants use Instagram both as a source of news about politics in Russia and a tool to spread information about issues they find important. Only 3 people mentioned Twitter and one (I2, 24, female), a master student from Elista, said that she follows journalists and influencers on TikTok.

The most mentioned media was Meduza: 10 out of 13 respondents follow it and read regularly. Meduza is an independent online news agency, available on various platforms in Russian and English: Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, VK, etc. Meduza also has an app for IOS and Android devices, and three interviewees use it daily. Others follow it on different social media (mostly Instagram and Telegram).

5 respondents said that they watched Dozhd (TV Rain) on Youtube regularly or follow it on different social media platforms. The other 3 said that they watch it occasionally or when they need some specific piece of information that is only available there. Apart from the above-mentioned sources, the respondents also read local news or the news from their particular municipality, follow journalists whose opinion they trust or whose views correlate with theirs. Two of the female respondents mentioned the feminist agenda in their feed and said that they follow several feminist influencers and read closely about the issues such as domestic violence and violence against women, gender inequality, etc.

One of the main reasons why the interviewees prefer online sources of political information is their mistrust of the information delivered by the state-controlled traditional media (especially television). Most of them said that at least some of their family members would watch political shows on federal television which the respondents consider “pro-Kremlin propaganda” (I12, 19, female). I1 (26, male), a PhD. student from Moscow, said that he does not want to watch state TV because his grandfather watches it every day and “that is already enough”. I2 (24, female) justified her preference by the fact that online sources provide her with information that is “relevant and important” for her. I5 (24, male), a master student in Taiwan, thinks that it is harder for the authorities to limit the freedom of speech online. He noted that there is a lot of fake information on the Internet, but “with time you can learn how to detect it”. I6 (24, female), a recent university graduate from Elista, praises Internet media for the opportunity to see the situation from different perspectives:

Even if you support the ruling regime, it does not mean that you should only watch and read pro-Kremlin media. Even though I mostly follow opposition channels, I still visit official state media or watch state TV in order to understand their point of view. Sometimes I even read state propaganda. (I6, 24, female)

However, she emphasized that she does not watch state television because they report the events that happen in Russia in a one-sided manner to fit the official agenda.

I8 (23, male), a master student from Ekaterinburg, prefers to read the news on the Internet because online media provide their sources and you can always check on them. However, with media like TV and radio, there is no opportunity to check the credibility of the information they provide. I11 (18, male), a university student in Moscow, when asked about why he prefers online media over television and radio, answered with “Who watches television or listens to the radio in our modern world?” and referred to TV as “propaganda and lies”. I12 (19, female), also a student from Moscow, said that federal television is “unbearable and impossible to watch” and that she does not understand how her grandmother watches it every day.

Another reason why the participants prefer new media over traditional ones is their convenience and the ability to watch “whatever you want whenever you want” (I2, 24, female). I3 (24, male) thinks that the Internet is more convenient than television because “you don’t have to watch ads and adapt your schedule to the programming of a certain TV channel”.

The participants’ responses to this set of questions clearly show the trends in the media consumption of urban youth which correlate with the results of studies

presented in chapter 2. All of them use digital media in their day-to-day activities, including reading political news. None of the participants mentioned newspapers, they referred to TV and radio as something old-fashioned and unnecessary in the digital age. This demonstrates that most of the young urban citizens do not trust the government and the narrative it imposes on the Russian citizens via traditional media channels.

4.2. Online Activities and Discussions

Most of the respondents (10 people) express their political views publicly on social media or offline. I1, I2, and I8 said that the main reason behind their unwillingness to share their dissent with other people is fear of repressions from the authorities:

After they started putting people in jail for likes and reposts, I decided to stop: I don't write comments, don't like anything.

(I1, 26, male)

I used to be very vocal about my political views on social media. But now I only post occasionally on my private pages on Twitter or Instagram for my close friends and family.

(I2, 24, female)

I am a silent type, I don't like to express myself publicly, and, I will be honest, maybe there is a bit of fear: what if I post something and this time I will have the Sword of Damocles hanging over my head?

(I8, 23, male)

However, the majority of interviewees do share their opinions on political events in Russia at least occasionally. Some of them have concerns about particular platforms, such as VK. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the founder and former CEO of VK Pavel Durov left the country after he was pressured by the FSB (Federal Security Service) to reveal personal data of VK users who participated in protests in Russia and Ukraine and sold his share of the company to mail.ru group, a company loyal to the Russian authorities. Therefore, many users fear that their privacy may be threatened as VK is now obliged to provide the police and the FSB with users' personal data.

For instance, I5 (24, male) is an Instagram influencer and prefers to share his opinion on Instagram rather than VK. He used to post about politics there but then stopped in order to “get out of harm’s way”. Because he has more followers on Instagram (his account is bilingual because he has subscribers from Russia and many other countries), and because posting on VK is not safe, he thinks that “it is not appropriate to post for a small audience and risk your own freedom”.

I10 (23, male) is a student in Brazil. He writes his own posts on VK and shares everything that Navalny and his team post online. He does not share the concern about VK as he believes that “a repressive state has limited resources, they cannot put everyone in jail”.

I6 (recent university graduate from Elista) and I12 (student from Moscow) follow news about politics closely and actively express their point of view on social media:

Even though I don't have thousands of followers, I still share information that I find important for other people to see.

I6 (24, female)

Many people tell me that they learn about certain news and events from my Instagram. I think that even though my page is pretty small, with only a couple hundred followers, I still contribute somehow.

(I12, 19, female)

I6 mentioned a recent case she was extremely concerned about and shared on her social media pages: the “Protect Our Veterans” movement that she saw many of her friends from university sharing online. This movement was forcefully imposed on her friends as they were told to share posts about veterans on their social media pages by their university administration. I6 was outraged and found this movement hypocritical as the veterans in Russia “live miserable lives” and some of them “don’t even have access to gas and clean water”. She also believes that the only reason behind this movement was the trial against Navalny over his alleged libel against a veteran.

I3 and I11 do not express their political views online because they do not find it helpful or necessary. However, their motivation is different. I3 (24, male) works in RT International, a Russian state TV channel, and although his views are different from those of his company management, he prefers not to share them online because he thinks it does not make any sense:

I don’t see any point in expressing my political views on social media because people in the government, the members of the ruling elite do not care about what you write about them online, and they don’t even know how to use the Internet.

(I3, 24, male)

I11 (18, male) used to be a volunteer for Navalny's regional office, thus, he is has strong opposing views. However, he prefers not to post about his views on social media as he thinks it is for "show off" and "real actions are much more important".

All participants discuss politics in personal conversations as they believe it is safer than sharing their opinions publicly. Although they prefer to talk about the political issues in Russia with like-minded people, most of the interviewees (12 out of 13) are open for discussion with people who do not share their point of view.

I1 (26, male) is willing to talk about politics with different people even if they have opposing views because he finds it "interesting". I3 (24, male) is ready to discuss the political situation in Russia in personal conversations but he does not try to persuade anyone. I4 (25, female), an architect from Moscow Region, has many arguments with her friend who has more "right-wing" views than herself. I5 (24, male) tries to communicate with different people even if he strongly disagrees with them:

If you only talk with like-minded people, you will find yourself in a "bubble" where it seems like everyone agrees with you, this is why it is extremely important to hear an alternative point of view.

(I5, 24, male)

I6 (24, female) talks politics with everyone who reacts to her Instagram Stories or publications on social media. If they disagree, she is ready to discuss but will not impose her point of view on others or try to change theirs.

Many respondents talked about their political arguments with family members. Thus, I7 (24, female) lives in Tbilisi, Georgia but whenever she visits her family back in Russia, she argues with her father regularly. He is a strong supporter of the current

regime, and she has more opposition-leaning views. She tries to discuss politics with her father and provide facts and arguments, however, he “does not take her seriously”. The same applies to I12 (19, female). Her grandmother watches a lot of state television and “believes everything they want her to believe”. Whenever I12 tries to argue with her, she says that “she’s older and knows better” and does not accept her granddaughter’s arguments.

I2 (24, female) used to be very active and vocal about her political disagreements on social media. She also argued with her opponents on Twitter. Eventually, she burnt out and stopped debating with people who do not share her political views because she thinks it is pointless and she will never be able to change other person’s opinion on the situation in Russia. Many respondents mentioned the argument widely used by the older generations and actively imposed on Russian citizens by the state propaganda: “if not Putin, then who?”.

Therefore, the responses given by the interviewees demonstrate that all of them are vocal about their political views at least to some extent and the majority express their disagreement with the current system publicly on their respective social media pages. Despite some degree of fear, they are trying to spread awareness and perhaps even educate some people who may not have access to alternative sources of information.

4.3. Political Participation and Impact

All interviewees expressed their willingness to participate in the political life of their country in one way or another. All of them participated in offline political

activities and the majority (9 out of 13) go on protests at least occasionally. However, not everyone has the ability or the opportunity to do it actively.

For instance, I2 (24, female) had to move to her parents' house far away from the major cities due to the pandemic, and, therefore, has very little or almost no opportunity to join protests. So she believes that the best option for her in this situation is to donate to different NGOs, such as FBK and OVD-info (an organization that supports political prisoners). This way she can help people in big cities where protests are larger and people can actually be heard. She thinks that the most effective way to influence the situation in Russia is to combine both online and offline efforts of Russian citizens:

Of course, it is very important to spread information and support activists and protestors with likes and shares. But at the same time, we have to continue offline activities, such as peaceful protests, because only combined effort can bring real change.

(I2, 24, female)

I3 (24, male) prefers donating to different organizations and media that fight for freedom of speech and democracy in Russia: FBK, OVD-info, Meduza (a media that was labeled a foreign agent and lost all the sponsors, and now relies only on donations). He noted that for a number of reasons, he cannot participate in protests, thus, he considers donating the safest and the most effective option in his situation. Nevertheless, he names mass protests as the most effective way to change the political situation in Russia in general:

I think that protests are a double-edged sword. If it is a large-scale movement, then it can actually change something. But if there are no

crowds, the effect is the opposite: the authorities see that their actions do not face resistance from the public, and they can continue doing whatever they want.

(I3, 24, male)

I4 (25, female) does not believe in the effectiveness of protests. She recalled 2011 mass protests in Moscow caused by Parliament election fraud and Vladimir Putin's decision to run for another presidential term and emphasized that "nothing really changed since then, or maybe even got worse". However, it does not mean that citizens should protest because "we can do little things". She gives an example of Ivan Golunov's case when public attention and indignation saved a journalist from prison (see Chapter 2). The other two respondents also mentioned this case as an example of public pressure on the authorities that leads to change.

I5 (24, male) and I7 (24, female) named fear the main factor precluding them from actively expressing their political dissent. As any young man in Russia, I5 is subject to military service, which is why he avoids any direct confrontation with Russian authorities:

This is one of the reasons why I am in Taiwan and not in Russia right now. We all know these stories when young guys were caught by the police during protests and forcefully sent to the army even though they had legal reasons not to. This is why it also seems hypocritical to encourage other people to join protests as I don't do it myself.

(I5, 24, male)

He believes that in his case, the most effective thing to do is online activity: he donated to FBK and victims of political repression; he also tries to spread information

through his Instagram page because “some people really don’t know what is going on in the country”.

I13 also lives in Taiwan but tries to “all he can” to support the protest back home, including donations, shares and reposts, and petitions. He even tried to vote online during the last election but failed due to technical issues.

I7 (24, female) also avoids public offline activities. She lives in Georgia and only visits Russia once or twice a year. The last time she was in Moscow, the mass protest demonstrations happened there. However, she did not participate:

I am a pessimist: all these activities are important as they attract more people to the cause but I don't think that all this can radically change the situation in Russia. This is why I left and don't want to return. I fear the Russian state.

(I7, 24, female)

I10 (23, male) also left Russia and moved to Brazil but due to personal reasons. However, before his moving, he actively participated in Russian political life, both online and offline. Starting from opposition politician Boris Nemtsov’s assassination in 2015, he has been regularly joining peaceful protests in Saint Petersburg. Now he tries to compensate for his inability to participate in online activities by helping friends who got arrested during protests, spreading information, and donating money. He thinks that any kind of involvement is important but offline participation is crucial because “apparently there is no other way to get rid of this regime”. He also believes that “woke people” should encourage others to participate by providing a personal example which is why he is vocal about his disagreement with the current political situation in Russia.

I6 (24, female) is involved in all kinds of political participation: she is very active on the Internet, sharing issues she is concerned about with her followers and signing online petitions. She also donates money to FBK and OVD-info and joins protests:

I think that, most importantly, we should spread awareness and educate people, and, of course, vote. The more people participate in the election, the fairer and more transparent the outcome will be.

(I6, 24, female)

She believes that protests are important because they can attract attention to a certain issue. She notes that for now, not enough people take to the streets but with time more and more will learn about the real situation in the country and it could lead to real changes.

I8 (23, male), I9 (23, male), I12 (19, female), and are all active citizens who participate in protests, elections, and other political events. I9 mentioned that he visited a meeting of the New People party meeting in Saint Petersburg but has not decided whether he wants to join them. He also tries to educate himself on politics by visiting different lectures, discussion clubs as well as spread information and educate other people, encourage his friends and family to join the protest movement, however “people are too scared and not willing to participate”. I8 also believes that protest is a most important tool of political pressure on the government and even though he understands the danger of going, he still goes and urges others to do so. I12 (19, female), a bachelor student from Moscow also joined protests but she was “scared and outraged by the amount of police violence”.

I11 (18, male), a university student in Moscow, calls himself “a hardcore dissident”. He worked in Navalny’s local office in his hometown Vladivostok, participated in protests, and helped to organize them. He believes that “only mass protest with real resistance can actually change something” but Russian people are not ready to act for change.

Based on the responses given by the interviewees, we can conclude that they are all willing to participate in their country’s political life but due to a number of reasons, not everyone can actually join protests or donate money. One of the main constraints is fear to be arrested, physically abused, or put in prison. Therefore, all respondents are ready to do more but in a safer environment.

4.4. Navalny and Russian Youth

All the respondents expressed a positive attitude towards Alexei Navalny. 10 out of 13 would vote for him if he ran for a high office, two were hesitant, and one said that he would not.

I3 (24, male), a journalist from Moscow, thinks that as a phenomenon in Russian politics, Navalny and his team are a positive change:

Somehow they managed to mobilize the opposition movement and change how people in our country perceive corruption.

(I3, 24, male)

He also notes that a big advantage of Navalny’s political movement over all the previous ones is its transparency and accountability to his supporters (who are also his sponsors). He praises Navalny’s personal courage and readiness to stand his

ground in debates with his opponents. Overall, his attitude towards him is rather positive, and he supports his movement “as a sign of protest”. However, he believes that Navalny’s rhetoric is populist and he has no actual agenda:

He only criticizes and does not propose anything, and I don't think he's capable of actually doing anything. This why I probably wouldn't vote for him.

(13, 24, male)

I5 (24, male), a master’s student in Taiwan, is a strong supporter of Alexei Navalny and follows him on all social media platforms. He closely watches FBK corruption investigations and supports all the initiatives started by Navalny and his team.

I don't believe that he is a foreign agent or does something illegal. I think he's doing the right thing and I would like to see what would happen to Russia if he could come to power.

(15, 24, male)

I6 (24, female), a recent graduate from Elista, also said she would vote for Navalny because she finds his views more modern. She tried to read different sources to see different opinions about him but after his poisoning the situation became clear:

I admire him as a person: what he does and is not afraid to do it. I am really worried about his health and well-being. I think he shouldn't have returned, he should've stayed there (Germany), in safety.

(16, 24, female)

Many respondents talked about admiration, his bravery considering the situation with his alleged murder, return to Russia, and the following arrest:

I think that he is a hero. I really admire him.

(I8, 23, male)

He is a nice guy. I am sure that if he came to power, he would make Russia free and happy.

(I11, 18, male)

Some interviewees said that they had doubts about Navalny and many criticized him for populism. I1 (26, male), a PhD. student from Moscow, thinks that everything that happens to Navalny is very unclear: “What if he really is an agent? Of the West, of Kremlin”. He also thinks that Navalny is a populist but adds that everything that all the events that happened upon his arrival to Russia are “a public execution” and that he condemns the Russian government for what they have been doing to him.

I2 (24, female) is not sure whether she would vote for Navalny. She would definitely consider other candidates and read through their political programs. Although she does not support Navalny completely, she still thinks that he deserves to run for the office:

It doesn't matter whether I support him and share his views. He is being heard by the millions and this can help to get the situation off the ground. This is enough for me. And maybe in the future, there will be more worthy candidates.

(I2, 24, female)

Apart from populism, some interviewees mentioned Navalny's early remarks that some of them consider hate speech. For instance, I12 (19, female), a university student from Moscow, is not ethnically Russian: her father is from a small ethnic group in North Caucasus, she expressed concern with some of his nationalist statements:

I know that he said all those racist things years ago, and he probably changed a lot since then. But if you look at his presidential program you will see statements about visa regimes with Central Asian countries and "stop feeding the Caucasus". My family is from the Caucasus and we are also Russian citizens.

(I12, 19, female)

She then added that she started trusting him more after the poisoning and that whatever his views are, how the government is treating him is unacceptable. She also said that she would probably vote for him but only after a thorough reading of his political program.

However, I11 (18, male), a bachelor student in Moscow, argues that Navalny's racist and sexist statements are the things of the past, and that they are used by his opponents in the government in order to paint a negative picture of him:

I used to be far-right myself and I'm not proud of this. But now I hold more left-wing views. People change and this is a good thing.

(I11, 18, male)

I7 (24, female) has a rather positive perception of Navalny: she sees him more like "a symbol of hope that Russia has a chance to become free". She is hesitant about whether she would vote for him if he was running for office as she does not know

what his actual political agenda is but then added that maybe she would do more research in order to understand Navalny as a politician.

Overall, most of the respondents praised Navalny for his courage and honesty, even though some of them have doubts about him or do not support him politically. They also think that he has a more modern, “western” approach to politics:

He is a Russian European; he has some common sense.

(19, 23, male)

I know him; his views are close to mine; he even shaped my views in some way. And after all, we don't have that many people to choose from and he's the most active one.

(110, 23, male)

Based on the responses, it can be concluded that the overall attitude of the interviewees towards Navalny is positive, even though they criticized his early racist statements and redundant populism. Many young people in Russia see him as the only alternative to the existing regime mostly because there are mostly no opportunities for wider political participation. Therefore, they put all their hopes for “beautiful Russia of the future” in one person — the one who speaks their language, understands their needs, and communicates with them using their tools.

4.5. The Impact of Smart Voting

All interviewees are familiar with Smart Voting, however, they lack a clear understanding of the electoral system in Russia and their respective regions. Several respondents failed to name the latest election in their constituency. The majority (9

out of 13) learned about Smart Voting from Alexei Navalny's social media (mostly YouTube, Instagram). The others read about it in the news, 3 people mentioned Meduza as their source.

The participants from Moscow and Saint-Petersburg "voted smart" at least once, people from other regions registered on the website but did not have the opportunity to vote due to some technical issues, age limitations (they were under 18), or the fact that several regions were not covered by Smart Voting in 2019-2020. However, all of them expressed willingness to participate in the Smart Voting campaign during the 2021 State Duma election in September.

I1 (26, male), a PhD. student from Moscow, is the most aware of the election process in his constituency. He "voted smart" during the Moscow Parliament election in 2019. He did not know anything about the candidate before she was recommended to him by the system because the government only wants to push candidates from the ruling United Russia party. The Smart Voting candidate from his municipality got a seat in the Parliament and this is why he believes that the initiative is working. He still follows her career in Moscow Duma and sees that she "participates in discussion and actually tries to do something".

Speaking about challenges and possible obstacles to the success of Smart Voting, I1 pointed out that in certain constituencies, all candidates can be from the ruling elite, "so you'll have to choose the lesser evil". Another problem of the campaign, according to him, is that it mostly covers young people who would not vote for United Russia in any case. He argues that the most thing Navalny and his team should do is campaigning among Putin's electorate — older people from the province, especially pensioners.

I3 (24, male), a journalist from Moscow, also voted for a Smart Voting candidate during the Moscow Parliament election. He learned about the campaign from Navalny's YouTube channel which he watches regularly. He also was not familiar with the candidate and only supported them because of Navalny's recommendation:

But that is the point of Smart Voting: you don't have to know the candidates in order to support them.

(I3, 24, male)

I5 (24, male), a master student in Taiwan, found out about Smart Voting from Navalny's social media and immediately registered on the website when it was first launched in 2018. He then voted for a candidate recommended by the program in Saint Petersburg municipal election in 2019 and urged his entire family to do so.

I6 (24, female), a recent graduate from Elista, did not have a Smart Voting candidate in her constituency. However, she closely followed the campaigns in other regions and is eager to participate in the 2021 State Duma election. In 2018, she was a civil observant at the Presidential election in her region and she was shocked by the fact that most of the registered voters in her polling station "did not even bother to show up".

She believes that the strike of voters initiated by Navalny in 2018 was a mistake and finds Smart Voting the best alternative to all the previous election campaigns from the opposition:

Over the last 10 years, United Russia completely monopolized power in the country at all levels. And monopoly in any form is harmful to society. Smart Voting allows different candidates to bring

an alternative point of view to the Russian political arena, and I think it is a positive change.

(I6, 24, female)

I2 (24, female), a master student from Elista, is subscribed to Navalny and FBK newsletter and this is how she learned about SV. At first, she did not pay attention to the initiative but after she received an email with 2019 results and saw that independent candidates got the seats in regional parliaments and in some regions, United Russia lost its majority, she decided to join the initiative. Now she is registered herself, plans to participate in 2021 and tries to spread information about Smart Voting.

I used to go and vote blindly: I did not know those politicians, I only knew that I did not want to support the candidate from United Russia. Smart Voting gives me an opportunity to use my vote effectively and not waste it.

(I2, 24, female)

Some of the respondents expressed their concern with the idea of Smart Voting as it contradicts the idea of democracy. For instance, I3 (24, male) has been following Navalny for several years and can compare Smart Voting with the previous election strategies, and he thinks that it is the most effective one. He named the government pressure on FBK and Navalny combined with election fraud the main obstacles to the success of this years' campaign. However, he was worried about the ethics of SV:

If you think about it, SV is actually scary: you vote as you are told to, without thinking. But in these circumstances, we do not have any alternative, so maybe Smart Voting is the best option.

(I3, 24, male)

I11 (18, male) used to be a solid supporter of Alexei Navalny; he even volunteered for his office in Vladivostok. However, he pointed out that after they launched the Smart Voting campaign, he became slightly disappointed in Navalny:

Smart Voting is the complete opposite of democracy because Navalny's team decides whom you should vote for. Even if it is effective, people should think for themselves and make that decision on their own.

(I11, 18, male)

Nevertheless, he noted that during the next election, he will look at all candidates and consider all options, including Smart Voting, in order to make the most informed decision possible but it most certainly will not be Vladimir Putin or the United Russia party.

Generally, the respondents named the same problems Smart Voting will face in the next campaign is first of all massive election fraud all over the country which is very difficult to prevent and combat, especially in remote areas of the country and at the federal level election.

Our people do not vote and our government is using this to manipulate the election results.

(I6, 24, female)

The second issue the participants were concerned with is the choice of candidates. I4 (25, female) pointed out that Smart Voting allows “random people” to become government officials but according to her anyone is better than the current MPs because “they’ve been there for too long”. I5 (24, male) also sees the problem in

the candidates' selection as most of them are from the systemic opposition and will not be able to do anything after being elected to the parliament because of their dependence on the ruling regime. I8 (24, male) is afraid that the candidates selected by Smart Voting would be "even crazier than the ones from United Russia".

Another problem according to the interviewees is the pressure from the authorities on Navalny and his team. I3 (24, male) predicted that the government would try to outlaw FBK and other organizations under Navalny's name which might discourage people from supporting them and their initiatives including Smart Voting. I6 (24, female) believes that the state propaganda will try to "scare people off: look, if you do not obey, you will repeat Navalny's destiny".

Nonetheless, many respondents emphasized that the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and the following events might attract more sympathy from people and they would be more willing to participate in the next Smart Voting campaign in line with the 2020 campaign.

Overall, the participants see Smart Voting as a compromise and a temporary measure, inevitable in the existing circumstances. They also perceive it as the best alternative to all the previous election campaigns initiated by the non-systemic opposition. The general attitude towards Smart Voting is positive: all respondents confirmed that they would consider the candidate proposed by Navalny's team in the next election.

4.6. Reflections

As I was conducting my interviews, I have noticed the main common feature among all my respondents: they are responsible citizens who are well aware of the political situation in their country but they do not have much hope left. People of my generation and younger spent their whole life in this regime with only one president ruling the country for over 20 years. The ruling regime has been systematically eliminating any opposition: in politics, media, education, civil society, and other fields so that it would seem that there is no alternative to the existing leadership. As a result, many young people do not see any prospect for the future of their country.

During my interviews, I asked the participants to reflect on whether certain facets of their identity affected their political views or their attitude towards the ruling regime. Interestingly, women were more reflexive about this rather than men. Thus I2 (24, female) that being Kalmyk which is a non-dominant ethnic group in Russia has clearly affected her values and attitudes towards the Russian government. During the Soviet Era, Kalmyks were affected by Stalin's repressions and forced to move from the places they lived in for generations. The same happened to the ancestors of I12 (19, female). Moreover, both of them mentioned that there is still racism present in the Russian society, and because they look different from the majority of Russians, sometimes they face misunderstanding and rudeness from their fellow citizens.

I12 also talked about how the Chechen war affected the lives of her closest family with her father not being able to go home to see his parents or too scared to give his own children Muslim names due to the rise of Russian ethnic nationalism in

the late 1990 — early 2000s. All this had a great impact not only on their personalities but also on their view of the regimes and governments and politics in general.

I6 (24, female) shared that her gender identity made her interested in politics. As a woman, she is deeply concerned with gender inequality in Russia especially regarding domestic violence. That was the first political debate she was involved in, followed by feminism, gender equality, and a wider range of political issues.

Many respondents mentioned social class as the important factor affecting their media consumption and political views. All of them are members of the lower- to upper-middle class which means that they have access to higher education and alternative sources of information. I12 (19, female) said that she was aware of her privilege and a fact that many people in Russia are not as privileged as she is. She also noted that due to her educational level she has the ability to read the news in different languages which inevitably “gives you the access to a wider variety of opinions and a more objective view of the world”. I5 (24, male) is from a highly-educated academic family with both parents having degrees from several prestigious universities and had an opportunity to live in different countries such as Australia and the UK. He thinks that a high level of education and the experience of living abroad are the main reasons behind his family’s political views as they were able to “see life in developed countries and compare it to how people back home live”. However, also emphasized that this is a privilege that the majority of Russians do not have.

Another aspect my respondents reflected on was the generation gap that to some extent is caused by the different media consumption habits as well as the political regime they grew up in. The biggest gap is between my respondents’ generation and the generation of their grandparents. Older people, born soon after

World War 2 and spent their whole life in the Soviet Union receive all the information on politics and other issues via traditional media, primarily television. They were taught to believe that if anything is on television, it is most certainly true because, in the USSR, TV was a tool of state propaganda informing the views and values of the citizens. The majority of my interviewees mentioned that their grandparents regularly watch political talk shows on state television with aggressive anti-western rhetoric and no critique of the president, government, and the ruling party.

Therefore, the most vulnerable social group is people from 55 years old and above, that is, pensioners who live in small towns. Firstly, they are subject to television propaganda, and secondly, when asked about the reasons for such a bad economic situation, they do not accuse the political leadership of the country, they blame Western sanctions, currency fluctuations, and falling oil prices. From this perspective, naturally, anti-Western sentiments are increasing. In this case, the Western countries are accused of all problems, including domestic ones.

However, young people who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union tend to use more diversified media channels that are mostly located online. During my interviews, when asked about their sources of political information, the respondents only named digital media. When I explicitly asked them about traditional media outlets such as radio, newspapers, and television, they would reply rather ironically, implying that no one is watching TV, reads papers, or listens to the radio anymore. First, it is not convenient. Second, they know that the legacy media are controlled by the state and they do not trust it. All this only widens the gap between the two generations.

I have had numerous conversations, arguments even, with my grandmother whom I have already mentioned earlier in this paper. We argue about politics a lot. The baseline is, I claim that her sources are wrong, she claims that mine are. I think that she is brainwashed by the official propaganda, she thinks that I am brainwashed by the Internet. In my opinion, this is how we benefit the existing system because this is what they want us to do: argue with each other and not participate in political processes. As long as young people believe that their family is brainwashed into voting for Putin and do not go to polling stations because their votes do not matter, we are not going to move from this deadlock.

Generally speaking, the data on media consumption from my interviews with Russian urban youth correlates with what is described in chapter 2. All of the respondents do not trust traditional media outlets, especially television as they believe it is a tool of government propaganda. It also correlates with the global media consumption trend, although the level of distrust of television is relatively higher among Russian young people. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Internet has become an alternative to television and other traditional media outlets but only for one social group — young people living in urban areas.

The participants are also well aware of the situation with the media ownership in Russia which was described earlier in chapter 2. Many respondents noted that the control over the media agenda is concentrated in the hands of very few persons from the government or closely linked to it, and, therefore, all the information provided by these media is biased as they slant their reports in order to fit the state agenda. They further emphasized that they fear government censorship and the fact that the authorities can have access to their online activities.

In the literature review, there is a reference to Wolfsfeld (2011) who argues that the news media intensify the misbalance of power in society as they provide the powerful with constant coverage and make the minorities or weaker groups look meaningless and less important. He also points out that the political movements benefit the most from the development of technology and the emergence of new media. This hypothesis can be supported by the responses given by the participants of this study. Many young people praise Navalny for his ability to create a wide political movement in a country with an authoritarian country and severe freedom of speech limitations. The respondents also noted that all the achievements of this movement are due to the fact that it is internet-based and thus, difficult to control for the authorities.

However, it is still challenging for a grassroots political movement to have a real impact on political processes, especially in authoritarian regimes like Russian where the government has the authority over communication and information which according to Castells (2013) is the source of power. The ruling elites are using coercion in order to maintain power; it can be persuasion or fear of persecution that most of my respondents mentioned during the interviews.

After analyzing the results of 13 interviews, it can be concluded that the prevalent feeling shared by all of my interviewees that I can personally relate to is confusion. We were born and raised between two countries and two eras — the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia and we are the first generations of Russians who did not grow up in the USSR. This radically distinguishes our generation from all the previous ones. Another big difference is the rapid development of technology, mostly associated with the rise of Internet that most of us grew up using.

Young Russians are confused mostly because we are a unique generation: we cannot relate to or learn from the experience of our grandparents and sometimes even our grandparents as they lived in a drastically different economic and political system. This is why many respondents mentioned that the older generations of their families do not understand them and that they feel disassociated, even separated from them.

They also feel confused because of the ambivalent information filed they find themselves in. On the one hand, there are online media that are more difficult control, and, therefore, they enjoy more freedom and are tolerated by the government to a certain extent. On the other hand, there is a powerful regime and its numerous attempts to crack down on freedom and democracy that threaten the few remaining independent media. They are willing to change this situation but they lack the knowledge of how to do this.

Another shared feature of my respondents is their feeling of desperation and, in some cases, even hopelessness. Many young people do not believe that the political situation in Russia can actually change as they were told by their parents that “nothing changes in this country”. They do support Navalny, Smart Voting and other opposition forces, however, very few believe that the opposition can influence the outcome of the elections or somehow impact the decision-making process. My interviewees, as well as many other Russian citizens, fear the government repressions, and therefore, are hesitant to actively involve in different kinds of political activities.

The participants of this study are certain that fear is the main obstacle to a wider and more active political involvement. Another important factor is the uncertainty: the state-run media are trying to persuade people with opposition-leaning views that they are the minority living in the big and wealthy cities and that the

majority, “ordinary people” support the existing regime. However, they do not think of themselves as a minority, they believe that others are just too scared to express their views publicly or are not able to see the truth because of being “brainwashed” by the state propaganda.

My respondents are very different; some of them have strong political views, be they socialist or libertarian; some just want to act for change and bring justice and democracy to their country. Some are ready for action some are scared for their life and the life of their loved ones. But most importantly, they are the future of Russia and the main power for change even though the government is persistently trying to make them think otherwise.

Personally, I can relate to many thoughts and emotions expressed by my respondents. As an international student in Taiwan, I was very distant from my homeland and did not have any opportunity to participate in my country’s political life. Reading news about what was happening back home also made me feel hopeless and desperate sometimes. Therefore, using the digital media to spread information about the protests, Navalny case, and other events that took place in Russia over the course of the past two years seemed like the only way to feel involved and engaged with Russian politics as I was not able to join protests or participate in elections.

I was able to use Smart Voting once, and I even persuaded several friends and family members to register. I do believe that it can work but considering all the limitations and that government persecution it will be extremely difficult for Navalny’s team to achieve significant results on a federal level.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Findings and Contributions

The main purpose of this research was to analyze Russian media from a young voter's perspective. This thesis contributes to the current state of knowledge in several ways. First, Smart Voting is a relatively new initiative that has not been studied academically, therefore, this study is a starting point in the research of SV and other voting strategies in Russia. Moreover, the present work adds up to the studies on the impact of digital media on voters' behavior and attitudes.

This thesis also contributes to the field of the political economy of communication especially concerning media studies in authoritarian regimes. Most of the research on political economy focuses on Western democracies, primarily the United States. This study takes Russia as an example of a non-democratic regime with a high level of state control over the media and freedom of speech limitations.

In order to address my research questions, I have conducted a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with digital natives — people who grew up using various digital tools, to identify the main features in their media usage, their political participation, and their attitude towards Smart Voting and I managed to distinguish some similarities.

The first Research Question that I am addressing in this study is about *how Russian youth are using digital media in their political activities*. First and most important, they do not trust and almost do not use the traditional media outlets. This is especially typical for Russian urban youth where the degree of dissent and

disapproval of the government is the highest across all social groups (Levada Center, 2020). Therefore, they receive most of the news on politics from online sources.

Another common feature among the participants of this research that they are all utilizing digital media in their political activities but with a different intensity. Some are hesitant to publicly express their political view as they fear the sanctions from the government, therefore, each participant uses the Internet in a way they feel most comfortable with. The same rule applies to offline activities: some respondents are scared or unable to actively participate in their country's political life and thus, they opt for online participation.

While reflecting on *why they support the Smart Voting candidates*, most of the respondents talked about their attitude towards Navalny which is generally positive though it varies; many respondents were hesitant about supporting him as a candidate based on his hate speech and nationalist activities he took part in earlier in his career. However, they praise him for the courage to speak out against the regime and his ability to mobilize opposition and the protest electorate. Furthermore, they condemn the Russian government for the alleged assassination attempt and the following trial and imprisonment as politically motivated and believe that these events will attract more supporters and more Smart Voting participants.

The interviewees see Alexei Navalny and his political movement as the only alternative to the existing regime. The main reason behind this, according to them, is the discouragement of the wider public to involve in politics caused by systemic suppression and elimination of any opposition by the Russian authorities in the past 20 years. Thus, not having alternative political movements and seeing Navalny's ability to mobilize people with opposition-leaning views, my respondents decide to

trust him and vote for the candidate that he believes has the greatest chance of succeeding in the election.

Therefore, answering Research Question 3 on *how they perceive Smart Voting's potential to change the political situation in Russia*, the respondents perceive Smart Voting as the only opportunity to influence the outcome of the election that has been unchanged their entire life but they are rather pessimistic about the scope of its results. They understand the danger this strategy poses to the democratic foundations but as they do not see any alternative to Smart Voting, they allow Navalny and his team to make this choice for them. Furthermore, it gives people the opportunity to express their disagreement in a safer way by using their vote effectively.

Apart from Smart Voting, the participants were asked to reflect on the previous election campaigns launched by the opposition. One of the most mentioned ones was the Strike of Voters initiated by Navalny in 2018 following his exclusion from the presidential race by the authorities. All the interviewees believe that encouraging Navalny's supporters not to vote was a mistake as it only benefited the regime by accumulating Putin's electorate and excluding all the protest votes. They are aware of the importance of voting in a democracy and are very vocal about it, which is drastically different from previous generations of Russians.

At the time the interviews were conducted, 4 out of 13 respondents were outside of Russia due to various reasons but one of them specifically named the fear of the Russian government (the "police state" as she referred to it) as her main motivation to leave the country. Others were dubious about going back because of the unstable economic situation, low employment, or military conscription. At the same time, all interviewees mentioned fear of the government, system, police as factors

precluding them from more active involvement in Russian politics. Therefore, it can be concluded that fear is the key constraint affecting civil participation in political processes in Russia.

A prominent Russian political scientist Yekaterina Schulmann (2016) once said that autocracies only live and thrive on citizens' passivity. My respondents and I personally could not agree more with this statement. All the manipulation with information, propaganda imposed on the Russian citizens, combined with police violence authorized by the state, only have one purpose — to curb all forms of citizen participation in political activities. The young people I have interviewed are aware of this fact, and they believe that they have the responsibility to act for change by becoming active citizens of their country. Therefore they are willing to express their political opinion and their disagreement with the current situation in Russia despite the fear and discouragement from the authorities.

5.2. Limitations

The majority of research works have certain limitations and the present one is not an exception. In this part, I will try to point them out and propose some improvements for future research.

The first and the most important one is my sampling technique. I started with my Instagram followers and my closest friends and asked them to find the participants for my interviews. However, not everyone was willing to take part in this kind of research even though I guarantee my respondents' anonymity and protection of their personal data. Moreover, as I was conducting my research while being outside of

Russia, my ability to reach out to people was limited as I was not able to attend different offline political events and recruit participants there.

Because my sample size was limited to my close circle and their friends and acquaintances, it affected the diversity of my group of respondents. They are urban citizens with at least one university degree, their family background ranges from lower to upper-middle class. There are 8 male participants against 5 females. And 10 out of 13 are ethnic Russians (approximately 80% of the overall population of Russia).

The other 3 are from Kalmyk and Chechen ethnic minorities. The Kalmyks are a Mongol ethnicity that consists the majority of the population of the Republic of Kalmykia in the south of the European part of Russia. The most practiced religion there is Buddhism. Another ethnic group represented in this study is Chechens — a Muslim ethnicity from North Caucasus.

Generally speaking, my sample size is rather diverse: it includes people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, different regions of Russia, the gender disparity is not that critical. However, the sampling could be more inclusive if I were conducting my research in Russia, and thus, it can be improved in future research.

Another limitation is the pressure on Navalny and his supporters from the Russian authorities. In 2021, FBK and Navalny's regional offices were included in the list of extremist organizations, which threatens everyone who supports them. Thus, the Parliament passed a law according to which people who were involved in the activities initiated by the organizations from the list or even donated money to them will not be allowed to participate elections.

Therefore, they excluded anyone who has ever supported Navalny and FBK from the legal political ground. Because of this, many people were scared to participate in my research which in turn affected my sample size as well. This might also affect the future of this study in Russia which is why I have added a disclaimer at the very beginning of this paper stating that this work has nothing to do with extremist activities or organizations. All these factors may also complicate further research on this topic in Russia.



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Appendix

Appendix 1. List of laws and regulations limiting the freedom of speech in Russia

Year	Law	Description	Penalty
2012	Federal Law № 139-FZ «On Introducing Amendments to the Law on Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development»	Establishes an Internet Blacklist with websites and URLs subject to blocking due to harmful or criminal content. The list is controlled by Roskomnadzor, the federal agency in charge of supervising online and media activities	If an owner refuses to remove content in question, hosting provider is required to do it or restrict access to harmful information. If hosting provider (social media) does not comply, Roskomnadzor has a right to block access to the website
2012	Federal Law № 121-FZ	Provides labeling the NGOs as «foreign agents». According to the law, foreign agents must register as such with the Ministry of Justice and indicate their status in all publications in the media and online.	Heavy fines or media website's blocking
2013	Law № 135-FZ (amendments to the law «On Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development and to the Code of Administrative Violations»)	Prohibits «gay propaganda», i.e. «promoting non-traditional sexual relations and the denial of traditional family values». The law applies to the content produced and distributed by television, press, radio and internet and bans recognizing relationships within LGBTQ+ community as normal and healthy	Fines of up to 5,000 rubles (US\$82) for individuals; fines of 40,000 to 50,000 (\$660 to \$826) for government officials; up to 1 million rubles (\$16,521) or a suspension of activity for up to 90 days for organizations
2013	Amendment to art.148 of Russian Criminal Code («Blasphemy Law»)	Criminalizes offending religious feelings of believers, i.e. «a public action expressing clear disrespect for society and committed in order to insult the religious feelings of believers»	Heavy fine to one year in prison

Year	Law	Description	Penalty
2013	Federal Law № 398-FZ («Lugovoi Law»)	Allows the law enforcement bodies to block online content that includes «calls for mass riots, extremist activities, or participation in unsanctioned mass public events» within 24 hours and without a court order	The provider then must block access to the website and has 24 hours to notify the website's owners, who must at once remove the banned content. Have been used repeatedly to target critics of the regime.
2013	Article 280.1 of Russian Criminal Code	Criminalizes «public, online calls aimed at violating the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation»	Heavy fines, compulsory labor or up to 5 years in prison with a following prohibition to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities (used to prosecute critics of Russia's actions in Crimea)
2014	«Bloggers' Law» (part of counterterrorism legislation)	Requires Russian bloggers with more than 3,000 unique visits per day to register with Roskomnadzor. Once registered, those bloggers assume practically the same legal constraints and responsibilities as mass media outlets, without the same protections or privileges, and required to provide their real surname, initials, and contact details on their websites or pages	Failure to register with Roskomnadzor is punishable by websites or mobile applications being blocked and/or fines of up to 3,000 rubles (US\$49) for individuals, up to 30,000 rubles (US\$493) for officials and up to 500,000 rubles (US\$8,482) for entities
2014	Amendments to the Mass Media Law	Reduces the permissible percentage of foreign ownership of any print media, online media, television, or radio broadcasters from 50 to 20 percent	Suspension of the activities of the media by the court
2014	Article 354.1 of Russia's Criminal Code	Establishes certain penalties for «rehabilitation of Nazism»	Up to 500,000 rubles in fines (US\$ 8,260) or up to five years in prison

Year	Law	Description	Penalty
2015	Federal Law № 242-FZ	Requires website operators and service providers to store and process personal data of Russian citizens on servers located inside Russia	Heavy fines or website's blocking
2016	«Yarovaya Amendments» (to counterterrorism laws and the Criminal Code)	Failure to report a crime becomes a criminal offense; heavier penalties for rehabilitation and incitement to terrorism; telecom operators are required to store all call records and any messages exchanged by users for six months and provide state security services with access to this information; the messengers and social media owners are obliged to help FSB decipher all the messages; strengthening the regulation of religious missionary activities; criminal punishment for «declination, recruitment or other involvement» in organization of protests; checking of postal parcels by the post office	Heavy fines to prison sentences
2017	Amendments to the Federal Law «On Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information» and the Administrative Code	The law obliges news aggregators with a traffic of more than 1 million people per day to check the reliability of socially significant information before its dissemination	Heavy fines for individuals and organizations
2017	Amendment to the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation	Bans software which allows access to internet content that has been banned in Russia, and prohibits owners of VPN services and internet anonymizers from providing access to banned websites and empowers Roskomnadzor to block sites which provide instructions on how to circumvent government blocking and use blocked sites	Heavy fines for individuals and organizations
2017	Amendment to the Law on Mass Media	Introduces the concept of media - foreign agent	Heavy fines or media website's blocking
2018	Amendment to the Law on Mass Media	Provides for the recognition of individuals as foreign agents when they distribute materials to an unlimited number of people and receive foreign funding	Heavy fines or media website's blocking

Year	Law	Description	Penalty
2019	Federal Law № 90-FZ («Sovereign Internet Law»)	Obliges telecom operators to install state equipment at traffic exchange points for analyzing and filtering traffic (Deep Packet Inspection; DPI) within the country and communication lines crossing the Russian border, establishes the Russian national Domain Name System (DNS). The Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) is put in charge of a «centralized management» of the Russian Internet and has a right to restrict access to the websites banned in Russia	Fines, blockings and other penalties
2021	Federal Law № 85-FZ («The Law on educational activities»)	Amends the Federal Law on Education, the government develops forms of control over the activities of people and organizations involved in education	Heavy fines for individuals and organizations, media website's blocking

Source: Official Internet Portal of Legal Information of the Russian Federation (<http://pravo.gov.ru>)

Appendix 2. Interview invitation letter

I am conducting these interviews as part of a study on the political views of the Russian youth as well as their attitude towards the electoral process in Russia. As a Russian student, you are in an ideal position to give me valuable first hand information from your own perspective.

The interview takes around 30 minutes and is very informal. I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on different electoral practices (including Smart Voting). Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

Your participation will be a valuable addition to my research and findings could lead to greater public understanding of the issue.

If you are willing to participate please suggest a day and time that suits you and I'll do my best to be available. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you!

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Exemplary questions:

1. What do you read/watch to learn about political news (social media, TV, newspapers)? Why?
2. Do you express your attitude towards the current situation in Russia on social media? Where? Why?
3. Do you actively participate in any political activities (both online and offline)? Why do you prefer a certain type of activity?
4. What do you believe is the best way to influence the political situation?

5. Does your family support your views? If not, do you try to persuade them?
6. How did you learn about Smart Voting?
7. When did you «vote smart»? Why did you support a candidate proposed by SV?
8. Do you think Smart Voting has the potential to change the situation in Russia?
9. Tell me about yourself (age, education, place of residence)
10. Tell me about your family

