

**2013 -2014 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

Maria Sidorkina
PhD Candidate
Yale University

Social Media and Political Engagement in Postsocialist Russia

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Research Abstract:

Over the course of dissertation fieldwork conducted between November 2012 and July 2013 in Novosibirsk and Moscow, Russia, I analyzed the cultures of online and offline public speech among a network of publically active citizens. The study relied on in-depth ethnographic analysis of speech communities to determine whether and how social media platforms are generating new forms of political engagement and collective agency. My research showed that social media is reconfiguring the imagination of collectivities and their politicization in distinct ways. However, it is doing so through interacting with social processes that do not primarily take place online.

Social media has given a new resonance to citizens' street actions and other "offline" activities (social work, artistic performances, circulation of newsprint) and has allowed types of organizing not feasible without networking and mobile technologies. Online discussion platforms have also enabled the diffusion of forms of addressing the state and fellow citizens that were previously rare in public discourse. These include "sincere" testaments of political commitment and the critical unpacking of official state documents. However, social media technologies have also become incorporated into social processes with longer histories and social domains that do not coincide with that of "active internet users." Existing processes of public opinion formation, social organization, and orientation to state practices reveal the current limitations of social media platforms. For instance, these platforms are better at streamlining conventional appeals to state officials rather than circulating new logics for citizens' political self-organization. Social media is still reproducing the mutual isolation of mass and elite publics. Additionally, beyond spreading information or registering opinions, social media are used only marginally in forging new kinds of links between citizens and novel institutions (online or informal education) and each other (whether in flash-mobs or social movements).

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Research Goals:

As proposed, the goals of my research were to shed light on the impact of new, online contexts of discursive interaction on the political role of public speech in Russia. My study's empirical concern was with whether users of social media contest culturally patterned divisions between political and apolitical genres and media of communication. Hopeful forecasters noted that social media in Russia were creating novel sites for critical citizen engagement with state policy and practice. Others predicted, however, that social media sites would remain a forum for private conversation and apolitical cultural production. My study endeavored to determine whether Russian social media are creating opportunities for engagement by attending to the actual, everyday speech practices in which the social, cultural and political meanings of old and new media play out.

The main hypothesis tested in my study was that cynicism towards public sphere discourse, as documented in studies of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian public speech, was changing in light of the emergence of alternative infrastructures for public communication. The null case hypothesis was that cynical logics of public speech continued to be reproduced online, despite the increasing openness of information and new tools for citizen contact. A related goal of the study was to analyze how ordinary urban residents are reconfiguring group belonging within a changing media and political environment. How does access to social media impact the kinds of collectivities Russians can and do project? Russians' enthusiastic embrace of social media platforms complicated the tradition of a collective withdrawal from politics, as evidenced in the mass street protests in 2011-2012 that followed the parliamentary and presidential elections. Are the forms of acting collectively envisioned by the oppositional protest movement circulating to larger publics through social media? In considering the effectiveness of social networking technologies in transforming collective sociality among urban residents, the current study also meant to challenge the conceptual divide between online and offline spaces. In studying speech communities situated across media and geographical contexts, my project aimed to trace how users take their conversations offline, and on the offline sites at which they are constantly learning the speech registers and social personas they bring to their online interaction.

Research Activities:

During seven months of fieldwork in Novosibirsk, Russia I collected comparative and case data on speech communities that constituted a network of the city's publically active citizens. During a subsequent two months of fieldwork in Moscow, I analyzed direct social and cultural ties between my informants in Novosibirsk and institutions in the capital. These

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institutional ties included structured relationships such as those that arise within political parties, educational outreach programs, or business collaborations. Additionally, I spent time in Moscow investigating discussion platforms that served as discursive models or sites of cultural pilgrimage for Novosibirsk cultural activists. Splitting up my research between Novosibirsk, a regional capital, and Moscow, the economic, cultural and political center of Russia, allowed me to probe into how integration, hierarchization and social distance were discursively maintained between center and periphery.

In conducting data collection I used participant observation methods, virtual ethnography, social network analysis, and semi-structured interviews.

Ethnography of speech communities and events

Novosibirsk social and cultural activists (*obschestveniki, aktivnye gorozhane*) and those who use similar tactics for occupying public space – the street, the newspaper headline, the state office or institution – are relatively well known to one another. This is because Novosibirsk is “small” by metropole standards: resources for civic initiatives come from several well-used sources (e.g. *Komitet po delam molodezhy*, the *Goethe Institute*, a local oligarch’s wife), and everyone scrutinizes and aims to shine in the same four or five online news platforms (*ngs.ru, sib.fm, tayga.info, sibkrai.ru*, local TV stations). Every group that participates in a common project forms a separate, somewhat cohesive speech community, with its own regular cycle of meetings and public activities.

The social groups that occupy contiguous spaces in Novosibirsk’s public sphere range in political stance (from overtly to covertly politicized) and allegiance (from left-wing anarchists and communist to socially conservative, pro-United Russia parties). The full political spectrum, as Moscow, is represented, even if the representative groups have no more than a handful of members. While in Novosibirsk, I attended many of the meetings of the largest or most active of the social groups or political parties – the meetings at which the content of “public actions” was often discussed or decided upon. This allowed me to collect reflections on the meanings of public activities, as well as to note the strategies individuals would use to reframe language as internal to the organization or intended for public consumption. I subsequently attended the public actions, whether “on the street” or online, that were discussed at the organizational meetings. This aspect of my fieldwork resulted in extensive audio and video documentation of activists’ organizational meetings, online campaigns, and street actions.

The different speech communities active in setting the agenda for public discussion in Novosibirsk developed mutual “offline” connections through felicitous personal meetings and in ad-hoc spaces: through private conversations or in the public events that punctuate daily city life.

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These public events include art exhibit openings, film galas, play readings, concerts, semi-private “after-parties,” and, more recently, protest actions. Additionally, public people interact at state-sponsored events such as round tables of experts organized by the local authorities, or public chamber hearings regarding issues of social importance. During my seven months of fieldwork in Novosibirsk I did not aim to collect ethnographic data on the full spectrum of such instances of public life. However, I did regularly attend events that were a representative slice of the Novosibirsk cultural scene, as well as events that were attended by the highly interlinked “nodes” in the network of my informants.

My research was specifically focused on the linguistic material generated at the various types of public events in Novosibirsk (party discussions, political meetings, planned street actions). The material I collected typically consisted of recordings of and fieldnotes on: (1) public discussions that were formally organized (e.g. Liberal Youth discussion club, the Marxist reading group, School for Civil Society Leaders, a “Regional Marketing” round table); (2) public meetings with speeches and slogans on specific topics (e.g. open mike demonstration against housing policies, “Strategy 31” picketing for the citizens’ right to protest); (3) semi-formal discussion about local politics, events or organizational nuances (e.g. Organizing Committee meetings of the united opposition, a demonstration-planning meeting by the social movement REformazia, an election candidate meeting with citizens); and (4) informal discussions (e.g. during or following a reading, show, or film screening).

In terms of audio data, approximately 250 hours were recorded at meetings and during informal conversations with event participants. The selection of discussion events for study was originally based on several dimensions of expected variation, including their stated form (organizational, educational, program building, socializing, oppositional) and relative status between interactants.

Virtual ethnography

Discourse samples from my Twitter feed, multiple Vkontakte “publics,” and Facebook groups were a crucial source of linguistic data and meta-data for this study. I used these social media sites for initial identification of publically active communities in Novosibirsk (most active individuals or groups were usually highly interlinked among themselves, and followed by larger groups of passive readers). After subsequent investigation of these communities’ life “offline” I continued to use the websites for tracking these communities’ evolving styles of self-presentation and self-positioning. Social networking data was useful for mapping communities’ virtual relationships with other activists and groups (maps which usually differed from those of relationships between the “de-virtualized” groups).

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In sum, ethnographic materials collected virtually include snapshots of conversations that: (1) revealed key ideas about genres and goals of discursive participation, online and offline; (2) preceded or followed offline conversations at key events my informants attended; (3) included reflections on Russian public and political conduct. Additionally, in selecting conversations for archiving, I attended to instances when participants signaled being keenly aware of the specifically “online” status of their conversations or clearly marked the use of “online” speech protocols. (The online-offline distinction is blurry in real life, rather than ontologically real; yet, demarcating this distinction is often important for individuals in instantiating differences of style or projected audience.)

Interviews

In total, I conducted approximately 40 semi-formal interviews, currently in the process of being transcribed. These are interviews with members who had different levels of leadership and participation in Novosibirsk and Moscow public and political life, and with whom I interacted throughout my fieldwork. For the most part, I interviewed active citizens who were at the time members of a single social network involved in organizing or participating in events of the type noted above. The nature and size of this network was studied using snowball sampling techniques (this, rather than random sampling is the preferred method for network analysis, since what is sought is data on the relationships between nodes, and not unrelated content) (Scott 1999). I repeatedly elicited from my informants names of individuals “most active” in shaping public opinion in Novosibirsk, and invited those people for an interview. This process continued until I started to recognize all the named individuals and had interviewed most of them.

Interview sessions included elicitation of reflections on prior instances of resonant public speech; questions about how and at what sites public opinion takes shape in Novosibirsk; and prompts to produce explicit commentary on the culture of online and offline public speech in Russia. Additionally, many interviews included elicitation of oral histories of political activity in Novosibirsk and Moscow.

Text and media artifacts

I have also collected numerous text artifacts, such as relevant print and digital news articles associated with my field sites; photos and videos, taken by me or others at the events I attended; and other publications related to specific organizations, such as brochures. Although I have yet to finish analyzing these materials, I have tagged and sorted them according to relevant criteria. Supplemented by mass media meta-analysis, this combination of methods allowed me to compare communicative practices and juxtapose self-reflexive claims about “what public speech

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accomplishes” articulated by different groups of actors. Detailed notes were kept throughout fieldwork.

Important Research Findings: (Photos in attached document.)

My fieldwork on the political potential of Russian public sphere discourse was conducted on the heels of a boom and bust cycle of oppositional activity in Moscow and other regional capitals (Fall 2011-Spring 2012). At the time of my arrival, laments about the loss of momentum for the protest movement were still a dominant genre in new media outlets¹. However, other political concerns have taken center stage: Moscow’s mayoral race raised new hopes associated with the use of new kinds of tools for building political participation and legitimacy. These tools are used to take advantage of those political opportunities afforded by Russia’s electoral system, rather than to drive street protests or expose corrupt state officials. Other regional elections will be now used to test these methods (e.g. crowd-sourced funding, social-movement type campaign organizing, and candidates running outside the “systemic opposition”). Novosibirsk is looking forward to a mayoral election in 2015 that is already sparking public debate, and promises to be an opposition-state showdown.

Marshalling public opinion, online and on the street

To illuminate new and routine ways for imagining public participation in politics available in Novosibirsk, I investigated how people talked about the role of public discussions and the formation of public opinion. One thing that was strongly shared among the publically active citizens I investigated was an orientation to public discourse. Despite what has been historically described as “cynicism” towards media representations in Russia, and despite censorship and self-censorship among media actors, my informants at some or all times demonstrated faith in the efficacy of online, broadcast and print media for shaping public opinion. They saw the media as crucial to generating public awareness of cultural or political events; inspiring public participation in activism; getting feedback for their activities from the public; as a way of exerting pressure on local and regional state authorities; and, in general, as a “resource” that is valuable for organizing social change.

The belief in the efficacy of generating public awareness or “resonance” (*obschestvennyj rezonans*) for issues of general concern could be seen in the strategies activists used to “mediatize” social campaigns (Agha 2011). That is, in how they aim to reach large audiences by joining communicative forms (e.g. demands for state accountability made at street protests or

¹ This kind of opinion piece has worn itself out by now, as has, unfortunately, coverage for those still being detained following the supposed provocations during the May 6th 2012 protest.

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online testimonials) with commodity forms such as news articles, social network posts, and slideshows of protest slogans. One very successful case of leveraging public opinion and gaining media attention (“*osveschenie v SMP*”) as well as a state response was the call for investigative justice following the death of a young student (*Nina Shestakova*). The 19-year-old girl was run over by an intoxicated police man, who blamed the accident on his wife, also in the car at the time. A group of supporters for the girl’s family was organized via the social network Vkontakte, which was able to raise public awareness through a series of street actions, press coverage, and by networking with other activists (See photo #1). Expert groups of journalists and lawyers convened to assist with steering the investigative committee to uncover the truth, hundreds of thousands people followed this story in the largest local media portal, and thousands of people participated in comment board discussions (*ngs.ru*). As a result, local officials had to react in the press to the corrupt actions of the investigative committee, and the investigation into the accident was reopened. The final results of the investigation have not yet been determined, but it is widely recognized that civil society efforts in this situation were a success (nation-level officials have weighed in, and the story was able to stay in the news long past the initial accident).

Although many similar cases of vehicle deaths happen in Novosibirsk every year, the death of this particular girl may get due process because a group of activists marshaled the resource of public opinion in pressuring the authorities. Other examples of mediatized campaigns abound: an ecological action that demanded for the city to clean up a snow dump site, a series of individuals picketing around the clock in front of a live city cam in support of political prisoners, and volunteers organizing online to rescue an old man from an illegitimate property transfer. All of these cases could be described as “online activism” going “offline;” however their public resonance was due to individuals successfully linking speech online, offline, in the mass media, and in protests on the street. In the case of Nina Shestakova, this linking was efficacious because activists were able to successfully pre-formulate the media responses by shaping aspects of their linguistic and visual “message,” and by devoting a substantial amount of their collective time to mediatization.

In Novosibirsk, and in Moscow today, the street is full of public actions of various kinds. However, the “offline” event or happening – a meeting, a picket, a performance – only becomes significant if it is instantly, and strongly, mediated online. A street event is staged not for the sake of the passer-by or the official who sees it, but to attract “media” – and specifically, “new media” attention (the high ratio of journalists to protesters at most events is a running joke for observers of street actions). Success in “raising public awareness” is measured directly in the level of public “reception” of an action – quantified in the number of shares, likes, and eyeballs on newspaper articles. At the same time, however, online popularity is “checked” by street

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showings, whose tallies are promptly circulated online. The number of online “comments” or “likes” await their proof in the pudding of foot traffic on the street. Otherwise, as one journalist and political activist put it, “a lot of comments on an article doesn’t indicate that it’s interesting, only that it was a cause for scandal among the internet trolls” (Mazur, Facebook, 4/22/13).

Playful solidarity: the Monstration and ironic slogans

The Monstration, a 10-year “absurdist” mass street action in Novosibirsk that traditionally takes place on May 1st, provides an example of another kind of imagined collectivity that has seen success in Novosibirsk (and beyond) in recent years. Unlike “public opinion,” it is not used as tool for making serious demands. Rather, this mock parade of 2,000-5,000 people, organized via the social network website Vkontakte.ru, provides a space for individuals to express themselves in a context that is marked as “anti-political” or “apolitical.” This context allows people who do not want to claim a specific, political point of view to come together and participate in a common discursive project. On the other hand, the very existence of this space free of politics often becomes a political issue as a result of limits on the event imposed by the state. Its yearly occurrence becomes an issue of the right to free expression, the right to occupy city spaces, and the right to reject official models of communicability (i.e. comprehensible public speech). For this reason, the Monstration is seen by some participants as being “pre-political” – allowing younger generations a taste of exercising their right to free speech, even if that speech is ironic or absurd. Analyzing what is distinct about the Monstration as a form of collective belonging helps compare this other modes of “street” level collective expression in today’s Russia.

The Monstration is a favorite event of members of the educated public in Novosibirsk (from the socialists, anarchists, computer programmers, students, art critics, and opposition activists to some state servants). However, it also causes skepticism, dissent and scandal in some circles. Those who are wary of deflating the seriousness of public speech, or are invested in preserving the Soviet legacy of May 1st Labor Day parades, are skeptical of the Monstration. State authorities are as mistrustful of the Monstration as they are of all non-state-aligned acts of public speech – e.g. they wonder *who* is paying for all these people to show up. Nevertheless, the Monstration’s popularity has earned it a secure place in the national cultural scene: the organizers won the prestigious *Innovation* prize run by the Russian Ministry of Culture in 2011, and it has become a highly “mediatized” installation in the public realm – that is, news stories about it travel along various paths to nation-level, new media publics. The extent of press coverage for the Monstration is in part due to the buildup leading up to the event – it is always uncertain whether the city administration will allow it to take place. The main “ideologist” of the

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Monstration, Artem Loskutov, skillfully drives this tension to motivate journalists to publicize the city’s continual attempts to prevent the event, and its continual triumph.

The reason for the continuing popularity of the Monstration in Novosibirsk (in size, it equals or exceeds all political street actions) points to the widespread dissatisfaction with the options for political engagement in Russia today. It also reveals people’s ambivalence about the public speech genres used by “sincere” oppositional and pro-state politicians. Observers of the 2011-2012 “Fair Elections” demonstrations in Moscow noted that after the initial protest there appeared a large number of humorous slogans, similar to those in the Monstration (a contrast with the seriousness of earlier protests by opposition groups like the National Bolsheviks) (See photo #6). As Loskutov puts it, people started using funny slogans because it was boring to just be serious all the time: “you can say that Putin was a thief once, twice, but then it's like... OK, we’ve said it so many times, now what can we do?” That’s when people turned to playful slogans like “You can’t even represent/picture us” (“*Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete*”), which first appeared at a St. Petersburg rally in winter 2012, and circulated widely from there.

Despite the ambivalent, playful, or completely absurd nature of both Monstration and many “Fair Elections” slogans (as well as many slogans at countless other street actions in Novosibirsk and Moscow), the slogan’s ubiquity points to the seriousness with which Russians take this verbal form of self-expression. After all, the participants in the Monstration could just dress up in funny costumes to show their creativity; instead, they spend days composing their slogans. The slogans at political meetings are the result of a coordinated organizational effort – usually a team of people comes up with specific phrasing to express their collective position, and then distributes posters to the rest of the participants. The slogans emerge from party decrees sent “down” the hierarchies, from processes of consensus formation at meetings, from memes circulating widely online, or from prior examples of successful actions. They are in dialog with prior meetings (documented online), and with those at the same meeting (e.g. photo #4). The reason that slogans matter today is that they are quickly re-circulated to various audiences: they create a visual sound bite to enable participants to frame each street action as an event with new content, that therefore has a right to appear in the “news;” they present a discursive portrait of a group that travels to large publics online; and they are photographed and scrutinized by state authorities for “extremist” content.

Opinions have not settled on whether the Monstration allows public expression for those who may otherwise be compelled to take political action seriously (“a release valve for political dissatisfaction,”) or whether it provides a safe zone of for those who may have otherwise never considered exercising their right to public speech (“political calisthenics”). In either case, its popularity points to the fact that many Russians are energetically experimenting with the types of

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public speech available to them, searching for the right idiom to publically express their ideas and commitments.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

My research on how Russian people imagine themselves as collectivities shows divergent trends in the degree of political engagement opened up by new media technologies. Many successful projects organized via social media are built around apolitical or anti-political collective identities (e.g. the Monstration). In Novosibirsk, however, it is clear that urban activists and ordinary people believe in the efficacy of “public opinion.” Activists use social media campaigns, street actions and professional networks to drive the news agenda (*zadavat’ povestku dnia*) and thereby pressure state actors. Public opinion is most effective in redressing grievances of a non-political nature (e.g. exposing a single corrupt policeman), but occasionally advocates for those unfairly treated for political reasons (e.g. for the release of Monstration’s organizer Artem Loskutov in 2009, following his arrest on trumped-up charges of drug possession).

Another way the public demands state accountability is with an instrument provided by the state itself – the petition. Many government and oppositional activist efforts boil down to facilitating this form of traditional, direct exchange between the citizen and the authorities (Cultures of Grievance in Eastern Europe & Eurasia 2013). For example, one issue of general interest in Russia today is the cost of housing infrastructure services (ZhKKh). RosZhKKh (<http://roszkh.ru>), a component of Alexei Navalny’s anti-corruption program, helps individuals write petitions to local bodies responsible for oversight for their specific housing block. It does not provide guidance, however, for neighbors writing collective petitions, or for reorganizing existing home owners associations to represent residents’ interests and lobby local authorities (see photos #8, 9).

Volunteer groups helping people in need (drawing on social networks and state organizations to gather funds) are also a robust form of citizens’ self-organization in Novosibirsk. Direct social assistance is seen as a “positive” and constructive way of tackling the problems of everyday life in Russia, in contrast with the intelligentsia’s traditional strategy of criticizing the state (Ries 1997; Matza 2009). That public opinion, the petition, and voluntarism are seen as the primary tools for effecting social change, however, illustrates the fact that city residents most readily imagine themselves as collectivities when putting pressure on local administrators, or when acting autonomously from the state. They do not imagine themselves organized into social or political movements advocating institutional transformation (this observation echoes other assessments from fieldwork conducted in Russia on political

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engagement, e.g. Hemment 2012; Patico 2008; Matza 2009). Citizen groups interested in political collective action are still seen as socially “marginal” (*marginaly*). This perception continues despite “Fair Elections” protests and the work of Alexei Navalny’s supporters, which had shifted the image of politically engaged collectivities closer to the mainstream.

There are multiple reasons for the perceived “marginality” of efforts to organize citizens politically². Among them, however, is that the kind of knowledge readily shared between activist groups, through educational institutions³ and informal collaboration, concerns the types of collective efforts described above: media campaigns (of which street actions are a component), petitioning the state (e.g. filing grievances), and “acting locally” through voluntary assistance (following “the theory of small deeds” or *teoriya malykh del*). However, acting locally is seen as *not acting politically*. It is seen as something that should be outside the scope of politics; that has to do with real needs and “taking concrete actions” (“*delat’ realnye dela*”) rather than with discussions of public interests. Local self-organization is therefore rarely used as a tool to promote action beyond providing direct assistance.

Public activists do see mass and social media as able to politicize individuals. However, there are several issues here. (1) First of all, the public is split between: (i) those that use new media outlets aligned with the opposition or other insular interest groups (e.g. right-wing Orthodox or nationalist associations), and (ii) those who only use the internet for entertainment purposes, or not at all (the latter get their news from mass channels such as state-censored TV or popular newspaper websites). News of political activity may not reach the majority of the population, or, if it does, only cast in a specific light. With some exceptions, social media networks tend to reproduce the cleavages in publics that exist along political and social lines. (2) Second, politicized media campaigns, such as the Fair Elections protests, are limited as a tool in that there is only so much that public representations of dissatisfied citizens can do, if the state is unwilling to respond to pressure. (3) Finally, international pressure on the Russian state regarding its policies fits into the trap of other “media campaigns” in that it is targeted at pressuring state actors regarding selective, high-scale issues delinked from a host of other problems and trajectories of everyday life in Russia.

² The current political party system, whether *United Russia* or the “systemic opposition,” such as the *KPRF*, *Yabloko*, or *Spravedlivaia Rossia*, is seen as a pragmatic compromise with state authorities, and thus, for many people, remains outside the realm of sincere political engagement.

³ Examples of such institutions in Russia’s regional cities include the oppositional School of Civil Society Leaders and the School for Public Politics, funded by Mikhail Prokhorov and Alexei Kudrin.

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In sum, my research suggests that there is a lack of attention to the practices and knowledge politicized collectivities can use to reach “the people” (*narod*)⁴ outside of mass media and direct assistance. While the theory of acting locally is popular, urban activists may need to share strategies of “speaking locally” (*teoria malykh slov* – speaking about shared interests at a local level, rather than in the media). Groups could focus on sharing practices such those used in Alexei Navalny’s election mobilization efforts. The apartment owners associations (*sobranie sobstvennikov*) are spaces that could serve as a great testing ground for new methods of collective organization. Sharing practices at this level, which is implicitly, but deeply, political, is already happening in certain social media communities. Soviet housing infrastructure is both a shared burden and a shared resource for conversation at a scale that is more public than the kitchen table, and, paradoxically, more impersonal than the media.

Co-Curricular Activity:

While in the field I discussed my research with several Russian scholars in Novosibirsk and Moscow who are interested in issues of public speech and political engagement in contemporary Russia, including Konstantin Antonov (*Novosibirsk State Technological University*), Alexei Penzin (*Institution of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences*), Artemy Magun (*European University in St. Petersburg*), Ilya Budraitskis (independent scholar working in Moscow), as well as graduate students at various institutions. Additionally, I engaged in informal discussion with Novosibirsk political and NGO activists through my fieldwork, and through the School for Civil Society Leaders. Finally, I talked about my findings with numerous Russian “public intellectuals” such as bloggers, performance artists, and poets who are unaffiliated with formal institutions, but who are invested in analyzing and transforming the Russian public sphere.

Conclusions:

The theme of revolution was still alive among some politicized speech communities in Novosibirsk by the time I arrived there in November 2012 – with questions raised about what the distribution of power would look like were a revolution to finally happen. However, these conversations seemed to betoken a return to traditional genres of public talk about social change, rather than to accurately represent political realities⁵. On the other hand, there were also changes in how the speech communities I studied chose to speak about their collective belonging. For

⁴ E.g. in the discussions I attended organized by a newly formed political party sympathetic to Alexei Navalny, participants didn’t know if there were *any* options for reaching wider publics, given the state’s monopoly on television, and the slow pace of attracting people through personal networks.

⁵ For a discussion of “revolution” as a trope for describing social change in Russia see Platt 1997.

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instance, the increasingly prevalent use of the term *publichnoe* or “public” today in Russia marks a change from almost a century of usage, during which topics of common space and general interest were discussed using derivatives of the root of *obschee* (meaning *common* rather than *public*) (Kharkhordin 2011). This change in usage could indicate attempts by key social actors to disassociate the notion of collective participation in public life from empty and cliché meaning of the term “society” (*obschestvo*) prevalent during Soviet socialism. It remains to be seen what the popularity of the term “public” signals in Russia today – the circulation of new models of collective identity, or the unexpected afterlife of Western concepts of civil society grafted onto Russians’ vocabularies by international development agencies in the 1990s (Hemment 2012).

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

Upon finishing data analysis I will have a robust framework for discussing the different models of collective belonging encountered in Novosibirsk, and hope to publish papers regarding each specific model, including the apolitical “flash mobs” (the Monstration), the “public” projected by media campaigns and street actions (which can pressure state actors through public opinion), as well as the kinds of distributed efforts at citizen-state and citizen-society interaction that resist projecting an agentive collectivity (petitions, “acting locally”). My dissertation, which I plan to publish as an academic monograph, will treat all these issues using a single theoretical lens for evaluating the how social media interactions transform or fuel existing social processes of political engagement and disengagement. I plan to translate my papers for publication in Russian academic journals, and present my results at public lectures in Novosibirsk and Moscow.

In future research, I will continue studying how ideologies of communication (associated with the projection of different types of collectivities) map onto practices in Russian public discourse. However, I plan to shift the scope of my work historically to analyze the patterns of public sphere organization in the early 20th century. Such work would help us place current public sphere dynamics within a historical context, well-analyzed by scholars in some aspects, but not from the standpoint of linguistic anthropology. My hope is that this and future studies will contribute to a richer understanding of the logics of Russian political culture.

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