

Russia's New World Of Digital Protesters

by *Flavio Fusi*

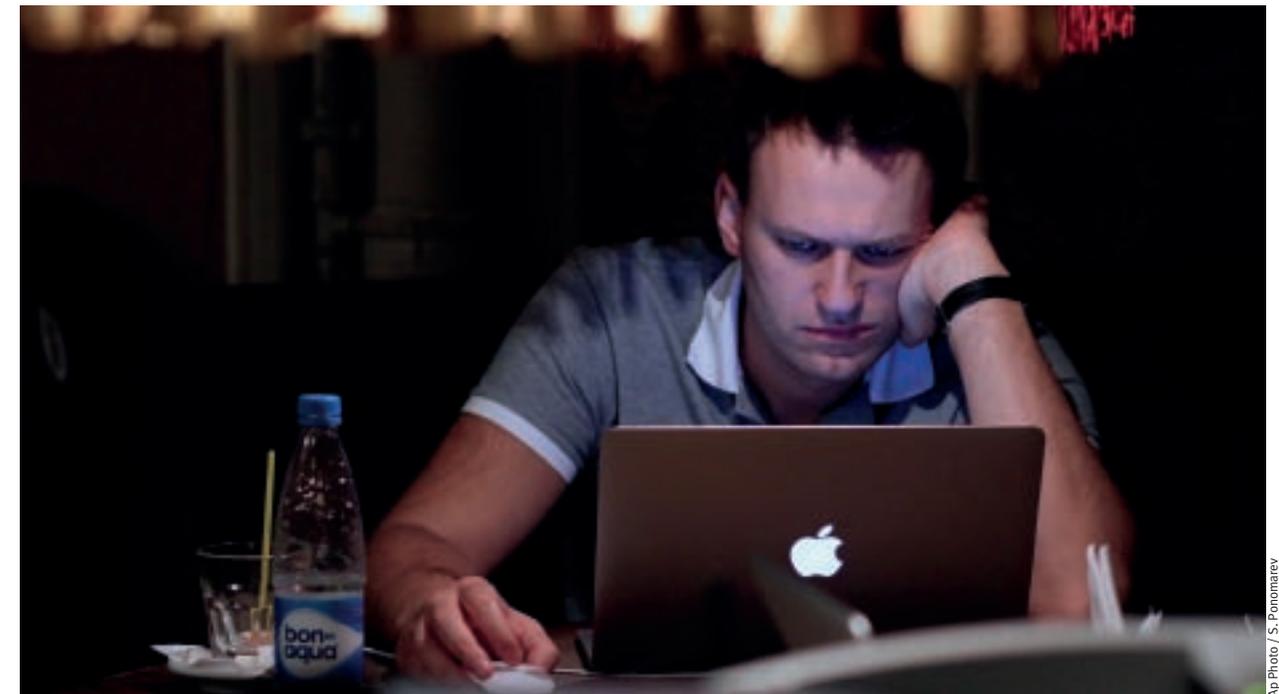
Social networking has become the instrument of choice for anti-government, helping to unite public opinion. The government can control television and print media, but not the web. Meanwhile dissent's constituency continues to grow.

The infamous, three-day coup attempt against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, known to some simply as the August Coup, was characterized by radio silence. When the plotters tried to seize power, beginning Aug. 19, 1991, "Swan Lake" was a state radio staple. On Aug. 20, Gorbachev's vice president, Gennady Yaneyev, whom the plotters had anointed to take over from the vacationing Gorbachev, held a drunken press conference. The edges began fraying. A day later, the plotters and their renegade army allies were arrested, in effect ending not only the putsch but also the Soviet Union.

Two decades later, "Swan Lake" has been replaced by a different kind of sound. Street protests in generated by a relentless online drumbeat apply pressure on newly re-elected President Vladimir Putin, whose mandate is expected to contain a great many more roadblocks than when he first won office in 2000.

A new, nonconformist generation is uneasy with the Putin power structure, which it sees as static and mani-

Opposition leader Alexey Navalny.



pulative. Most are computer and social media savvy, so much so that Putin refers to them as “computer hamsters.” It was the hamsters that were most effective in mobilizing anti-Putin protests following the contested December parliamentary elections and ahead of the presidential vote in March. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Moscow, most of them urged into action by blogs, Facebook, and Tweets. The new face of Russian dissent is digital. Virtual dissent is all but unstoppable. Between December and March, Russia saw the birth of dozens of new online platforms and mobile phones apps, almost all of them aimed at giving Putin dissenters a way to connect with each other. The new wave, which mirrors social networking in much of the West, is showing no signs of abating. For years, LiveJournal, an American content platform introduced in Russia in 2005, was the hub of anti-government posts and reports. More recently, however, Facebook, friendlier to sharing and interaction, has jumped into the mix.

According to recent statistics, Russian Facebook users increased from five percent in 2010, to 18 percent in 2012. The Russian digital world, and within it the Putin opposition network, is much more dynamic as a result.

While the censoring of individual dissenters, the print press, and television is relatively easy, and traditionally organized, reining in the web is far more problematic. Russia has some 60 million online users and most of Moscow is wireless. Red Square, with its visual examples of power structures, buildings and domes, is now at war with an insidious virtual world that needs no such symbols to thrive.

The hamsters can get around the traditional gagging the Kremlin applied to communication and information. Though the Kremlin still legislates all major national and regional broadcasting outlet, it has no control over Internet postings (unlike China, which has actively worked to suppress the web). The extent of online influence became evident during Putin’s presidential campaign, in part because television had been co-opted.

“The elections made the Kremlin paranoid about who should be given airtime,” says TV host Vladimir Pozner. “The point being that no one wanted to admit that in reality Russian TV is anything but free.” Adds another TV personality, Kira Prosutinskaya: “I’d be lying if I said that

working in television is easy these days. Top management is worried sick about job security, which means that just about every decision is combed over.”

Broadcast information is both the Kremlin’s trump card and its Achilles heel.

“Some powerbrokers literally tried to take over news management before and immediately after the presidential elections,” says Alexei Venediktov, who until recently headed Moscow’s maverick Echo of Moscow Radio.

The station suddenly found itself in turmoil. On the one hand it gave wide berth to Yulia Latinina, who has long been critical of Putin and developed conspiracy theories; on the other it interviewed more mainstream figures like Gorbachev, who is now a political consultant.

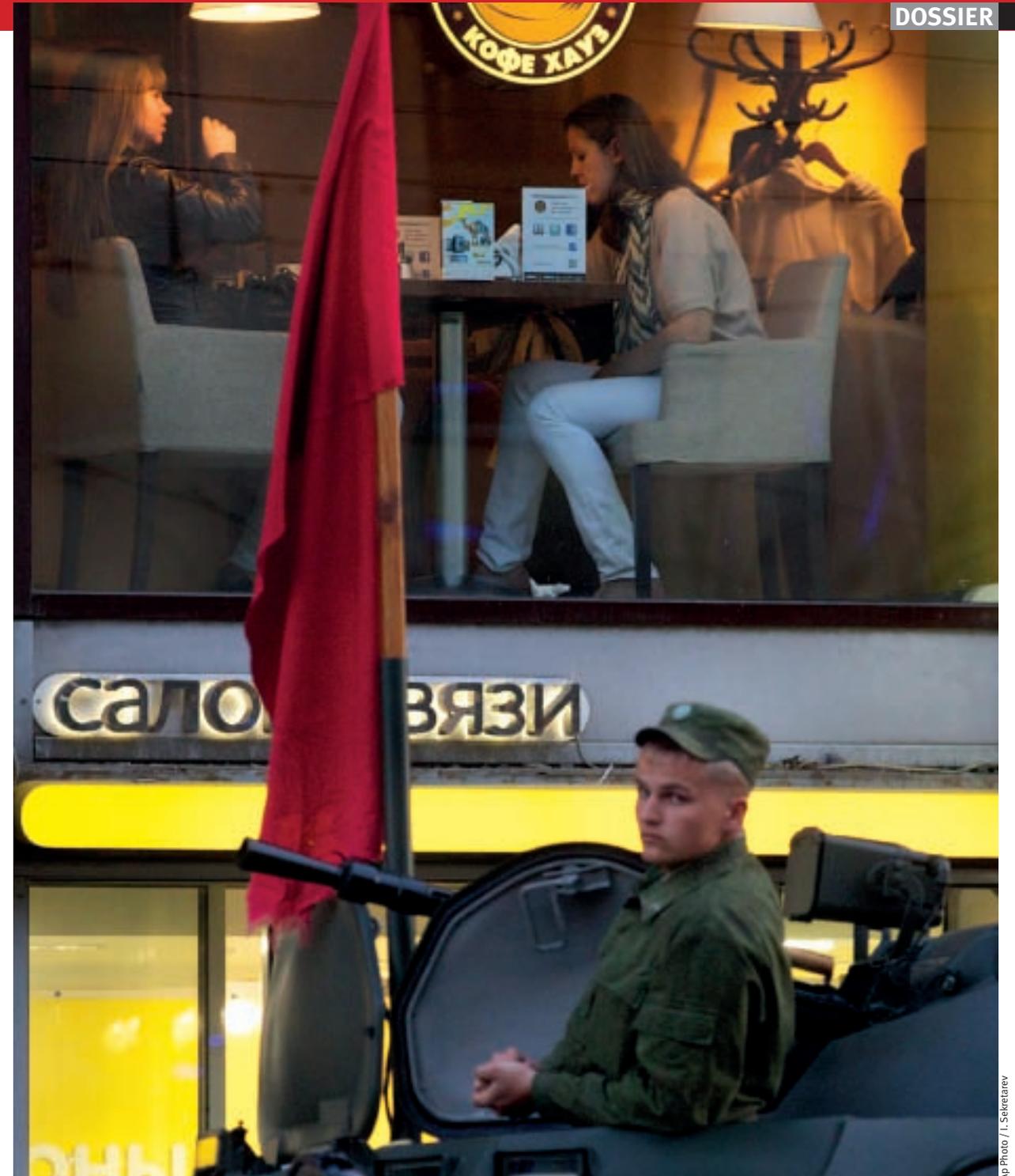
But as soon as the street protests abated and Putin was re-elected, the station was targeted.

The radio, which is 60 percent owned by energy giant GazProm, fired Venediktov from his post on the board of directors. Vladimir Varfolomeyev, his deputy, met the same fate. The radio’s upper echelons were purged of reporters and editors, seen as particularly unfriendly to the Kremlin. Political hegemony and economic clout, basically Putin and GazProm, has dominated the Russian scene for more than a decade. It has the decision-making clout to steamroll dissent at a moment’s notice.

Venediktov, who will stay on as senior editor, says the newsroom is united. Despite the changes at the top, he insists there will be no censorship or discrimination. But the decisions suggest another scenario, at least beneath the surface. Even before the vote, Putin had accused the station of smearing his campaign.

Says the unapologetic Varfolomeyev: “It was essential that the government neutralize the influence journalists had on the choices made by the station. As a result of the protests last December, the government accelerated this strategy. Authorities worry that some media can become the fulcrum of opposition movements. For us, the whole idea is just ridiculous, since we’re doing our jobs. But this is the position that political leaders have decided to take, and it’s happened before our very eyes.”

Young women in a Moscow café awaiting the start of Victory Day parade practice.



AP Photo / I. Sekretarev



LaPresse

Says political and media analyst Alexei Pankin, reflecting on two decades of authoritarian new management. “Much has changed over 20 years. The country has had three different presidents. There are no more tanks in the streets. The traffic jams are out of control as a result of economic stability. At the same time, there have been mounting protests and mass demonstrations. But in each sensitive political situation, notwithstanding the social climate, radio and television have been strictly regulated, if not by laws then by presidential decrees.”

But the spread of social networking threatens to undermine the status quo forever. Many observers, responding to the events of the Arab Spring, which was largely generated by online connections, predict that the Russian authoritarian system won’t be able to handle new media, which is in turn synonymous with youth and the trappings of modernism. There’s no telling if they’re right, but the fashionable also has its way of making a mark on politics. On the list of Time Magazine annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world, only one Russian name appeared, that of 35-year-old blogger Alexei Navalny. The engaging Navalny is considered a key engineer of the anti-Putin protests. “His personal charisma is complemented by a sardonic sense of humor that is ideal for puncturing the propaganda of the gray and humorless Kremlin,” wrote former chess champion Garry

Putin seen on television during the electoral campaign.

Kasparov in “Time.” In March 2012, after Putin’s re-election Navalny helped lead an anti-Putin rally in Moscow’s Pushkin Square that was attended by between 14,000 and 20,000 people. After the rally, he detained by authorities for several hours, then released.

Navalny’s mention in “Time” clearly annoyed Putin. Said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov: “There’s clearly been some kind of mistake. I have no idea what [the magazine’s] selection criteria must be. Vladimir Putin’s authority in Russia is both known and credible, and was confirmed in the recent presidential vote. The power our president wields needs no validation at an international level.” Beneath the Pax Putin lurks an arm wrestling contest for control of public information. Both street demonstrations and the dour mood of whole social classes suggests that the social pact that emerged from the late 1990s, the so-called age of riots, is fast coming undone. That pact implicitly held that if the government guaranteed social stability and the stockpiling of consumer goods, citizens would maintain a disinterest in politics, except when they were called on to vote. The scenario seems unlikely to hold up for long.

Then again, it wouldn’t be Russia if there weren’t Cas-



Ap Photo / Y. Polansky

Navalny during a protest against election fraud.

sandra figures warning of impending Kremlin coups. Only a few days after the revival of the Putin presidential era, the newspaper “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” alleged that interior ministry “troops” would no longer be under control of the ministry but instead answer directly to the presidency as part of the creation of a new National Guard. Most startling was the predicted size of the new force: 300,000 to 400,000 troops, including army, navy and air force officials, as well as aircraft and a variety of resources culled from the Emergency Situations Ministry. In essence, said the paper, Putin was quietly overseeing the creation of a parallel army in the vein of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard. Is Moscow turning into Tehran? Is Putin the new Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?

Though Russians are known for their overactive imagination, it’s fairly clear that Putin wary about situation around him. The sensitive Kremlin immediately denied the National Guard report, one that in previous years would have been ignored as media sensationalism.

But that hasn’t slowed media speculation. Journalist Alexander Golt recently published an op-ed piece in “The Moscow Times” titled “Siloviki in a Panic.” The Siloviki are Putin’s old “comrades in arms,” members of

his inner circle that helped usher him into the national forefront after he left the St. Petersburg office of the KGB for Moscow, trading the bleak intelligence world the Kremlin’s gilded rooms. The role-reversal between Putin and now former President Dmitri Medvediev, says Golt, is more than just a game. As the two men negotiate future government commitments, some senior officials ministers wonder about their job security. The siloviki are worried because clan warfare can be tough. Their power is by nature opaque and none of them are remotely accountable to public opinion.

Many foresee power struggles and social turbulence ahead, which Putin ridicules. What are 50,000 protestors in Moscow in the context of a vast nation that contains 11 time zones? Yet Boris Kagarlitski, also writing in “The Moscow Times” insists that lower class rage is simmering. Popular discontent over rising prices, inadequate infrastructure, real poverty, and rampant corruption will be increasingly directed toward those in charge, few of whom have any idea what to do with the unrest.

“Authorities hoped to use popular discontent to their own advantage, without bothering to think about how they would channel it later. Now they have no idea how to put the genie back in the bottle and cannot imagine how powerful that force really is,” writes Boris Kagarlitski ominously. ●