

Reports and Commentaries

SOCIAL MEDIA, MOBILISATION AND PROTEST SLOGANS IN MOSCOW AND BEYOND
Mischa Gabowitsch

This essay is an attempt to test out some of the ideas that will frame my forthcoming book on the ongoing Russian protest movement. In particular, it presents some preliminary findings from a project to collect the slogans of the movement.

It was during my fieldwork in Western Siberia in 2008 that I realised how firmly the internet had become part of the cultural landscape in provincial Russia. In Barnaul, I interviewed the members of *Moi flag smiat* [My flag is crumpled], a local antifascist d.i.y. punk band. They had gained some nationwide fame in the subculture after becoming one of the first provincial bands to tour a large part of the country (as well as Ukraine and Belarus), having established contact with others in the scene largely through the internet. The band members and their friends were not scions of the local elite by any definitional stretch; many had learned about the internet quite recently, and some were still not using it. Yet local online discussion forums, whose contents were sometimes relayed by the most connected in the group, had become an important source of information for them, as for the other activists I interviewed, for example, in Tomsk or Tiumen'. Just as importantly, the internet allowed them to stay in regular contact with groups not just in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, but also in neighbouring regions. This was in stark contrast to a time not that long ago, when Siberians might have frequent contacts with Moscow, but were often ignorant of what was happening in the nearest big city. Along with a number of other factors, the internet had introduced a measure of transparency and connectedness that might seem natural but was in fact quite recent.

These impressions were confirmed countless times that summer—at an electronic music festival and a hippie Rainbow Gathering in the Altai Mountains, for example, or when, at an anarchist anti-nuclear tent camp on the outskirts of Nizhnii Novgorod, I interviewed a young man from Magadan. He had recently left his home town on the edge of nowhere, virtually unreachable by land, after meeting likeminded people online. He was now going to settle in Kovrov, a small city in Vladimir Oblast. At the same camp, a teenage girl from Khabarovsk was 'recognised' by peers from European Russia after exchanging chatroom nicknames with them.

Geographical mobility might not come as a surprise in a country forged by population movements, but today that mobility is low overall, compared to the U.S., Western Europe, or even many other post-Soviet states. In the early 1990s people in provincial Russia stopped reading national newspapers, and until recently, the central TV channels were often considered the only glue that held the nation together. Penetrating the country, the internet, even if used for entertainment, chatting, travel planning, or other completely apolitical activities, was forging new connections where few existed before, and indeed many had been destroyed. This was perhaps most starkly visible on youth scenes, as colleagues studying other regions and other musical subcultures confirmed.

But could this translate into a new kind of civic activity? And what role does it play in the current movement for fair elections?

When the protest movement erupted in December 2011, I—like so many others—was struck by the diversity and originality of the slogans displayed at the protest meetings. I decided to collect all slogans displayed at demonstrations that were documented online in order to get a sense of that diversity. Given the sheer number of protests in Russia and solidarity demonstrations abroad, the task soon became too time-consuming for one person. What started out as a personal blog¹ became a collective research project with assistants from different Russian regions². Our project to collect photos of the slogans, preserving information about the author and original URL, and to enter the texts into a database documenting the time and place of their display is ongoing. To date we have collected photos of over 5,000 slogans (posters, signs, banners etc), the vast majority of them from outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The photos were taken in places from Penza to Yessentuki, from Khabarovsk to Voronezh, and from Tokyo to Madrid on over 40 separate dates between November 2011 and April 2012³. Almost inadvertently, this has probably become the most detailed project to systematically document the protest movement as a whole, since in the process we also note the few cases where no textual signs were displayed at the protests (or rather none are documented in available photos or reports) as well as discrepancies between different accounts, e.g. when posters are clearly visible in photos of a protest meeting yet news outlets report that there were no slogans—or deny that there even was a protest. At the same time we note regions where we can be reasonably sure that no public protests took place: at the time of writing, Birobidzhan, Kyzyl, Norilsk, the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Chukotka, and Chechnya, where President Ramzan Kadyrov has issued what many see as a serious threat to anyone taking part in election protests by calling them ‘enemies of the people’ and expressing a desire to see them jailed (Rbc.ru 2012).

¹ At <http://slogans10dec.blogspot.com>, effectively discontinued in February 2012.

² I would like to acknowledge the sustained and invaluable participation of Manarsha Isaeva and Olga Sveshnikova, as well as assistance from Ekaterina Gimaletdinova, Maria Kanatova, and Olga Mikhailova.

³ Photos from the protests in Moscow and—to a lesser extent—Saint Petersburg have been collected by Vadim Lurie, Andrey Moroz, Aleksandra Arkhipova, and other members of the Folklore of the Snow Revolution group on Facebook. A number of scholarly and journalistic publication projects are forthcoming, including a volume of articles (in Russian) edited by Arkhipova and a photo album produced by Julia Idlis. Vadim Lur’e has already published a commented photo album based on demonstrations from Moscow and Saint Petersburg: Lur’e 2012.

In this essay, to approach the question of the impact of social media on the protest movement, I discuss the dual function of the internet as a mobilising and communication tool, drawing on insights from my fieldwork and our ongoing project on slogans.

Mobilisation and (Self-)Representation

The claim that the internet, and social media in particular, have changed the face of civic action, has at least two components that need to be distinguished. One claim is that social media have made it easier to mobilise people; the other is that they create more publicity for the movements. These claims are of course interrelated: internet users who learn about a protest movement through social media, i.e. from personal acquaintances or through other trusted sources, are more likely to join it than those who only see official media representations of the movement, which will probably be negative, selective, or indeed non-existent. Conversely, those who are already taking active part in a movement may feel emboldened by the very fact of having relatively free online media at their disposal, allowing them to reach large numbers of people beyond those physically present.

Still, it is useful to distinguish between these two functions.

Mobilisation

Social media create an unprecedented ease of instantaneous communication with very large groups of people, including people preselected based on personal acquaintance and shared interests, thus creating trust. In this sense, their use for quick mobilisation is unparalleled—and certainly a far cry from the onerous and slow-moving combination of long-distance train travel, mass mailings, public debates, and late-night discussions at organisers' apartments that made it possible to stage mass rallies, and even form unionwide coalitions around a variety of political causes, during perestroika.

In addition, social media fill a void in Russian civil society, where completely independent print media have become an exception in recent years and, perhaps even more importantly, offline networks and meeting places that could be used for mobilisation remain rare. Their importance in Russia, and in the current protest movement in particular, is vast for the same reasons why that importance was vastly exaggerated for the Green Movement in Iran and the Arab Spring. Not only is internet penetration higher in Russia than in the Middle East and North Africa; the internet is also making up for the vast distances and, most importantly, for the lack of alternative connections between people.

The houses of worship—mosques, churches, monasteries—that played such an important role as spaces for discussion and mobilisation in civic resistance movements from Panama to the Philippines, from the GDR to Egypt, and from the American South to Burma serve no such function in contemporary Russia. Worship attendance is low and religious hierarchies are largely aligned with the state; in addition, those Muslim regions of Russia where attendance is highest (the North Caucasus and specifically Dagestan) exhibit high levels of (both voluntary and coerced) support for the current political regime. It would be interesting to study the grassroots political involvement of Russia's growing Protestant population—

especially in the Far East, Siberia, and the Northwest—but so far their presence in the protest movement remains largely invisible.

Other spaces and independent organizations also remain rare compared to the abundance of difficult-to-control bazaars or coffee-shops in the Middle East. While Russia has seen an explosion in the number of shopping malls and high-end cafes in recent years—with all the stifling effects on the non-commercial uses of public space that are well-documented from other countries—other kinds of public venues remain rare. Despite occasional success stories, attempts to use institutions of higher education for independent civic organisation are regularly curtailed by increasingly authoritarian university administrators, as witnessed by the demise of Saratov State University's celebrated History Department, the failed attempt at Moscow State University to oust the dictatorial Dean Dobrenkov, or the thwarted creation of an independent student union at Petrozavodsk State University, among many other examples. There have been several attempts to create small cafes-cum-libraries-cum-cultural-centres that copy Dmitry Itskovich's PirOGI, Bilingua, etc franchise in Moscow; nevertheless, clubs and similar venues for independent cultural activity remain rare in the provinces, and those that do exist are often made to serve business interests, making them prohibitively expensive for large segments of the younger population and creating new barriers to independent civic activity. In my fieldwork among d.i.y. punk antifascists in provincial Russia, I was repeatedly told how the presence of neo-Nazi youth among the band line-up and audiences at politically colour-blind concerts organised by commercial impresarios led to physical clashes and deprived those associated with democratic subcultures of safe meeting spaces. The same holds true for outdoor public spaces—the central squares, Lenin Streets, or parks that often continue to serve as meeting places for bikers, skaters, rappers, hippies, punks, and political activists alike: always open to attacks by right-wing groups or clampdowns by police forces and difficult to use during the long winters, these remain a poor substitute for public space. They are eclipsed by semi-private spaces that require an entrance fee, be it financial or in the form of relatively strong initial commitment, the latter including patriotic youth clubs or gyms. Finally, the fact that the civil society structures that have sprung up in Russia have often developed in an unexpectedly close symbiosis with the state (Kulmala 2011) means that they cannot easily provide spaces for independent communication and activity in situations where state and civil society interests clash.

Thus much of everyday interaction in Russia outside the workplace remains organised around strong ties such as family or closely-knit groups of friends. While the advent of social media does not seem have altered this fundamentally—most people's online networks remain relatively small, and much activity is concentrated in local discussion forums—they have created a new kind of easily accessible space that can be used for discussion and mobilisation at relatively short notice, and quickly merged with similar networks.

The importance of social networks is heightened by the fact that Russia, as has often been argued, remains a country of atomised individuals—or rather, small atomised groups connected mostly by the shared consumption of TV (e.g. Dubin 2004). This adds an interesting twist to the ongoing debate about the role of new social media in mobilisation. Malcolm Gladwell has persuasively surveyed some of the evidence that social media, built as they are around weak ties, are good for short-term, low-risk mobilisation, while being ill-adapted to the kind of high-risk involvement that requires strong connections and trust (Gladwell 2010).

In the Russian case, however, even the weak connections largely remained to be created, as evidenced by the fact that most newcomers to the online protest groups had no or few prior connections to other members. (Incidentally, in addition to important LiveJournal blogs such as Alexei Navalny's, it is worth noting that the vast majority of online groups created to coordinate local protest meetings—Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Tula being the exceptions—were created on *vkontakte.ru*, the Russian Facebook clone, rather than Facebook itself.)

Nevertheless, for all their excitement and capacity to create new connections through novel forms of sociability, the mass rallies that took place between the Duma election and Putin's inauguration were largely the kinds of low-risk, short-term events that social networks are so good at coordinating. Once that initial stage is passed, it is doubtful that the very existence of social networks with newly dense connections will be sufficient to sustain the new offline ties and continue to provide an independent space for civic activity.

It is also doubtful whether it is the mobilising function of social media that has created the impression of a nationwide protest movement. One reason to be cautious about this claim is that, at the time of writing, the protest meetings across Russia have been attended almost exclusively by residents of the cities and towns where they took place as well as the surrounding regions. The Million-Strong March scheduled for May 6 in Moscow, which many non-Muscovites are planning to attend, will be a test of the mobilising capacity of civic groups that need to employ social media to a far greater degree than their opponents, who can rely on the 'administrative resource', i.e. the use of the state bureaucracy and institutions controlled by party members—for example in order to forcibly mobilise state employees, factory workers or soldiers for pro-government demonstrations. The active use of social media notwithstanding, demonstrators will hardly be able to emulate the success of earlier non-violent protest movements in countries such as Serbia or Ukraine, where factors such as shorter distance, nationalist mobilisation, pre-existing civic movements and working coalitions between political parties and civic actors arguably played a much more important part than social media.

My argument here is that it is the mobilising capacity of social media that is their most original feature in the current Russian context; yet it is also the one whose impact is weakest overall. Conversely, the internet's role in representing the movement, despite a number of new developments, is closer to that played by more traditional media in earlier periods, especially during *perestroika*, yet it has a greater impact, both on the movement itself and on the ways it is perceived from the outside.

Representation and Communication

The impression of a true nationwide movement, to the extent that it is due to social media, has more to do with their function of (self-)representation—to which I now turn.

In its most basic form, this simply means getting the word out: as with most non-violent protest movements around the world directed against the status quo, state-controlled media systematically misrepresent the current protest movement and its size and indeed in some places ignore it completely. Independent reports in blogs make up for this, often constituting the main or only source for subsequent news reports. The distinction between reporters and participants has become blurred beyond recognition. This is not entirely unprecedented: the

Soviet authors who, during perestroika, reported on civic movements both in East Central Europe and in the Soviet Union itself often did little to hide their sympathies and the fact that they had actively participated in discussions or rallies. Yet access to the media was restricted. Until recently, and really until the advent of the internet, relatively small groups of demonstrators would vie for the attention of a very large audience that could best be reached through channels of communication controlled by a restricted circle of gatekeepers: reporters and, very importantly in the Russian case, editors who decide what is shown on TV or in newspapers and what is not. This was especially important given Russia's enormous size and the fact that public political activity tends to be concentrated in the large cities, especially in Moscow. Media coverage was, and remains, paramount to the nationwide success of any movement, and today just as during perestroika, protesters in provincial capitals will often come out mostly to show their support of a Moscow-based movement.

One thing that has changed is the ways in which posters are used at demonstrations. While individual creativity blossomed during perestroika, multiple copies of the same slogan continued to be used well into the post-Soviet period, often to a greater extent than at official Soviet demonstrations in the preceding era: the organisers of Soviet marches could be sure that every slogan deemed fit for public communication would actually be reflected in media reports; those vying for attention in the pluralistic era that started with perestroika had to maximise their chances of making it into the public spotlight by displaying multiple instances of the same sign or other symbolic paraphernalia, such as flags. The contrast has been readily apparent at many post-Soviet demonstrations between those—often the main organisers of a demonstration and members of their party or group—who are mindful of such questions of wider communication, and those—often elderly individuals with big signs displaying long, complicated messages—whose primary objective is apparently to be noticed by others in the crowd and start a conversation about their concern.

Over the past decade or so, the production of protest signs for public display has become vastly simplified. Personal computers with internet connections and printers are now widely available, and so are ready-made pieces of clip art, printing paper, photo-editing and laminating technologies, and other supplies and techniques, making copy-pasting and printing easier than even the production of leaflets used to be in the age of the typewriter and carbon paper. This new ease of production encompasses printing on non-traditional materials, such as balloons, and has made the use of photographs and other images—in addition to text—ubiquitous on protest signs.

Simultaneously, the spread of the internet and, in particular, Web 2.0 services has changed the way such messages are reported and communicated, greatly diminishing—though by no means obliterating—the significance of editors and other gatekeepers, and restructuring the audience of protest messages. Web users can now view—and request—live visuals in real time, captured by demonstrators themselves or amateur reporters (the distinction is often blurred or purely declarative), compensating for some of the limitations of physical absence.

Image 1. ‘Unlike’. Cologne, 4 February, 2012. Photographer: Ekaterina Drobyazko.



Source: <http://publicpost.ru/photo/id/256/#> (accessed 28 May, 2012)

This means that many more protesters now act the way the elderly ‘demonstration crazies’ (who are also still very much present) used to. Individuals are now competing for attention *within* a group that comprises both those physically present at the demonstrations (and taking digital images of each other for immediate or later upload) and physically distant online viewers, rather than merely trying to represent the entire group to outside media that relay images to anonymous audiences. Even in a large crowd, the authors of individual messages are easy to identify, either on the spot or through the later use of social networks (thus, in January 2012, a public online paper chase for the author of a sign saying ‘I did not vote for these bastards, I voted for the other bastards’ quickly turned up the author, Dmitry Zvorykin, who, it turned out, had already described the process of its creation in an earlier blog post (migdal_or 10.12.2011).

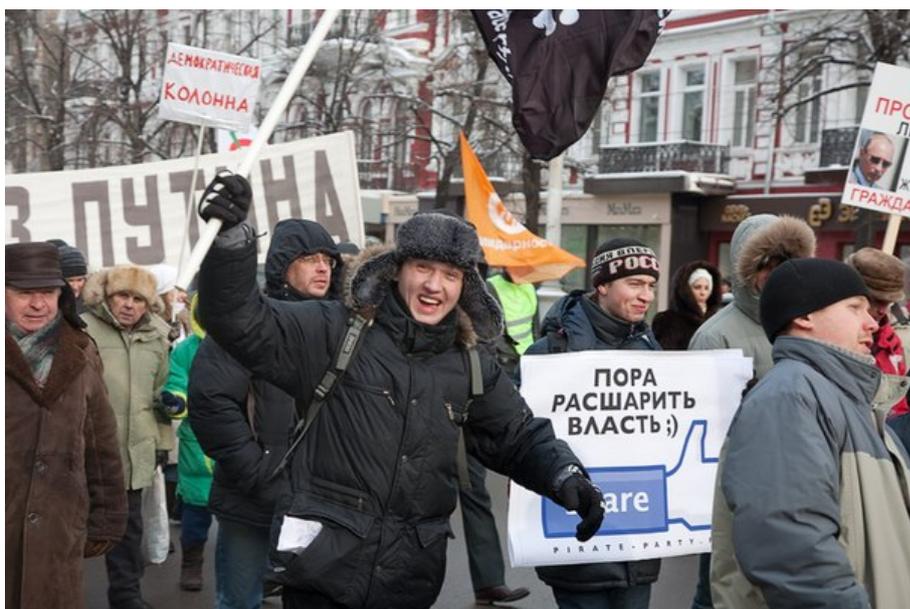
Image 2. ‘‘I did not vote for these bastards, I voted for the other bastards’.



Source: http://img-fotki.yandex.ru/get/5822/47599339.33/0_7c5e8_c370f072_M

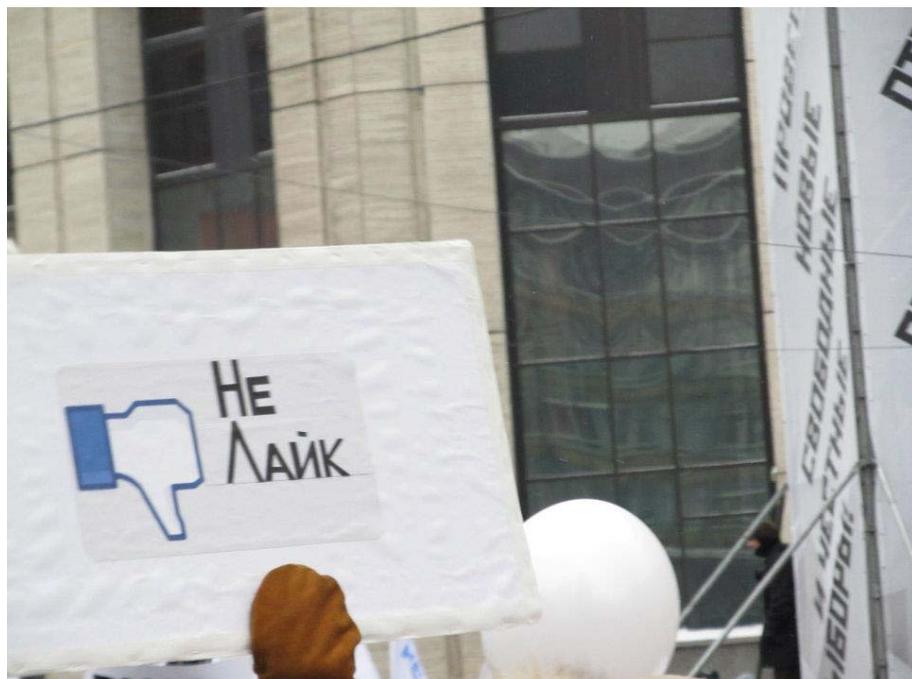
The success of a poster now hinges not only on the forcefulness of its content, but on the originality of its phrasing and visual presentation. This is surely one of the reasons why ready-made templates, although available, were hardly used during the protest meetings. For example, the Moscow city magazine *Bol'shoi gorod*, which was instrumental in providing a platform for protest organisers, offered such a template, which could be filled with one's own text, on its highly popular web site, but we have found only a handful of instances where this template was actually used. The very forms of communication at the demonstrations themselves transplant a virtual reality to the streets.

Image 3. ‘It is time to share power’ [the verb usually refers to file-sharing]. Voronezh, 4 February 2012. Photographer Anatolii Kravchenko.



Source: http://vk.com/photo-33521528_278462436 (accessed 28 May 2012)

Image 4. ‘Not like’. Moscow, 24 December 2011. Photographer Viktoriia Koroleva.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=158935170877349&set=a.15893107754442> (accessed 28 May 2012)

Image 5. ‘United Russia. Added 4 December 2011. 140 000 000 dislike this’. Novosibirsk, 24 December 2011. Photographer Nikita Trubetskiy.



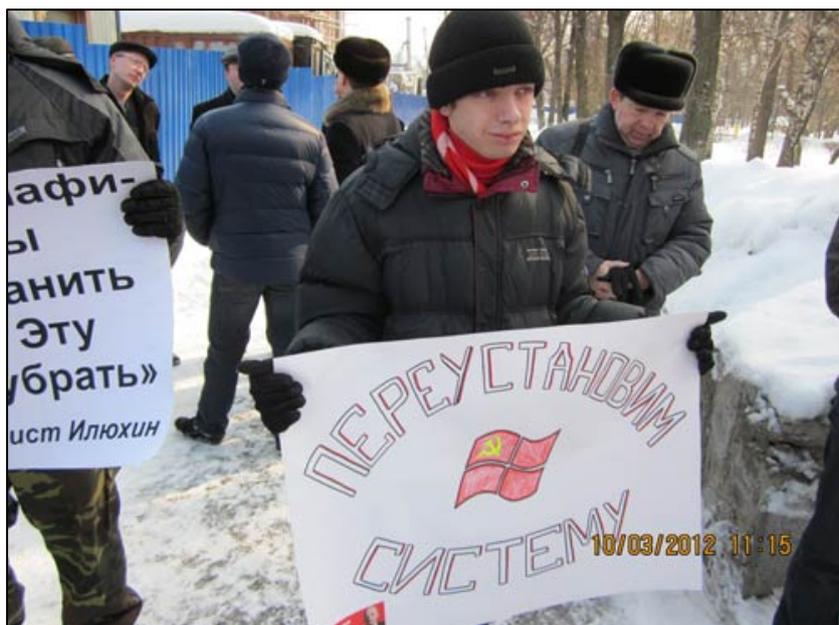
Source: http://cs302109.userapi.com/u626316/149291296/z_93aadbc4.jpg (accessed 28 May 2012).

Image 6. "Lake" is a reference to the dacha cooperative "Ozero" outside Leningrad in the 1990s, whose members included Vladimir Putin and many of those close to him who are now in positions of power. Moscow, 6 May 2012.



Source: Mischa Gabowitsch.

Image 7. 'Let us reinstall the system'. Penza, 10 March 2012. Photographer Ivan Finogneeov.



Source: http://kprfpenza.ru/images/stories/images/10-03-12-mit/_IMG_2179.jpg (accessed 28 May 2012).

Not only does the experience of using Web 2.0 services such as Livejournal, vkontakte, and Facebook, structure the design and language of many signs, which may resemble screenshots or use internet terminology ('United Russia, added Dec 4'), It also turns the demonstrations into a place to find new contacts ('Good morning'). Even more importantly, individual behaviour at the demonstrations resembles the fluid, decentralised, and multi-tasking communication found in social networks. At large protest rallies, some participants may stand close to the stage, listening to speeches and commenting on them on Twitter, getting distracted and wandering to the back of the crowd, where others are busy taking pictures of each other for immediate publication in their blogs, ignoring what is happening at the front of the rally.

Both photographers and sign-holding demonstrators (who are often the same people) realise that the pictures taken are intended for publication, and act accordingly: the photographer may be thinking about which picture will be most successful, improving his or her place in blog or news site rankings, while the person holding the sign is thinking about what he or she will look like in an online context.

Image 8. 'We are the 99%'. Rostov-on-Don, 4 February 2012. Photographer geta Krashenitsa.



Source: https://fbcdn-sphotos-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-ash4/402347_244023505678419_ (accessed 28 May 2012).

Demonstrations with individually-designed signs are thus reminiscent of Web 2.0-style communication, where the main hierarchical principle is that of individual popularity. Smiles or other gestures of approval and attention parallel the use of 'Like' buttons, while the act of taking a photo resembles the online repost.

It appears that the safest way to achieve such popularity is to introduce a personal, often humorous twist—such as a pun, pop culture reference, or hokku—on generally acknowledged themes of the protests. Hence the protesters dressed as Lego figures carrying a sign saying ‘This Duma is not legOtime’, or the countless portrayals of Putin as a Sith Lord, Voldemort, Mr Burns from the ‘Simpsons’, a snake, or a crab⁴. The originality of such signs resides in the way in which the message is expressed, not in the message itself. And even the originality of expression must remain within the framework of a recognizable meme, since otherwise the pun wouldn’t work.

The authors of slogans that address very specific problems—such as municipal-level conflicts over property or demands to extend war veterans’ social benefits to home-front workers—often look isolated—like Facebook users who earn few ‘Likes’ for pathos-laden statements, compared to the great popularity of ironic bloggers. Often such signs are held by elderly protesters.

Image 9. ‘Mr Karelin, brother of Sasha Karelin, return the island of Kudryash to the people’. Novosibirsk, 4 February 2012. The brother of wrestler and United Russia politician Sasha Karelin is accused of having illegally acquired an island where many Novosibirsk residents have their summer houses. Photographer Igor Babushkin.



Source: http://cs5604.userapi.com/u21726985/152026259/z_42b15c55.jpg (accessed 28 May 2012).

⁴ The snake refers to a televised interview where Putin referred to the protestors as Bandar-logs, referring to the foolish monkeys from Kipling’s *Jungle Book* and implying that he was the wise snake Kaa. The crab is a reference to a speech where Putin said of himself that for eight years he worked like a galley slave. The Russian phrase “*kak rab na galerakh*” can be phonetically understood as “*kak krab na galerakh*” – “a galley crab.”

However, for all the changes to communication at the protest meetings themselves, social media do not seem to have introduced a fundamental change to the way the movement as a whole is perceived from the outside. This is largely a question of scale: while social media have the capacity to place vast amounts of nuanced and detailed information in the hands of those who care to assimilate it, their very fast pace means that very few do care. With the exception of a few journalists and social scientists, any one person will still view the movement based on representations aggregated by trusted news media or popular bloggers—Ciceros for the inflationary economy of attention rather than Cerberi of censorship. These, in turn, will filter the available information based on their interests and preferences. Thus the dream of the individual protester changing the world, or at least the Russian political system, through an especially original slogan remains largely futile; for students of social movements, however, the wealth of detailed information published through social media makes them a goldmine.

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