

# Democracy: New Tools for the Struggle

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First of all, I would like to thank all the people and institutions who made this workshop possible. The Ratiu Foundation and Woodrow Wilson Center gave me this opportunity to share my ideas with and to learn from this extraordinary audience and other speakers. I want to personally thank Indrei and Nicolae Ratiu, Dr. Eliot Sorel, Christian Ostermann and Mircea Munteanu.

The story of life of Ion Ratiu, after whom this workshop is named, is both tragic and inspiring. He had to seek political asylum from the pro-Nazi dictatorship established in Romania when he was younger than me and he remained in exile for half a century. Still, he never gave up his work for eventual liberation of his motherland. It is difficult to imagine how much persistence, patriotism and faith it required for him to continue his quest through all this time. After Romania ultimately set itself free from totalitarianism, Ion Ratiu was lucky enough not only to be able to return to his home country but also to contribute to its restoration and reintegration into democratic world. This example is an inspiration to so many people around the world who never stop believing that democracy is achievable in their countries—including my own country, Russia.

The last decade saw Russia's democracy, however weak and flawed, destroyed by power-thirsty and corrupt former state security officers who were brought to power with Vladimir Putin. This downfall initially met barely any resistance from the citizens tired of instability, insecurity and reforms. Too few people realized that it is much easier to give away your liberty than it is to reclaim it later.

## **Sliding Down To Authoritarianism**

In 2000, still a high school student, I almost accidentally found the Website of Amnesty International. Then I located a Moscow Group's page and clicked the "Join" link. This is how I became an activist. So I have to admit that new technologies influenced me more than I

influenced new technologies. I believed that defending human rights was a way to make my country freer and more democratic. I think, Ion Ratiu must have had somewhat the same idea as he was a friend of Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International.

Meanwhile, things were getting worse. The Kremlin took over all national TV channels. Party system, elections, and the judiciary were more and more controlled. All political and economical power was becoming more centralized. A euphemism of “managed democracy” (and, later, “sovereign democracy”) was invented to describe the new status quo after this slow authoritarian coup d’état. I realized that the main battle for freedom in Russia was taking place in the political sphere, so I joined SPS (Union of Right Forces), a democratic, liberal (in the European sense) political party.

The tradition of those years was for leadership of all so-called “opposition parties” (including SPS) to engage in secret talks with the Presidential Administration before each national election. The parties promised to behave properly (for example, not to attack Vladimir Putin in their campaigns) and in exchange could hope to be allowed to make it to the Parliament. Oftentimes, even lists of their candidates had to get clearance from Vladislav Surkov, the gray cardinal of Putin’s domestic policy. Although this undemocratic and degrading procedure has never been officially acknowledged, everybody knew it existed. Parties’ leaders didn’t know how to campaign without privileged access to funding and television, so they used all their authority to enforce these secret agreements in their parties. Those who did not comply had to leave the parties, like I eventually did in 2007. Interestingly enough, even these agreements didn’t help SPS, either due to their own mismanagement or because the Kremlin violated its part. Anyway, SPS lost its 2003 elections, and so did Yabloko, the other democratic party, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union leaving the Parliament without any democratic factions altogether.

By 2005, old opposition political parties had discredited themselves. They lost all remains of their morale; self-preservation became the main motivation for their leadership and staff. They brought themselves into that dead end by pretending to be in the opposition to the authoritarian regime and not daring to speak openly about it at the same time. I recall how the SPS spokesman was striking all mentions of Vladimir Putin out of a press release that I had prepared in 2004. He explained: “Putin has 70% rating and we only have 3%. We will criticize him when it becomes vice versa.” No surprise that SPS failed to receive even 1% in next elections and dissolved itself in 2008.

## **Oborona and Solidarnost**

Since old parties couldn't stand in defense of democracy any more, we began to look other ways. In March 2005 we founded Oborona, a youth movement that declared defense of democratic principles of the Russian Constitution by non-violent means its main goal. In fact, the very word "oborona" means "defense" in Russian.

Oborona was different from everything we had in Russia at that time. Firstly, it was independent of any parties or politicians. Oborona would not participate in elections or support anybody. It also rejected any control or interference from outside because then we would be driven to the same dead end where the old parties found themselves.

Secondly, Oborona was very direct and outspoken in its criticism. It wasn't afraid to call a spade a spade or, for that matter, to call Putin responsible for destroying Russia's democracy. It was something unseen in the democratic movement of that time. It made Oborona look appealing to many while, at the same time, some of our older colleagues considered us stupid kids who couldn't understand "the dialectics of politics." Anyway, five years later, SPS is dissolved, but Oborona lives and its "rebellious" slogans have been adopted by the mainstream democratic movement. If nothing else, Oborona deserves credit for daring to say that "the Emperor has nothing on at all."

Since its foundation, Oborona has been particularly active in street protests, trying to mobilize people, especially the youth, to push for their rights. Indeed, it is not a secret that the very creation of Oborona was inspired by the Orange Revolution that brought hundreds of thousands to Maidan in Kyiv in 2004. In addition to outdoor activity, Oborona was a real experimental lab for all sorts of new technologies and tools to be used in the struggle for democracy. Many of the ideas that I am going to share today were born or tested in Oborona. Two months ago I ended my active participation in the movement, but I'm still trying to keep track of what is going on there.

The new political language, introduced by Oborona, was used by other groups, most importantly by Solidarnost (that is, Solidarity). Founded two years ago, Solidarnost soon became the largest democratic movement in Russia. It has been organizing campaigns and protests, publishing books, participating in elections and now even plans to challenge the Surkov's "managed democracy" by creating a new political party. Sacking of all-powerful Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov was to some extent the result of a Solidarnost's year-long

campaign exposing his corruption and abuse of office. Now, Solidarnost is considering joining forces with other democratic groups on the eve of Parliamentary and Presidential elections, in an attempt to ruin the Kremlin's plan to quietly reproduce the system.

Although the Russian democratic movement has become more solid, experienced and self-confident since 2004, some very serious, systemic problems must be solved. There has been almost no flow of new faces, new leaders since early 2000s, when Putin established strict control over television. Lack of strategic vision, both among leaders and activists, causes apathy and disorientation within the movement. A lot of people lose enthusiasm and quit while others get so desperate that they begin considering violent options. Incompetence and irresponsibility become a norm. Level of people's dissatisfaction with the government may only be compared to dissatisfaction with the opposition.

Demand for a new generation of civil society activists is obvious, but supply is low, almost non-existent. It will take years for new leaders of the movement to emerge and grow up, to get educated and become known. I see the task of identifying and helping them as one of the most serious challenges in today's Russia.

These new leaders will need new tools for their work. When we speak of new technologies, we usually mean information and communication technology (ICT), primarily the Internet and mobile phones. But in fact, there is more to new technologies than that. It includes new forms of management, different organizational structures, more sophisticated approaches to planning campaigns and crafting messages and so on. There is a lot to learn.

## **New Technologies: Advantages**

However, ICT and, more specifically, the Internet have undoubtedly become the biggest discovery of the last decade. Their unique traits have changed the struggle for democracy in Russia.

Firstly, the biggest advantage of the new media over the old—television, newspapers and so on—is that it is a two-way street. In other words, in the Internet, a monologue is replaced by a dialogue. You cannot control all content or all content creators any more. Lie is exposed; truth is harder to hide. When, in August this year, United Russia party decided to organize a propaganda campaign in the Internet around forest fires, they didn't expect it to backfire. A blogger Valeriy Nazarov, more known by his nickname *piligrim-67*, found that they were using

Photoshop visual effects to make up photos of their “heroic” activists “extinguishing” forests. When, a few days later, United Russia published a new photo report on how their youth leaders were fighting fire, the same blogger discovered that there had been no forest fires in that place. The scandal was so big that the top officers of United Russia’s youth branch Youth Guard were sacked and United Russia even claimed that it would stop its propaganda activities on the Internet outside their own Website—where they can control everything. Anything like this would be unthinkable on television or other conventional media, since they are tightly controlled.

Although Internet is still unavailable luxury for many Russians, it is clearly the most affordable and democratic means to make one’s voice heard. It would be impossible to mention all the issues, people and organizations that we learnt about thanks to new media. One year ago, a police officer from Novorossiysk Alexei Dymovsky published a video address to Vladimir Putin on YouTube complaining about widespread corruption and abuse of authority in the police system. Completely unknown to the public, he quickly became almost a national celebrity when approximately 1 million people watched the original address. Following his suit, whistleblowers from other institutions including prosecutors’ offices, local administrations, other police units began publishing their own addresses revealing the scale and severity of corruption in the country’s public service. Together with other civil activities, both online and offline, it made the government react. A police reform was started, with the goal to stop corruption and decay of the police system. The new law on police introduced by Dmitry Medvedev has several provisions of that sort, but it also forbids officers to publicly criticize the situation in their units or the agency as a whole.

One of the key concepts of the new media is crowdsourcing, or delegating a job to “an undefined, large group of people.” This technology is perfect for civil society, not only because it lets underfunded NGOs perform highly complicated tasks, but also because it creates and sustains communities of active citizens around certain issues, something necessary for a democracy to function. In recent years, we have a lot of actions and campaigns crowdsourced online. For instance, a mourning for victims of March 29 terrorist attack in Moscow was organized by several Twitter users, and within hours of the tragedy hundreds of people came to mourn those killed and to demand investigation. A few weeks ago, Twitter was used to organize and coordinate a campaign in support of journalist Oleg Kashin who had been beaten severely in Moscow.

While United Russia was trying to use old Soviet propaganda tools to score some points

on forest fires, other people designed a project called Karta Pomoschi (or “Map of Help”) located at [www.russian-fires.ru](http://www.russian-fires.ru). They were gathering reports of forest fires from people all over the country and putting this information on a map. They were also contacting volunteers from nearby regions who would fight those fires. Then they began coordinating aid to those who remained homeless because of the disaster. The project was prepared in two days by several dedicated activists.

Another crowdsourcing project, [shpik.info](http://shpik.info), gathers information on police and FSB officers and other public servants who participate in political repressions. Shpik.info runs an open online database of more than 500 such officials with detailed descriptions of what they have done. The authors of the site say that they want to break the sense of immunity that these people have by exposing their misdeeds. They also believe that one day this database will help illustrate those responsible for human rights abuse under the current regime.

New digital technologies make it possible for a faster, almost instant proliferation of information. New media together with mobile phones lets anybody organize live webcasts not only from indoor meetings but from anywhere. Such webcasts are done via Twitter, blogs, or video broadcasting services like qik.com. Hundreds and thousands of people from all over the country can follow important political and social events as they unfold. It is especially important in cases when urgent action is needed, like protests where a lot of people get arrested. Protesters tweet from demonstrations and then, occasionally, police vans and stations, report police misconduct and post photos. Now it became almost impossible for the authorities to conceal what is happening and we think that it has contributed to reducing police violence against demonstrators. It also helps human rights activists to know exactly how many people are held and where, who needs help first and how to distribute their limited manpower. Another important implication for us is that we less and less depend on journalists to cover our activities, since we can do it ourselves. It helps us not only negate censorship, but also reduce risk of police intervention or provocations because information of planned actions often leaks through journalists.

One of the most notable—or notorious—features of the Internet is that it allows people to read and post content anonymously. Under repressive regimes, it helps people stay on the safe side while freely expressing their views. One of the best-known anonymous authors in the Russian Internet is Twitter user KermlinRussia, who mocks the official Twitter account of the Russian President, originally called KremlinRussia. They are the two highest ranked political

bloggers according to Yandex. As KermlinRussia once said, he (or she) would like to show his face to the public but fears to get a metal rod in that face. So he (or she) remains anonymous.

## **New Technologies: Drawbacks**

As many other things, new technologies have their dark side. We often rely on them or believe in them more than we should. One thing that we have learnt from our experiments with these new tools is that virtual activity *does not* equal to real-life participation. To support a cause by signing an electronic petition or posting a comment in a blog is something very different from going out in the street for the same cause or even attending a safe indoor event. You may consider yourself lucky if 10 people come to your event out of 1,000 who signed up.

Whether we like it or not, a movement cannot be entirely virtual, especially where there is no accountable government or influential conventional media. Street rallies as well as other forms of struggle like strikes and boycotts are still the most powerful tool in the hands of non-violent protesters. One can imagine an authoritarian government ignoring even a huge online campaign but not a large real-life protest.

There is another danger of overestimating the power of new technologies—something I call “virtual emigration.” It occurs when a person dissatisfied with the status quo restricts his activities only to the Internet because it is easier and appears safer. There are thousands and thousands of people in Russia who criticize the government very harshly and complain about lack of freedom on forums, in blogs and in private conversations. But they never do anything to change the situation. This may be one of the explanations why the Internet is relatively free and uncensored in Russia: it is better for the Government to have rebellious Internet and quite streets than to have all those unhappy people protest.

Another problem that everybody is aware of is that repressive regimes use the Internet to gather information about the dissent and their activities. They learn about planned actions from our e-mails and take measures to disrupt our plans. Oftentimes, activists got arrested even before they made it to the place of a planned protest simply because the information leaked out over the Internet. Three months ago, spokesman for Moscow police openly admitted that they were reading communications of Oborona activists. We too often forget that tools so handy for us to use are also handy for the government to intercept.

When I said that the new media is a two-way street, I meant it. While it became possible

for us to expose lies and propaganda of the regime, it also gave them a new tool for manipulations and provocations. Anonymity is also a double-edged weapon as it can be used to throw in false information. One thing that worries me with WikiLeaks is that it gives a perfect means to organize very effective and powerful provocations. Imagine somebody adding one or two professionally crafted false messages—or even words—into thousands of true cables that are being published on the Internet. It will be almost impossible to prove they are not authentic and the outcome may be unpredictable.

Some believe there is something in Russia like the China's so-called "50-centers" (they are people who get paid around 50 cents for posting a pro-Government comment on the Web). These "Internet brigades" are thought to have been active in Russia for years. Whether it is true or not, the regime definitely uses the Internet for its own shadowy propaganda campaigns. Earlier this year, for instance, a series of videos were published anonymously where members of the opposition and independent journalists were seen offering bribes to traffic police and womanizing. Questions were raised about trustworthiness of these videos, but it is clear that they couldn't be filmed without participation of secret services.

Sense of anonymity also helps people feel less responsible for what they are saying or doing. It provides a fertile ground for growth of real extremism, that is, use of violence to achieve political ends. Unfortunately, this problem also exists in Russia and is getting worse. In June this year, a group of young men in Far East region of Primorye—so-called Primorye Guerillas—made a series of armed attacks against police officers. Two or four policemen were killed, several others injured. The young men believed that they were "cleansing the land" of the corrupt police. The group was swiftly destroyed, but their actions were (and are) very broadly discussed on the Internet. They received a lot of words of support from Internet users, even a few fan sites were created. More attacks against police followed, organized by other parties, in part as a result of this support.

Internet's democratic nature also has its reverse side. Non-hierarchical, network structures may be very effective in developing ideas, but not so much in their adoption or realization. I've seen it during my 5 years in Oborona, which is a network. When everybody decides for themselves, it is very difficult to follow a strategy and to maintain even primitive discipline. When you can't reach a consensus, making a hard choice can become a tormenting task, often leading to fierce conflicts and splits in the group. Extreme individualism, even egocentrism that is somewhat a result of the Internet democracy is bad for collective actions.



Internet can help us speak freely, but it is our task to learn how to listen.

## **Conclusion**

The new tools that are available to us thanks to technological and economical progress are already changing the Russian society and one of its most active parts, the democratic movement. Old methods of waging political struggle are beginning to fail, and both the regime and its opponents are looking for something new. It is not necessary that the change will be favorable for democrats. Those who will learn how to use these instruments more effectively will have a major advantage in the future. But it cannot substitute vision and courage, persistence and faith—the traits that helped Ion Ratiu keep up his fight through half of a century. Because, after all, tools are just tools.