


YouTube as Alternative Television in Russia: Political Videos During the Presidential Election Campaign 2018

Social Media + Society
January-March 2021: 1–9
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305120984455
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


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Abstract

Previous studies on “youtubification” of political communication (May, 2010) have largely focused on democratic contexts. This study aims at exploring the role of the global video-sharing platform in non-democratic political communication, using the example of the Russian presidential election of 2018. It draws on the qualitative content analysis of 169 political videos collected from the “Popular” section of Russian YouTube during the last 2 months of the presidential campaign. The results show that oppositional discourse dominated the most popular political videos of Russian YouTube and that pro-state actors tried to co-opt the platform, publishing videos made in amateur and semi-professional styles that imitated user-generated content. Drawing on the findings, I discuss the risks and benefits of YouTube publics for the Russian authoritarian regime and the role of social media platforms in consultative authoritarianism.

Keywords

YouTube, political communication, authoritarianism, online media, Russia

Introduction

Since the late 2000s, YouTube has evolved from being just one of the popular international video-sharing platforms to being a successful tool for political campaigning, with the 2008 Obama presidential election campaign being an important milestone for this development (Scherr et al., 2015). Many studies have been conducted on the usage of YouTube in political communication, both by politicians (Gibson and McAllister, 2011; Gueorguieva, 2008) and by civil society actors (Ridout et al., 2015; Thorson et al., 2013), in particular, during elections of public officials (Gulati & Williams, 2010; Sohal & Kaur, 2018). However, these studies have largely focused on Western contexts, and, so far, no research has been conducted on the role of YouTube in political communication in non-democratic contexts.

At the same time, research on so-called “consultative authoritarianism” (He & Warren, 2011) has focused on the increasing use of social media by authoritarian elites (Gunitsky, 2015; Toepfl, 2018; Truex, 2017); however, it has not yet scrutinized the role of the global video-sharing platform, YouTube, in authoritarian political communication.

My study aims at addressing these two gaps in the existing research by exploring the role of YouTube during elections under consultative authoritarianism. How do different

political actors co-opt the global platform in a country with a restrictive media environment? Russia, where traditional media are widely controlled by the state, but where the internet still offers the possibility of free speech, constitutes a perfect example for addressing this question. In the last 5 years, YouTube has established itself in Russia as an alternative to state TV, with a high level of political content among trending videos (Goncharov, 2017).

In 2017, political analysts in Russia started to talk about the rise of YouTube as a protest space, especially for the younger generation, who generally does not watch TV (Gorbachev, 2017). The reason for this conclusion was the so-called “protests of schoolchildren,” which were triggered by Alexey Navalny’s YouTube video accusing then prime minister Dmitri Medvedev of corruption.

Parallel to the growth of YouTube as a politicized space, the Russian state has been consequently co-opting social media and, today, uses them to promote its own agenda

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(Fedor & Fredheim, 2017; Gunitsky, 2015). After the “protests of schoolchildren” in 2017, Russian pro-state actors increased their efforts to co-opt the platform (Golubeva, 2017).

This study maps Russian popular political YouTube videos during the final stage of the presidential campaign in 2018, starting from the oppositional rallies on January 28, 2018, to 1 week after the elections, March 25. It is based on a qualitative content analysis of 169 political videos from the top 12 most popular videos on Russian YouTube. I have analyzed the public created on Russian YouTube around political topics during presidential election by drawing on Toepfl’s (2020) theoretical approach to publics under authoritarian rule. Toepfl has suggested distinguishing between three types of authoritarian publics according to discursive practices typical of these publics: uncritical publics, policy-critical publics, and leadership-critical publics. In his approach, the publics are analyzed according to three main components: participants, environment, and discursive practices (Toepfl, 2020, p. 6).

The remainder of this article is divided into six sections: First, I review the academic literature on consultative authoritarianism, particularly on the use of social media by authoritarian elites. Then I look at the existing studies on political communication on YouTube. In the third section, I describe the methodology and present findings. Drawing on the results of the study, I discuss the risks and benefits of YouTube publics for the Russian authoritarian regime as well as the role of YouTube in authoritarian elections.

Consultative Authoritarianism and Social Media

Early works on the spread of information and communication technologies were rather optimistic with regard to the liberalization potential of the web and focused mostly on the role of the internet in mobilizing bottom-up movements, in democratic as well as authoritarian contexts (Gunitsky, 2015; Robinson, 2010). However, in the last decade, authoritarian regimes have shown remarkable resilience to new communication technologies, and scholars have started to talk about a worldwide authoritarian “resurgence” (Walker, 2015). A range of studies have appeared on how authoritarian rulers have co-opted internet tools and used them to legitimize and stabilize their regimes (Gunitsky, 2015; Pearce, 2015). The new term “consultative,” or “deliberative,” authoritarianism (He & Warren, 2011; Stockmann, 2013) was coined to describe “a form of rule in which power holders use communication to collect the preferences of those their decisions will affect and take those preferences into account as information relevant to their decision-making” (He & Warren, 2011, p. 273). Researchers have described different benefits as well as risks that so-called “input institutions” (Nathan, 2003) have brought to authoritarian leaders (He & Warren, 2011; Toepfl, 2018; Truex, 2017). These institutions, which include,

among other things, media, help elites gather citizen feedback for the government, co-opt the opposition, and give an opportunity for antagonists of the regime to “vent their anger” as well as to resolve social conflicts (Toepfl, 2020). The main risk of input institutions for the state is that providing a certain degree of freedom of expression may place the legitimacy of the ruling elites under question and thus endanger the regime (Stockmann, 2013; Toepfl, 2020).

A big part of research on the use of social media by authoritarian elites deals with case studies from China, a pioneer of “consultative authoritarianism” (Truex, 2017), where a range of input institutions were implemented starting in the early 2000s (He & Warren, 2011; Nathan, 2003). Today, these input institutions are, to a large extent, represented by online interactive portals. Truex (2017) performed a survey experiment with Chinese internet users and found out that citizens who randomly used the National People’s Congress’ (NPC) online participation portals showed “greater satisfaction with the regime and feelings of government responsiveness” (Truex, 2017, p. 329).

In Russia, a move from an anocratic (Marshall & Cole, 2009), or semi-authoritarian (Toepfl, 2012), political regime toward authoritarianism in stricter terms aligned with growing attempts by state actors both to gain legal control over the internet and to infiltrate online communicative milieus. Prior to 2013, there had only been a few studies on the digital communication of Russian elites, and they mostly focused on blogging on the part of governmental officials (Bode & Makarychev, 2013; Toepfl, 2012). As Toepfl (2012) found out, 29 out of 83 regional leaders were running blogs in 2010. He examined the content of these blogs and concluded that they played “a far greater role in generating legitimacy for the Russian political system than they do in democracies, because the semi-authoritarian Russian system lacks other mechanisms which generate (input) legitimacy in developed democracies” (Toepfl, 2012, p. 1455). Bode and Makarychev compared the content of oppositional and pro-governmental bloggers in 2011–2012 and found that pro-state blogs were used by state officials as “depolicitizing tools meant to decrease the degree of—and space for—political expression” (Bode & Makarychev, 2013, p. 55). After the increase of state engagement in co-optation of the internet as a reaction to the protests of 2011–2012 in Russia, more studies of what Strukov (2012) called “networked Putinism” appeared. Gunitsky described how Russian authorities used social media to stabilize the regime. He distinguished four strategies of co-optation of social media in authoritarian contexts: (1) counter-mobilization, (2) discourse framing, (3) preference divulgence, and (4) elite coordination (Gunitsky, 2015, p. 42). Toepfl (2018) explored how the state proactively uses democratizing internet tools, for example, online voting, to legitimize the regime. On the example of the case of internet votes for the President’s Council on the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, he analyzed how this tool was used by the state, on one hand, to “convey to the mass public the image of a transparent, accountable and responsive government” and, on the other hand, to co-opt oppositional elites (Toepfl, 2018).

That said, it must be noted that social media have been used effectively in Russia to also voice dissent against the state. This trend increased in 2011, when the protest movement “For Fair Elections” marked a “turning point for the socio-political situation in Russia” (Klyueva, 2016). As many studies have shown, social media, particularly Facebook, played a significant role in mobilizing the protesters (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013; Denisova, 2017; Klyueva, 2016). The opposition adopted online tools for self-organization (Klyueva, 2016), and, since 2012, the state has reacted by restricting online spaces. However, criticism of elites is still visible in public space, in particular, on social media platforms (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019).

As Toepfl (2020) has suggested in his recent theory of authoritarian publics, China and Russia represent two different types of authoritarian regimes that diverge in the discursive practices dominant in their publics-at-large. According to Toepfl, China has a policy-critical public-at-large, where criticism of policies as well as of lower-level officials is tolerated, but not that of the country’s highest-ranking leaders. Russia, however, has a leadership-critical public-at-large, where even political leadership of the country is regularly criticized in certain publics that attract a significant number of the country’s citizens (Toepfl, 2020). The third type of public-at-large is uncritical publics, which can be found in the most restrictive regimes, such as North Korea or Turkmenistan, and which do not allow their citizens space for any type of criticism if it is not sanctioned by the leader (Toepfl, 2020). For the study of consultative authoritarianism, the two first types of authoritarian regimes are of particular interest, because they tolerate a certain level of criticism that is necessary for the functioning of the input institutions.

Unlike in the Chinese regime, Russian citizens are offered a formal opportunity to vote for the parliament and for the leader of the country in authoritarian elections where no real chance is given for candidates who would challenge the status quo of the country. However, this means that the government regularly stages an election campaign where not only the “tamed” parliamentary opposition takes part but also the non-systemic opposition tries to influence the outcomes of the elections through informal, mostly online channels.

While the institution of elections under authoritarianism that can also be regarded as an “input institution” (Toepfl, 2020) has been thoroughly explored by political scientists (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Knutsen et al., 2017), the role of social media in authoritarian elections so far remains under-researched. This article aims at addressing this gap by exploring political communication on Russian YouTube during the presidential election of 2018.

Political Communication on YouTube

Founded in 2005, YouTube developed into a leading global video-sharing platform within just a few years, and, since 2008, scholars have been talking about “youtubification” of

political communication in established democracies (May, 2010). Many studies have highlighted the democratization potential of the “user-driven environment of YouTube” (Dylko et al., 2011), especially in the aftermath of the U.S. presidential election of 2008 (Dylko et al., 2011; Gueorguieva, 2008). The bottom-up communication of civil society actors was studied based on, among others, the examples of the Occupy movement (Thorson et al., 2013), ecological activism (Shapiro & Park, 2017), and the Uyghur nationalist movement (Vergani & Zuev, 2011). However, with growing commercialization and institutionalization of the platform (Bishop, 2018), scholars have observed an increasing trend in predominance of top-down communication flows on YouTube (Dylko et al., 2011; Kim, 2012; Shapiro & Park, 2017). Thus, the study of the most popular political news videos during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign showed that news sourcing and news production was controlled by elites, while only the secondary gatekeeping (news distribution) was dominated by non-elites (Dylko et al., 2011). It also found that “traditional media still retain[ed] a strong hold on what content the masses consume[d]” (Dylko et al., 2011, p. 844). Similar results were presented in the study by May (2010) that traced the audience changes for the top 22 political YouTube channels in the United States during the period 2008–2010: Corporate media were by far more successful on the platform compared to online-only outlets. May also stated that, although YouTube was dominated by entertainment and lifestyle content in “calm periods,” during the 2008 election period, it showed “the ability to serve as a viable political communication channel” (May, 2010).

Several studies have explored the role of user-generated content in political videos on YouTube. Boyd (2014) classified the roles performed by users on YouTube based on her analysis of videos of Obama’s inaugural address in 2009, distinguishing between the first level of participation (creation, publishing, and viewing of videos) and the second level of participation (liking, disliking, and commenting on the content). In their study of German political videos prior to parliamentary elections in 2009, Scherr and his colleagues (2015) found that user-generated content was, surprisingly, not among the success factors for the popular videos. Another study analyzed political advertising on YouTube during the races for the U.S. Senate in 2010 and found that political ads posted by ordinary users and quasi-political organizations had the same rate of views as those sponsored by traditional electoral actors. However, new media covered the ads of traditional actors in a much more intense way compared to the non-traditional ones (Ridout et al., 2015). These studies show that, in democratic contexts, traditional actors and mainstream media receive more voice in political communication on YouTube compared to non-elites. Will a similar pattern emerge in non-democratic contexts, where political competition is distorted by restrictions on the part of the state?

So far, very few studies have been conducted on the political communication on YouTube beyond Western contexts

(Vergani & Zuev, 2011), and, so far, almost no research has been done on the role of YouTube in political communication in authoritarian contexts. This can be partly explained by the fact that this platform is banned in several authoritarian countries and thus does not play any significant role there, as in the cases of China and Pakistan. For a long time in Russia, YouTube was not that visible in terms of political activity. Studies on the role of social media in the protests “For Fair Elections” in 2011–2012 revealed the significant role of the social networking sites Facebook and Vkontakte (now VK.com) in cultivating and informing the protests, but not that of YouTube (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013; Denisova, 2017; Klyueva, 2016). It was the “protest of schoolchildren” in 2017 that demonstrated the importance of this global video platform for Russian political communication, as the protest was triggered by an investigative video published by anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny on YouTube (Gorbachev, 2017).

According to Google Russia, in September 2017, YouTube, for the first time in its history, became the third most popular online website in Russia, with a monthly audience reach of 38.4 million users (approx. 26% of the Russian population), just behind the search engines Google and Yandex (Polyakova, 2017). The popularity of the YouTube channel of the opposition leader Alexey Navalny, who was not allowed to participate in presidential election, is comparable to that of the top entertainment TV channels (Goncharov, 2017). At the same time, according to the media company RBC, the main focus of Vladimir Putin’s presidential campaign of 2018 was officially placed on his promotion in social media. It also highlights the importance of these channels for official political communication in Russia (RBC, 2017). A recent study by Denisova and Herasimenka (2019) explored the phenomenon of rap culture on Russian YouTube. The authors conducted a critical discourse analysis of the rap videos as well as of the commentaries underneath the videos, and they highlighted the importance of this online space for political discussions of Russian users.

Despite the trend of tightening internet control in recent years (Vendil Palin, 2017), the Russian state has still been tolerating free speech on YouTube. As a result, this video-sharing platform has become a kind of “alternative television” in the largely state-controlled media landscape of Russia, which makes it a demonstrative example for studying political communication on YouTube in an authoritarian context. This study analyses political communication on YouTube in an authoritarian setting by addressing the following research question: How did different political actors co-opt YouTube during the Russian presidential election of 2018?

Method

To answer the research question, I collected a sample of the most popular political videos on Russian YouTube during the last 2 months of the presidential campaign using the following

procedure. I observed the top 12 most popular videos that appeared in the “Popular” section on Russian YouTube each day, starting from January 28, 2018 (the day of the Russia-wide protest rallies organized by oppositional leader Navalny) and running until March 25, 2018 (1 week after the elections), accessing YouTube from the same account, registered in Russia, to ensure the consistency of results. I selected all videos with political content from the “Popular” section. The final collection contained 176 videos. After viewing the videos, I removed seven items, which dealt exclusively with inner political issues of Ukraine, insofar as they did not tackle Russian politics and thus were not linked to the presidential electoral campaign. The selection process resulted in a sample of 169 videos.

The “Popular” section of Russian YouTube locates itself on the first page of the website and features 12 videos that have gained the most popularity on a particular day. The algorithm of selection of videos for this section is not quite transparent (Bishop, 2018) and is linked to the measurements of views and reactions to the videos as well as how fast they have been achieved (Sokolovsky, 2018). There have been allegations by the Russian media that pro-state actors have tried to manipulate the ratings of YouTube, for instance, by organizing large-scale operations of liking or disliking certain videos (Meduza, 2017; Sokolovsky, 2018).

The non-transparency of the YouTube algorithm and the alleged influence of trolls imply certain limitations for this study: I cannot claim that the selected videos are really the most viewed and commented upon videos on Russian YouTube. However, as Thorson and colleagues (2013) have noted, the YouTube recommendation system itself is “likely to affect the success of certain videos,” and the “Popular” section, no matter how it is constructed, constitutes a particular public that is prominently presented on Russian YouTube and therefore suits the analysis of political communication on the platform.

After capturing the videos, I pursued qualitative content analysis of the sample (Mayring, 2010). As YouTube in Russia may be considered to be an authoritarian public in the sense of Toepfl’s theory (Toepfl, 2020), I drew on theoretical framework by Toepfl, who suggested three key elements of an authoritarian public: (1) the *participants* involved in the public, both passive and active; (2) the *environment* within which these participants communicate; and (3) the *discursive practices* that participants perform (Toepfl, 2018). Moreover, Toepfl distinguished three types of authoritarian publics according to their discursive practices in terms of critics of the country’s high-ranked leaders: leadership-critical, policy-critical, and uncritical. In *uncritical publics*, virtually no criticism circulates at all, unless it echoes criticism previously voiced by the leadership. In *policy-critical publics*, criticism is common for all types of acts and policies, accounted for by lower-level officials or institutions of the authoritarian regime. In *leadership-critical publics*, criticism is regularly targeted even at the country’s highest-ranking political leadership (Toepfl, 2020).

As a first step of analysis, I performed a pilot study of the corpus of 60 videos (one third of the sample) to form categories for the analysis of the three elements of the YouTube public. It was particularly helpful for the coding of *discursive practices* to include not only the political orientation of the videos but also the forms (genres) of the video content into the codebook. Based on the preliminary analysis of the videos, the following three large groups of videos could be distinguished according to their form: (1) professional, (2) semi-professional, and (3) amateur.

As for political orientation, I tested the applicability of Toepfl's approach to the case being studied. My preliminary analysis of data resulted in four main types of videos according to their political orientation: (1) pro-state—videos that explicitly supported Putin and his government; (2) anti-oppositional—videos that defamed political opposition; (3) neutral—videos that did not show any bias for or against the leader, but that afforded critical statements about the political situation as a whole; and (4) oppositional—videos that explicitly criticized Putin. As a second step, I related these types to Toepfl's categorization, and I found that the framework was well applicable for analyzing the data. The first two types can be interpreted as “uncritical” publics in Toepfl's terms. The neutral category can be related to the “policy-critical” publics. The oppositional discourse can be defined as the leadership-critical public. As a result, I have included the three types of publics as categories in the codebook.

To analyze *participants* of publics, I have coded the formal characteristics of the videos (author, views, likes, dislikes, comments) as well as the Russian political figures that were featured in the videos and the attitude toward them as expressed by the author of the video (negative/neutral/positive). *Environment* was also coded, with the help of formal characteristics (presence or absence of comments).

The coding was conducted by two coders, both fluent in Russian. One third of the sample (60 sub-units) was double-coded and tested for inter-coder agreement with Cohen's kappa test, and the agreement rate was between 88% and 99% for various variables. The lowest, yet still satisfactory, agreement was achieved for the variables “Attitudes towards political figures” (88%) and “Genres of videos” (91%).

Findings

The intensity of the appearance of political videos in the top 12 of Russian YouTube differed throughout the studied period, with four peaks of popularity of political content that can be identified within it: (1) January 28–31, 2018; (2) February 4–6, 2018; (3) February 28 to March 1, 2018; and (4) March 15–19, 2018. The first peak was linked to the “Voters” strike rallies organized by Navalny. The second was dominated by pro-state satirical videos against Navalny. Over the course of the third peak, the majority of political videos dealt with the scandal during the TV debates that was provoked by a fight between two presidential candidates, Sobchak and Zhirinovskiy.

The last peak was linked to the coverage of the elections that took place on March 18. It is remarkable how fast the interest in political topics in the YouTube video sample sank after elections. A week after the elections, only one video featuring a political figure (Pavel Grudinin, another presidential candidate) appeared within the top 12.

Across all the videos, I analyzed three elements that constituted a public as suggested by Toepfl: (1) participants, (2) environment, and (3) discursive practices.

Participants

In this study, I closely observed only a portion of participants involved in the creation of the YouTube public, the group that Boyd, in his analysis of YouTube, called participation of the first level (Boyd, 2014): publishers of videos and featured speakers. As for participants of the second level (viewers of the videos), I have gathered information on the number of views to assess the size of the audience.

Forty-one out of 79 accounts that published popular political videos can be described as oppositional, 27 as pro-state, and 11 as neutral. The top oppositional accounts that published the majority of the videos in the sample were as follows: the two YouTube channels by Navalny (Alexey Navalny and Navalny Live) that authored 24 videos; the oppositional vlogger Kamikadzedead (10 videos); and the pro-communist journalist and politician Maxim Shevchenko (8). We expected a significant number of videos from the young liberal opposition candidate Xenia Sobchak. However, we spotted only one video from Sobchak's channel in our sample. Although her campaign was social-media-oriented and targeted a younger audience, she was apparently outrun on YouTube by the Communist Party, which, in Russia, is traditionally oriented to older voters.

Only one clear leader in the pro-state “camp” could be identified: the account “Politics Today: Russia U.S.A. Ukraine” (“*Politika segonya: Rossiya S'SH'A Ukraina*”), which published videos from pro-state federal channels (seven videos). This account appeared late on the top-12 list, in March 2018. All other pro-state accounts did not appear within the top-12 videos in a systematic way, while Navalny's accounts did. The leader of the “neutral” camp was vlogger Yury Dud, with his interviews with journalists and politicians (nine videos).

As for the featured political figures, only four out of eight presidential candidates were prominently mentioned in the videos (Putin, Grudinin, Zhirinovskiy, and Sobchak), as well as the oppositional leader Navalny, who was banned from taking part in the elections. Forty-three percent of the 46 videos that clearly supported political figures contained statements of support for Navalny, 34% were for the Communist Party candidate Grudinin, and 23% were for Putin. The videos featuring content against political figures (47 videos) were mostly targeted against Putin (62%); 19% were against Navalny, 11% were against Grudinin, 6% were against Sobchak, and 2% were against Zhirinovskiy.

As for the audience for the videos in our sample, the oppositional accounts were significantly ahead of the pro-state ones. In our sample, we had 29 videos that had gained more than 1 million views as of the day of coding. Twenty of them contained oppositional content, 6 contained neutral content, and only 3 featured pro-state content. Out of the 20 oppositional videos with more than 1 million views, 11 belonged to Navalny's channels. One of the most popular pro-state videos (with 1.12 million views) was disguised as an oppositional video titled *This is how they cast in votes during elections*. The second most popular featured Putin's address to the Federal Assembly, and the third most popular was a live report by NTV on election results.

As we can see, the "Popular" section of Russian YouTube during the last phase of the presidential election campaign was clearly dominated by oppositional participants, with a predominance of non-systemic opposition around Navalny and pro-communist actors. The presence of pro-state actors was sporadic, and their activity lagged behind in terms of the number of videos and their audience.

Environment

All the videos analyzed operated in the environment of YouTube, which offers limited possibilities to changing technical features of channels. The only significant element that can be adjusted by publishers is the option for the audience to publicly interact with the channel (one can enable/disable the option to like/dislike/comment content). My assumption was that pro-state channels would tend to disable participatory features to avoid critical discussions, whereas oppositional channels would always be open to interaction with their viewers.

I have spotted eight cases where publishers have switched off participatory features. Contrary to expectation, these were publishers with varying political orientations: four pro-state accounts, three oppositional accounts, and one neutral account. As a rule, in the oppositional accounts, one could find an explanation of the decision of the vlogger to switch off likes and dislikes. For example, Kamikadzede (2018) made this adjustment for a period of time to not allow pro-state trolls to downgrade his videos in the YouTube ratings. I could not find any explanations for switching off the participatory features in pro-state accounts. As mentioned above, in this case, we can assume the change in the YouTube environment can be explained by the intention of pro-state publishers to avoid the formation of oppositional publics below their videos.

Discursive Practices

The videos were coded according to the level of criticism of a political leader that could be observed in their content: uncritical, policy-critical, and leadership-critical (Toepfl, 2020). The analysis shows that 16% of the videos constituted uncritical publics, 35% were policy-critical ones, and 49% were leadership-critical. Thus, the leadership-critical

discourse was not only prominently present among the popular videos on YouTube but also dominated it.

As for the genres of videos, the sample contained a wide range of formats, from professional TV reports and talk shows to videos of bloggers sitting in front of their computers at home, or just a picture with a voiceover spoken by a bot. As already described in the "Method" section, I have defined the following three types of genres, based on the preliminary analysis of the videos: (1) professional, (2) semi-professional, and (3) amateur. The "genre" variable was coded according to these three types. The coders were subsequently asked to describe the form of the videos more precisely.

Within these categories, I have observed the following variations of genres: (1) *professional* (61 videos): a live TV report with a standing reporter, a live video report, a news program with a moderator(s) and news pieces from reporters, an interview in a professional setting, a professional radio broadcast; (2) *semi-professional* (49 videos): a witness report, a moderator(s) in an improvised studio commenting on videos, satirical videos (film clips dubbed in a satirical way; memes); (3) *amateur* (59 videos): a blogger in front of a computer commenting on videos from their desktop, a blogger of anonymous identity commenting on the news (this can be a blogger in a mask, and/or with an altered voice or the voice of a bot), a picture with a voiceover.

All the three types of genres were used by all the three types of publics. At the same time, we observed some remarkable patterns in using the genres by pro-state (uncritical) and oppositional (leadership-critical) publics. Thus, both channels by Navalny (leadership-critical publics) produced professional videos, although Navalny's personal addresses to his followers were made with the aesthetics of semi-professional vlogger videos, with him sitting against a simple background with a laptop and showing some video clips. However, the majority of pro-state videos were made in semi-professional and amateur styles. These were, for instance, satirical videos that mocked the opposition. Some videos were titled in an oppositional way and looked oppositional, but, in fact, aimed to defame the opposition leaders. As for policy-critical videos, the majority of them were represented in professional video formats.

Thus, we have observed that pro-state actors sought to co-opt the platform by adopting a semi-professional and amateur style, and oppositional channels tried to professionalize the production of their videos so that they could keep up with the state TV programs and thus become a competitive alternative to uncritical TV publics.

This study does not aim at analyzing agenda-setting mechanisms, but my observation of discursive practices shows that there were certain patterns in agenda spill-overs between oppositional and pro-state videos: oppositional videos reacted to the content and topics set by the state media, whereas pro-state accounts avoided referring to the agenda set by the opposition (for instance, Navalny's "voters" strike). It is also remarkable that a large number of the popular pro-state videos

were dedicated to topics of foreign policy, whereas the oppositional videos tackled mostly inner political problems.

Based on this analysis, I conclude that the public that was created in the “Popular” section of Russian YouTube in the wake of the presidential election of 2018 can be defined as leadership-critical. It can also be described as crossroads of opinions, where different political views are tolerated and can gain popularity within one technological environment, thus constituting a unique space in the Russian media system for otherwise unwelcome politically diverse TV content. We have observed a predominance of leadership-critical discourse that was created by systematic activity on the part of professional and semi-professional oppositional actors. The pro-state actors tried to co-opt the platform, but, as of March 2018, they did not have the same success in their attempt as the oppositional communication channels did.

Discussion

This study examined the role of YouTube in the Russian authoritarian elections and contributed mainly to two strands of research: (1) political communication on YouTube and (2) studies of consultative authoritarianism.

The results show a significant difference in the roles elite and non-elite actors play in political communication on YouTube during elections, compared to democratic contexts (see Dylko et al., 2011; May, 2010). It was non-systemic opposition as well as non-institutional actors and YouTube-only media that dominated the discourse of the most popular videos during the presidential election in Russia. Pro-state actors strove to co-opt the platform, but did not experience the same success as alternative sources, in contrast to studies of democratic contexts that have shown that traditional media and mainstream political actors receive the highest amount of attention during election campaigns.

We have observed that YouTube as a platform has gained significance as an alternative communication space in Russia compared to the protest wave of 2011–2012 (Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2013; Denisova, 2017). This proves the assumption of some scholars that the same global platform can play different roles depending on socio-political context and time period (Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2014; Oates, 2013). As Oates (2013) has noted, “[. . .] any online communication tool cannot be understood to have a single role within a society or even a particular protest. Rather, online communication tools both reflect and refract existing power and informational networks within a country” (p. 182).

As for political communication in consultative authoritarianism, we have observed how a leadership-critical public was constructed within a state-dominated public-at-large. It was not only oppositional political speakers with their consistent publication strategies that contributed to the success of the oppositional discourse, but also the audience as passive and active participants of this public: the users proactively searched for and reacted to the alternative information,

which boosted the popularity of oppositional videos, despite the alleged manipulations of pro-state actors that reportedly tried to downgrade critical videos.

The pro-state accounts were not successful in promoting their discourse in the political videos of YouTube. This may be explained partly by the fact that their content did not meet the demands of the audience that sought alternative information on the platform. Moreover, there is an obvious contradiction between the nature of the open content sharing platform and the ambition of an authoritarian state to control communication flows. This approach ignores “the fundamental cultural logic of YouTube,” which, according to Burgess and Green, draws on authenticity (Burgess & Green, 2018).

Despite of the predominance of the leadership-critical discourse on YouTube in the wake of the presidential election, the state did not employ any restrictions on the platform, although it had legislative tools to do so and even warned of blocking the platform after YouTube refused to delete one of Navalny’s videos in February 2018 (Meduza, 2018). This fact shows that perceived benefits for the regime from tolerating this public apparently prevailed over the risks of losing control over the information flows and endangering the stability of the regime. Alongside the possible benefits listed by Toepfl (feedback for the elite about the real state of public opinion, co-optation of opposition elites, venting anger), one other benefit for the regime can be added that, in my view, played a role in this particular case. Navalny’s strategy of making his followers, who were protest voters, boycott the elections (“voters” strike) played into the hands of the state. It practically matched the strategy of the Kremlin that aimed at raising turnout of certain voters by mobilizing Putin’s core electorate, while the mobilization of protest voters was undesired (Rogov, 2018). The results of the elections exceeded even the most optimistic expectations of pro-state sociologists (Baunov et al., 2018): Putin gained 77% of the vote with a turnout of 67.5% (Central Election Committee [CEC] of the Russian Federation, 2018). This obviously proves that the strategy of tolerating a leadership-critical public on YouTube in the wake of authoritarian elections was, at the end of the day, beneficial for the state.

Conclusion

This study was based on an analysis of the most popular videos on Russian YouTube during the presidential election of 2018. Analysis of other authoritarian contexts, as well as studies of non-electoral periods, would help to better understand the role of YouTube in political communication in various socio-political contexts. Other paths for future research may include a study of the second level of participation on YouTube in authoritarian contexts (Boyd, 2014), in particular, comment sections and the role that pro-state trolls play in creating publics under YouTube videos, as well as studies of audience perception of political YouTube videos. To better understand the functioning of consultative authoritarianism, other Web 2.0 platforms, such as Facebook or Telegram,

could be placed under scrutiny, as well as mechanisms of agenda-setting and spill-overs of agendas between different types of partial publics, both within national contexts and in a cross-cultural comparative perspective.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work has been supported by the German Research Foundation DFG under an Emmy Noether grant.

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