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Turkish Studies

eISSN: 1308-2140

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi



Doxing as a Form of Online Activism: Case of Alexei Navalny's Film *A Palace For Putin*

Çevrimiçi Aktivizmin Bir Türü Olarak Dokslama: Alexei Navalny'in "Putin İçin Bir Saray" Filmi Vakası

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Abstract: This article sheds a light on doxing as a form of digital activism and use of social media platforms through mapping the case of video released by Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny in January 2021. 2-hour film *A Palace for Putin* was posted on YouTube and within 3 weeks, 109 million views were registered by YouTube only. Similar to 2017 Navalny's video that was devoted to the corruption schemes of the Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, released after Navalny's arrest *Palace* was followed by the mass protests in the biggest Russian cities. This article aims to discuss the impact of doxing and social media platforms on political process in Russia. It is argued that by drawing attention of Russians to Putin's corruption schemes, video exposes wrongdoings and delegitimizes the power of the Russian president. Also, doxing creates a platform for debate and exchange of opinions directly in the comments under the videos, therefore, civic engagement is promoted. However, doxing and digital media platforms also violate privacy as a basic human right. Also, it is argued that doxing videos have very little potential to mobilize Russians or organize citizens that support opposition. Rather, it is a work of opposition headquarters and activists. At the same time, there is a risk of the new circle of authoritarian measures that government adopts as a response to growing activism. Article relies on qualitative methodology. Author conducts qualitative analysis of the film supported by the analysis of comments left by YouTube users under the videos.

Structured Abstract: This article sheds a light on doxing as a form of digital activism and use of social media platforms for digital activism through mapping the case of video released by Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny's team in January 2021. Video was shared upon Navalny's arrival to Moscow from Berlin where he was staying at the hospital due to the poisoning by Novichok nerve agent in August 2021. 2-hour film titled *A Palace for Putin. The Story of the Biggest Bribe* was posted on YouTube channel and within 3 weeks approximately 109 million views were registered by YouTube only.

This article aims to discuss the impact of doxing and social media platforms on political process in Russia. Particularly, the strengths and weaknesses of both are analyzed on the basis of *Palace for Putin* film's case. Doxing is defined as public identification or publishing private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge. This research answers the question about the impact of doxing and social media platforms through which doxing is spread on the activism in Russia. It is argued that by drawing attention of Russians to Putin's corruption schemes, Navalny's YouTube videos expose wrongdoings and

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Cite as/ Atıf: Demydova, V. (2021). Doxing as a form of online activism: Case of Alexei Navalny's film *A Palace For Putin*. *Turkish Studies*, 16(3), 909-929. <https://dx.doi.org/10.7827/TurkishStudies.49688>

Received/Geliş: 26 February/Şubat 2021

Accepted/Kabul: 20 June/Haziran 2021

Checked by plagiarism software

Published/Yayın: 25 June/Haziran 2021

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delegitimize the power of the Russian president. Also, doxing creates platform for debate and exchange of opinions directly in the comments under the videos. Therefore, civic engagement is promoted. However, as this articles proves, doxing and digital media platforms also violate privacy or the basic human right that contradicts the notion of democracy itself. Discussions on social platforms happen rarely since users tend to advertise themselves rather than to make a dialogue with other users. In case when discussions happen they often lack cohesiveness and arguments supported by evidence. Debates frame events into the existing beliefs and at the same time simplify political, economic or social matters that opens the way for populism. These videos have limited capacity in mobilizing Russians or organizing citizens that support opposition so they could join mass rallies against government. Rather, it is a work of opposition headquarters and activists. At the same time, there is a risk of the new circle of authoritarian measures that government adopts as a response to growing activism.

Article relies on qualitative methodology. Author embraces the following data collection techniques. First section presents literature review on social media and their implications for democracy; role of YouTube in political process as well as on doxing and its significance for activism. Then, author conducts qualitative analysis of the film supported by the analysis of comments left by YouTube users under the video. Article also uses Russian legislation on media to set a framework for analysis of the opposition and media activism. Finally, article relies on media coverage of the events in Russia that preceded and followed Navalny's film release.

Analysis indicates that doxing videos are successful in sharing information and drawing attention of Russians to Putin's corruption schemes. Video set agenda that is corruption of the Russian elites headed by Putin himself. Furthermore, doxing creates platform for debate and exchange of opinions directly in the comments under the videos. Therefore, civic engagement is promoted.

However, it would be a mistake to end up with simple univocal estimation of doxing in social media. As this articles proves, doxing and digital media platforms also violate privacy or the basic human right that contradicts the notion of democracy itself. Mobilization potential of *Palace* is also very humble: these videos do not mobilize Russians and do not organize citizens that support opposition so they could join mass rallies against government. Rather, opposition activists through the network of headquarters and Telegram or TikTok channels and thanks to the financial sources mobilize and organize people. Analyzed video seems aim to achieve another goal that is presentation of Navalny as a candidate for presidency and his program as it was in the case of his *KRUGI* videos in 2013 when Navalny was running for Moscow city mayor's position. Discussions on social platforms may not happen due to the inability of users to communicate with people having opposite views. If discussions happen they lack cohesiveness and arguments supported by evidence. In most of the cases, discussion does not happen, insofar as users tend to promote themselves rather than to be engaged into the communication. Existing debates frame events into the existing beliefs and at the same time simplify political, economic or social matters that opens the way for populism. At the same time, there is a risk of the new circle of authoritarian measures that government may adopt as a response to activism.

From this perspective, it would be logical to conclude that doxing on social media platforms has advantages as well as limitations for political process. Social media themselves without significant budget or without offline activists and headquarters may not be successful. Historical moment and personality of leader also matter. Thus, pandemic and economic deterioration in Russia are set off against luxury of elite's life. While Navalny managed to succeed in social media particularly after incident with poisoning and imprisonment.

Keywords: Area Studies, doxing, Navalny, online activism, opposition, Russia, YouTube.

Öz: Bu makale, Rus muhalif aktivist Alexei Navalny'nin Ocak 2021'de yayınladığı video vakasını analiz ederek sosyal medya platformlarının kullanımına ve dijital aktivizmin bir türü olarak dokslamaya ışık tutuyor. 2 saat süren *Putin İçin Bir Saray* filmi YouTube'da yayınlandı ve 3 hafta içinde yalnızca YouTube tarafından 109 milyon görüntüleme tescillendi. 2017 yılında Alexei Navalny'nin Başbakan Dmitry Medvedev'in yolsuzluk planlarına adanmış videosuna benzer şekilde, Navalny'nin tutuklanmasından sonra yayınlanan *Putin İçin Bir Saray* filminin ardından en büyük Rus şehirlerinde kitlesel protestolar gözlemlendi. Bu makale, dokslama ve sosyal medya platformlarının Rusya'daki siyasi süreç üzerindeki etkisini tartışmayı

amaçlamaktadır. Rusların dikkatini Putin'in yolsuzluk planlarına çeken videonun, suistimalleri açığa çıkardığı ve Rusya devlet başkanının gücünü gayrimeşrulaştırdığı iddia ediliyor. Ayrıca dokslama, doğrudan videolar altındaki yorumlarda tartışma ve fikir alışverişi için bir platform oluşturuyor ve buna bağlı olarak sivil katılım teşvik ediliyor. Buna karşın dokslama ve dijital medya platformları temel bir insan hakkı olan mahremiyeti de ihlal ediyorlar. Bu tür videolar Rusları harekete geçirmiyor veya muhalefeti destekleyen vatandaşları örgütlemiyor. Aksine, bu görevi muhalefet karargahı ve aktivistler üstleniyor. Aynı zamanda, hükümetin yükselen aktivizme bir yanıt olarak benimsediği yeni otoriter önlemler döngüsü riski de var. Makale, nitel araştırma metodolojisine dayanmaktadır. Yazar, YouTube kullanıcıları tarafından videonun altında bırakılan yorumların analizi ile destekleyerek filmin nitel analizini yapmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bölge Çalışmaları, dokslama, çevrimiçi aktivizm, muhalefet, Navalny, Rusya, YouTube.

Introduction

This article sheds a light on doxing as a form of digital activism and use of social media platforms for digital activism through mapping the case of video released by Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny's team in January 2021. Video was shared upon Navalny's arrival to Moscow from Berlin where he was staying at the hospital due to the poisoning by Novichok nerve agent in August 2021. 2-hour film titled *A Palace for Putin. The Story of the Biggest Bribe* was posted on YouTube channel and within 3 weeks approximately 109 million views were registered by YouTube only.

This article aims to discuss the impact of doxing and social media platforms on political process in Russia. Particularly, the strengths and weaknesses of both are analyzed on the basis of *Palace for Putin* film's case. This research answers the question about the impact of doxing and social media platforms through which doxing is spread on the activism in Russia. It is argued that by drawing attention of Russians to Putin's corruption schemes, Navalny's YouTube videos expose wrongdoings and delegitimize the power of the Russian president. Also, doxing creates platform for debate and exchange of opinions directly in the comments under the videos. Therefore, civic engagement is promoted. However, as this articles proves, doxing and digital media platforms also violate privacy or the basic human right that contradicts the notion of democracy itself. Discussions on social platforms happen rarely since users tend to advertise themselves rather than to make a dialogue with other users. In case when discussions happen they often lack cohesiveness and arguments supported by evidence. Debates frame events into the existing beliefs and at the same time simplify political, economic or social matters that opens the way for populism. These videos have limited capacity to mobilize or organize citizens that support opposition so they could join mass rallies against government. Rather, it is a work of opposition headquarters and activists. At the same time, there is a risk of the new circle of authoritarian measures that government adopts as a response to growing activism.

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The following section of the article reviews theoretical and empirical works on the topic. Then, the brief information about *Palace for Putin* film is provided followed by the discussion of the Russians' reaction to the film. Furthermore, doxing as a political tool, its strengths and weaknesses as well as advantages and limitations of YouTube in social activism are debated with

the reference to qualitative analysis of the film and comments to it. Concluding remarks summarize the findings of the article.

Literature Review. Theoretical Framework and Empirical Studies

Social media appeared to be a focus of attention of many disciplines. For the sake of this article, a bulk of the sources on social media has been categorized into three groups. In this section, with the reference to literature on the topic, the role of social media, particularly YouTube in political process is discussed; debate the relation of social media to democracy is provided; definition and conceptualization of doxing as well as analysis of the existing dispute on the pros and cons of doxing for democracy is completed.

Social Media, Democracy and Democratization. Significant bulk of literature on social media concentrates on relation of social media to democracy. The main clash seems to occur between those providing evidence on positive impact of social media on democracy and those emphasizing the dangers of the social media for democracy. The first group of the scholars underline the value of social media in facilitating debate, civic engagement and participation (Abbott, 2012; Ellison & Hardey, 2014) as well as in promoting trust towards the institutions (Warren, Sulaiman & Jaafar, 2014). At the same time, there is a group of researchers suggesting that social media may be dominated by humor, agenda-setters (Gayo-Avello, 2015) or self-sorting practices (Sunstein, 2018) therefore they lack potential for promoting democracy. Discussions on Facebook and Twitter platforms, according to Gayo-Avello, lack arguments and coherency and are highly opinionated. Some scholars also suggest that social media destroy traditional institutions and practices, such as media, (Loader & Mercea, 2011); disregard minorities (Gerbaudo, 2014); and not only lack potential to unite and mobilize people for an action (Gladwell, 2010) but in fact provoke government's authoritarian measures in the Internet (Gerbaudo, 2014; Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts & Barberá, 2017). As Malcolm Gladwell put it in 2010,

The Internet lets us exploit the power of these kinds of distant connections with marvellous efficiency. It's terrific at the diffusion of innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, seamlessly matching up buyers and sellers, and the logistical functions of the dating world. But weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism. (Gladwell, 2010).

YouTube in Politics. There is considerable debate on the role of social media in political process that includes evaluation of various platforms. This article focuses on the use of YouTube channel by Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation for releasing a doxing video. Video aims at unmasking corruption schemes of the Russian president Vladimir Putin and his closest milieu. YouTube's role in political process has been evaluated with the reference to elections and advertising among others. A study of Ridout, Franklin Fowler & Branstetter (2010) demonstrates the advantages of YouTube during 2008 presidential race in the US such as high-quality videos, broad audience, cheapness and easiness. At the same time, scholars point at significant limitation of YouTube – to produce a “viral” video a person needs significant financial resources. Authors point out at the potential of YouTube as advertising rather than a cite for debate. Similarly, Church (2010) suggests that the YouChoose section of YouTube favor the candidate's character over political experience and explores the possibility that the medium promotes passive (rather than active) political engagement on the part of the user. The idea of the construction of the YouTube audience as a “postmodern constituency” is also proposed. Way's (2015) research on the use of YouTube for sharing political songs during Gezi protests in Turkey demonstrates that the platform is not the place for debate and engagement. Rather, it opens the way for populism since complex political, economic and social matters are simplified. Also, discussions under such videos have a tendency to frame events into pre-existing alignments. Lewis (2019), in his turn, suggests that rejection of mainstream media is often the first step in radicalization for many young people, as their previous worldviews get destabilized that may open the way for extremism.

Conceptualizing Doxing. Merriam – Webster dictionary defines doxing as public identification or publishing private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge. (Dox, n.d.) The methods employed to acquire this information include searching publicly available databases and social media websites, hacking, and social engineering. Douglas (2016, p.201) defines doxing as “releasing publically a type of identity knowledge about an individual (the subject of doxing) that establishes a verifiable connection between it and another type (or types) of identity knowledge about that person”. Douglas also categorized doxing into three types: deanonymization, targeting, and delegitimization. Delegitimizing doxing releases private information with the intention of undermining the subject’s credibility, reputation, and/or character. It attempts to shame and humiliate the subject, often by portraying her as a transgressor of an established (or supposed) social norm (Douglas, 2016, p.205). This article concentrates on delegitimization doxing act which is directed against Russian leadership.

Doxing is a relatively new concept for social sciences: the earliest works are dated by 2012. (Davison, 2012). Small number of publications on political doxing have been recorded; though in recent two years, the number of publication started to grow. Trottier (2020) defines doxing as a form of digital vigilantism. He argues that people resort to doxing when formal institutions and procedures are incapable of rendering justice. However, this brings us to the main problem of doxing as vigilantism – unclearness of the terms and rules. Palvai (2016) believes that despite the anonymity that facilitates privacy to speak liberally in public without the fear of being noticed, yet it can vitiate the privacy by sanctioning the Internet vigilantes to march into the privacy of others with ease. While the up-to-date laws pertaining to the Internet allowed a kind of amnesty for the Internet vigilantes, they may pose a threat to the privacy protection of others as Internet vigilantism results real world-effects. Similarly, Solo (2020) argues that online defamation, doxing, and impersonation are three of the major problems of the Internet age that are getting greater. They can cause serious troubles for the victims, whether victims belong to racial or sexual minorities or vulnerable people. Lindvall (2019) proposes two anti-doxing statutes that would provide doxing victims with legal recourse. The First Amendment demands that these statutes have stringent requirements, and they will not apply in most cases of online harassment. Buoziš (2019) argues that the affordances of digital platforms produce a more fixed public discourse where a wide array of evidence can be juxtaposed in a more directly democratic manner. But much of that openness relies on the participants’ anonymity. Threats to that anonymity, in the form of doxing, constrain the discourse in such a way that drives dissident voices underground, or into private, gated discourses. For Whyte (2020), the main problem related to doxing is the spread of narrative within closed, fringe, conspiratorial communities. Cyber-attacks, data leaks and bot manipulation of social media constitute the most visible efforts to spoof the function of mechanisms that ensure these standards for the quality, origination, credibility and perceived freedom of information.

This article addresses a gap in the literature by mapping a case of the opposition-made doxing video devoted to President Putin’s corruption practices in the Russian Federation. Doxing in Russia can be attributed to the phenomenon of civic activism (Lonkila et al., 2021: 139) that within the framework of authoritarian legislation on media and the Internet appears to be a tool of the opposition activists.

Findings. A Palace for Putin Film

About the Film

A Palace for Putin. The Story of the Biggest Bribe is a documentary-investigation of the Anti-Corruption Foundation established by Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny in 2011. (Navalny, 2021). The film was published on YouTube on January 19, 2021 shortly after Alexei Navalny’s return to Russia from Berlin and his arrest. In August 2020, Navalny’s poisoning with *Novichok* nerve agent was announced. (Kozenko, 2020). The same poison was found in the blood

tests of the former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yuliya in Salisbury in 2018. To recover, Navalny stayed in German hospital till January 2021. His arrest in Moscow airport was related to the Yves Rocher case of money laundering: particularly, Russian authorities announced the need to change suspended sentence to the real one due to Navalny's escape to Germany.

Navalny's film was in the top ten in YouTube trends in 26 countries, taking the first place in 10 of them. As of January 31, 2021, film received more than 105 million views. The film tells the story of a corruption scheme, which, according to the authors of the investigation, is headed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Most of the film is dedicated to the "Putin's Palace" – a residence on the Black Sea coast in the Gelendzhik region, allegedly owned by Vladimir Putin through proxies. The area of the palace complex is 68 hectares, while 7000 hectares of land around the palace are a closed area controlled by the Federal Security Service (*FSB*). Anti-Corruption Foundation estimated the cost of construction of the palace complex at 100 billion rubles (1.1 billion euros).

Reaction in Society

Reaction of Russians to the video can be called a "communication explosion": very high number of views was recorded within very short period of time. By February 3, YouTube only recorded 108 million views. By February 10, it was 111 million views. To compare, population of Russia constitutes 145 million people. Attention to Alexei Navalny and his imprisonment started to grow even before the release of *Palace*. This attention was provoked by the activist's poisoning and release of the details of poisoning on YouTube by him personally. (Navalny, 2020). Following Navalny's return to Russia he was arrested and imprisoned for thirty days. Two days later "Palace for Putin" was released. Although it was not the first attempt to reveal private information about a politician, the second most popular film – *He Is Not Dimon for You* (Navalny, 2017) was viewed on YouTube only 1.2 million times after its release in 2017.

Protests on January 23 and January 31 in more than 100 Russian cities and towns were provoked by arrest of Navalny and the film. Hundreds of thousands of Russians occupied the streets and squares to demand release of the opposition activist. (Demydova, 2021). However, online activism was even more remarkable. Young people turned to *slacktivism* – online actions performed in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement. (Lonkila et al., 2021: 139). Numerous videos on TikTok were recorded to draw attention to the arrest and to call for support during the protests. (Demydova, 2021). Memes about life style of Putin who has 18-meter ice palace, aqua disco, mud storage, unique Italian furniture, oyster farm and vineyards spread the Internet. (Inside 'Akvadiskoteka,' 2021). This facilitated outbreak of political humor in Russia.

In general, research indicates growing level of digital activism in Russia. Recent 618-page *Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (2020) in which works of 42 authors are included proves the point. On the other hand, Levada Center's surveys demonstrate that use of social media in Russia grows at the expense of time allocated for TV: from 2013 to 2020, the number of people who watched TV in Russia dropped from 88% to 74%, according to the Levada Center. At the same time, daily social media use increased in one year, from 46% in 2019 to 51% in 2020. The use of messenger apps was at 69% in 2020. (Gorbachev, 2021). 109 million Russian citizens who watched Navalny's film on YouTube only and who left their opinions among 1738907 comments¹ contribute to the growth of digital activism currently.

Navalny's 32-month sentence showed how Russian authorities are concerned with the possible instabilities provoked by his videos and mass rallies that followed releases. 32-month

¹ As of February 10, 2021

sentence may allow Kremlin to avoid revolution during September 2021 Duma elections. Particularly, designed by Navalny Smart Voting online platform aims at pulling the votes from the United Russia party candidates by teaching people how to vote. Navalny may be free by the 2024 presidential election but most probably his registration application will be declined by the Electoral Commission since the criminal record exists.

Discussion. Doxing as a Form of Online Activism in Authoritarian States

Doxing and online activism appears to be the form of political activism that promotes engagement particularly in authoritarian countries where Internet allows greater freedom of expression. In this way article supports findings of Zuckerman (2008) about “cat and mice game”. Doxing allows exposing the wrongdoing of the president and elites, delegitimizes their power. Contrast to Putin’s framing of the 1990s as a period of instability and mafia wars (Malinova, 2020), doxing videos point at the president as the one responsible for corruption, crime and rule of illegal structures and informal relations. Video provides comprehensive criticisms of the government without censorship on the level available for ordinary citizens. Video unmasks hypocrisy and double standards of the authorities. For example, Russian government froze pension accounts in 2015 (Russia to freeze, 2015) and increased pension age in 2018 (Rainsfrod, 2018) while building luxury palace for Putin. That means palace had been built at the expense of the retired Russians. Furthermore, Putin is accused of poisoning Navalny and therefore is presented as killing liberal opposition. These films also set agenda – corruption is Russia starts from the top.

Palace described in the video became the symbol of corruption and wealth of the elites, symbol of unequal distribution of wealth in Russian society. Palace itself, furniture, accessories became the topic of numerous memes and humor that outbroke in Instagram (e.g. Gudkov, 2021) and TikTok (e.g. @dolphin_team.chelny, 2021) following the release of the film. Numerous security measures that protect palace from invasion from the sea as well as the distant location and no-fly zone emphasized by film-makers intend to persuade Russians that despite social policies of Putin who cares of the people there is a huge gap between him and the people. In fact, Russian president is afraid of the people that explains the walls and bunkers in his house. Finally, film attempted to mobilize people: in the film, Navalny called Russians to visit Smart Voting platforms and protests against the government.

Problems and Limitations of Doxing

This article also emphasizes the dangers of exposing and defaming as the essence of doxing stressed by the earlier findings (Lindvall, 2019; Solo, 2020). While it is argued that doxing as a digital activism has deliberative and mobilizing potential for citizens and contributes to democratic procedures development, one should not neglect the fact of intrusion into the privacy that violates the basic human rights that are the essence of democracy. Thus, releasing the videos on Putin and Medvedev’s private life Navalny in fact violated article 23 of the Russian Constitution that protects privacy of each Russian citizen. In fact, repeated doxing acts open the way to surveillance and new post-modern notion of power that is no longer located in the government only. New centers of power, such as communities of hackers or cyber-attackers collaborating with opposition appear to be particularly meaningful and strong in their impact on agenda-setting.

From the other point of view, this type of activism may provoke new authoritarian measures of the Russian government (Gerbaudo, 2014) that may go far outside the Internet space. As series of bans issued shortly before the protests and Navalny’s sentence announced in early February prove, “Empire strikes back”. To provide specific example, one should touch upon the case of Telegram channel that was blocked in Russia in 2018. In October 2017, a court decision was made in favor of the FSB, which imposed a fine of 800 thousand rubles on Telegram developers. The reason was the refusal of the Telegram management to transfer the keys to decrypt messages from 6 persons accused of committing a terrorist attack in St. Petersburg. According to

Telegram and VKontakte networks' founder Pavel Durov, the requirements of the FSB were impracticable both from the technical point of view and from the Constitution of the Russian Federation, violating Article 23, which provides citizens with the right to privacy of correspondence, telephone conversations and other messages. In his opinion, the requirements of the FSB would fit into the framework of the law if they were limited only to help in catching terrorists, but the FSB's requirements are based on the transfer of universal encryption keys to view the correspondence of an unlimited number of persons. On April 13, 2018, the Tagansky Court of Moscow ruled in favor of Roskomnadzor, thereby allowing it to start blocking the messenger in Russia. On April 22, Roskomnadzor published a new version of the by-law "Procedure for Identifying Information Resources in Order to Take Measures to Restrict Access to Information Resources", in which the department has new grounds for entering sites into the register of prohibited resources. Previously, the regulator did not have a legal basis for mass blocking, which it had to create retroactively. (Sherman, 2020)

Provided above example of Telegram suggests that Kremlin may reply to the growing online activism with the spin of new bans against media, including digital media. In late 2020, Russian authorities announced their intentions to limit YouTube, Facebook and Instagram in Russia following the path of Chinese government where these platforms had been blocked. Thus, experts list formal reasons for such decision: "YouTube does not connect to the unified register of *Roskomnadzor*, does not localize personal data, as required by Russian law, but in some cases manually disables some videos, blocks content". (Belyaeva, 2019).

YouTube as a Political Tool

YouTube appears to be a cheap effective tool with the potential to reach broad audience without being censored. It allows posting long videos with music and animations making it entertaining and memorable as well as easy for understanding. Sharing through link allows integrating the video into other social media, websites or platforms. Through special applications it may be downloaded as well. Video may become viral very easy, given the producer of video already draws attention of public due to its poisoning and imprisonment, as it was in the case of Navalny and his young audience. In contrast, without such life events, doxing videos may not draw attention of general public as it was seen in the case of *He Is Not Dimon for You* film released by Navalny in 2017. Though it still may lead to the protests against corruption as in case of 2019 protests. (Thousands demand protesters, 2019).

At the same time, comments under the video appear to be a platform for debate and free expression of opinion. Video draws attention to the opposition leader as well as to the problem, facilitate mobilization of activists. Contrast to the views about passive engagement (Church, 2010) this research suggests that YouTube promotes engagement. Young people who are politically engaged in social media tend to indulge in *slacktivism* (online actions performed in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement, such as signing an online petition). In 2021, youth was responsible for TikTok disorder – number of videos claiming the violation of human rights in Russia and calling to support Navalny. Also, mass protests in Russia in 2021 as well as in 2019 provoked by films prove the correlation between film and engagement. Evaluating Navalny's support, research centers show that he is particularly effective online. Thus, if 19% of Russians approve Navalny's actions in general, active Internet users' support is 45% while among those relying on TV as a source of news only 11% support Navalny. (Vozvrashhenie Alekseja Naval'nogo, 2021).

Advertising of Navalny

Palace for Putin may also be treated as an advertising act. Navalny himself presents his discoveries on the video, makes conclusions and accuses Putin of corruption and double standards

as well as of poisoning.² If one approaches Navalny's video from Church's (2010) perspective of candidate's advertising, one should look for personal features of Navalny that are emphasized. What are those? As a professional, he is a high quality investigator-journalist and lawyer. He exposes and defames corruption and wrongdoings of Russian elites, demanding justice and truth through the vigilantism act. As the episode with the poisoning, return to Russia and immediate arrest prove, Navalny is brave and consequent. He stands on his principles till the end despite the risk of imprisonment or even death. The very fact of his return to Russia in spite of possible assassination (as it happened in case of another opposition leader Boris Nemtsov) or arrest is the evidence of his loyalty to Russians. This image of Navalny is created by his team through the number of videos published on his channel. He seemed to prepare them for presidential race 2018 and 2024.

Palace and other videos of recent few years are not the first attempt of Navalny to advertise himself. In 2013, when he was running for a Moscow city mayor post he issued a number of videos known as *KRUGI (Circles)*. (Navalny, 2013). Each video was devoted to a specific issue, such as healthcare, education or migration and was showing a discussion of the relevant issue among Navalny and experts on the topic. Analysis of the videos indicates that it was Navalny's program of actions upon his election as a city mayor, carefully presented by himself through the number of answers to the questions and criticisms raised by his guests.

Since all online projects are implemented by his Anti-Corruption Foundation one may realize that Navalny has professional team and a network of headquarters. January 2021 protests reveal, this team is thoroughly organized, well-sponsored and active online and offline. From this one can conclude that Navalny has launched far-reaching electoral campaign aiming at success in 2024 presidential race. Given support of the US president Joe Biden who demanded release of Navalny has chances to succeed. Surveys report growing popularity of Navalny: support rating increased by 100% within a year. (Kornya, 2020). Also, respect and sympathy towards him is growing. Particularly, among the factors of the growing sympathy Russians name his ability to tell truth. (Alexey Navalny, 2020). As to the evaluation of his activity by Russians, surveys show that he is particularly popular among young people: 36% of people aged 18 – 24 support him, while only 12% of those aged 55 and more support Navalny. (Vozvrashhenie Alekseja Naval'nogo, 2021). Sociologists agree that change of the generations in Russia need time, therefore Navalny's activities should have a long-term perspective.

Problems and Limitations of Social Media Activism

Provided in this section analysis will shed a light on the limitations of social media activism. Analysis is conducted on the basis of comments' examination with the references to the earlier findings in the literature. The screenshot of the comments provide the evidence for analysis. The aim of this analysis is to fill a gap in the literature by mapping a case of political activism in Russia, supported by discussion of its strengths and weaknesses. Contrast to the authors who believe in social media activism promoting democracy (Abbott, 2012; Ellison & Hardey, 2014), Gayo-Avello (2015) suggests that social media users are not equal: political, economic, and media elites have greater presence in social media (Gayo-Avello, 2015:10) that contradicts to the essence of democracy. Navalny and his team have occupied social media platforms, especially YouTube and Telegram. Attention given to his latest YouTube video on Putin's house in Gelendzhik can be explained by few factors. On the one hand, his poisoning earlier in August contributed to his popularity among young Russians. The, Man of the Year 2020 award which he received along with Putin drew attention of citizens. Finally, return to Russia in January followed by arrest and sentence prove that Navalny is ready to fight. He is a popular opposition activist already. This is

² On Navalny's YouTube channel, there are also few videos devoted to poisoning and people responsible for it. These are out of the article's scope

maintained by sociological survey evidence: Levada Center’s report shows Navalny to be the second most inspiring person in Russia. (Vdohnovljajushhie Lichnosti, 2020). At the same time, even earlier videos of the Anti-Corruption Foundation are being watched as a result of the success achieved by *Palace for Putin* film. Figure 1 shows that user *Fedya Botov* asks how many people watch film about Medvedev after having completed *Palace for Putin*. As it can be seen, 14 thousand people reply positively. Evidence indicates that popularity of a person defines the popularity of his discourse. It was not a video about the palace that determined popularity of Navalny. Under these conditions, a candidate with no experience or activism record has little chances to succeed in online activism campaign as it can be seen in the earlier videos of Navalny. This supports the findings of Gayo-Arvello who stresses that posts by social media elites usually have a clear agenda-building objective, and such posts are favored by the general public over posts from non-elite users. (Gayo-Avello, 2015: 10). The fact that Navalny deserved attention of mass media during the incident with poisoning substantiate the fact that the film produced by less famous person would not have been that popular.

As to the agenda setting, idea of Navalny’s team is to frame Putin as Russian mafia’s God Father contrast to the narratives of Putin about shaky 1990s and mafia wars, weak law and central state. As Malinova (2020) suggests this discourse had been a source of Putin’s legitimacy. In 2000s, Kremlin produced concepts that aimed at framing 1990s as well as Putin’s presidency: thus, *strong state* concept was contraposed to the *wild outburst of freedoms* in 1990s (Malinova, 2020: 5). In the earliest years of Putin’s presidency particularly popular were the “*establishing order, dictatorship of the law, restoration of the integrity of the state, the struggle against terrorism, and even the development of a strong and prosperous civic society*”. (*Ibid.*) As a counterthesis, Navalny’s film presents money laundry schemes and bribes of Putin and his proxies that can be traced back to early 1990s implying that Russian oligarchs were supporting Putin financially for letting them “embezzling Russia”. For Navalny, this narrative would allow delegitimization of Putin’s power, secure mobilization of people against Putin and in support of himself in the absence of other opposition candidates.

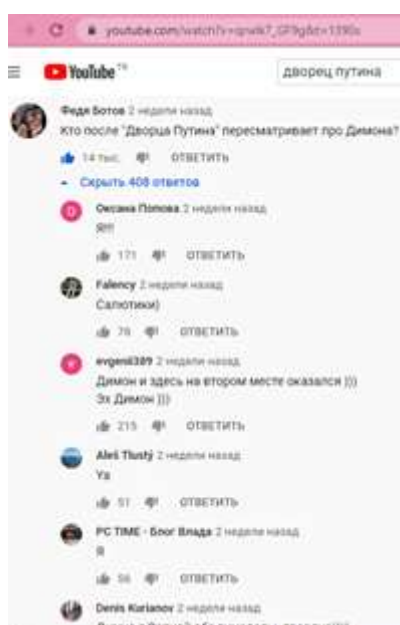


Figure 1: Comments of the Users Regarding *On Vam Ne Dimon* (2017) Film Devoted to D. Medvedev

Furthermore, significant financial resources explain Navalny’s ability to prepare and issue 2-hour investigative documentary. Some parts of it were filmed in German libraries and archives;

while video from Gelendzhik has been recorded by a drone. Consequently, while literature argues that digital platforms make activism cheaper and freer one should not neglect the fact of sponsorship provided to Navalny.

While the control over social media as well as popularity as an important prerequisite represent the first most important limitation of the social media, another significant problem lies in the debate it promotes. This problem challenges the argument about the positive impact of social media on democracy as well. Here, article relies on the analysis of the comments below the video. Literature suggests that most social media users prefer to avoid discussions in which they need to interact with users who have opposing ideas. When they do encounter conflicting arguments, they do not propagate them within their network. In contrast, a tendency to *homophily* or desire to interact with like-minded people can be noticed. (Gayo-Avello, 2015: 10). The following example proves the point. User Filonova Svetlana (Fig.2) suggests that “Russian veterans lack housing, the ones who have it do not have decent conditions while Russian Guard obtain 300 million of funding”. User Tatyana Haritonova adds the updates as to the volume of Guard’s funding, while Yamil Suleymanov uses famous quotation of Medvedev: “we have no money but you hang on at least for a century” to support Filonova Svetlana’s statement and to explain authorities’ position on veterans. (Fig.2). Correspondingly, one can trace the univocal stand of users on the issues of veterans.

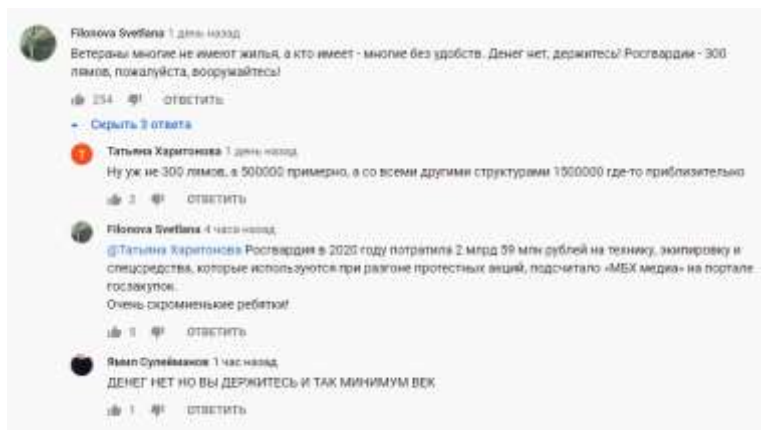


Figure 2: Comments of the Users on Position of Veterans in Russia

Another issue that characterizes battle of comments is the nature of participants. First, not all groups are involved into the debate but only those who watched the video on YouTube and decided to join discussion. Second, to leave a comment, user should be registered on the platform that means he is active on YouTube and leaves comments under other videos. Finally, bots are involved that makes debate less reasonable.

Arguments of the participants, if discussion finally happens, lack coherency and are highly opinionated. Research failed to find references to the statistics or official documents that would prove the opinion of the users. Instead, user Net Toge thinks that “in Putin’s palace, there are all vices of the humankind” (Fig.3). In his turn, user Vladimir E believes that “it was a genius movie and Navalny deserves Oscar”. As it can be seen, discussion is not coherent, marked by “blinkered deliberation” (Gayo-Avello, 2015: 11) when users rather seek to draw attention to their own comments than to promote discussion and reach consensus or conclusion. Comments lack arguments as well as evidence. At the same time, comments do not deal with politics, economy or international relations matter but rather contain very general evaluations of the elites’ wrongdoings from the moral perspective. Comments also do not call for action or recommend a solution so they have little contribution to activism and regime change, for instance.

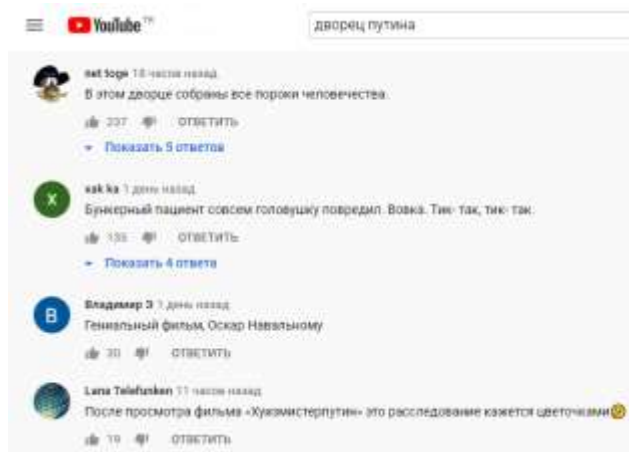


Figure 3: Users Express Their Opinions as to the Film

Social media users have a propensity for humor and goofiness as central points of political “discussion.” (Gayo-Avello, 2015: 10). Putin is called “oldie” or *starichok* in Russian (Fig.4) and is consonant to *Novichok* nerve agent and is being compared to a Soviet fairytale character Old Khottabych introduced by a writer Lazar Lagin in 1956. In the Lagin’s book, Old Khottabych was famous for his magic that was out of date and place. Another example of humor in the discussion is an anecdote by Mikhail Rezko (Fig.5). Anecdote presents a conversation between Putin and his press secretary Peskov:

Peskov: I have two news. A good one and a bad one. Which one should I start with?

Putin: The bad one.

Peskov: Noone has voted for you.

Putin: What is the good one, then?

Peskov: You won.

Anecdote above suggests electoral fraud in Russia to be a regular practice of Kremlin. Putin’s closest milieu is involved into the manipulations with the ballots and seeks to preserve Putin’s power while Russians are aware and got used to this.

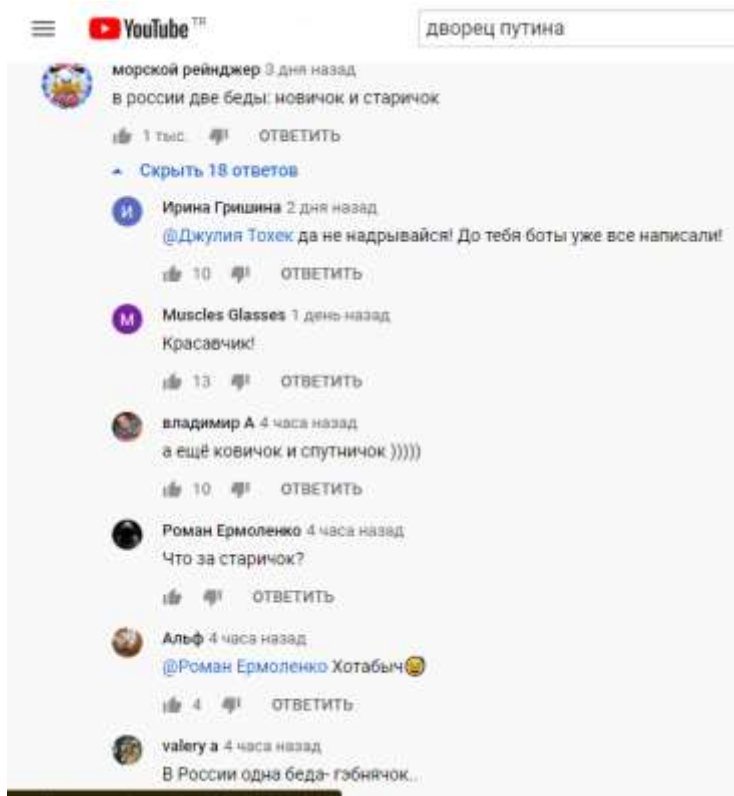


Figure 4: “There are two problems in Russia: Oldie and Novichok”

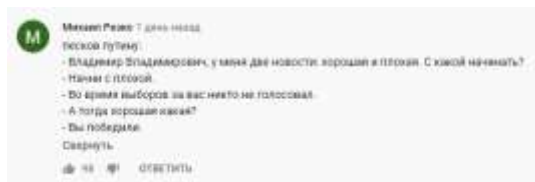


Figure 5: Anecdote on Electoral Fraud in Russia from the Comments

Reference to other wrongdoings of Putin’s regime was recorded in the comments. Thus, Novichok nerve agent is presented by user *Morskoy Rejndzher* as a tool to deal with the opposition. (Fig.4). Navalny’s newly declared 32-month sentence seemed to be unfair and violating the rule of law for the user *A E* who compared court proceedings on Navalny’s case to a dream (Fig.6). Corruption of public officials is treated as usual thing in Russia as it is stated by user Elena Shkuropatskaya (Fig.7). Findings confirm Way’s (2015) conclusions about framing discussion according to the previous judgements. In this way, discussion appears to be guided, indirectly driven by the agenda set by the Navalny and his film. At the same time, commentators do not learn anything new from the film or the debate, in fact, people in the comments are closed for new opinions that corresponds to the earlier findings about *homophily*.

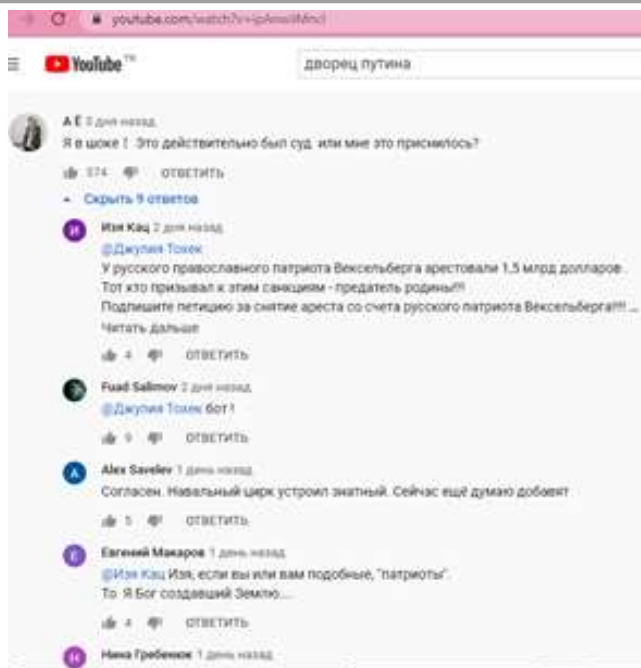


Figure 6: Discussion of the Court Hearings on Case of Navalny

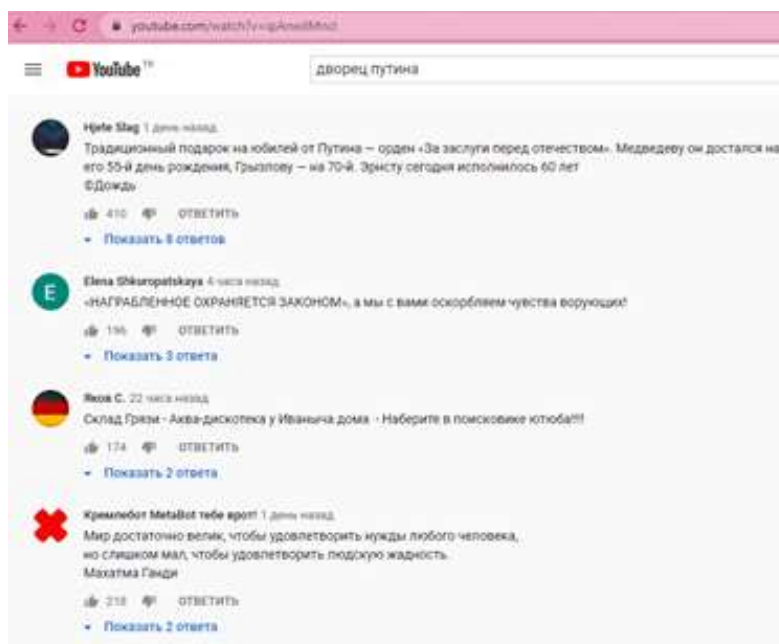


Figure 7: Comments of the Users

Comments are also distinguished by populism: complicated political, economic and social issues are being simplified and reduced that confirms the findings of Gerbaudo (2014) and Way (2015) suggest, this type of digital activism opens the way for populism. Figures 7 – 9 are to demonstrate this point. *Tigr v Polosochku* user (Fig.8) suggests that Putin “kills and builds churches. Oyster usurper is the biggest thief-rat. Hypocrite despot and psycho.” Attacking elites is one of the central components of populism as literature on populism suggests. (Engesser et al., 2017). In the same comment, author demands freedom for Russia in a very emotional manner

without specifying what exactly he means and with no reference to specific human rights and freedoms. In figure 9, user *Masterskaja Tvorchestva* defines main political regimes as it follows: “if people are afraid of authorities, it is a dictatorship. If authorities are afraid of people it is a democracy.” *Masterskaja Tvorchestva* provides no essential features of democracy, such as human rights and freedoms, multi-party system or competitive elections. Eva Nedeva (Fig.10) analyzes state budget by putting that “there is no public money but only money of tax payers”. Although, this reminds a very famous quotation of Margaret Thatcher, Eva Nedeva made no reference to a source. Her comment lacks conclusion or any connection to the words of other users. This is typical for all comments – they have no relevance to other users’ words. In this way, real discussion is not possible.

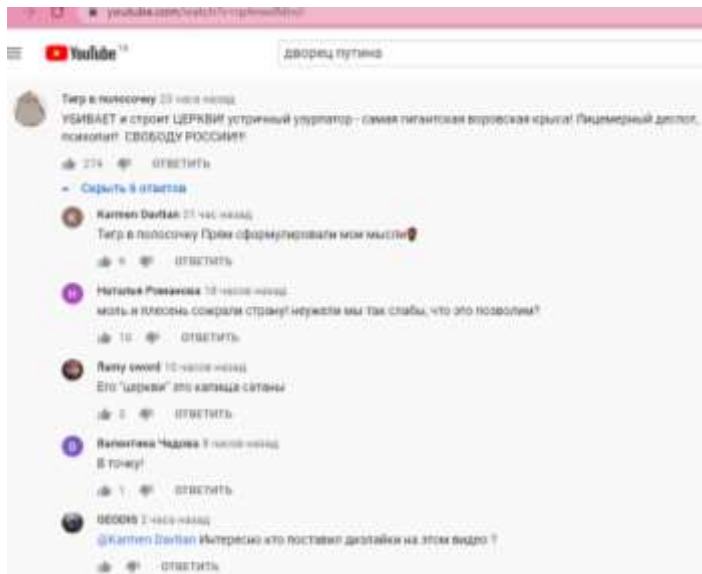


Figure 8: Comments of the Users on Putin’s Policies Regarding Russian Orthodox Church

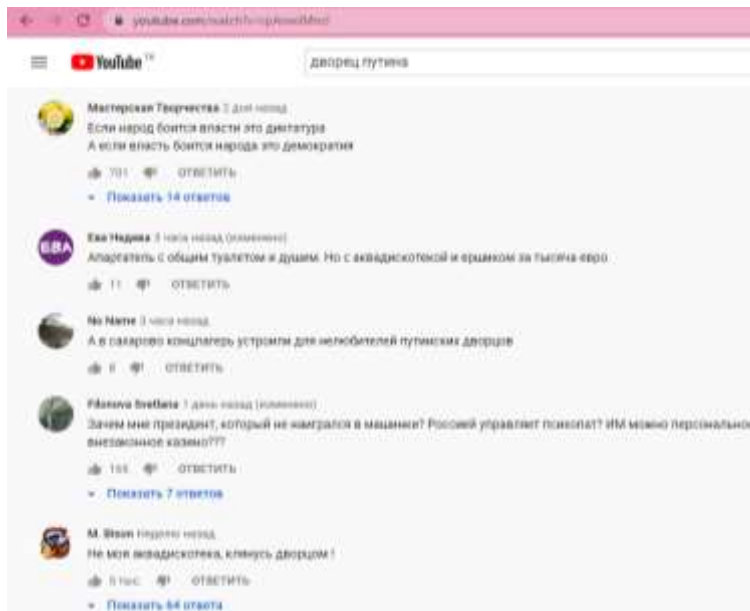


Figure 9: Comments of the Users

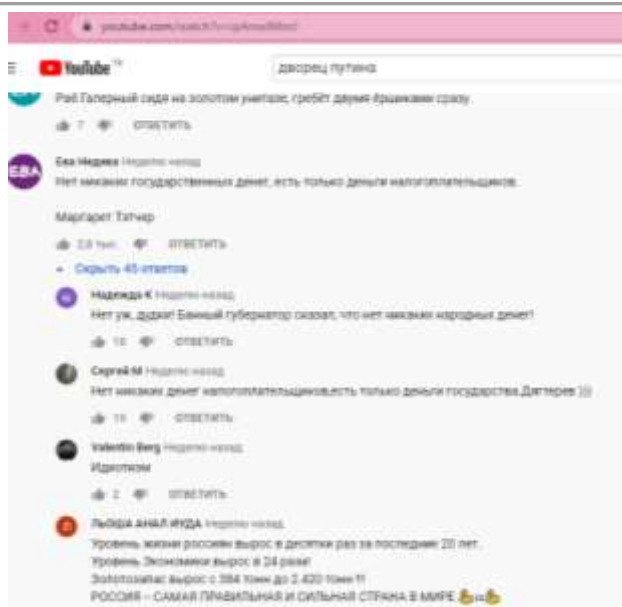


Figure 10: Comments of the Users

Analysis of the comments shows that due to the *homophily* and other features of the commentators as well as the side effect of populism and simplification, polarization occurs in the debate. Two user camps emerge: supporters of Navalny and pro-Putin citizens. (Fig.7). This polarization is marked by “hyper-partisanship” when parties are in fierce disagreement with each other. (Deb et al., 2017: 4). Users supporting Putin are framed as “Kremlin bots” with reference to “bot factories” used by Kremlin during 2016 US presidential race in order to polarize American citizens and achieve Trump’s victory.

While this video appears to be popular in social media, one should not neglect the fact that majority of Russians do not use the platforms. As earlier discussion of the TV and social media suggests, only 51% of Russians use social media daily. Information about date, time and places of the rallies, as well as instructions as to preparations and behavior in case of detainment were spread through TikTok. (Zotova, 2021). As Deb et al. (2017) demonstrates, social media have a “risk of converting popularity into legitimacy” while ignoring broad masses of citizens behind social media. Disruption of the public debate is also a negative outcome of the discussion on digital platforms. Earlier in this article, the share of Russians who get information from the Internet was indicated as quite low. Correspondingly, majority of Russians are not involved into the debate. Furthermore, some groups of users may be disregarded. For instance, by denouncing Putin as old (Fig.4, user *Morskoy Rejndzher*) and therefore committing wrongdoings, commentators frame all elderly people as incapable of occupying public posts. That may lead to the exclusion of elderly people from the public debate. Also, in Russian society such framing promotes aggression and hostility towards elderly politicians and officials as well as negative reaction to the users responsible for the corresponding discourse. In fact, this pulls discussion out of its agenda – corruption. On the one hand, such debate on the dominance of old Soviet elites, particularly former security structures officers, in political space of Russia may facilitate change of generations, mentioned in Levada Center’s report as a condition for regime change in Russia. Here, new young leaders in the government can be brought to power by young activists.

While the debates under the video include 1747305³ comments it can hardly be argued that the same number of people joined mass rallies in January 2021. Different estimations report 300 –

³ As of February 14, 2021

400 thousand people who joined protests in Russian cities and towns. Sociologists state that people on the streets were not necessarily motivated to support Navalny. Rather, they were protesting Kremlin's policies and the gap between authorities and people under the conditions of economic deterioration and responsible for it pandemic. (Volkov, 2021). This confirms the statement about lack of mobilization potential of the videos and debates under them. Few commentators indicate that Russians got used to the corruption and uneven distribution of the wealth and they do not feel themselves responsible for changes. In fact, this shows citizens do not know about the way to bring changes. These findings correlate with the data on civil society activism and suggest that Russians needs education in the field of civil activism that is absent since the adoption of the Western agent law in 2006. Then, western NGOs and their donors had to withdraw from the Russian Federation.

To sum up, most of the comments under the video are the opinion of the users that do not promote a debate. Film itself as well as discussion under it do not mobilize or call for action. This is done by Navalny's foundation headquarters and activists in Telegram and TikTok. As analysis shows, for organization of the protests such as protests in Russia on 23 and 31 of January videos are no enough. Real political activists as well as significant funding for videos and headquarters are needed. Also, as sociological survey indicates, Navalny is not popular among older generations of Russians who are not using social media. Doxing videos raise awareness of the problem, draw attention of the citizens to the societal issue and set agenda. As it can be concluded from the analysis of the comments, they also promote humor which may serve as a cushion for tensions in the society but at the same time decrease the significance of the issues raised in the videos. Finally, populism is the distinguishing feature of the digital activism.

Conclusion

This article discussed the impact of doxing and social media platforms on political process in Russia. The strengths and weaknesses of both were analyzed by means of Alexei Navalny's *Palace for Putin* (2021) film's case. This research addressed the question about the impact of doxing and social media platforms through which doxing is spread on the activism in Russia. Analysis indicates that doxing videos are successful in sharing information and drawing attention of Russians to Putin's corruption schemes. Video can set agenda that is corruption of the Russian elites headed by Putin himself. Furthermore, doxing creates platform for debate and exchange of opinions directly in the comments under the videos. Therefore, civic engagement is promoted.

However, it would be a mistake to end up with simple univocal estimation of doxing in social media. As this articles proves, doxing and digital media platforms have limitations. Thus, doxing violates privacy or a basic human right that contradicts the notion of democracy itself. Mobilizational potential of *Palace* is also very humble: videos do not mobilize Russians and do not organize citizens that support opposition so they could join mass rallies against government. Rather, while film called Russians to subscribe for the updates of his channel, attend electoral platforms of Navalny as well as support him by joining the protests in January 2021, they are the opposition activists from Navalny's team who through the network of headquarters and Telegram or TikTok channels and thanks to the financial sources mobilized and organized people. While engagement in the form of *slaktivism* or debate is obvious, its potential is very limited. Analyzed video may aim to achieve another goal that is a presentation of Navalny as a candidate for presidency and his program as it was in the case of his *KRUGI* videos in 2013 when Navalny was running for Moscow city mayor's position.

Furthermore, discussions on social platforms also have limitations. First, they may not happen due to the inability of users to communicate with people having opposite views. So, in this regard, democratic engagement through the social media platforms is overestimated by previous works on the topic. If discussions happen they lack cohesiveness and arguments supported by strong evidence. In most of the cases, discussion does not happen, insofar as users tend to promote

themselves rather than to be engaged into the communication. Existing debates frame events into the existing beliefs, and at the same time, simplify political, economic or social matters that opens the way for populism.

Moreover, research suggests that government may choose two strategies of response to the growing activism: immediate and long-term. On the one hand, Anti-Corruption Foundation has already been outlawed and added to the list of the extremist organizations in which ISIS and Al Qaeda are mentioned as well. Also, the short-term strategy will include blocking the social media as it was seen earlier in the case of Telegram. Another possible action can be the penalties imposed on digital media for sharing content related to mass protests to support Navalny. On the other hand, there is a risk of the new circle of authoritarian laws that Russian government may adopt as a response to activism. Thus, the law on educational activities that entered into force on June 1 is the example. According to the document, all actors that implement educational activities through online channels, accounts or podcasts have to get a license. This significantly reduces freedom of media and speech and opens the way for censorship in Russia. At the same time, the probability that Russian authorities will stop after the law on educational activities is low taking into consideration September 2021 Duma election.

From this perspective, it would be logical to conclude that doxing on social media platforms has advantages as well as limitations for political process. Social media themselves without significant budget or without offline activists and headquarters may not be successful. Historical moment and personality of the leader also matter. Thus, pandemic and economic deterioration in Russia are set off against luxury of elite's life. While Navalny managed to succeed in social media particularly after incident with poisoning and imprisonment it will be useful to remember that his popularity rating even one year ago was twice lower. On the other hand, yet, protests in Russia have not turned into one of the color revolutions therefore one can conclude Navalny and other liberal forces in Russia still have to produce meaningful and strong tools against Russian authoritarian regime.

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