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**Political Memes as Tools of Dissent and Alternative Digital
Activism in the Russian-language Twitter**

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**UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER** 

**Political Memes as Tools of Dissent and Alternative
Digital Activism in the Russian-language Twitter**

by

Anastasia Denisova

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
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Abstract

This research has analysed the role of Internet memes in the contemporary Russian alternative discourse. It has identified memes as the Internet common language that users exploit to communicate on all topics and also utilise as the mind-bombs to influence the political discourse. This project focused on the employment of memes in the deliberation of the Crimean crisis in the Russian Twitter in 2014. Pro-government and anti-government activists have used this format of texts to promote their agenda and interpret the events, discuss political leaders, contest symbols of state propaganda and alternative narratives. The study is highly original as it followed the development of memes in real time; the interviews collected with the prominent meme makers and sharers stand out as the testaments of direct participants of this process. The subsequent in-depth analysis of the distributed memes unveiled the prevailing themes, narratives and symbols that shape the political and social discussion between the elites and resistance in contemporary Russia. This research on the role of the Internet memes in political deliberation of the Crimean crisis contributed to the understudied field of political uses of memes in a non-Western authoritarian environment.

The conceptual framework includes recent theory on the Internet memes, tactical activism, connective action, carnivalesque resistance, individual action frames and creativity for politics. Internet memes have proven to be a popular vehicle of critical political communication in Russian social networks due to the ease of producing and sharing, opportunity for self-expression and receiving feedback to one's creativity and benefits of anonymity that escapes censorship and protects activists. My study has revealed that memes are limited in the sophistication of the ideas they can convey and in maintaining a long-term meaningful discourse; they serve as the in-jokes of digital communities; their ambiguity and anonymity challenges community building yet nurtures the spread of ideas; therefore, memes are more likely to serve as disruptive mind-bombs that connect ideas rather than individuals.

This research has documented and analysed the media and political developments in Russia during 2011-2014 and provided suggestions for further research on the utilisation of entertaining artful texts for political deliberation, formation of the alternative discourse and political mobilisation in the restricted Russian media ecology.

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I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the dearest people in my life: P., my parents Tatiana and Vladimir, my family and friends. I am very grateful to my supervisors Dr Anastasia Kavada and Dr Peter Goodwin for their support, knowledge, great guidance and fascinating personalities.

CHAPTER 1. Introduction

The Russian media environment of the 2010s has become a turbulent space for the deliberation of alternative political discourses. The government has been promoting its agenda through a variety of national broadcasting, radio, press and Internet outlets; the level of indoctrination significantly increased by the mid-2010s (Kachkaeva, 2015). By this time, the state had successfully shut down or curbed the influence of leading independent media that used to hold the elites to account. Liberal publics have largely relocated to social networks and various Internet media as the nonconventional sources of information, opinion and political ideas (Yuhua, 2014). In this environment, the Crimean crisis that erupted in 2014 has become a significant test for the capacity of resistant citizens to maintain their non-hegemonic views and interpret the events independently. The Crisis started in February 2014, when Russia intervened in the domestic conflict in Ukraine and facilitated the independence referendum in the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, known for its Russian-speaking majority. Russia swiftly accepted the peninsula into its territory in March 2014, prompting harsh international criticism and domestic debates in Russia over the legitimacy of this move.

Due to the lack of established independent media, many resistant Russian citizens have exploited social networks to criticise the Kremlin. Resistant microbloggers have actively employed satirical means of expression, such as ironic tweets, parody and Internet memes (Bugorkova, 2015). Internet memes are viral texts that proliferate on mutation and replication and contain a humorous ambiguous joke that calls for the user's awareness of the broader context for interpretation (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2013; Meikle, 2014). During the peak of the Crimean crisis in February-April 2014, dissenting social media users utilised memes to suggest non-hegemonic ideas around the inner motives of the Russian elites, to oppose the misrepresentation of facts by hegemonic media, to discuss the discourses on Russian army and patriotism, corruption and absence of opportunities for dissent, as well as the role of Russia in global politics and the public representation of the president, Vladimir Putin, in the conflict. Meanwhile, pro-government users were also producing and distributing many memes on the Crimean crisis and shared them to social networks. These texts enforced the messages and symbols from state propaganda, condemned the opposition and praised the Russian elites. The proliferation of these

viral digital artefacts prompted my study on Internet memes as innovative practices of political activism and communication of the state supporters and resistant publics in Russia.

Since the fall of the USSR in the 1990s, Russia has undergone various periods of media and political freedom. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union with its undisputed hegemony of the Communist Party in mass indoctrination (Kireyev, 2006), a variety of political parties entered the public space in the newly established Russian Federation. From the 1990s until the early 2000s, Russian citizens were enjoying the peak of freedom of speech and assembly; they participated in relatively democratic elections and were able to choose from a large array of media at their disposal (Chernikova, 2014). Different broadcasting, press and radio companies operated on either a state-funded or commercial basis and acted as the sites of political contestation for the elites and citizens (Kiriya, 2012). Independent media were an influential player during the election times in the 1990-2000s (Chernikova, 2014) and contributed to the promotion of multiple voices in the public sphere.

However, the gradual suppression of freedom of speech commenced in the early 2000s. The newly appointed Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, intensified control over the content of the news broadcast by state media and was steadily increasing pressure on liberal resources in their coverage of politics and especially the domestic Chechen Wars (1999-2009) (Muratov, 2014). As a result, by the mid-2000s, nearly 70-80% of the population supported the government and endorsed Vladimir Putin as a strong and trustworthy leader (Robertson, 2012). The repeated success of the pro-Putin party *Edinaya Rossiya* at the parliament elections in this and following decades secured the undisputed support of the leader's initiatives. With the weakening influence of the previously strong Communist Party and scarce representation of liberal voices in parliament (Oliker, Crane, Schwartz & Yusupov, 2009), the opposition was almost excluded from decision-making by the late 2000s.

The development of the Internet media and social networks in the early 2000s did not escape the Kremlin's attention. Despite the proclaimed market economy and proliferation of commercial digital companies, the elites commissioned loyal media tycoons to acquire control or ownership over independent Internet media, social networks and search engines (Chernikova, 2014). This crusade against electronic businesses coincided with the establishment of extensive control over traditional

media. By the mid-2000s, the Kremlin either owned or indirectly managed the main television channels, dominant newspapers and magazines, national radio stations, information agencies and news outlets (Kireyev, 2006; Chernikova, 2014). Internet media and social networks still remained a relatively open space for the expression of alternative opinions and views. Those journalists who lost their jobs at liberal outlets started popular blogs, microblogs, standalone websites or Twitter accounts (Roberts & Etling, 2011).

Massive civic protests against the corrupt government erupted in 2011-2012 in large cities and became a turning point for further restriction of freedom of speech. It is widely believed (Bugorkova, 2015; Robertson, 2012; Clement, 2012) that these rallies were to a large extent organised and facilitated by communication on social networks, especially on Facebook and its Russian analogue Vkontakte. Resistant users raised awareness, coordinated for the event and discussed alternative views online. The Kremlin harshly suppressed the manifestations in the streets and subsequently tightened its control over the digital realm (Robertson, 2012; Hoft, 2012). A number of highly restrictive legislative measures of the late-2000s to early-2010s almost prohibited oppositional discussions and political mobilisations online, deemed illegal the use profanity and the Internet memes focused on real individuals, and also imposed a ban on public assembly without state permission (Malgin, 2014; Dobrokhotoy, 2012). In this complex media ecology, the remaining politicised discussions on social networks of the 2010s often act as the last available spaces of resistant communication and discussion (Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013).

This project originated as an inquiry into the oppositional uses of Internet memes in Russia in 2011-12. However, I experienced difficulties in retrospective collection of data and accessing individual and group accounts of protesters; Facebook and Vkontakte have strict privacy settings that challenged data scrapping. Furthermore, it was considered more feasible and informative to focus on a new emerging case of political resistance facilitated by the networked digital communication; such a case would be more viable in terms of data collection, access to the participants and up to date reflective analysis of findings. The Crimean crisis that took place in 2014 has become a worthwhile case to explore due to its high political impact on propaganda and resistance discourses (Bugorkova, 2015), as well as the capacity to collect memes on Crimea on Twitter in real time. During the Crimean debates, Internet memes have achieved additional value as the conduits of

meaning and interpretation, as well as triggers for independent discussions that had been excluded from the public realm (Sampat & Bugorkova, 2015; Toler, 2015; Gambarato & Medvedev, 2015).

Recent protest mobilisations all over the world, from the Arab Spring to the Occupy Movement, have raised many debates on the potential of social networks for spreading alternative discourses, connecting resistant citizens and mobilising them for political action (Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013; Aron, 2012; Chomsky, 2011). While many scholars attribute much weight to the networking capacity of digital platforms as the empowering tools for resistant crowds (see, for instance, Howard, 2014; Zuckerman, 2013), the more sceptical voices (Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013; Morozov, 2013b; Diani, 2001; Webster, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002; van Laer, 2007, among others) conceptualise electronic conversations as the continuation of offline relationships; they refer to the digital space as a mirror of the offline social and political order. My research included the analysis of current trends in this debate; it was important to do so to fit my study into the broader debate on the potential of participatory digital culture and networked activism for resistance. I have located my study within frameworks of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and personalised action frames (Wellman, 2001; Diani, 2011; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Lindgren & Lundstrom, 2011) to analyse the impact of individualised resistant communication and activism in collective mobilisations. Furthermore, I have incorporated the ideas on emotional storytelling and power of self-expression (Benkler, 2006; Melucci, 1996; della Porta & Diani, 2006) as motivating forces behind one's involvement in creative deliberation in politics online. Additionally, as Lievrouw (2011) and Lasn (1999) have suggested, alternative formats and practices such as Internet memes, culture jamming and other disruptive media enable individual users to express themselves and at the same time to disrupt the conventional hegemonic discourse without swearing allegiance to any political party or movement. The politicised utilisation of Internet memes also illustrates Garcia and Lovink's (1997) concept of tactical media activism that involves utilising hegemonic commercial media platforms for distribution of alternative ideas and appeals. Moreover, Bakhtin's (1984) theory of carnivalesque resistance was applied to offer a deeper explanation of artful digital deliberation in the Russian political environment: I sought to analyse why and to what extent the state permits these expressions of digital

discontent and how the exchange of politicised Internet memes relates with propaganda and dissent discourses at large.

My research focused on the interplay of memes in the Crimean crisis as the means of political digital deliberation. I was particularly interested in the role that memes play in the promotion of alternative political communication in Russian social networks. I have endeavoured to establish whether Internet memes act as inside jokes of the liberal Internet crowds and a format of communication that helps politically resistant users to identify each other; whether memes are instrumental in suggesting alternative discourses and mobilising for political activism and whether they promote community building online. I have also looked into the ways in which the government and loyal users appropriate this format for the propagation and deliberation of conventional ideas or marginal interpretations. By doing so, I evaluated the prevailing themes and narratives, as well as styles of expression that each side of the political discourse favours in their deliberation.

In order to tackle these questions, I have applied a mixed method approach that included content, textual, network and interview analyses. I collected the Internet memes that focused on Crimea and were spread in the Russian-language segment of Twitter throughout February-March 2014, which marked the height of the Crimean crisis. In the course of real time data scrapping, I have collected over 600 memes, which I further classified by the means of content analysis. I have further selected 50 exemplary memes from my sample and performed textual analysis on them in order to reveal hidden meanings and references to the context. My background in the media, networks of media contacts and persistent monitoring of Russian-language social networks enabled me to identify the most prominent politicised meme makers and sharers in the Russian Twitter. I have succeeded in conducting 15 interviews with both loyal and resistant meme sharers, asking them about personal motivations and risks, practices of production and sharing, as well as their insights on the potential of memes and social networks to influence politics. We have also discussed Russian censorship and the capacity of the Internet to promote alternative discourse and mobilise for political action. Additionally, I have attempted to trace the mutation of several memes in their digital journeys; and with then a trial network analysis performed on the networks of popular pro- and anti-government users to unveil the underlying networks of production and sharing.

My research sought to address the gaps in the existing studies on the politicised uses of memes in the digital space. It particularly assessed the potential of memes as innovative practices of political deliberation in the restricted Russian media environment; highlighting the advantages and limitations of raising awareness, spreading alternative discourse and promoting political activism through the means of memes. This study has also demonstrated how the government employees and loyal users exploit memes for various purposes and fill with opposing meanings; how memes reflect the trending concepts and themes of hegemonic narratives and supply suggestions to the resistant narratives in social media. Analysis of the interplay of pro- and anti-government memes has revealed the strategies and modes of political contestation from both sides of the political spectrum. By conducting in-depth interviews with meme sharers and performing various kinds of analyses on the sample of Crimean memes, this research has produced original, exclusive findings on the potential and role of the Internet memes in political communication online. It has highlighted the main advantages and evaluated the shortcomings of memes for alternative communication; it has identified and analysed relevant academic theory for contemporary studies on memes and indicated the directions for further research in this field.

The dissertation is organised as follows. This introduction is followed by the second chapter that summarises the history and practices of Russian resistance to the government over recent decades; discussing the development of traditional and electronic media and explains how the periods of relative freedom of speech and later restrictions on free journalism and public discussion shaped the Russian media environment of the 2010s. The following chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to the theoretical background of this thesis: they discuss the relevance of studies on participatory Internet culture, alternative activism, connective action, information wars, tactical media and the role of humour in resistant politics to this research. Further, an overview of the concept of the Internet memes and its role in social network conversations and alternative politics is provided. Chapter five explains methodological choices, such as utilisation of content, textual, interview and network analyses as the main methods and discusses the limitations and ethical considerations of this approach. Chapter six demonstrates the results of the undertaken research. Chapter seven juxtaposes findings from different methods, reflects on them and relates

them to the initial aims and objectives of this dissertation. I draw conclusions and suggest further directions for the research on the political uses of the Internet memes.

CHAPTER 2: Contextual background

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become important platforms for everyday communication. In recent years, users have largely employed them not only for daily interaction and information gathering, but political deliberation, mobilisation and coordination. The role of ICTs in alternative political communication and political activism is evolving as social media are developing rapidly.

The power of new media in generating, maintaining and promoting a political debate varies greatly from country to country and especially from one political system to another. Many scholars (see, for instance, Papacharissi, 2002, 2015; Morozov, 2011; Milner, 2013) assume that digital space is only an extension of the offline space. However, other academics argue that wide expansion and recognition of the social media offers new opportunities for communication and mobilisation. Russia as a neo-authoritarian country with a keen interest in technology has its own history of balance between mainstream and alternative media. The newly adopted practices of online resistance link contemporary dissidents with the clandestine opposition of the Soviet times, samizdat and marginal politicised communication. In the current restricted media environment of Russia in the 2010s, social media have a potential to operate as an alternative platform for information, cooperation and dissent.

This chapter commences with the analysis of the political and media context in Russia in the 2000-2010s. The Crimean crisis in 2014 suggested new patterns in the politicised communication of the pro-government users and oppositional publics in social networks (Bugorkova, 2015). Loyal digital users confronted liberal crowds in the virtual environment; social networks functioned as the continuation of the traditional media discourse as well as the separate space for the deliberation of politics (Kachkaeva, 2015; Bugorkova, 2015). By 2014, the resistant Russian public have established a variety of practices of using social media for spreading the liberal ideas

and mobilising for action. However, this deliberation of alternative politics derived from the practices that had been established in the late-2000s – early-2010s. Those Russian citizens who had been opposing the state in the previous decade, expressed much of their criticism in the discussions in social networks; these media had become instrumental in providing the resistant public with open spaces for debates and mobilisation (Clement, 2012). This chapter amalgamates the findings from the research on oppositional digital discourses and civil mobilisations in Russia in the 2000-2010s period so as to analyse how the liberal public were shaping; who these people are and what their motivations and practices are; and how they exploited the Internet and offline activism for challenging the government.

In 2011-2012, dozens of thousands of people took part in manifestations against the corrupt government in Moscow, St Petersburg and other big cities. The mobilisations were largely enabled by the communication and cooperation via social networks, and this amalgamation of online and offline efforts resulted in what the BBC (2011: para 2) has called the “biggest protests since fall of USSR”. The political mobilisations of the early 2010s would have been impossible without the political and civil developments of the 2000s. This chapter analyses the formation of the liberal publics in Russia since the fall of the USSR; it examines the existing research on the regional mobilisations and episodes of civil activism that paved the way (Clement et al., 2012) to the political mobilisations of the 2010s. It studies the development of Russian civic society in the 1990s-2010s; it further analyses the main characteristics of the newly emerged dissent public and their media practices, the employment of new media in generating resistance and alternative political talk. It also links the tradition of Soviet media consumption and propaganda with the recent modes of mass media consumption and Internet communication. Then, the chapter evaluates the increase in the state’s restrictions imposed on freedom of speech and assembly, and evaluates limitations experienced by traditional media and social network users.

2.1 Russia's liberal resistant public

The first large Russian protest mobilisation of the 2010s followed the Parliament elections in December 2011 and gained the name of 'snow revolution'. Dozens of thousands of people joined rallies in Moscow, St Petersburg and other big cities to voice their criticism of the corrupt government and demand fair elections. As Robertson (2012) points out, the name 'snow revolution' was coined as a metaphor: snow is known to come unexpectedly and melt with the spring. The same was said about the first attempt of politicised Russia to express itself – the massive protests were called "unexpected" by the press and decreased when the spring came. Since the first widely attended manifestations in February and March 2012, protest activity has declined. By May 2012, the hopes of the protesters faded as the extensively criticised Vladimir Putin was elected President for yet another term. His press secretary Dmitry Peskov announced a harsh official position on the liberal protests, reportedly asserting that 'an injured riot police officer should be avenged by smashing protesters' livers on the asphalt' (Hoft, 2012). Nonetheless, the rise of civil activism in the 2010s signified a milestone of a decade-long historical development. By 2011, 'the organizational and cultural apparatus for large-scale protests was already in place' (Robertson, 2012: 2).

The civil society of modern Russia has been forming in turbulence since the fall of the USSR. The 1990s were a time of political, cultural and social shift. Citizens experienced a number of immensely chaotic, highly criminalised and uncontrolled structural, power and organizational changes (Robertson, 2012). Soviet structures were collapsing, and new systems were still to be built, hence most of the protest activism of that time was not directed at high-scale changes, but rather concerned specific local issues. The post-Soviet government witnessed hunger strikes and blockades of roads and railways in campaigns on unpaid wages (Robertson, 2012).

Gradual development of social institutions throughout the 1990s along with the economic prosperity of the early days of the millennium, secured high approval rating for the government in the 2000s. It also facilitated the rise of Vladimir Putin to power; first as a prime minister, then president of the country (Oliker, Crane, Schwartz & Yusupov, 2009; Robertson, 2012). The administration of Vladimir Putin has notably promoted a very specific negative labelling of the 1990s in the popular media

discourse. The elites have continuously referred to the early years of young Russia as 'the wild 1990s' ('лихие 1990-е') (Parfenov, 2010). This widely used idiom (also known as 'the lawless 1990s' or 'the reckless 1990s'¹) was coined in the early 2000s and is often opposed to 'the fat 2000s' (or 'the gorged 2000s'). This is particularly interesting as the stigmatisation of 'the lawless 1990s' largely contributed to the praise of political and economic stability of Putin's Russia in the 2000s (Parfenov, 2010; Eggert, 2015). Criminal news and television series that depict the criminal environment of the 1990s, occupy a substantial part of the prime time viewing; they had become the most popular genres of the Russian federal television by the 2010s (Kachkaeva & Kiriya, 2007).

The 2000s brought an interesting yet barely visible advancement in the formation of liberal public. 'Liberal' here does not refer to the adherents of a specific political party, but generally defines those citizens who endorse freedom of speech and assembly, representational forms of governance and governmental guarantees of individual rights and liberties. These people oppose any inclination towards dictatorship and demand protection of constitutional rights of the citizens (see Lipman & McFaul, 2010). First stems of civil activity of the liberal publics became visible in the early 2000s. The 2000-2010 decade of economic prosperity fortified the state's dominance in the economy (the government seized control over such strategic sectors as oil, gas and defence). Despite the proclaimed 'democratic' status, political establishments have rather promoted a 'neo-authoritarian' rule with the state's hegemony over politics and economy (Oliker, Crane, Schwartz & Yusupov, 2009; Becker, 2004).

The first noticeable organisations to protest Putin's regime came from extreme ends: the National Bolshevik Party, Oborona, the Avant-garde of Left Youth and many other anarchist and leftist groups raised their voices against the monetisation of social benefits and other issues of Putin's politics (Robertson, 2012: 3). These organisations did not succeed in gathering much public approval and remained on the marginal end.

¹ It is now hard to identify the author of this catchy term. It was probably first mentioned in the novel 'The Liar' by Andrei Konstantinov, then appeared in the names of popular crime television series and documentaries (Berdy, 2010). Michele A. Berdy of The Moscow Times provides a linguistic analysis of the word 'лихие' that can approximately be translated as 'wild' or 'reckless' but is actually more multifaceted in Russian. Berdy accounts at least five connotations: 'immoderate', 'intensely bad', 'jaunty', 'show-off' and 'looking for trouble'.

Nonetheless, the 2000s have proven the ability of average citizens to mobilise on a local level for civil causes. The pre-2010s protest activity in Russia largely qualifies as "NIMBY" ("Not In My Back Yard") rallies: people were more likely to participate in activism protecting their essential needs or immediate environment rather than advance abstract political notions and ideologies (Clement, 2012). Among the most notable cases of civil uprising in between the mid-2000s and mid-2010s, are the mobilisation against the construction of an ugly oil company office tower that would have ruined the skyline of St Petersburg; the delays of payments for factory workers in Rubtsovsk; the destruction of a forest for a highway in the satellite town of Moscow; the corruption of the administration of the northern town of Arkhangelsk, and so forth.

By the early 2010s, Russian protest activities had considerably changed in their tone and range of claims: from local issue-based, direct action protests, they evolved to major political 'democratic' style marches and gatherings with demands to curb corruption (Robertson, 2012; Clement, 2012). Several studies (Robertson, 2012; Gladarev, 2012: 24) point to the increasing level of theatricality in recent mobilisations, when participants exploited mockery, parody and street theatre to support their claims. Gladarev (2012: 24) refers to the rise of artful dissent practices as glorious 'celebration' of the emerging civil society. Many participants of recent Russian liberal mobilisations were not encouraging hatred, but irony towards their political targets. They spread humorous texts, posters and symbolic figures made of carton; the inclination of the protesters towards more humour and performative practices fits in the globally experienced "need for alternative repertoires for political expression and mobilisation" (Norris, 2007: 641). At the local level, it may have also signified the end of fear of the government among the Russian public (Asmolv, 2012).

Self-organisation has become another prominent feature of the Russian protest mobilisations of the mid-2000s – early-2010s. The wide spread of ubiquitous Internet technology enabled citizens to distribute information online and coordinate in social networks, bypassing traditional media and established political and civil institutions (Clement, 2012). Dmitriev (2012) draws an example of a local mayoral election in the small Russian town of Chernogolovka, where citizens employed digital space to form 'networked structures'. Local entrepreneurs largely participated in the online discussions and supported civil activity - as a result, an independent candidate won the

elections, largely due to this digital support. Liberal activists have also exploited digital technology for monitoring and reporting on the events of corruption during the 2007 all-Russian Parliament elections (Oliker, Crane, Schwartz & Yusupov, 2009).

The development of the Russian civil society corresponds to Dahlgren's (2006: 273) concept of citizenship being 'a question of learning by doing'. Activists with varying political views and coming from different locations within Russia have achieved significant experience in spreading awareness, mobilising and coordinating regional protests throughout the 1990s-2010s. Robertson (2012: 3) argues that the 2011 post-election protests in Moscow were to a large extent organised by the experienced protest activists who had gained familiarity with protest rhetoric during previous decades and were involved with various organisations and campaigns. Moreover, several local NIMBY activists gradually became known at the national level and emerged as politicians (Clement, 2012, Gladarev, 2012). The gradual transformation of the local civic activists into opposition figures of the national level has become a notable pattern of the Russian political activism (Clement, 2012).

Defining Russian resistant publics in Western political terms is a challenging task. There is a peculiar perplexity of self-definitions of the Russian opposition and the scholarly approach to identifying the participants of dissent mobilisations in the country (see Kullberg & Zimmerman, 2011; Robertson, 2012). For the purposes of this thesis, I have used "resistant publics", "opposition", "anti-Kremlin" and "anti-government publics" as interchangeable terms that define those citizens who oppose the government or criticise the instances of political propaganda. Although I acknowledge that "resistance" and "opposition" bear varying connotations, I nonetheless use them as synonyms for the Russian case. Kullberg and Zimmerman (2011) explain that the politically active Russian citizens tend to define their political identity in "post-communist" terms, which means that they oppose themselves to the governments they do not support, as well as to the political regimes of the past. By doing so, they explicitly demonstrate disapproval of certain identities, but fail to clearly outline the political identity that they can relate to. Many educated Russians who took part in civil activism or protests in the recent decades refrain from calling themselves the proponents of liberalism or democracy (Kullberg & Zimmerman, 2011). They praise the freedom of speech, free market economy, resistance to the state oppression and manipulation (Robertson, 2012). At the same time, they are sceptical

about the existing oppositional parties and express doubts about the affiliation with any established political identity, such as liberals, socialists, communists and so forth.

The other issue that challenges the self-identification of the Russian resistant publics is the low number of popular oppositional parties in the political landscape of mid-2010s (Robertson, 2012). As they are unable to associate their views with those of any prominent political figures, the resistant publics in Russia can therefore be distinguished as ambiguously “anti-Kremlin” or “anti-government” crowds. This classification is limited as it obscures the inner political differences between various parts of the resistant audience: their claims, heroes and motivations can vary substantially (Clement, 2012). Nonetheless, imperfect as it is, this categorisation enabled me to demarcate a certain number of people in the population who share a critical standpoint towards the government and its propaganda. For this thesis, I have classified those resistant users who have been vocally opposing the elites as “oppositional crowds”, or “resistant publics”. There can be many more people who silently disagree with the leader’s policies and would vote for an alternative candidate. However, only those who visibly criticise the elites in the public realm (street protests, social networks or traditional media) were included in this research.

Despite the development of political awareness and emergence of local civil mobilisations in the 1990s-2000s, in the 2010s there is still a significant gap between the level of protest activism in big cities and the rest of the country. The degree of political awareness also differs among the citizens of different social status and education. National surveys held by Democracy International (cited in Robertson, 2012: 4) show that university-educated, middle and upper middle class urbanites are more informed and concerned about corruption, civil rights and moral decline. Contrary to this, working class and less educated Russians are more disturbed by economic issues, such as low wages, high prices, increasing poverty and unemployment. Many politically active middle class Russians tend to associate democracy with a higher level of life (Grigoryev & Salmina, 2011). Robertson (2012: 4) utilised the term 'urban intelligentsia' to describe the politically aware educated Muscovites and Petersburgers, while Kiriya (2012) refers to this newly distinguished stratum as ‘angry urbanites’ or ‘angry townspeople’.

Several media pointed to the prosperity of participants as the limitation to the longevity and strength of the urban protests. The recurrence of such labels as 'Mink Revolution' (Sobchak, 2012) or 'debonair demonstrators in mink coats and designer jeans' (Schwartz, 2012) has strengthened the perception of the Bolotnaya 2011 and further protests as elite bourgeois manifestations (Lieven, 2012). As the prominent Russian political journalist Andrey Kolesnikov (2012) assumes, the censored traditional media were reinforcing this labelling in their reports, appealing to the citizens of smaller cities and rural areas. They were aiming to redirect people's discontent with poor living conditions at those 'fat middle class hipsters in fur coats', whom they accused of 'trying to shatter the stability' (Kolesnikov, 2012: para 6).

Nonetheless, the statistical data on economic and social status of the protest participants partially contradicts these claims. By the 2010s, 20 percent of the country's population belonged to the middle class (Tikhonova & Mareyeva, 2009; Ovcharova & Maleva, 2009; Grigoryev & Salmina, 2011). The urban protests of 2011-12 united many representatives of this social group - those individuals with a high social status were more likely to seek political information and form own opinions (Grigoryev & Salmina, 2011). Only 5 percent of the December 2011 protest at Sakharov avenue in Moscow can be classified as "rich" in the sense of "not refusing ourselves anything" (Levada-Centre, 2011), while the majority reported moderate financial capacity in terms of being able to buy food and clothes, but rarely afford larger spendings. However, Leon Aron (2012), director of Russian studies at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, suggests that traditionally and historically, one's belonging to the middle class in Russia is defined not as much by income, but education and occupation.

In accordance with these localised criteria, the 2011 protest rallies in Moscow mostly attracted middle class participants - 70 percent had a college degree or higher, and 13 percent reported they were more than halfway through college. Regarding occupation, about a quarter of protesters were professionals, and a quarter more either working as managers or owning their own business (Levada-Centre, 2011). Interestingly enough, a year before the protests occurred, sociologists were already defining this emerging generation of Russia's 'new protesters'. Maria Lipman (2010: para 4), the chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Society and Regions Program, contributed her definition of 'the new urban class' as 'young, well-educated

professionals and entrepreneurs who have learned to rely on themselves and take their own decisions.’

Many researchers link the rise of social protest with the era of economic prosperity in Russia. The classic paradigm of political development in post-industrial society (Huntington, 1968; Fukuyama, 2006; Bell, 1976; Lipset, 1960) enlightens the globally recognised patterns in the local Russian case. After the period of economic prosperity, the middle class expands rapidly and demands not only personal freedom and rights, but also liberty and voice in governing their countries. Aron (2012) points to Spain, Portugal and Greece of the 1970s, South Korea and Taiwan of the 1980s as the examples of the protests that the middle class drives against the authoritarian government.

Economic opulence as a paradoxical trigger of social unrest was thoroughly analysed as early as a century and a half ago by the French political thinker Alexis De Tocqueville (1856, see 2001 English translation, as cited in Aron, 2012: 3). He utilized the example of the 1700s in France, when stable increase of wealth did not prevent the revolution, but promoted the spirit of rebellion. The 'De Tocquevillian paradox' has recently been seen in the Arab Spring, when the very promising and quickly developing economy of Tunisia did not avert the country's revolution (see Aron, 2012). The De Tocquevillian paradox therefore connects the French revolution with modern uprisings in a unique way. It means that revolutions can grow not only out of despair, but also out of hope: 'the mere fact that certain abuses have been remedied draws attention to the others and they appear more galling; people may suffer less, but their sensibility is exacerbated' (De Tocqueville, 2001, as cited in Aron, 2012: 3).

In Russia, the rise of oil and gas prices secured steady economic performance through the 2000s and assisted the formation of middle class. They have become more confident in the ability to establish their own business and have familiarised themselves with the corrupt administrative principles of the state institutions (Dmitriev, 2012). Besides, the educated middle class Russians are living through an era of the unprecedented access to information and goods. The freedom of travel and communication, entrepreneurship and expression, demarcates them from previous generations. Having achieved success on the personal level, they have started to

believe that they deserve a say in governing the country and being among the stakeholders (Aron, 2012; Grigoryev & Salmina, 2011; Kolesnikov, 2012).

The economic divide is one particular side of the Russian 2010s' protest mobilisation; its other important features are the age and digital literacy of the participants (Lally, 2011). Over half of the protesters who went to the December 2011 rally in Moscow were under the age of forty, with a quarter being between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four (Levada-Centre, 2011). The young generation of those aged between twenty and thirty are the single largest age cohort in contemporary Russia and form a quarter of the population (Dmitriev, 2012). They have a strong middle class presence and frequently express a demand for an improved political system and economic operation.

The majority of these young Russians are frequent Internet users. Russia has demonstrated one of the fastest Internet usage growths in the world. In 2011, 37 million people were logging onto the Internet every day, and 52 million were using the Internet some of the time (Englund, 2011; Aron, 2012). Lally (2011) adds that by 2011, three out of four Internet users aged 25-34 would go online every day, twice as many as among their parents' age. Not only the generational divide and availability of technology, but also a so called existential, or mindset divide can be noticed here. 'This new generation know more freedom than fear' (Lally, 2011: para 8). The digital literacy of the young generation enabled them to exploit the technology for political purposes, among others. As one of the December 2011 protesters put it, "The Internet is the only way for people to find out the truth. I'm on the Internet until my eyes hurt" (Lally, 2011: para 9). Interactive technology not only facilitated information dissemination, but aided mobilisation: 89% of participants of the Sakharov avenue rally in December 2011 learned about the event online (Levada-Centre, 2011).

However, many Russian scholars (Dmitriev, 2012; Rogov, 2012) refrain from being overly optimistic about the potential of Russian protest activity beyond large cities. One of the potential obstacles to the growth of democratisation and protest activism is the 'polarisation' of the Russian society due to the unbalanced distribution of wealth and resources among the regions. According to the established socioeconomist Rogov (2012), the country is divided in two: 'Russia-1' and 'Russia-2'. 'Russia-1' consists of 44-50 million residents of large cities who mostly belong to

the middle class, hold a university degree or a professional education diploma and have stable access to the Internet. 'Russia-2', in contrast, is the rest of the population: 100 million people dwelling in small cities and with a rural income, who possess a lower level of education and tend to receive their news and opinions from the traditional media. From this perspective, 'Russia-2' becomes a social base for anti-modernisation (Dmitriev, 2012; Gudkov, 2012). Many areas within 'Russia-2' subsist on government subvention, which makes their population more 'paternalistically oriented' towards the centre of power and less interested in political plurality. Contrary to this harsh dissection, Lipman (2010) and Aron (2012) call for a more flexible conception and argue that the citizens of less developed Russian regions are very diverse in their social statuses, levels of education and political awareness. In support of this, the national survey on corruption held in 2012 (The Moscow Times, 2012) revealed that every third Russian was outraged by the level of state corruption. The survey took place in 43 Russian cities and engaged 1600 respondents, involving 'Russia-1' as much as 'Russia-2.'

Another point of concern for 'protest-pessimists' (Dmitriev, 2012; Gudkov, 2012) is the lack of any strong opposition coalition and popular alternatives to Putin. The only serious threat to Putin's hegemony may be coming from Alexei Navalny, an anti-corruption activist, candidate for Moscow Mayor, lawyer and popular blogger, who has become one of the most visible opponents of the regime. By the time of the protest, one-fifth of participants admitted they would vote for the party led by Alexei Navalny (Levada-Centre, 2012). By November 2013, when Navalny entered traditional politics and took part in the Moscow Mayoral elections, he received the support of 27% of voters (Ria, 2013).

2.2 Post-Soviet politics, the Crimean crisis and media discourses

While the resistant public was still developing its own way of expressing political criticism and participating in politics, the Crimean crisis of 2014 brought major challenges to the formation and self-actualisation of this cluster of the society. The annexation of Crimea and subsequent political and rhetorical changes in the Russian society signalled an important shift in political debates, both in traditional and digital

spheres. The resistant liberal public was struggling to keep their previous criticism as they had to confront the new discourses promoted by the government, such as intensification of the nationalistic paradigm and condemnation of any resistance (see Sampat and Bugorkova, 2015). However, the oppositional liberal publics managed to add new tenets to their criticism of the government – for instance, in addition to accusing the elites of corruption, many Internet users pointed to the rising level of misinformation in the media discourse and engaged in fighting propaganda (Kachkaeva, 2015). Pro-government users were also actively commenting on the state media discourse in social media, but utilised the networks to further promote and expand the ideas spread by the Russian television (Cottiero et al., 2015).

The Crimean crisis of 2014 refers to the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and its subsequent inclusion in the Russian territory. This event was propelled by the domestic struggles in Ukraine and international confrontation over the influence in this country among Russia and the European Union (EU). In the autumn of 2013, Ukraine was in the middle of negotiations with the EU, which were seen as a spin from the cooperation with Russia (BBC, 2014b). Yet, at the last moment the Ukrainian government led by President Viktor Yanukovich suddenly dropped the agreement on closer trade ties with the EU (BBC, 2013) and thus voted allegiance to Moscow. Massive public protests were sparked, with 100,000 people gathering in the middle of the Ukrainian capital. Protesters occupied the main square called Maidan Nezalezhnosti, and ‘Maidan’ soon became a globally recognised brand name for the anti-government rallies in Ukraine (Heintz, 2013). By February 2014, the situation on Maidan got out of control, 88 people died over 48 hours in clashes between protesters and police, and president Yanukovich was forced to sign a compromise deal with opposition leaders. The parliament vowed to remove him, and Yanukovich fled to Russia (BBC, 2014b).

The Russian government accused the US and EU of orchestrating a coup in Ukraine (Reuters, 2014). By the end of February 2014, unidentified gunmen arrived at the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, the region known for its highest numbers of the ethnic Russian majority. Russian media reported numerous cases of neo-Nazi unrests and threats to the ethnic Russians in Ukraine (Harding, 2014). On the 1st of March 2014, the Russian parliament approved Vladimir Putin’s request to use power to protect Russian interests in Ukraine (BBC, 2014b). Meanwhile, Russia kept denying

any connection with the armed uniformed forces in Crimea. Russian television was assuring the audience that Crimean people organised the self-defence groups to resist the European and American pressure, preserve independence of the peninsula and keep ties with Russia (Shevchenko, 2014). Nonetheless, these alleged “self-defence troops” appeared in combat uniform and held professional guns, which cast doubt on the spontaneous and independent character of this mobilisation. The Russian government denied having sent any professional troops to Crimea and argued that if local people wanted to gather in the name of Russia, it was solely their own will. Pro-Kremlin media and social media users utilised many euphemisms in their coverage of the uniformed gunmen, including “volunteers” and “self-defence forces” (Ria, 2015b); some bloggers joked that these troops may be “tourists”, others referred to them as “little green men” (Shevchenko, 2014).

The public deliberation of the definition for the unidentified pro-Russian gunmen in Crimea signalled a new turn in rhetoric between loyal and resistant publics. Liberal social media users questioned the government’s claims and suggested that these troops belonged to the Russian army (Meduza, 2015). At the same time, the pro-Kremlin bloggers and social media users advanced the idea that the gunmen served Russian interests voluntarily and endorsed “polite people” as the catchy yet ambiguous title for the troops in question (Shevchenko, 2014).

The term “polite people” originated in electronic media right before the referendum on Crimean independence. One of the local media outlets in Ukraine quoted their source in the Crimean police who claimed that unidentified gunmen had occupied the local airport and “politely” asked the police to leave the building (Politnavigator, 2014). Then, Crimean blogger and journalist Boris Rozhin reposted the news item in his blog and titled it as “Polite people have seized two airports in Crimea” (Meduza, 2015); the meme was born and soon went viral in the blogosphere and traditional media. According to an alternative view, spin-doctors who came to Crimea from Moscow suggested the catchy term (see Shevchenko, 2014). As the popular Russian blogger Ilya Varlamov speculated, “they are creating an image of a Russian liberator-soldier wearing a nice new uniform and armed with beautiful weapons, who has come to defend peaceful towns and villages” (Shevchenko, 2014). Traditional media swiftly appropriated the term from cyberspace. Several media rushed to identify the “polite people” as Russian troops although the Kremlin denied

sending any force to Crimea (Ria, 2015b). Vladimir Putin confirmed the deployment of a Russian professional army in Crimea only in April 2014 (Meduza, 2015).

Supported by the presence of the “polite” gunmen, the pro-Russian leadership of Crimea voted to abandon Ukraine and announced the referendum on the 16th of March. Despite objections from the West, the referendum took place and resulted in a 97% vote in favour of joining Russia. The EU and the US imposed a number of sanctions against a list of Russian officials. Russia officially accepted Crimea into its territory on the 18th of March (BBC, 2014b).

Starting from April 2014, new waves of anti-government protests shattered Ukraine, this time against the new administration. The most violent clashes took place in the historically loyal to Russia Eastern Ukraine. The evolving conflict among pro-Russian separatists and government forces advanced in a war with the mass exploitation of armoury and military machinery. Throughout 2014, Russia kept denying its military presence in Ukraine, claiming that armed forces were independent pro-Russian rebels. Tension with the West increased, as the EU and the US expanded their sanctions on trade with Russia. Russia replied with its own sanctions and banned almost all agricultural products from Europe and other countries that supported restrictions against Russia.

The heated political confrontation with the West kindled a remarkable increase of indoctrination in the traditional Russian media (Kachkaeva, 2015). State-controlled television intensified propaganda and labelled Ukraine as the land of Neo-Nazi hostility towards ethnic Russians. The news presented pro-Russian separatists as liberators and Western politicians as enemies and threats to Russian sovereignty, society and moral values (Kachkaeva, 2015; Kendall, 2014a, 2014b). The consolidation of propaganda efforts in the state-controlled broadcasting, radio, press and the Internet media (Yugas, 2014) required cleansing of the digital sphere, including liberal media outlets and user-generated networks.

Kendall (2014a, 2014b) and Kachkaeva (2015) used the term “hybrid war” to identify Russian military and media activity in the Crimean case. “Hybrid war” refers to a type of warfare where all significant activity happens below the radar; propaganda and provocation occupy a central stage (Kendall, 2014b). Unlike the Cold War, when the exchange of rhetoric, misleading information and name-calling between the USSR

and the US and their allies was the main substance of the conflict, hybrid warfare comprises both rhetoric and military action. Yet the main focus is still on the speech in traditional and new media, the contested interpretation of the actual events (Kachkaeva, 2015). From another perspective, “hybrid war” is a conflict with the blurred distinction between war and peace (Ries, 2014, cited in Kendall, 2014a). The Economist (2015) applied this concept to Russia and referred to it as a country that denied its military involvement in Ukraine, but later on took part in negotiations with the West as one of the participants of the conflict.

The escalating Russian propaganda of 2014 thrived on three popular national rhetorical paradigms: nationalism and the idea of the Russian superiority, siege mentality that presented the country under threat from domestic and external enemies, and the largely propagated campaign for patriarchal values and revulsion against any deviation from the ‘norm’, be it religion, sexual preferences or alternative political views (Nechepurenko, 2014; Yaffa, 2014; Kates, 2014; Harding, 2014; Laruelle, 2014b). The state media and pro-government Internet users have notably increased their attacks on the liberal public, accusing them of lack of patriotism in the Crimean debate (Yaffa, 2014; Kates, 2014). This significant shift in the state’s public rhetoric complicated the efforts of the resistant public in generating the alternative discourse and criticising the government; after the Crimean crisis they were forced to point not only to the instances of corruption, but to the manipulation of propaganda, dangers of nationalist narratives and also to defend themselves from being called the state traitors (Sampat and Bugorkova, 2015).

The appropriation of the nationalist rhetoric by the Russian state of the mid-2010s fits in with the long tradition of the Russian nationalist propaganda of the previous times. Post-Soviet culture fuelled the continuous anxiety of the society over national prestige and fear of the foreign influence (Borenstein, 2004), search for the new collective and national identity for social cohesion (Rantanen, 2002; Laruelle, 2014b) and framing of Russian nationalism as patriotism (Laruelle, 2014b: 7; Ryzhkov, 2015).

Russian nationalism became a staple of young Russia’s propaganda in the 1990s. After the fall of the USSR, the country was suffering from an economic meltdown, low level of patriotism and rising discontent of the population with the government (Pettersson, 2009). The First Chechen War took place in 1994-1996 and formed a

turning point in the foundation of a new nationalist discourse. The oil-rich Chechen Republic had been calling for sovereignty since 1991, and in the mid-1990s, the pro-Russian forces stormed the Chechen capital Grozny (Muratov, 2014; Petersson, 2009). Media coverage of the Chechen conflict promoted the idea of defending ethnic Russians from the domestic enemy of the aggressive and unpredictable Chechens. The pro-government media were depicting Chechens as radical Muslims who present a risk to the Russian state sovereignty and safety of the Christian majority of the Russian citizens (Petersson, 2009). The elites notably enhanced the pressure on a variety of liberal outlets flourishing in the 1990s. Such clichés as ‘law and order’, ‘state’ and ‘national interest’ eventually replaced the notions of ‘freedom’, ‘free speech’ and ‘democracy’ in the public discourse (Zassoursky, 2000).

The state rhetoric on nationalism, identification of inner enemies within the state and protection of the national interest notably intensified with the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), prompting Muratov (2014: para 4) to remark that ‘the Chechen wars murdered Russian democracy in its cradle’. During the Second Chechen War, a series of devastating terrorist attacks destroyed civilian houses in Moscow and other cities, inciting more anti-Chechen pro-Russian nationalist coverage in the media (Muratov, 2014). The government accused the Chechen extremists in the terrorist attacks, and intervened in the republic. The pro-government media followed the campaign and praised the Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as a brave decisive person ready to protect his people (Petersson, 2009). State media were scapegoating the Chechens, prompting the Russian population to identify the whole ethnicity of this Southern Caucasus republic with a terrorism threat (Petersson, 2009). Russia’s oldest human rights organisation, The Moscow Helsinki Group, issued a report on racism and xenophobia in 2002 and identified a cumulative trend towards the pejorative portrayal of minorities in the media. Not only ethnic minorities, but citizens of foreign countries, followers of less popular religions and even political opponents of the government were often presented negatively, e.g. as lacking in intellect or morals, or being disproportionately opulent, or criminal by nature (Moscow Helsinki Group, 2002).

Additionally, throughout Soviet and Russian history, Russian media have continuously portrayed the United States of America as the largest external enemy (Riabova & Riabov, 2013). The appeal to the ‘American threat’ flourishes in contemporary Russian mediated nationalism. Russian politicians and media have been

blaming the US for their influence in global conflicts, invasions of other countries and orchestration of the Ukrainian protests (Kuzio, 2015). The rhetoric of antagonism with America derives from the days of the Cold War in the second half of the last century, when the Soviet Union and the US frequently defined national values and morals in opposition to the assumed amorality of the other country. American presidents depicted the USSR as the wicked, powerful, savage, atheist, totalitarian state in pursuit of global domination (Edwards, 2008). The USSR promoted the similar description of the United States to its citizens – Soviet and Russian people have learned to perceive the American government as the ruthless amoral schemer and the American population as the inert, uneducated and ignorant masses of people (Medhurst, 2012). The Cold War was remarkable for consisting first and foremost of rhetoric (Medhurst, 2012). The sharp exchange of witticisms and judgements, offending satire, accusations and bravado was the war in itself, and words replaced deadly weapons (Brockriede, 1968). Although it was mainly constructed on the opposition to the US, the Soviet Cold War rhetoric also incorporated the concept of the Nazi enemy in the formation of the national discourse. The elites appropriated Nazi labelling broadly to stigmatise the bourgeoisie, liberal dissidents, far-right nationalists and national communists (Kuzio, 2015: 162).

The contemporary Russian propaganda around Crimea inherits many components and rhetoric tactics of the Cold War instruction (Kachkaeva, 2015). For instance, it flexibly manipulates the notions of nationhood, Nazi threat (Harding, 2014), liberal traitors (Yaffa, 2014; Kates, 2014) and interprets the discourse on gender and sexuality in a political light. Russian state indoctrination explicitly labels the LGBT community as ‘impure’ and critically refers to America and Europe as the prominent advocates of homosexuality. There is a special catchy term ‘Gayropa’, which is a portmanteau of ‘gay’ and ‘Europe’. Typing in ‘Gayropa’ in the top Russian search engine Yandex returns 406,000 webpages (figures for the 20th of January 2015). Riabova & Riabov (2013) link the rise of anti-gay rhetoric with the tradition of anti-bourgeois rhetoric in the USSR and distinguish this tactic as the emerging trend in negative labelling in Russia. Currently, the revival of the political propaganda based on the issue of morals incorporates the stigmatisation of Europe as ‘Gayropa’ to undermine the liberal achievements of democratic countries in Russian public opinion (Riabova & Riabov, 2013). Moreover, the enforcement of anti-gay rhetoric in Russian media correlates

with the increased masculinisation of politics. Eichler (2006), Foxall (2013) and Riabova & Riabov (2013) agree that the Kremlin has mobilised the framework of strong and militarised masculinity for boosting patriotism and nationalism since the Second Chechen War in the 2000s until the present day.

Furthermore, the contemporary Russian nationalism relies on the centuries-long tradition of the 'Russian idea' as the superiority of Russia over other countries in terms of high morality and spirituality, philosophy and culture (Kantor, 2004). This discourse has become particularly strong in the debates on Crimea, as the state mobilised it to justify Moscow's involvement in the neighbouring country's politics (Teper, 2016; Kuzio, 2015). The concept of Russia's special place among the Slavic countries was specifically prominent in the tsarist Russia, was overshadowed by the Soviet Communist ideology during the USSR and revived in the post-Soviet times. Russian politics and culture have long promoted two main paradigms to map Russia on the global political arena: siege mentality and messianism (Kantor, 2004). 'Siege mentality' refers to the enduring expectation of the threat from abroad. It was formed in the course of numerous wars, invasions and occupations that mark Russia's turbulent history since the early days. Vast territory and lack of natural geographical barriers to invasion left the population at the forefront of the battle, and entire cities and villages often served as 'defence fortresses' (Kantor, 2004). Personal interests counted for little; the interests of the state dominated. Confino (2013) develops this argument by highlighting that citizens had to develop an obedient civic mentality to be able to consent to the power and pressure provided by the authoritarian rulers; they received safety and stable distribution of resources in return for their conformity.

The messianism of Russia is another influential national idea that has infiltrated Russian philosophy and political mindset for ages. Since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Russian elites have been upholding the idea of Russia as the guardian of true faith, humanity and civilisation. Two historical events predisposed the formation of this concept: two and a half centuries of occupation by the Tatar Mongol yoke in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, and the fall of the Byzantine empire in 1453 (Confino, 2013; Kantor, 2004). Russians struggled to preserve their unity and identity under the violent Tatar siege and turned to the church for comfort and solace. After the liberation from the foreign occupation, Moscow princes united multiple regions

around Moscow and affirmed their leadership by proclaiming the city as 'the Third Rome'. This high title established Moscow as the ancestor of the Orthodoxy from Rome and Constantinople (Confino, 2013; Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2010; Il'in, 2004). By that time both capitals had lost their statuses as the bearers of Orthodoxy, and Moscow elites claimed to have inherited the duty and right to champion Orthodox faith in the world. After the Tatar Mongol oppression, this new national idea of Russia appeared appealing to the recently liberated population and flattered the national self-esteem (Kantor, 2004).

The messianic underlining of Russian culture appears in the works of Dostoyevsky, Tyutchev, Nekrasov, Belyi and in the Bolshevik propaganda. The concept of 'Russian idea' and the similar notion of 'Russian soul' (Confino, 2013; Helleman, 2004; Kantor, 2004) shape the philosophical and political framing of the Russian nationalist rhetoric. Contemporary pro-government advocates of the Russian idea claim that the nation does not need inspiration from the Western political regimes or culture, and has to develop unique principles of politics, society, economy, law and art (Vishlenkova, 2011). Ruling elites mobilised the 'Russian soul' argument to validate unconventional strategies in international and domestic politics, as well as to grant a comforting narrative to the citizens and prevent them from comparing their welfare and lifestyle with those of the foreign nationals (Helleman, 2004; Kantor, 2004). Confino (2013) suggests that Russian state rhetoric employs the Russia idea to explain or excuse the lack of a market economy, democracy, or a civil society. Helleman (2004) and Il'in (2004) express similar concerns and assess the Russian idea in Platonic terms, as an eternal set of archetypes, a perfect model for an imperfect world. Any politician or regime can fill it with its own doctrines and projections: 'The Russian idea itself has to be rationalised in order to bring down idealistic and utopian aspirations of mass thinking' (Il'in, 2004: 55).

The amalgamation of discourses on nationalism, scapegoating the minorities and political opponents and promotion of the patriarchal political and gender values have informed the state propaganda in the Crimean crisis (Kachkaeva, 2015; Kuzio, 2015; Harding, 2014; Yaffa, 2014). Besides the proclaimed right to protect the morals and traditional values in the pan-Slavic space, Russian propaganda also included references to the centuries of very special relationship between Russian and Ukraine. Hegemonic media reminded the audience of the shared historical and cultural

background with Ukraine, and referred to it as a “brother” or satellite in need of protection and guidance (Kuzio, 2015). In a supplementary discourse, Russian media referred to Crimea as the ex-Russian territory and reminded the audience that it used to belong to the Russian territory from 1783 until 1991. The peninsula formally constituted a part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialistic Republic, which was among the republics of the USSR, but achieved independence in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union. Reflecting on these historical links, contemporary Russian propaganda suggested that “Crimea was returning home” (Khudikova, 2014), thus reinforcing the idea that the Russian/Soviet empire was retrieving its previous borders and might.

Russian elites have been referring to Ukraine in patronising terms for a few centuries. Moscow’s influence over the neighbour country started in the seventeenth century when the region was under Polish rule. Pro-Russian Christian Orthodox clerics looked for the opportunities to establish Russian influence in the area and promoted the idea of Orthodox unity among the Slavs (Hillis, 2013). They relied on the postulate that the ancient Russia was born in Kiev and declared the Orthodox inhabitants of the Ukrainian land its legal heirs. By this time pro-Russian forces first referred to the Ukrainian southern lands as ‘Little Russia’. Russian media of the 2010s have further promoted this well-known nickname for Ukraine (Hillis, 2013; Kappeler, 2003).

In the eighteenth century, Russia obtained more control over southern Ukraine. Cossacks, nobles and gentry promulgated pro-Russian sentiments through writing chronicles and stories that were endorsing ‘Little Russia’ as the guardian of the Orthodox values (Hillis, 2013). This Little Russia nationalist identity was used to counterbalance the strong Polish and Jewish nationalism in the region (Hillis, 2013; Kappeler, 2003). By the mid-nineteenth century Ukraine had become part of the Russian territory, though many citizens advocated for the independence from Russian influence (Hillis, 2013). Moscow fought to preserve the Russian empire by banning the Ukrainian language in schools and book publishing, thus ignoring and suppressing the nationhood of the Ukrainians (Petrovsky-Shtern, 2009). People met the legislation with resistance that lingered until the 1905 revolution. Then Ukraine became a gruesome battlefield in the First World War. In 1917, when the revolutionary forces overthrew the Tsar regime and established the Temporary Government in Russia, Ukraine finally declared independence.

Hillis (2013) calls the promotion of the ‘Little Russia’ concept an effective counter-strategy to resist Western influence in Ukraine; by imposing this nationhood concept, Moscow offered local people the alternatives to the Polish, Jewish and Catholic identities. Yet this paradigm has proven problematic in the long-term relationship with Russia as it undermined the nationalist sentiments of Ukrainians. Joseph Stalin allowed nationalities and national identities to flourish in the USSR, advocating Lenin’s idea of the supranational state. He expedited the delivery of education and print in the national languages of the Soviet republics, as the means of social contract and consent to the Communist ideology in return (Szporluk, 2000: 7-16). Yet Moscow’s rhetoric on Ukraine throughout the Soviet times featured belittling terms and rested in the idea that nine million Ukrainians required the Kremlin’s guidance to thrive. ‘In Russia, Ukrainians are not considered a separate nation, and the Ukrainian language is considered a dialect of Russia. ... Ukrainians have historically been considered second class, as poor copies of Russians’ (Gusejnov, as cited in Bateson, 2014: para 11). Lada (2014) corrects this by noting that Russian elites have long promoted the paradigm of Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood, where Ukraine would likely appear as a younger, weaker brother among the two.

Vladimir Putin embraced the rhetoric of brotherhood with Ukraine and employed it in two propagandist narratives. He continuously referred to the Ukrainians as vulnerable brothers and emphasised Moscow’s responsibility to intervene in their politics (Kuzio, 2015); he also incorporated close ties of Ukraine in the paradigm of the ‘Russian World’, which is a recent concoction that praises a pan-Slavic supranational unity (Teper, 2016; Kuzio, 2015). In the brotherhood rhetoric, Putin identified the citizens of Russia and Ukraine as not only belonging to the same ‘breed’, but actually constituting ‘one nation’ (Bateson, 2014). Public opinion polls illustrate that the majority of Russians support ethnocentric nationalism (March, 2012) and have a tendency of fear and hostility towards ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, most Russians make an exception for Ukraine and tolerate a much warmer and welcoming attitude towards the Ukrainians whom they mostly treat as ‘brothers’ (Laruelle, 2003).

As for the pan-Slavic unity, this phenomenon of the Kremlin’s supranational rhetoric was boosted after the Crimean crisis (Kuzio, 2015). Claims on the ethnocultural unison of the Russians and Ukrainians were framed in the concept of ‘the Russian world’ (Russkiy mir, ‘Русский мир’) (Teper, 2016; Kuzio, 2015). This

idea stems from Vladimir Putin's public speeches and merges discourses on Russia's moral superiority with the claims on Moscow's historical right to dominate the politics in the region and offer support to any country or ethnicity in need. The Russian president conceptualised his vision of the 'Russian world' by the end of the television marathon with the nation in 2014 (Kremlin, 2014a). He used the term 'a person of the Russian World' defining this individual as a broad thinker and champion of high moral principles, who is concerned about the world outside of his private space and seeks to help people in need regardless of regional borders. Putin counterbalanced Western values of personal gain and individual success to the Russian virtues of patriotism, dignity and sacrifice for your friends, nation and the Motherland (Kremlin, 2014a: para 6). The concept of the Russian world infers that a Russian has the moral responsibility to care for the well-being of other nations; the definition and borderlines of the area of Russian concern are very vague and supply fruitful grounds for misapprehension (Kuzio, 2015).

The growing discourse on Russia's superiority over other countries, nationalist underlining of collective identity and enhancement of the messianic notes in propaganda have boosted the narrative of Russia's imperial ambition. In contemporary political and media studies, the term "imperial ambition" mostly appears in the works on the USSR and US: during the times of the Cold War, Western scholars coined the term "Soviet imperialism" (see Galeotti & Bowen, 2014), then Chomsky referred to America's foreign policy of constructing an enemy as "the doctrine of imperial domination" (Chomsky & Barsamian, 2010). In the Crimean case, the Russian imperial ambition implies the exhaustion of the imperial rhetoric to bolster patriotism at the domestic level, explain to the population the legitimacy of military involvement in Ukraine (Kassianova, 2001) and promote the idea of Moscow exercising control over the ex-Russian Empire (or ex-Soviet Union) territories, via undefined means. Sociologists deem the promotion of this rhetorical construction as the compensatory concept that masks the existing socioeconomic issues and encourages the population to assess life in a broader perspective (Dubin, 2014).

The intensification of state rhetoric on Russia's exclusive political and cultural path, self-defined responsibility over other nations and promoted hostility towards the West further complicated the efforts of the liberal public in generating resistance to the government. The propaganda on Crimea labelled the critics of the annexation as

the traitors of their country (Kachkaeva, 2015) and defined ‘patriotism’ as full loyalty to the government’s politics (Yaffa, 2014; Kates, 2014). This additional feature of the Crimean discourse presented a significant challenge to the liberal deliberation. In the post-annexation media environment, pro-government outlets have frequently referred to the opponents of the ruling elites as conspirators, and even those who pointed to the Crimea-unrelated issues of corruption were presented in a negative light (Kates, 2014). The scapegoating of resistant publics coincided with the unprecedented level of public support for the leader (over 80% throughout 2014 – Kates, 2014) and a high level of trust in traditional media (Kachkaeva, 2015), making the 2010s a highly challenging setting for alternative political communication.

2.3 Cult of a leader: Putin and the personalisation of politics

The appeals to the importance of a strong leader in Russia derive from the historical tradition of having an authoritative head of state and also to the notion of “cult of personality” from the Soviet times (Travin, 2015). In the Russian empire, the Tsar was believed to be the highest authority who would be liable to account only to God; then in the Soviet era the leader would often be portrayed as the father of the nation and embodiment of virtues (Bjelica, 2014). “Cult of personality” refers to the political phenomenon when an individual (in most cases, a prominent political leader) exploits the means of mass communication to propagate an idealised and worshipful image of himself in order to seek the approval and adoration of the masses. The term has been widely used in relation to Joseph Stalin who had established himself as an all-powerful head of state and caring father of the Soviet people in the 1920s-1950s (Bjelica, 2014; Rees, 2004; Goscilo, 2012).

Vladimir Putin has been constantly promoting the importance of a strong leader to keep together such a large and ethnically diverse country as Russia; propaganda repeatedly reinforced the idea that a decisive man in power was essential to protect the state from multiple external and internal enemies (Walker, 2014a; Cassiday & Johnson, 2010; Rees, 2004). The need to promote his public persona of a decisive strong leader relied upon the tradition, but also responded to the drawbacks of Boris Yeltsin’s public image. Russia’s first president Yeltsin (who had preceded Putin in the

Kremlin) was notable for his illogical temperamental decisions, bad health and drinking problems. Putin carefully composed his public identity to embody “hyper-masculinity” in Russian politics, in opposition to Yeltsin and other feeble politicians of the 1990s (Goscilo, 2012). From the late-2000s until the present day, Putin has orchestrated multiple public appearances in various adventurous settings that allowed him to flash his skills at “masculine” activities. He flew with cranes, rode a horse with a bare chest, found timeworn pottery shards on the seabed, fired a sleeping drug into a Siberian tiger and plunged to the bottom of the ocean in a submarine. The Daily Mail granted him a comparison with the Bond villain for his 2013 expedition to the shipwreck in the Gulf of Finland (Williams, 2013), ironically reflecting on Putin’s allusion to being a president-action hero.

Figure 1. Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin rides a horse in southern Siberia's Tuva region, August 3, 2009. REUTERS/RIA Novosti/Pool/Alexei Druzhinin



Figure 2. Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin swims in a lake in southern Siberia's Tuva region, August 3, 2009. REUTERS/RIA Novosti/Pool/Alexei DruzhininF



Figure 3. Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin attends a judo training session at Top Athletic School in St. Petersburg, December 18, 2009. REUTERS/Ria Novosti/Pool/Alexei Druzhinin



Figure 4. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin carries artefacts he recovered whilst diving at an archaeological site off the Taman peninsular in southern Russia, August 10, 2011. REUTERS/Alexei Druzhinin/RIA Novosti/Pool



The series of mannish escapades reproduced popular stereotypes and visual icons from action movies, fostering Putin's public image as a potent man in charge. Travin (2015) accordingly believes that in the times of economic turbulence, Putin's administration has been trying to promulgate Putin's cult as a separate discourse. They split the leader from the rest of the country's management, present him as a solitary hero and thus disconnect him from the criticism of a poor economy and corrupt management. Retailers reproduce Putin's iconic activities on consumer goods such as T-shirts, mugs, and other souvenirs. The continuous promotion of Putin's cult could make him the analogue of the British Queen or Mickey Mouse (Travin, 2014) – a mythical and likeable symbol detached from any tangible responsibilities and accountability.

Contrary to this, some sociologists (see Cassidy & Johnson, 2010) accuse Putin's cult of lacking personality: a mysterious personal life and reserved demeanour do not enclose many features of the character yet leave much freedom to the supporters to fill the gap. The postmodern version of the leader's cult invites anyone to contribute to the incomplete image: one can use the available public identities of Putin (a harsh orator, ex-KGB officer, bare chest hunter) and complete it with their own projections, from prosaic to macabre (Cassiday & Johnson, 2010). From another perspective, Putin's administration has benefitted from the nebulous personal life of the president and shielded grey areas with constructed narratives. Putin's office promoted at least five main public identities of Vladimir Putin in his first presidential term (2000-2004) (Gorham, 2012). The public profiles that made him popular included technocrat, 'doer' (energetic and determinate), 'silovik' (strong man with influence), 'muzhik' ('a real man' in the archetypal sense) and patriot. Gorham's (2012) classification helps us to understand the public expectations of the 2000s.

By the 2010s, the division of roles had changed. Putin's public representation became more sexual (Foxall, 2013: 134, cited in Bjelica, 2014) and ensued an all-encompassing "macho" identity that incorporated 'silovik', 'doer' and 'muzhik'. Sperling (2012) links the rise of machismo in Putin's political discourse with the need to justify the single-handed rule of the country. Unlike Stalin who promoted himself as the Father of the nation, Putin prefers to act as a brutal Prince Charming (Bjelica, 2014). Ashwin further explains that in "the post-communist era the state no longer aspires to be the father to its citizens" (Ashwin, 2000: 85, cited in Bjelica, 2014: 3).

This alleged shift in the collective perception of the leader (from a father to a lover) also correlates with the development of the market economy in the country. The state refuses to provide everything for people and expects them to take individual responsibility (see Snegovaya, 2015).

However, the evolution of a protecting father figure to a lascivious male is not complete, as the patriarchal discourse is still very influential in Russian politics and the society at large (Bjelica, 2014). Russian corporate culture, for instance, still demonstrates a strong tendency towards paternalism; people prefer instructions and control to equality and partnership (Snegovaya, 2015). Belkovsky (2003) and Snegovaya (2015) suggest that the majority of the Russian population still endorses vertical hierarchy and praises the virtue of discipline over changes and taking the initiative (Belkovsky, 2003). This standpoint leads to low protest rates, a reactive economy and limited expectations of the government (Snegovaya, 2015). Having passed the age of 60 a few years ago, Putin now faces a challenge about whether to fully embrace his paternal role or insist on remaining the sexually appealing Prince Charming (Travin, 2014); by mid-2015 he was still balancing on the edge between the two.

Heavy reliance on traditional gender representation along with the fictionalised public antics consigned Putin in the realm of a media myth. Despite being criticised for his “blatant bravado” by the West (Weil, 2014), these actions nonetheless cemented Putin’s mythos and reinforced hegemonic power relations. Putin recurrently linked traditional sexuality with health, power and stability (Riabova & Riabov, 2013). He constructs national identity on the basis of conformity to patriarchal gender roles and portrays the LGBT community as a threat to public order and moral sanity. The Russian leader’s cult of the 2010s exhibits a highly conservative “gender regime”, where “gender regime” refers to “the state of play in gender relations in a given institution” (Connell, 1987: 120, as cited in Sperling, 2012). Elites manipulate gender discourse as “the scaffolding of regime power—perhaps especially when the government has not allowed much room for political debate over issues” (Sperling, 2012: 254). Macho Putin memes reproduce the gendered Russian ideology: the contestations of femininity and masculinity play an overstated role in politics, casting shadow on ideological debates and reinforcing the idea of traditional hegemony (Sperling, 2012).

2.4 The media environment: censorship, alternative media and the Internet

Researchers believe that it was Putin who first understood the importance of state control over the media in the young Russian state. After the decade of flourishing freedom of speech under President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, Putin reversed the privatisation and commercialisation of the media (Lipman & McFaul, 2010; Chernikova, 2014). Since 1999 until the present day, the state media policy has become increasingly restrictive over alternative spheres and discourses. Putin has gradually reinstalled many traits of the Soviet media system, which in turn correlated with the conventional patterns of public media consumption deriving from the USSR.

In the 1920s-1950s, maintaining an effective propagandist media machine was crucial for the Soviet leaders in promotion and preservation of the Soviet identity (Kiriya, 2012). The centralised flow of mass communication was accessible to all; television and radio broadcasting reached people free of charge and had no advertising. Newspapers were sold to individuals at a fixed price; however, one free copy of every issue was sent to all workplaces to indemnify that all members of the audience have access to the state press (Kiriya, 2012).

Nonetheless, counter-flows soon emerged as individuals were seeking a wider understanding and reflection on political, social and economic issues. The shadow production of alternative media and marginal culture resulted in such practices as “samizdat”. “Sam” translates from Russian as “self-” and “izdat” is the short form of “izdatelstvo”, which is “publishing”. The term “samizdat” refers to the dissident activity of copying prohibited books by hand and secretly distributing them among close circles of trusted individuals (Saunders, 1974). The phenomenon of “samizdat” emerged in the 1950s and lasted until the late-1970s. One of the active Soviet political dissidents Sergei Kovalev once defined it as “the Internet-for-the-poor” (Kovalev, cited in Oushakine, 2001: 194), as samizdat permitted access to the never-published texts that were excluded from the dominant discourse. Following the comparison, I am assuming that these manually reproduced artefacts of culture with the sets of alternative ideas can be considered the predecessors of the Internet memes in the ways they promoted non-hegemonic discourses and united politics and marginal culture. Furthermore, Oushakine (2001: 195) advocates looking at samizdat texts as not merely

political, but inherently artistic: the supporters of this practice opposed not only the state, but the rigid language of Soviet bureaucracy and limited stylistic range of expression for artists. Samizdat, in this perspective, was influential in creating a “close circle of like-minded people who spoke their own language, inconceivable to others” (Krivulin, 1997, as cited in Oushakine, 2001: 195). The proliferate global artist Ilya Kabakov insisted that samizdat was powerful in opposing propaganda, and his comment allows drawing parallels with the contemporary Russian artful dissent in social networks: “...all these horrifying means of propaganda that used to constantly gaze at us without allowing us to gaze at them became the objects of the gaze itself” (Kabakov, 1999, as cited in Oushakine, 2001: 195). Samizdat did not specialise on the scrutiny of the texts and messages of the Soviet propaganda per se (Oushakine, 2001), yet enriched the dissent of individuals with creative non-censored tools to express themselves on politics and arts (Parisi, 2013: 7; see also Kiriya, 2012). Parisi (2013) points to the ephemeral nature of this practice – the distributed texts were scarce, distributed on fragile paper and often in barely legible small font, many of them remained incomplete and rewritten in spontaneity and rush. This assumption further permits linking samizdat to the practice of meme-making as the ephemeral and often inconsistent yet meaningful practice of political deliberation in the restricted environment.

The low number of samizdat outlets and reproduced books (Oushakine, 2001; Parisi, 2013) is explained not only by severe censorship, but also by the socialist Soviet economy. The centralised system of the USSR guaranteed the hegemonic flow of media and cultural products to all the citizens free of charge; as non-profit projects, state media and culture were relying solely on the state budget. Marginal cultural production, therefore, required mobilisation of the limited individual resources. Kiriya (2012) calls the accessibility of media and culture in the Soviet times a type of social contract where accessibility was traded over the control over content. The contemporary Russian media environment resembles the Soviet media system as the state dominates media and culture either financially (through ownership and personal grants to loyal opinion makers²), or legally (via restricting laws and censorship). For

² The Russian government finances the production of expensive patriotic movies. One of the recent ones was supposed to promote patriotism and strike a romantic chord of the bravery and heroism of the Soviet people during the Great Patriotic War. A famous director Fyodor Bondarchuk recently produced the movie “Stalingrad” on one of the most gruesome battles of the Great Patriotic War 1941-

instance, it is known that since the 2000s, managers and top editors of national broadcasting companies were informally required to attend Friday meetings in the Kremlin where pro-government points were distributed and the media agenda shaped (Baker & Glasser, 2007). As a result of media consolidation under the state control, the majority of large broadcasting and print media in Russia became subjected to unceasing censorship and filtering of their content (Koltsova, 2006).

Another trait that relates the contemporary Russian social contract over media with the Soviet tradition is the wide availability of high quality entertainment on television and prevalence of this programming over serious content. Since the beginning of Putin's rule in the 2000s, the state has invested much money in the development of high and low entertainment shows (Pervyi and Rossiya channels) and criminal news and series (NTV). This approach guaranteed that the audience would stay in front of their television screens and consume not only entertainment but also the government-approved news and analysis (Lipman, 2010; Etling et al., 2010). The majority of Russians are accustomed to using the media as the interpreter of reality, an establishment that explains and enlightens (Kachkaeva & Kiriya, 2007). Only a minor part of the audience exercises a more practical approach to the media as a source of information, but seeks varying viewpoints for comprehension (Klimov, 2007). The state caters to these members of the audience by preserving a limited selection of liberal media, which are often evaluated as an institutionalised alternative media sphere (Kiriya, 2007) or 'information ghettos' (Kiriya & Degtereva, 2010). Besides, the state tolerates the remaining critical mouthpieces to monitor the alternative political and social discourse (Etling et al., 2010).

The elites have developed a range of strategies to control offline media, yet have not equally succeeded in dominating the Internet (Kiriya, 2012). The economic crisis of 1998 became a first important point in the development of the Russian Internet – citizens were looking for additional sources of information, primarily on economic issues. The next big advancement for the RuNet (Russian-language Internet) was the year 2008, as the five-day war between Russia and Georgia triggered a wave of publications in independent online media and blogs (Chernikova, 2014). Many of

1945. Many nostalgic movies and television series spread over the Russian hegemonic media often reinforce the myth of the idyllic Soviet society (Guardian, 2013).

those blog posts gained significant popularity and were featured in the rating of top blogs provided by the biggest Russian search engine ‘Yandex’ and the mailing system Mail.ru. Opposition voices, therefore, became visible for the general audience, and the Kremlin was considering creating a parallel state search engine, but later cancelled the project (Chernikova, 2014). The government then reportedly pressed Yandex to shut down the rating system (Chernikova, 2014). This move caused a backlash from the blogging community as users blamed the company for restricting the freedom of speech. In 2008, a Kremlin-related oligarch Alisher Usmanov and owner of the largest mailing platform Mail.ru expanded his media empire and seized control over the popular social network Vkontakte. Usmanov also attempted to acquire Yandex, but did not succeed despite serious efforts and his loyalty to the Kremlin (Chernikova, 2014). Over the years, many popular liberal media were established on the Internet, such as the e-versions of the popular liberal newspapers Kommersant and Vedomosti, news outlets Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru and Slon.ru, and news and analytics portal Colta.ru. They were successful in attracting a large number of readers, with the leader Lenta.ru reaching the audience of 20 million readers per month by 2014 (Suleimanov, 2014b).

By late-2015, nearly 100 million Russians had access to the Internet, which accounts for 60 percent of the population (InternetLiveStats, 2015). The reported growth is almost 10 percent a year. The largest figures are seen in bigger towns, prompting Etling et al. (2010: 9) to call the Russian Internet ‘an elite and stratified medium, dominated by urban and educated users with a marked divide between the major cities and exurban areas’. Russian users have unequal access to the Internet and preferences towards various social networks (see Kiriya, 2012). Global and local networking platforms share the social media market, with local companies prevailing. According to the May 2014 statistics, the Russian analogue of Facebook remains the most popular social networking site in the country – Vkontakte reports 52.1 million users, which makes for one third of the population (Ria, 2014), while Facebook has the audience of 23.4 million, and only 8.3 million people engage with Twitter. Twitter has experienced the largest growth of members in recent years, from 1,000 users in 2007, to 2.3 million by 2012 (Kelly et al., 2012).

However, the number of people using the Internet for the dissemination of political information and discussion is relatively low. By 2010, the overall study of the Russian blogosphere revealed that the active cluster of those people who blogged

regularly, interrelated with other blogs and received citations in blogosphere and media, was about 11,000-12,000 (Etling et al., 2010). Researchers have analysed over 5 million blogs and declared that these 11,000 bloggers formed the so-called “Discussion core” of social networks: they combined the benefits of blogging platforms (self-expression, comments, access to a large audience) with the networking features of social networking services. Some of these users were politically active, others mostly expressed their views on the economy, culture and personal issues. Those who were interested in politics were more likely to express their individual points of view than recite the opinions from the professional media. By 2010, Russian blogosphere was relatively free from the government’s control; the liberal users were supporting different ideological standpoints and some were affiliated with political and social movements, with democratic and nationalist clusters prevailing (Etling et al., 2010: 25). Pro-Kremlin users had not formed a consistent community by that time, but appeared as an array of individual voices (Etling et al., 2010: 26). Livejournal.com has been significantly losing in popularity since 2011 (the platform lost 23% of readers within a year in 2011 (Glavred, 2011)). Due to the high number of hacker attacks in the early 2010s and unpopular decisions of the platform owners, many opinion leaders migrated to other social networks, and so did their followers (Glavred, 2011).

Twitter, the microblogging platform that allows the creation of interest-based, rather than affinity-based networks, may have a particular promise for political deliberation in contemporary Russia (Kelly et al., 2012). Static and dynamic relationships between Twitter accounts allow users to create varying types of ties and communication patterns. Static refers to the number of followers and accounts followed, while dynamic constitutes a network of ‘mentions’, when user A includes user B’s tweet preceded by @; these two main types of ‘mentioning’ are retweets and replies. The idea of dynamic relationship on Twitter is useful for this research as it helps to evaluate the capacity for network building on microblogging platforms. The liberal opposition of the Russian Twitter often exploits hashtags in their tweets (Carr, 2012) and thus attempts to increase interconnectivity between members of the resistant public and to reach the broader audience beyond the immediate circle of followers.

Twitter became a prominent platform during the December 2011 Parliament election, as people were reporting violations and their own primary results from the local polling stations (Kelly et al., 2012). Then they utilised microblogs, Facebook and

Vkontakte to spread information and mobilise their networks of contacts for the offline rallies. One of the major protest activists, anti-corruption blogger turned politician Alexei Navalny, was constantly tweeting texts and photos from the march until the moment he was arrested. Many users kept following him through his journey, and thousands of people were signing each hour to receive his updates (Kelly et al., 2012). Another popular opposition account @KermlinRussia, followed by over a million people, was providing a constant flow of mocking commentaries to the official politics. @KermlinRussia have established themselves among the intellectual elite of Moscow and promoted one of the popular memes that reflected on the self-identification of the protest public. One of the @KermlinRussia founders, the public relations specialist Ekaterina Romanovskaya, kept the 2011 protest meme as her personal Facebook page timeline image for several years. This meme says “Hamster shrugged” (see Figure 5) and refers to the widely spread discourse fuelled by the pro-government journalists and Internet users who called the 2011-2012 protesters “Net Hamsters”. This was a derogative way to reflect on the active employment of social networks by liberal users in their civic and political mobilisations (Vechernyaya Moskva, 2012; Varlamov, 2014). However, the liberal cyberspace replied to this offence by jokingly accepting the name. They further produced a creative idiom “Hamster shrugged” (“хомяк расправил плечи”) borrowing from the Ayn Rand’s novel title “Atlas Shrugged” and emphasising that any ordinary user has the right to be heard and demand change.

Figure 5. Hamster Shrugged, a meme that turned into a poster, retrieved from the public Facebook page timeline of Ekaterina Romanovskaya, @KermlinRussia, 28 November 2013



Resistant microbloggers were using Twitter among other social networks during the 2011-2012 protests, yet this particular website proved to be more resilient to

government attacks than other platforms. Government-led and pro-government hacker attacks took down many liberal websites, including LiveJournal and independent media during the 2011 Parliament election (Roberts & Etling, 2011), but Twitter remained safe and the oppositional media outlets that were confounded by the cyberattacks, turned to Twitter to address their audience.

The success of Alexei Navalny and @KermlinRussia in reaching hundreds of thousands through their microblogging has exemplified the efficiency of digital storytelling for grassroots activism, raising political awareness and mobilisation (Gambarato & Medvedev, 2015). However, the power of digital platforms became evident for the pro-government users as well. Since the first interruptive campaigns on the digital liberal discourse in 2011, the Kremlin has fortified its digital media presence and reportedly established a specific department for social media communication. The Russian government maintains an Internet department with at least 400 employees who generously post comments online (Toler, 2015), thus redirecting the discourse from meaningful deliberation into quarrels and noise (Volchek & Sindelar, 2015). The state-sponsored labourers are known as “the Internet trolls” (Volchek & Sindelar, 2015). Supervisors brief them on the pre-packaged points and keywords to disseminate, and trolls sandwich them on various websites, from media outlets and forums of local administrations (Volchek & Sindelar, 2015) to trivial social media discussions on any topic, from politics and lifestyle, to fashion and sports (Toler, 2015).

Russian Internet expert Anton Nossik (cited in Toler, 2015) reasons that not all pro-Kremlin users work for the Kremlin, and those who do are easily identifiable by the artifice of their speech. He believes that they do not hold much influence over the views of real people on politics. Conversely, other experts (see Bugorkova, 2015; Toler, 2015) note that trolls do not pursue the goal of convincing the audience, but aim at confusing it. Pomerantsev (cited in Bugorkova, 2015) terms this digital tactic as ‘reverse censorship’: the government cannot censor interactive digital media, but can pollute it with aggressive, offending comments, hate speech, praise of the government, meaningless links, conspiracy theories and gossip.

Besides the indirect pressure on the liberal discourse in social networks, the Kremlin has also introduced a number of restrictive laws that imposed legal limitations

on the self-expression of digital publics. In 2016, Russia's state Internet regulator issued a 'recommendation or warning' against "using a photo of a public figure to embody a popular internet meme which has nothing to do with the celebrity's personality" (Sampat & Bugorkova, 2015: para 2). This suggestive measure followed a scandal with the picture of the pop singer Valery Syutkin that the Internet crowds exploited to illustrate a meme "Smack the Bitch in the Face". The obscene phrase that glorifies violence against women was juxtaposed with the portrait of smiling Syutkin who is known for romantic songs and has no relation to the phrase. The artist appealed to the court demanding the removal of the meme from a popular amateur website Lurkmore that publishes information about memes and Internet culture. The court ruled in Syutkin's favour and subsequently prompted the more general recommendation from Russia's communication watchdog. In addition to the existing ban on parody social network accounts that exploit the names of real people (Sampat & Bugorkova, 2015), this new initiative against memes with the pictures of public figures can significantly curb the flow of memes that portray Russian politicians. While the new measure targets defamation, the elites can employ it to repress criticism of the government in the shape of parody, as political actors clearly classify as public figures (Brown, 2015).

Other legislative projects that followed the 2011-2012 social unrest installed severe restrictions on freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. The amendments to the Law on the Freedom of Assembly were passed in June 2012, soon after the large protest against corrupt Presidential elections took place in Moscow. Human Rights Watch (2012) called these amendments "draconian" as they virtually prohibited any public gathering exceeding six participants. In order to organise a march, one was required to apply for official authorisation, and the violation of this procedure was entitled to a high fine. The amendments increased the already high penalties: from 10,000 roubles (170 pounds) up to 300,000 roubles (50,000 pounds) for individuals and up to 600,000 roubles (100,000 pounds) for organisers³. Repeat offenders could face a prison sentence of up to five years (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Dobrokhotov, 2012). This legislative measure, for instance, led to the much debated court decision to sentence eight participants of the May 2012 anti-Putin rally in Moscow. Although deemed as a 'deeply flawed case' with 'inappropriate charges' by the Human Rights

³ The currency exchange rate was calculated from the average 2012 figures.

Watch Russia (2014), in February 2014 the judge handed down sentences varying from two and a half to four years of prison to all the defendants on the grounds of alleged violent behaviour during the march.

The elites accompanied the attack on freedom of assembly with a series of laws restricting freedom of speech. In July 2007, the odious Law on Extremism was passed that set the criteria for the state prosecution of those promoting ‘extremism’ in the public space. The Law became especially notable for its vague definition of extremism (‘inciting hate or enmity, or, similarly insulting the dignity of a person or a group on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, heritage, religious affiliation...’)⁴. The Law on Extremism was immediately dubbed as ‘casting a wide net’ (Eckel, 2007) with reports that many prominent human rights activists, politicians and political analysts were called to appear in court for their writings and claims (Oliker, Crane, Schwartz & Yusupov, 2009). By 2014, the government had updated the law by imposing an unprecedented penalty (up to five years in jail) on those posting ‘extremist’ pledges in the electronic media, including “liking” or “reposting” extremist information (Kremlin, 2014b). The law labelled offences to the human dignity and spreading non-Russian values as possible grounds for sanctions, making the directive vulnerable to misinterpretation and manipulation. Additionally, in 2012 the Russian government passed a law allowing officials to shut down any website without a court order – the measure was explained as a means to protect children from inappropriate content, such as drugs or suicide promotion and child pornography (BBC, 2012). Liberal media condemned the new decree arguing that it is open to abuse and leads to further censorship of the Internet.

The Crimean crisis has triggered the production of more laws against the freedom of self-expression and political debate on the digital sphere. From the 1st of August 2014, all popular blogs (with more than 3,000 visits per day) were required to register with the communication watchdog and qualify as a media outlet. This measure granted the watchdog permission to silence any popular blog or microblog without a court order. Besides, the law set the end to online anonymity, as the blog owners were obliged to pass their personal details to the state agency. The ambiguity of terms in the Blogger Law opened room for speculation and potential abuse. As the commentator

⁴ The full text of the Law on Extremism (officially known as Article 282 of the Criminal Code) can be found at <http://www.russian-criminal-code.com/PartII/SectionX/Chapter29.html>

Andrey Malgin (2014) from the liberal radio Echo of Moscow explains, the law does not clarify whether the owner of a personal Twitter account or Twitter as a whole should register; or clarify what exactly a ‘user-generated platform’ definition comprises (e.g. blogs, microblogs or the likes of Amazon.com). The Blogger Law established grounds for the potential trial of those posting ‘false information presented as truthful’; ‘insulting individuals or specific categories of citizens with reference to their gender, age, race, nationality, language, religion, profession, place of residence and work, and their political views’ and suppressing or concealing the publicly important information (Malgin, 2014). The broad scope of offences and obscurity of the Law implies that executors can interpret it using their own discretion.

Furthermore, in 2014 Vladimir Putin signed the initiative that obliged all Internet companies to store personal data on Russian citizens exclusively on the Russian servers, making the companies that operate on foreign server illegal from September 2016 (Newsru, 2014). All emails, social networking conversations, personal data from shopping websites and lists of networked connections have to be located in Russia, thus becoming an easy target for the communication watchdog and intelligence services. According to the Russian legislation, this data should be presented to the government officials at the first notice (Newsru.com, 2014).

In 2014, the newly imposed constraints on social media users were paralleled with the pressure on independent media and alternative discourse platforms. The government attacked the biggest online news outlet, a major social network and an independent television channel. Galina Timchenko, the respected editor-in-chief of Lenta.ru, the largest independent news website, was ousted for political reasons. The dismissal of Timchenko urged the resignation of dozens of journalists working in Lenta.ru, and the complete change of content of the website (BBC, 2014a). The statement released by the editorial staff in response to Timchenko’s sacking produced a now famous summary of the decline of free journalism in Russia: ‘The problem is not that there is nowhere left for us to work. The problem is that there is nothing left, it seems, for you to read’ (BBC, 2014a: para 12). The largest independent online television channel Dozhd (TV Rain) also experienced pressure for its unbiased investigation on corrupt officials when leading cable and satellite operators suddenly dropped it, causing significant profit loss. Pavel Durov, the founder and general director of the most popular Russian social network, Vkontakte, refused to provide

user data to the security services; he was fired at the company board meeting and had to flee to the country (The Moscow Times, 2014).

Lastly, in 2014 the Russian government officially banned four main Russian curse words from use in the media, theatre, literature, music and blogs (Omid, 2014). The law on profanity was presented as a measure to protect the beauty of the Russian language; however, media professionals (see, for instance, Klishin, 2014) regarded it as an attack on the freedom of expression. Profanity played a serious role in resistance communication during the Soviet era. Soviet dissent literature engaged with foul expressions and slang as the linguistic opposition to the loquacious clumsiness of the official bureaucratic vocabulary (Klishin, 2014). Noteworthy, in China the similar ban on vulgarity led to a rise in euphemisms online (Omid, 2014), suggesting that Russian Internet users may also resist by coining more euphemisms and savvy puns that would further distinguish the resistant publics from the conformists (Klishin, 2014).

CHAPTER 3: The Internet, Humour and Tactical Media

The development of electronic media and social networks has brought new dimensions to the ways people discuss and mobilise for politics. This chapter analyses how the historical practices of alternative media and art, principles of political deliberation and means of promoting oppositional discourse in the media have informed the multiple shapes and forms of political resistance on the Internet. It scrutinises theoretical background on tactical media and connective action, culture jamming and the role of satire and humour in political communication online. It also discusses the benefits and limitations of the concept of participatory Internet cultures for this research; incorporating the most recent academic studies on digital censorship and surveillance.

3.1 Information Wars: Tactical media activism for political dissent

Political activism online can take inventive forms, which are inspired by the legacy of political mobilisation framing, art and media practices. Lievrouw (2011: 19-27) classifies five main genres of how people employ new media for political purposes. They comprise culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilisation, and commons knowledge. Although these genres can in practice overlap, the classification helps to distinguish among various forms and strategies of the activists.

Alternative new media derive from the media tradition of political commentary and satire, Dada and Situationism (Lievrouw, 2011), and advertising and marketing techniques (Lasn, 1999), among others. They often seek to fill the gap left by the mainstream media and disrupt the hegemonic ideology, provide alternative perspective and articulate the issues hidden by the dominant ideology. Four main characteristics define alternative media: 'the use of medium as content, the rejection of ideology, the merging of politics and art, and appreciation of the ability of digital information to directly make things happen' (Braman, 2002, cited in Lievrouw, 2011: 17). Following Lievrouw (2011) and Atton (2004), this chapter defines alternative activist media as participatory, non-commercial liberating channels and practices that

unite political content, social responsibility and artful expression (see Atton, 2004: 3-4). Atton calls these alternative new media 'actions in their own right', rather than a platform for broadcasting about 'real' actions (Atton, 2004: 5; see also Raley, 2009: 5-6). This characteristic is particularly important to make distinction between alternative resistant new media and mobilisation media. The former generate a discourse that alone accounts as activism while the latter mostly support and coordinate the offline political activity. For this research, I will be mostly focusing on the first kind (alternative resistant new media), which defines an act of communication as activism, with or without offline extension.

One of the prominent examples of alternative use of commercial media is tactical media. They are interventionist media practices that interrupt the mainstream discourse, borrow elements of mass culture and traditional media and reconstruct them to criticise the dominant political and social order (Garcia & Lovink, 1997). Tactical media activists use a wide range of platforms, channels and methods; they broadcast their texts via theatres and squares, cable channels and new media, to name a few. They do not limit their activity to the DIY (do-it-yourself) projects or large commercial media. Tactical media aim to combine many channels to create a personalised media network and guarantee wide media presence of the alternative ideas. Garcia and Lovink (1997) and Raley (2009: 6) emphasise flexibility and interactivity of tactical media, their openness to remix and new ideas. Kireyev (2006) suggests linking tactical media with the Soviet samizdat, demonstrating how alternative media practices can fill the gaps left by the hegemonic discourse, and even question its authenticity. Tactical media are very subjective (Garcia & Lovink, 1997): they represent the point of view of the user, hence can be linked with the personalised use of social networks and individualist political engagement online.

Culture jamming is conceptually related to tactical media, as both attack the discourses promoted by the dominant ideology and culture and both have roots in Dada and Situationism. The Dada movement was started around 1915 in Europe by an international coalition of artists and writers who were condemning the cruelty of warfare, the industrialisation of mass production and consumerist culture (Bonnett, 1992). Dada artists were inventive in expression; they combined novel media technologies such as photography, cinema, and print, with the classic forms of art such as painting and sculpture. They were among the first political artists to use remix

methods, matching random fragments of photographs with newspaper articles, distorted imagery, absurd text and pieces of clothing. With their projects, Dadaists aimed at disrupting the 'normality', inviting the audience to see the reality in a different light (Bonnett, 1992: Plant, 2002).

Situationists continued the work started by the Dada movement and resumed the attacks on consumerist culture and hegemonic politics in the 1950s-1960s (Plant, 2002: 1-3). This cluster of French and international artists led by the French philosopher and filmmaker Guy Debord was confronting the ever-present Spectacle, the newly adopted tradition of mass culture to reinforce consumerist desires, surrounding the audience with endless images of advertised goods and lifestyles. The Situationists encouraged the audience to create unconventional situations in their personal experiences; they called for more creativity and urged people to produce their own culture (Plant, 2002).

Situationists followed Dadaists and relied on remix culture and montage to subvert popular cultural texts. However, they insisted on moving from the ironic subversions made by Dadaists to the partisan propaganda tactics that resulted in not only subverting, but also inverting the meaning of borrowed images and texts. The newly created media items were much more rebellious than Dadaist work and could be as harsh as revolutionary demands. Debord and his followers went to the extreme of creating provoking and even violent situations in the streets and public places to evoke the importance of authentic life experiences (Lievrouw, 2011, see also Debord, 1967).

The creative interventionist practices of Dada and Situationism influenced the emergence of culture jamming and tactical media. Peretti (2006) calls contemporary tactical media 'micromedia', referring to their autonomous nature and limited coverage. However, subversive media activism is not limited to the specifically designed independent media platforms. Recent examples of political uprisings facilitated by global social networks (see, for instance, Aron, 2012) show that political activism can find a way through commercial user-generated networks. Political activists largely use the Internet tools that were designed for the publication of non-political content for their purposes (Shirky, 2011), because general-use digital platforms can escape government censorship and cater to larger audiences

(Zuckerman, 2013). This trend is evident in China, for instance, where the popular social network Sina Weibo became more important for political discussion and mobilisation than the purposely crafted US-funded websites such as 'Internet freedom' (Zuckerman, 2013).

The political environment in each particular country determines the modes and limitations of political activism online. In repressive regimes, alternative digital activism may be restricted to remix practices and mediated dissent, while liberal administrations of other countries allow mobilisations and collective action. Gamson's *Strategy of Social Protest* (1975, 1990) helps to identify the prerequisites that either facilitate or challenge the development of dissent communication; this theory also allows analysing whether digital resistance in each particular environment has the capacity of transforming in offline action. A social protest involves a group of people who want to mobilise the passive crowds against an antagonist who lies outside the audience (Gamson, 1975: 16-17). In order to succeed, the protest group needs to strategically define its target, mobilise as many supporters as possible and, if feasible, gradually mature from the times of stability until the moments of turbulence (Gamson, 1975).

Political Opportunity theory (Tarrow & Tollefson, 1994; Kitschelt, 1986) highlights three vital components that facilitate the development of political activism: Insurgent Consciousness, Organisational Strengths and Political Opportunities. Tactical media and nonconventional, artistic forms of activism such as production of politicised art and distribution of viral texts online, can point to the issues of common grievance and unite the protest public around these topics (see Shirky, 2011). Political activists utilise tactical media to promote insurgent consciousness, which refers to the shared feeling of deprivation and injustice in a community that leads to calls for justice (see Tarrow & Tollefson, 1994: xvii). However, the acknowledgment of collective grievances and demands for change is not enough to motivate people to organise for a dissent. Organisational strength is required; it is defined as the strong leadership and sufficient resources possessed by the protest organisation to recruit and mobilise members (Kitschelt, 1986). Furthermore, even with the existence of established dissent organisations and structures, clear identification of goals and methods of protests, another component should be in place - political opportunity. This concept implies that the political system is vulnerable for a challenge that social movements

can therefore promote. This vulnerability can be a result of political pluralism, decline of repression, division within elites and increased political enfranchisement (Amenta et al., 2010). Tactical media assist in championing the diversity of voices and opinions (Lievrouw, 2011: 120-121; see also Raley, 2009) and cultivating relationships among like-minded individuals (Lievrouw, 2011: 151); therefore, they have a capacity to propagate insurgent consciousness. However, they are limited in the ability to compete with the hegemonic media and mass propaganda (Peretti, 2006). Tactical media have a short-term effect and normally affect small audiences; they may employ a too bizarre or unconventional style of expression that not all the members of the general audience can equally understand (Garcia & Lovink, 1997; Raley, 2009: 9-12).

3.2 Participatory cultures and the Internet divide

The development of new technologies and virtual networks in the recent decades has led to the emergence of new types of mediated interaction between individuals. In the Internet-enabled 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2009), any person can become a user and producer of media at the same time. Bruns (2007) calls this new practice 'produsage', a portmanteau of 'production' and 'usage' that implies that anyone can post a story, share a story or become a media of his own by sharing personal information and updates online, redistributing the content of others and adding opinions and comments. Participatory culture has transformed the ways people talk and coordinate for civil and political causes, circulate cultural products and interact on a personal and social level (O'Reilly, 2005; Szilvasi, 2011).

As accessible as this structure of digital communication may seem, scholars are debating whether the online participatory space is democratic (open, egalitarian, universally accessible) or restrictive. Jenkins (2009), Scholz (2008) and Chomsky (2011) argue that social media and participatory culture may equally promote or limit democracy, depending on a variety of factors. Digital space is not inherently democratic: intellectuals often dominate the production of authentic ideas and viewpoints (Scholz, 2008; Chomsky, 2011). Furthermore, the more resourceful actors such as large corporations and institutions possess more influence over the discourse than individual users (Morozov, 2013a). For instance, owners of social networking

platforms can manipulate individual expression through the design and advertising suggestions to the users (Szilvasi, 2011). Digital communication is therefore not purely user-generated and user-inhabited, but constitutes a whirlpool of interaction between users, corporations and platform owners, discourses and technologies. Furthermore, the father of ‘participatory culture’ concept Richard Jenkins (2009) identifies at least three limitations of contemporary participatory culture that obscure individual engagement: ‘participation gap’, ‘transparency problem’ and ‘ethics challenge’.

The ‘participation gap’ emerges from ‘digital divide’ studies (see Norris, 2001; Iosifidis, 2011) which imply that people have different levels of access to new technologies and uneven media literacy to embrace the possibilities of participatory media in full. The ‘transparency problem’ refers to the overwhelming amount of information that the Internet exposes to the users, making it unfeasible for them to process the multiple gigabytes thrown upon them. The ‘ethics challenge’ mostly concerns individuals with low levels of digital literacy, such as younger or older users who demonstrate limited awareness of the Internet’s potential harms to privacy and reputation, and can be abused by others (Jenkins, 2009).

Despite these challenges, new digital communication formats, such as self-expression and discussions on social networks, have become an important tool for political talk and protest mobilisations (Bennett, 2003). A wide variety of available platforms facilitate deliberation on civic, economic and political issues by allowing publication of texts, and exploitation of coordination and fundraising tools (Theocharis, 2015; Karatzogianni, 2012a). Nonetheless, employing the digital realm for political deliberation is not a priority for the majority of users. An average user first engages with the information and communication technologies for consumerist and entertainment purposes, then advances to e-banking and e-government services and only after that may become interested in civic engagement (Helsper, 2008). Although this three-step model is not fixed, it provides a sound account of one’s introduction to the digital world.

Those who utilise new media for political discussion demonstrate different degrees of participation and involvement. The user-friendly interface of social networks and their creative entertaining tenet of interaction can facilitate community

building (Garrett, 2006; Bennett, 2003). Even fundraising for the cause has become easier and now entails a couple of clicks. The online political communicators can use different kinds of framing and styles of language to attract the previously passive and disengaged users (Garrett, 2006). Van Laer (2007: 5) applies the term 'political socialisation' to describe the online political discussion that users *accidentally* fall into - it may start as mundane talk in a digital network, transform into a political debate and then result in further political mobilisation and action in the offline realm. Social networks thrive on open communication, and the ability to follow or to broadcast to an array of communities at any given time. Zuckerman's (2013) theory of 'latent capacity' is valuable for this research: even those users who are normally neither interested nor involved in politics can receive political information and ideas when they browse the newsfeed produced by their network of friends. These politically disengaged users may notice the political memes and other light versions of political information, shared by their contacts. Therefore, a certain amount of political knowledge infiltrates the user's agenda and may encourage more attention, when matched with personal interests. Furthermore, should an issue arise that appeals to a politically passive person and incites them to raise their voice, he or she is already equipped with the audience of networked 'friends' to share the political content with. People may suddenly 'use their online presence' (Zuckerman, 2013) for political purposes and join the pre-existing dissent communities. As Li (2010) accordingly notes, even casual conversations and gossip on social networks play the role of a subtle digital adhesive that assists in building trust among the members of the conversation.

Contrary to this, many scholars (Papacharissi, 2015; van Niekerk et al., 2011: Diani, 2001; Webster, 2002; van Laer, 2007) assess the digital realm as a mirror and continuation of the existing social order. The availability of politicised Internet spaces and communities cannot incite one's interest in politics. Lievrouw (2011) further adds that digital communication operates by the means of expression and communication developed by societies over years. The historical approach applies to political uses as well: politically active people utilise the technology as a tool to reach their goals (van Niekerk et al., 2011), as they employ posters, petitions, rallies and meetings. The design of social networks allows for a wide range of mediation practices that do not replace but rather supplement non-digital political activities.

People become engaged in political communication online for various reasons, informed by their personal beliefs and intentions or group pressure. According to the classic resource mobilisation theory, those who share common grievances or aims do not necessarily unite for the cause unless they have other motivations (Olson, 1965). An individual needs to see personal gains in her contribution to a mobilisation. Although the majority realise that collective action can bring the desired results for the community, this reasoning is not sufficient to motivate one's engagement in politics. However, the contemporary social mobilisation theory has moved beyond the rational approach and further explored the meaning of identity, emotion, culture, social behaviour, irrational behaviour and opportunity structures (Karatzogianni, 2012a; Melucci, 1996; della Porta & Diani, 2006).

Without neglect to the importance of organisations, leadership and brokering differences, they emphasised the power of emotions and self-expression in one's engagement in public activism. The development of digital media has contributed to the increasing power of emotions and storytelling in contemporary dissent practices (Karatzogianni, 2012a; Papacharissi, 2015; Theocharis, 2015). Interactive social media amplify the tradition of storytelling and “invite people to *feel* their own place in current events, developing news stories, and various forms of civic mobilisation” (Papacharissi, 2015: 4). Karatzogianni (2012a: 245) accordingly adds that “affective structures mediate between the actual and the digital virtual”; they create a new realm of engagement and of experiencing the protest. Participants of digital mobilisations construct and promote “virtualities” of hope, freedom, aspiration, fear and hatred (Karatzogianni, 2012a: 53). Social media users can connect, respond and further shape these virtualities and digital narratives: they can supplement their own subjective interpretations and get involved emotionally, connecting with the experiences of others by expressing their endorsement or disagreement with the suggested stories (Papacharissi, 2015). Users mediate their affective feelings online, and these feelings often become the driving energy of dissent communication.

Moreover, the rise of digital social media has boosted one's capacity to express themselves online and become noticed by the others; various platforms and opportunities make ordinary individuals more visible than ever before (Meikle, 2014). The motivation to express oneself creatively and politically is an influential force that can stimulate one's participation in dissent communication. Theocharis (2015: 2-3)

further notes that what we understand by “political participation” has significantly changed in the era of digital media. Any manifestation of one’s political views, persuasion of others and politicised artistic contributions to the digital sphere (memes, tweets, jokes and other casual conduits of communication) can qualify as the practices of political participation. The act of “mobilisation”, therefore, can be defined as the deliberate activation of social networks to diffuse political information and influence the opinions of others (Theocharis, 2015: 5); it does not call for offline action or establishment of organisations or structures. This contemporary type of politicised communication in social networks often involves individualist self-expression and references to personal experience, judgements and feelings (Papacharissi, 2015; Theocharis, 2015). Networked political participation, therefore, constitutes the alternative logic of political engagement online; individualistic motives and modes of expression prevail over collective ones.

Instead of brokering differences between formal groups and organisations, negotiating collective identity frames, individuals co-operate and share personalised frames and expressions of individual ideas, opinions and creativity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The Internet provides numerous platforms and networked communities that allow articulating one’s political views and beliefs to individuals and groups. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) note the change of discourse in political discussions and mobilisations. They use the open Occupy mobilisation as an example of a shift of narrative, where the conventional ‘who we are’ discourse of classic political communities was replaced by personalised frames. However, in order for these frames to acquire attention in the multitude of other individual frames, collective processes are required. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) offer the idea of ‘connective action’ as the contemporary substitute to collective action in protest mobilisation. By connective action, they refer to political mobilisations that do not require established leaders and organisations, but aggregation of users who self-organise via digital platforms. However, they note that in most current mobilisations both types of action are present in hybrid ways.

Barry Wellman’s (2001) concept of ‘networked individualism’ also fits into the connective action logic. ‘Networked individualism’ refers to a new social order where the abundance of ‘personalised’ technologies (email, social networks, mobile phones and so forth) encourages the shift from societies built on place-based solidarity to ‘networked societies’ organised around networks of individuals (Wellman, 2001; see

also Castells, 2007). Hence, social networks have a potential to serve as "fragmented systems of joint action" (Lindgren & Lundstrom, 2011). Sharing personal experiences makes users more involved in large-scale communication and mobilisation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Diani, 2011). Granovetter's (1973) 'strength of weak ties' further explains how dispersed weak connections may provide access to larger populations than strong consistent ties. Therefore, social networks that loosely unite various users with bespoke personal accounts and frames can grow into large networks of multiple interrelation and provide a fertile platform for engagement of all sorts. Theocharis (2015) further strengthens that interpersonal communication in social networks becomes more instrumental for the popularisation of movements than shared ideologies and the appeals promoted by conventional organisations.

Nonetheless, the accumulation of protest publics in a virtual space does not guarantee the initiation of collective activism. Juris (2012) criticises the connective action concept with his notion of 'aggregation'. He states that masses of users may indeed unite in a shared digital platform and even follow the same interests and web pages. Yet this assembly is weak and, without additional organisation, faces a high risk to remain a crowd of disengaged individuals. Moreover, a large amount of personalised frames may constitute a chaotic collective space in need of filtering and supervision (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2013b). The open nature of digital communication leaves room for misunderstandings that can lead to alienation and fragmentation of publics. Furthermore, it is hard to predict which personal action frames will get recognition and spread (Morozov, 2011).

3.3 Censorship, surveillance and anonymity

The majority of social networks are openly accessible and therefore can be used not only by activists, but by the government. The elites utilise social media to monitor dissent communication (Andrejevic, 2009), gather information on the participants, identify leaders (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014: 57) and points of intervention. They use the collected data to disrupt the discourse by the means of direct censorship, blocking access to the digital platforms and contaminating the discussions with pro-government ideas (Morozov, 2011; Li, 2010). Trottier (2012) and Andrejevic (2009) state that the

elites implement surveillance technologies to shape the suppression of dissent. The governments may selectively or totally block the use of electronic technology (cutting off the Internet, denying access to the global social networks or local forums of dissent communication (see Shirky, 2011; Li, 2010)), try to hack dissent accounts and communities online (van Niekerk et al., 2011: 1411) or demand the removal of particular texts, videos or stories (Fuchs & Trottier, 2014). Yet the influence of hegemonic regimes expands far beyond these acts of censorship. Power holders attempt to diminish the value of social networks as coordinating platforms and channels of spreading the awareness among protest publics (van Niekerk et al., 2011). They not only seek to block particular platforms or challenge collective access to the flows of anti-governmental communication, but also persecute citizens individually. Repressive governments such as China, for instance, implement state-of-the-art technology to track any user's unique IP address and true identity (Poell, 2014: 195). The design of many social networks, such as Facebook, for example, limits anonymity of users: they need to provide their name, location and fill the extensive digital profile in order to benefit from the various opportunities of networking, entertainment and other forms of engagement that the platform provides (Youmans & York, 2012). Twitter is more liberating in this instance as it permits the exploitation of pseudonyms and does not require the disclosure of personal information and relationship ties with other users (Trottier, 2012).

However, users still have a choice of whether to establish a digital profile that would expose much personal data or a limited amount of individual details; one can decide whether to challenge or protect one's privacy (Trottier, 2012). Besides, in their networked communication people can employ various forms of expression such as creative allegoric language that can escape censorship of the government: puns, Internet memes, grammar mistakes and metaphors can elude surveillance and allow activists to maintain the dissent communication (Li, 2010). In summary, social media remain a complex realm for the deliberation of alternative politics, and the capacity of users to promote resistance largely depends on the level of control of the state over public communication online and offline (Li, 2010; Poell, 2014).

The Internet is a fruitful space for the proliferation of various ideas and aggregation of diverse crowds. On the one hand, its open and ubiquitous nature facilitates political deliberation among large groups of people; users can benefit from

anonymity and freedom of commitments to any political party in their discussions; they can connect to the like-minded individuals and mobilise for political action, bypassing traditional leaders and institutions. On the other hand, people have varying levels of access to the Internet, digital literacy and interest towards politics. From this perspective, the online realm often acts as the mirror of the offline political situation: those citizens who are politically active offline are likely to participate in digital politics, while the more passive ones may still remain disinterested either online or offline. Politically engaged users utilise many nonconventional practices of spreading the awareness of alternative ideas: tactical media, culture jamming and production of the Internet memes. By doing so, they appeal to the large masses of the Internet public who may appreciate the amusing text and acknowledge its political content, which can lead to more interest in politicised communication and challenge the opinions on politics and events. Such artful practices can escape the surveillance and censorship. Yet, the elites also exploit the Internet and social networks for propaganda and maintenance of hegemony. Therefore, digital space remains a site of struggle between dominant and alternative discourses; it facilitates many instances of political deliberation, yet has many limitations that obscure its promise as the independent information hub and platform for political debate.

CHAPTER 4: Internet memes as the creative means of political resistance

4.1 Defining memes

A creative and personalised approach of using media for political activism has promoted the use of inventive means of expression, such as the Internet memes. A phenomenon of culture, in recent decades they have received much interest from various disciplines, including mathematics, social sciences, psychology, linguistics and media studies. The conceptualisation of memes varies significantly between sciences, yet the overriding definition interprets a meme as a contagious idea that spreads as a virus and mutates through dissemination (see, for instance, Dawkins, 1976; Brodie, 1996).

Biologist Richard Dawkins (1976: 203-215) created the initial concept of a meme as a cultural analogue to a gene. Dawkins (1976: 206-209) argued that memes resemble genes in their structure, mechanisms of distribution and survival, productivity and fecundity. A gene is a molecular unit of people's bodies, a biological code holding important information for building and maintaining cells and passing the invaluable hereditary data to offspring (Dawkins, 1976: 211-212). Memes are similar to the genes in the way they pass cultural information and ideas between individuals and generations. It is important to note, though, that genes are extremely accurate in their algorithms, and a mutation leads to damaging errors (Dawkins, 1976: 30-33). Memes, conversely, survive in the process of constant replication and transformation. Dawkins (1976: 208-209) distinguished three main features of a meme: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Fidelity refers to the inner trustworthiness that makes a meme appealing; fecundity (or replicability) renders easy and quick imitation; and longevity is the aptitude to survive among other memes for a long time thus ensuring the meme's continued existence. Dawkins (1999) compares the development of a meme with the childhood game of Chinese Whispers (also known as Telephone): in a line of children one draws a picture and shows it to the next kid, he memorises what he thinks he saw and draws his own image, then passes it to the next child. The result obtained at the end of the chain might have little in common with the original drawing, yet preserves recognisable features or elements that would allow linking the final sketch with the initial one.

Dawkins' (1976) original conceptualisation of memes has received much criticism for the analogy with genes and vague definition of the characteristics and function of memes. The differences in copying processes and fidelity rate between genes and memes challenge the legitimacy of their comparison (see Sperber, 2000; Blackmore, 1999). The mutation of genes leads to the malfunction and collapse of the system, while for memes the mutation is desirable and often unavoidable. Blackmore (2010) assumes that memes are counterproductive for genes: genes endeavour to keep the energy for survival, and memes overwhelm the brain space, occupying thought with the burden of excessive information to process. Moreover, Sperber (2000) strengthened the point that memes are not direct genetic counterparts in preserving and distributing culture, but more complex tools. They are less reliable in delivering accurate information yet people can fill them with additional details and foster the development of ideas.

Furthermore, social scientists and non-academic critics questioned the necessity of introducing a new term that resembled the already existing notion of 'patterns'. Brown (2014), for instance, dismissed 'memes' in the Dawkinsian rendition (1976), arguing that they possessed the same characteristics as 'ideas', and any transmission of cultural information involved recreation and modification. Dawkins himself responded to criticism decades after having devised the original concept: he reviewed the biologically determined notion and remarked that the laws of natural selection do not bind memes. Users create memes to deliberately hijack the original cultural text, thus the choices and decisions of people drive memes forward (Dawkins & Marshmallow Laser Feast, 2013, as cited in Wiggins & Bowers, 2014; see also Shifman, 2011, for corresponding assumptions).

Still, the apparent ambiguity of the common definition of a meme remains one of the major drawbacks of the notion for interdisciplinary studies, and even champions of meme research acknowledge this issue. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) are generally supportive of studying memes academically and state that memes resemble other designations of cultural production: 'idea', 'pattern', 'tune', 'structure' and 'set', and admit that 'pinning down precise criteria for something counting as a meme is close to impossible' (Ibid.: 205).

However, narrowing the definition down in relation to the specific field of science helps to overcome the challenge of defining memes. Psychologists and computer scientists, for instance, attempted to complement the idea of Dawkins (1976, 1993, 1999) by expanding the meme concept beyond the cultural unit to an information unit in general. They considered memes as ‘the building-blocks of your mind’ (Brodie, 1996: 36; see also Plotkin, 1993). From this standpoint, memes are not only units of cultural production, but include broader modes of human knowledge and comprise names, relationship patterns, principles of society, choices at a traffic light, information about the surrounding planets and solar systems (Blackmore, 1999). This conceptualisation champions Dawkins’ (1999) statement that memes travel through time and transmit ideas in-between generations, but falls short in establishing clear boundaries of what a meme is.

The issue of identifying the borders of a meme has been another point of criticism to the scholars who study this cultural phenomenon. Does the whole song or the chorus form a meme, is it the tagline or the picture with the tagline that makes an Internet hit, and is it the one-liner from a movie or an actor saying a one-liner to the camera that makes a meme? (see, for example, Gill, 2011). Developing the idea expressed by Dennett (1995), Blackmore (1999) defends the study of memes by limiting a meme to the smallest meaningful element that replicates itself with trustworthiness and fertility. Most researchers share this tendency to decrease the potential meme to the smallest meaningful replicable entity. For instance, the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony are often referred to as the classic example of a self-sufficient meme unit (Dawkins, 1976; Brodie, 1996; Dennett, 1995; Blackmore, 1999).

Memes differ from iconic images and from viral texts that do not experience much alteration. They are never fixed symbols, stories or icons, but interactive aesthetic artefacts that reflect momentary tendencies of culture and socio-political discourses (Goriunova, 2013); they can change shape, size and style through mutation. The example of the Che Guevara iconic poster demonstrates that icons function in close relation to the subject (Goirunova, 2013: 3-4). Memes, instead, offer a much weaker representation of the original subject and thus hail individual expressiveness and encourage further reiteration of symbol. Shifman (2011) adds that people share

memes not because they want to disseminate the story they found interesting, but because they want to have their input in the retelling and propagation of the story.

Furthermore, media and sociology scholars (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Shifman, 2011, 2013) call for the distinction between ‘viral texts’ and memes. Contradicting Brodie’s (1996) suggestion of defining memes as ‘viruses of mind’, they insist on examining the difference between those texts that spread in their original state versus those experiencing alterations (Shifman, 2011: 4). Shifman (2011) advances separating ‘viral texts’ from ‘memes’ on the basis of possessing or lacking modifications. Wiggins and Bowers (2014: 12-15) accordingly propose a two-step algorithm to study the ascent of a media text to a meme. They suggest that when a user alters a unit of media production, such as a music video or an expressive photograph, he or she coins an ‘emergent meme’. This emergent meme escalates to a full ‘meme’ when other users contribute and share their alterations, thus validating the popularity and interest of the community towards this text.

This research focuses on the conceptualisation of memes for media studies. I am relating to the most recent definitions, such as the one produced by Esteves and Meikle (2015: 1). They identify memes as the form and practice of storytelling. This notion helps to pin the memes down to the artefacts of remix culture and at the same time locate them within the context of the centuries-long practice of altering and merging ideas and stories (Esteves & Meikle, 2015: 8). Since the emergence of the first forms of communication and interaction, from newspapers to jazz improvisation, people have exchanged ideas. The reproduction of memes relies on the classic ethos of storytelling. As early as in the 1930s, Sir Frederic Bartlett (1932) proved that a story changes every time with its retelling, becoming either decorated with new details or losing components. Memes are not comprehensive stories; they are elements of storytelling. The concept of a meme is therefore valuable for the social sciences, cultural studies and media research as it explains how ideas accumulate in condensed units and evolve through social interexchange.

Media scholarship (Esteves & Meikle, 2015; Meikle, 2014; 2010; Milner, 2013; Davison, 2012; Börzsei, 2013; Burgess, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Lievrouw, 2011) has appropriated the concept of memes to study the viral texts that spread over the Internet. In the most common contemporary rendition, Internet memes are

‘multimodal artefacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary’ (Milner, 2013: 2357). Börzsei (2013) contributes that the majority of memes on the Internet these days are manifestations of visual culture: a meme can consist of a still image, an image with a phrase, a GIF (Graphics Interchange Format, an animated image), or a video; it may contain a punchline (aphorism quotes, movie catchphrases or any witty slogans) or make a statement without added text (see also Blank, 2014). This heavy reliance on visual formats links Internet memes with the advertising industry (Lasn, 1999): many memes resemble advertising posters with an expressive image and a compelling laconic slogan.

From a different perspective, the accretion of memes in the digital sphere can be associated with the rise of emoticons (Davison, 2012; Börzsei, 2013). The innovative idea to employ punctuation marks to resemble a sideways smiley face appeared in 1982. An avid user of the text-based social network USENET, Scott E. Fahlman conceived emoticons to combat misunderstanding in virtual communication, where the lack of visual means often leads to misinterpretation of the message. The smiley gained popularity in many other online communities, evolving in a minimalist prototype of what we now know as an Internet meme (Yus, 2011, as cited in Börzsei, 2013). The primary functions of emoticon were to inform (pass the non-verbal, non-textual information) and entertain members of the network. Eventually, the smileys matured in the large variety of coded symbols with the meaning often more complex and contextual than forthright expression of emotion (Börzsei, 2013). These traits of emoticons relate them to memes, which often serve as the in-jokes of digital communities (Milner, 2013).

The burgeoning popularity of memes throughout the 1990s-2000s owes to the increased accessibility of the Internet connectivity and graphics editing software (Börzsei, 2013). By the mid-2000s, memes had grown from subcultural jokes into a mainstream gimmick. Large meme aggregators, such as 9GAG and 4Chan, enjoy popularity compared to the major news outlets and entertainment web sources (in 2012, over 4 million users visited 9GAG each month (Börzsei, 2013)). Nonetheless, the exchange of memes is by no means limited to the particular meme-centred platforms. In recent decades, netizens have scattered them in large numbers to blogs, microblogs, forums and interactive social networks thus emancipating them from the constraints of geek communities to the mainstream. Esteves and Meikle (2015: 565)

point to the remarkable aptitude of memes to cross not only the boundaries of digital platforms, but contexts and narratives. Memes have matured into the elements of commonly understood Web narratives (Burgess, 2008), and their role expanded from entertainment tools to the means of political and social commentary. In recent years, social media users have been employing this language of the Internet communication to interpret the news, debate on social issues and campaign for significant causes (Esteves & Meikle, 2015; Meikle, 2014; Shifman, 2013).

4.2 Memes as ‘discursive weapons’ and their role in political deliberation

Memes are not just the casual vocabulary of the Internet public; users exploit them as symbolic rhetoric arguments in conversations and debates. Social network inhabitants interact, co-create and collaborate by the means of memes (Gauntlett, 2011; Meikle, 2014, 2010), which opens new perspectives for the deliberation of politics online. Memes serve as the artful format of sharing ideas and drawing public attention to specific issues. From this perspective, the utilisation of memes for political activism relates to the recent media strategy of ‘mindbombing’ developed by the late Bob Hunter of Greenpeace (Greenpeace, 2005), and in broader historical outlook – to propaganda.

The Greenpeace founding member Bob Hunter (Greenpeace, 2005) championed the distribution of the posters so striking that they would encourage urgent action from the public. This idea of ‘mindbombing’ fits into the logic of tactical media and illustrates how one can use memes for introduction of the alternative discourse and disruption of the hegemony. For Greenpeace, dissemination of the disturbing and expressive visuals pursued the goal of shifting the paradigm and changing conventional ideas of the public. Hunter drew his media strategy on the ideas of Marshall McLuhan; however, it also stemmed from the centuries-old methods of propaganda as the type of communication aimed at manipulating the recipient’s opinions and achieving ‘a response that furthers the desired intent of the persuader’ (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2014: 1-2). Studying memes as the units of persuasion and locating them within propaganda studies unveils their potential in condensing complex issues to clear-cut judgements and dismissing the alternatives. The circulation of

politicised memes online increasingly serves as symbolic ideological negotiation; it may not sustain a coherent public debate online, but can precede the formation of communities or substantial discussions (Peters, 2013).

Bernays (1928: 9) refers to propaganda as ‘the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses’, while Bryant (1953, as cited in Jowett & O’Donnell, 2014: 49) defines propaganda more generally as an abuse of rhetoric, when the speaker misrepresents the truth and offers biased views as facts. Power holders install a system of symbols and representations, suggesting meaning making practices and associations for the members of a society. People have been persuading each other since the early days of civilisation, employing verbal and non-verbal means, from the monuments and public performances of the preliterate ancient ages (which signified superiority and wealth of the governors) to the press, literature, music and movie industry of the later centuries (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2014: 58-59). Propaganda utilises simple imagery, omissions, misrepresentations, appeals to emotions and often exploits conventional stereotypes (Pratkanis & Turner, 1996, as cited in Jowett & O’Donnell, 2014: 7). From this viewpoint, memes can qualify as a genre of propaganda, as users exploit them to present a reduced depiction of reality.

Politically active users employ Internet memes as the discursive weapons of power struggles that assist in advising the discussion in a particular way (Metahaven, 2013). The exchange of politicised memes in cyberspace has evolved in an alternative tactic of political activism (Lievrouw, 2011; Metahaven, 2013) and is seen as ‘a strike at the level of discourse’ (Peters, 2013: para 3). Users produce memes to persuade other users; in many cases the mobilisation of Internet memes empowers people to draw attention to the themes and viewpoints that normally stay out of the dominant public sphere (Lessig, 2004: 70-71; Metahaven, 2013; Peters, 2013). Through political memes, citizens make aesthetic, cultural and ideological choices; the decisions they make attribute to the development of free expression in cyberspace. Memes can be extremely biased in the way they depict reality and refer to various concepts and people, yet they help individuals to express their views and promote a liberating communication environment; the environment that is free from monopolies, state pressure and traditional media formats (Metahaven, 2013).

A meme does not belong to any specific group or community; it has no inherent political or cultural connotation except for the promise of entertainment. Memes are empty conduits or layouts that anyone can fill with meaning or commentary (see Metahaven, 2013; Meikle & Young, 2012). The autonomous and non-aligned character of memes further nurtures the idea of their independence from elites and power holders. Memes are a brainchild of the new democratising media ecology (Meikle & Young, 2012) that permits anyone to share their opinion with a large community. The reliance on collective creativity further fortifies the analogy of memes with folklore and vernacular manifestation (see Milner, 2013; Burgess, 2008; Blank, 2014; Davison, 2012; Howard, 2014). The ‘creator’ of a meme is in most cases unknown, and the Web collective acts as the author (see Meikle & Young, 2012). The modification and redistribution of memes abolish copyright and ownership boundaries in the open environment of the global Internet. Davison (2012) suggests the term ‘nonattribution meme’ to emphasise the practice of generating memes with no demand of authorship. Commercial companies, politicians and crowdfunding groups have already attempted to abuse this ethos by appropriating copyright-free Internet memes for campaigning (Esteves & Meikle, 2015). Nonetheless, this practice affirms the status of memes as the common Internet vocabulary, as even hegemonic institutions seek to exploit them to engage digital crowds.

Drawing on these cases of capitalist adaptation of memes, critics denounce their role as the colloquial language of Internet users and call them artificial constructs and progenies of advertising deployed to the cyberspace (Morozov, 2013a). This aspect limits the capacity of memes to act as mindbombs. On the one hand, one cannot trace the meme’s provenance, and this allows memes to escape censorship; but on the other hand, we’re not sure how trustworthy the memes are since we don’t know who wrote them. Morozov (2013a) challenges the authenticity of the popularity of memes by pointing at the platform-based predisposition in their dissemination. From this perspective, the circulation of memes is not free from the influence of corporations and power holders. Facebook and Twitter, for instance, have the algorithms that pursue and endorse the popular. Many editors of online media shape their texts and news so that they resemble memes (Morozov, 2013a). By doing so they try to ride the wave of the Internet virality and promote goods.

Lasn (1999) and Meikle (2002, 2014) contest this criticism by locating memes within the resistant media practice of culture jamming, which opposes the practices and values of the consumerist society. Nevertheless, many scholars agree that the distinction between authentic and artificially engineered memes is tremendously blurred (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Godwin, 1990). For instance, if a public relations officer deploys a text online and it goes viral with many alterations, one could admit that the meme is born. Regardless of the aims of a meme producer, digital crowds genuinely accept the text and propagate it, attributing their own values and meanings to it; from this moment, the text does not belong to the individual, but to the collective discourse. Do we define the meme as authentic or manufactured in this case? Burgess (2008) defends the immunity of memes to manipulation by stating that one cannot predict what textual hooks or signifiers make a meme popular. From her view, any meme that the digital crowds endorse, adjust and distribute in large numbers can be deemed authentic.

Another drawback of the Internet memes in their exploitation in meaningful discussions is the ethical aspect. Zittrain (2012) raises concerns about the ethical side of meme-engineering: a person can be often 'meme'd' without consent, hence he or she is deprived of the basic right to privacy and control over her image and public representation. The example of the Star Wars Kid meme is the yardstick of the ethical debate. A 14-year old high school student Ghyslain Raza made a video of himself playing with the imaginary lightsabre. His classmates secretly posted the video online and attracted millions of views. The teenager received plenty of unwanted comments and bullying, had to drop out of school and receive counselling for depression, while the Star Wars Kid video sparked myriads of parodies and remixes (Pfeiffer, 2013). Zittrain (2012) argues for devising a digital tool to tag the individuals who occasionally become heroes of the memes, so that they can either endorse or withdraw insulting memes from the public space.

Politically active users engage in various creative tactics to generate the alternative discourse; however, in recent years governments have also appropriated similar interventionist practices to corrupt the resistant communication. Rogers (2009) identifies the need to study memes as the arenas of struggle between propaganda activists and opposition publics. State propaganda in many countries utilises this artful format to speak in the language of the Internet crowds and incur public consent to the

dominant ideology (see, for instance, Pearce, 2014; Li, 2010). Public political campaigns involve memes in the promotion of their candidates among the Internet savvy publics (Morozov, 2013a). Additionally, the elites deploy paid bloggers, microbloggers and commenters in the digital space: they distribute memes with the praise of the government and suggest negative labelling for critics of the state (Burroughs, 2013). As a result, both government and opposition employ memes to compete over the minds of the audience (Volchek & Sindelar, 2015), and this tendency is strong in democratic (Morozov, 2013a) and non-democratic (Pearce, 2014) regimes. For instance, the recent study on Azerbaijan social media (Pearce, 2014) demonstrated that production and circulation of memes has become a part of the communication strategy of the authoritarian government. State propaganda exploits these digital ‘mindbombs’ to reinforce dominant ideology, and promote hegemonic national identities and stereotypes (Pearce, 2014: 39-40).

As for the Russian case, the employment of catchphrases, sharp images and satirical texts in public rhetoric is rooted not only in advertising and culture jamming, but in the more local tradition of Soviet modernism (Livshin & Orlov, 2007). After the First World War and the fall of the Russian empire, the new Soviet government promoted the use of laconic, sharp and expressive language in the public media. It borrowed the elements of artistic expression of modernism and relied on the sharp poetry of the likes of Vladimir Mayakovsky, visual laconism of Alexander Rodchenko’s photography and newly emerging advertising (Livshin & Orlov, 2007). The government hired poets and artists to create posters, cartoons, newspapers and bulletins for the masses (for instance, the renowned poet Vladimir Mayakovsky was responsible for the propaganda bulletin *Okna Rosta* (Livshin & Orlov, 2007)).

Satirical magazines were among the very few outlets that permitted criticism of the state, although in a very shallow and light-hearted manner. Such magazines as *Krokodil* (The Crocodile), for instance, were approved by the state propaganda – they published cartoons that mocked social vices, low-level bureaucracy and occasionally criticised the West as the embodiment of moral decline and exploitative capitalism (Nelson, 1949; Gamson & Stuart, 1992). Satirical magazines employed professional cartoonists who were sanctioned by the government to produce these cartoons, which became the official aesthetic culture of the USSR (Nelson, 1949). Nonetheless, sometimes these state-permitted bits of criticism featured more liberal commentary

than was intended by propaganda. Critical Soviet citizens appreciated cartoons for the occasional bursts of free comment on politics and corruption, even on a very superficial and seemingly toothless level of disagreement (Gamson & Stuart, 1992). The visual language of magazine cartoons bears much resemblance to many formats of the present day Internet memes: it offers a condensed and often simplified representation of a complex situation or event and demands the contextual awareness of the audience (Gamson & Stuart, 1992). In order to interpret a cartoon, as much as a meme, one has to decode the hints and allusions that the author is making. Besides, cartoons are biased and, similarly to memes, advocate a specific viewpoint or at least invite the audience to ridicule a person, a trait or an event.

However, cartoons were among the very many tools of Soviet propaganda and constituted only a small part of the discourse. The state utilised various formats of expression (patriotic movies and songs, public speeches of politicians and biased news commentary, parades and community gatherings) to promote hegemonic ideas and praise the regime. The indoctrination appealed to many emotions, and yet hatred was perhaps the strongest and most proliferate one in the narratives on resistance and opposition (Astakhov, 2012). The Soviet propaganda of the Second World War realised how important were negative feelings in indoctrination; it distinguished from the weak propaganda efforts of the Tsar government in the First World War by appealing not only to the patriotic feelings, but inflicting loathing towards the enemy (see also Lasswell, 1995, on the power of the mobilisation of hatred). Soviet elites acknowledged the need to target propaganda against a certain actor, nation or vice. The dichotomy of good and evil, aggressors and defenders became crucial to conceal national wrongdoings and direct public rage at the external targets (Astakhov, 2012). Recent studies of propaganda developments in the oppressed political regimes (see, for instance, Li, 2010, on China, or Pearce, 2014, on Azerbaijan) demonstrate that contemporary propaganda also relies on this strategy; it often paints opposition, liberal media or even the Internet as a whole as the vicious actors and enemies of the population. Contemporary pro-government memes in the Russian political discourse online borrow many traits of the aggressive Soviet propaganda: they aim to denigrate opposition and direct the rage of the mainstream public against critics of the state (Voček & Sindelar, 2015). These memes may look like Soviet-style cartoons or Western advertisements yet they often bear this important characteristic of the USSR

indoctrination: hatred against criticism, resistance and the non-conventional (Bugorkova, 2015; Volchek & Sindelar, 2015). Moreover, state-controlled media in authoritarian countries sometimes promote moral panic on the dangers of the Internet (Pearce, 2014), presenting it as the site of extremism, pornography and crime. Russian officials in 2014, for example, fuelled the moral panic by announcing that the new media audience is being brainwashed – politicians generously deployed the term “information war” in public speeches, warning people that “enemies of the state” were strategically disseminating misleading information online (Ria, 2015a). These appeals to the public fears in non-democratic media regimes help the governments to achieve public consent to the implementation of restrictive media laws (Li, 2010; Yang, 2013).

Classic traits of visual and textual propaganda of the last century can be seen in both pro-government and anti-government memes, either in Western or Russian discourses (Sparkes-Vian, 2014). Lee and Lee (1939) identified a range of classic principles as early as in the 1930s, and these classic rules are still traceable in the framing of contemporary memes. Despite the advancement of political communication, Lee and Lee’s (1939) lasting categorisation has endured as the valid framework in the studies on persuasion (see, for instance, Hobbs & McGee, 2014; Shabo, 2012). Enriched with Lasswell’s (1938) addition on the ample use of fear and rhetorical construction of the enemy, the fundamental devices of propaganda that I am applying in this research comprise eight methods: Assertion, Name Calling, Glittering Generalities, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking and Bandwagon (Lee & Lee, 1939; Shabo, 2012). Running current political memes through these filters sheds the light on the rhetorical construction of their messages and framing (Sparkes-Vian, 2014).

The Assertion method presents a debatable idea as common knowledge or a mutually agreed postulate (Lee & Lee, 1939; Shabo, 2012: 11-12). Name-Calling refers to labelling an enemy with derogatory names; it relies on the pre-existing social prejudice and links the target with something that people dislike. This method utilises sarcasm and ridicule and can appear in the form of the Lesser of Two Evils, when a propagandist generates an illusion that the audience needs to make a crucial choice between two unpleasant options (Shabo, 2012: 41-43). The Glittering Generalities method links vague but appealing notions with the targets; it relates certain people or actions to ‘freedom’, ‘honour’, ‘glory’, ‘patriotism’, ‘Motherland’ and other cheering

concepts without any rational justification. Transfer technique connects particular strong feelings (such as blame, disapproval, trust etc.) from one object to the loosely related other. For example, a politician can wear religious symbols to attract the believers and gain their support for his speeches, even if they are not related to religious matters (Shabo, 2012: 69). In the indoctrination technique of Testimonial, a speaker includes quotations or endorsements of respected people in his speech, thus aiming to enforce public approval of the rhetoric (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). When employing the Plain Folks tactic, a propagandist pretends to act on behalf of common people, uses their slang and may make deliberate grammar mistakes to appear approachable and trustworthy (Lee & Lee, 1939; Shabo, 2012). The Bandwagon device is slightly similar as it creates an effect that the propagandist speaks on behalf of the majority; yet it more relates to the value of collective approval rather than belonging to laymen, to encourage the conformity of the audience (Lee & Lee, 1939). Card Stacking involves the selective omission of truth, when only a positive part of information is presented to the public, and unfavourable details are concealed (Shabo, 2012).

4.3 Memes and solidarity-building

There is little evidence that social network users employ memes to facilitate social bonding or glue communities, but they can assist in identifying compatible individuals among digital crowds (Milner, 2013; Borzsei, 2013). American anthropologist Patricia Lange introduces the concept of affinity videos as channels of socialisation. Lange (2009, cited in Shifman, 2011) identifies amateur YouTube videos as means of growing kinship; users comment on them and on each other's remarks thus creating a tenuous yet visible community within the network. This imagined virtual community has a remarkably low threshold, members do not need to expose their identity or status, but may freely enter or leave and commit to different levels of involvement. This virtual aggregation of individuals fits into the concept of 'affinity spaces' introduced by the sociolinguist James Paul Gee (2004). 'Affinity spaces' refer to the shared areas, often online, where people gather according to their interests, cultural or ideological similarities. According to Gee (2004: 67), 'an affinity

space is a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender'. Memes are coded viral texts that travel through minds and platforms and form an important connecting element of affinity spaces (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). They feed on them, and they feed them. Bauckhage (2011: 49) limits successful memes distribution to homogenous communities: 'the majority of currently famous Internet memes spreads through homogenous communities and social networks rather than through the Internet at large'. However, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Esteves and Meikle (2015) contradict this standpoint, noting that Internet memes can travel beyond the boundaries of digital platforms, discourses and languages they initially flourished in. This capacity of memes to overcome boundaries of communities and personal accounts makes them instrumental in distributing ideas in networks of networks (Esteves & Meikle, 2015). Various users may occasionally spot memes in their newsfeeds on Twitter and Facebook and then share it to their own followers who may be interested to do the same, thus maintaining the circulation of the memetic texts to a wide range of people.

The Internet memes feature a variety of styles of humour, from irony and sarcasm to parody and cheesy jokes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), which makes them appeal to various digital crowds. Although Shifman (2011) assumes that the most successful memes are distinguished by simplicity, it has to be further explored whether this 'simplicity' purports blandness or sophistication. On the one hand, poorly done videos or collages that celebrate the amateur character of production are likely to generate a high number of user-generated responses (Shifman, 2011: 18). On the other hand, meme creators can engage in more absurd and allegoric humour, composing complex symbolic texts that require a higher level of awareness or culture from the audience (Goriunova, 2013). Shifman's (2011) view corresponds with Knobel and Lankshear (2007) who declare that an Internet meme ought to be incomplete; this inherently deficient nature of a memetic statement fosters users to solve the puzzle, attribute lacking meanings or embark on a creative dialogue by altering or judging other people's memes. Simplified and expressive imagery generates an emotional response and interest from the audience (Milner, 2013).

When social network users concoct memes, they merge self-expression with the pursuit of community recognition and visibility (Esteves & Meikle, 2015: 562). Memes incorporate a sophisticated interplay of commonsense and originality (Esteves & Meikle, 2015; Milner, 2013). Users appropriate memes to benefit from *inclusivity* in the circulation of an in-joke, and adjust it for the sake of *exclusivity*, attempting to draw an innovative rendition of a common pattern (Esteves & Meikle, 2015). The necessity to conform to the existing unwritten rules of conduct that shape online interaction (Milner, 2013) preserves the recognizable features of the memetic format. However, the reputation of memes as “in-jokes” of the online community has its drawbacks. Drawing parallels with the issue of digital divide, especially digital literacy, I am following Zuckerman’s (2013) point that memes are coded messages and therefore can be confusing for various people: members of the audience may have varying abilities and skills to read the ‘code’. Those who are unfamiliar with the rules of digital discussion and styles of the Internet slang, or possess limited awareness of the broader socio-political context may consider memes meaningless. In order to be able to read a meme, one has to be digitally savvy or at least have basic familiarity with this format of communication (Zuckerman, 2013). From this viewpoint, memes can impede the inclusivity of communication – the issue of ‘meme divide’ questions the legacy of memes as the mutually understood lingua franca.

The conceptualisation of memes as discursive weapons demonstrates that these Internet texts are more likely to link ideas, rather than individuals. Users exploit memes for self-expression, entertainment, as well as contribution to the political debates and persuasion of others. People utilise the condensed format of a meme to construct a convincing argument based on simple expressive means. Nonetheless, the distinction between understanding memes as the Internet’s vernacular, or discursive weapons is considerably vague. From one perspective, memes are an activity and genre of discourse at the same time (see Esteves & Meikle, 2015; Meikle, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014; Shifman, 2011; Peters, 2013). Those who champion memes as the common language of the Internet perceive them as the product of participatory culture and the means of polyvocal public discourse; vehicle of commentary and socialisation; viral unit of culture that people transmit to each other to attain visibility (Meikle, 2014), promote connectedness and spread ideas. Those who distinguish memes as ‘discursive weapons’ and deliberate mindbombs of persuasion declare that

they provide new possibilities for alternative political activism, as users create memorable visual symbols of resistance and aim to convince others through this entertaining and artful conduit of expression (Bayerl & Stoykov, 2014; Metahaven, 2013). In the first case, users utilise memes as the slang of trivial babble online; in the second, they exploit memes deliberately to influence the discussion.

4.4 Memes as carnivalesque resistance

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on the carnival as a form of dissent helps to further connect artful political communication, media activism and Internet memes. A prominent Russian scholar, philosopher and semiotician, Bakhtin (1984) founded his theory of carnival on the studies of the medieval times and Francois Rabelais, when laughter and the comical were prohibited in order to protect the hegemonic ideology. Bakhtin (1984: 5-8) identifies medieval carnival as a form of dissent, a legal activity that allows for the promotion of alternative discourse, multiplicity of styles, and an intentional polyphony ('heteroglossia'). Unmasking the villains and their vices, telling the ugly truth in a joyful, even rudely funny form, is an essential feature of carnival.

Carnival was a forceful mass manifestation of opposition to the official tone of the medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. It was distinctive by the extensive use of humour in all forms: ritual spectacles (carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace), comic verbal compositions (parodies, in the Latin and in the vernacular) and various genres of billingsgate, vulgarity (curses, expletives, and popular blazons). Parody is an important component of the carnival 'inside out' logic: there should be a continuous drift from top to bottom, from front to rear, numerous spoofs and travesties. The utilisation of various forms of humour for political criticism links carnivalesque resistance with the distribution of resistant memes in contemporary digital environments. Bakhtin (1984) called carnival a utopian realm of community, freedom and egalitarianism. The state in the medieval times responded to these outbursts of free speech and spirit by organising its own spectacles. These shows were praising and reproducing the existing ideology. Propaganda of the past century and contemporary efforts of the governments in promoting the praise of hegemony in traditional media respond to the logic of the "spectacle". The officially sponsored feasts (since the

performances of the medieval times to mediated spectacles of our days) are always based on the past and reinforce the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values. Not by chance, the notions of heroic past and patriotism often shine in dominant discourses of contemporary oppressive governments (Livshin & Orlov, 2007; Ryzhkov, 2015); they celebrate the current power relations as eternal, embedded in tradition hence indisputable. Remarkably, the tradition of spectacle would be reinforced in the Europe of the 1950s and 1960s and Soviet Russia and attract harsh criticism by the Western Situationists (Lievrouw, 2011).

Carnival served as an expression of physical, linguistic, and cultural freedom, as well as freedom of speech; the jokes were often simple and the expression tended to turn vulgar (Bakhtin, 1984: 16-18). The value of profanity in the liberating carnivalesque laughter directly links Bakhtin's theory with the recent Russian ban on foul words in culture. For Bakhtin (1984), vulgarity of the folk humour opposed the bureaucratic and rigid expression of the state discourse. Political meme as a joyful vehicle with meaningful content enhances the logic of carnival: people exchange jokes and share a laugh, comment on society, culture and politics and make argument on the heated issues. Bakhtin's (1984) carnival theory allows merging two conceptualisations of memes: products of the mundane Internet's folklore, they nonetheless obtain political connotation and rhetoric strength when deployed against political targets. Promoting a discussion of political abuses is challenging in the countries with repressive regimes, and taking part in a street protest can become dangerous (Iosifidis, 2011). In these circumstances, social networks provide a relatively free space for constructing personalised accounts and sharing identities, grievances, and messages (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The proliferation of alternative discourses in the realm of social networks reminds of Bakhtin's (1984: 8) conceptualisation of the carnival as a 'second life, organised on the basis of laughter'. In restricted environments, digital networks often function as the parallel media reality for the dissent public: the discussions in these spaces differ dramatically from the ones of hegemonic media. Those individuals who come to social media to discuss politics utilise memes as personal action frames. They do not oblige him or her to join any party or identify with a collective. Similar to the marketplace during the carnival, social networks serve as the pool of ideas, a relatively free space where participants can share individual stories, complaints and nasty jokes about the government without disclosing their identities. Participants of the carnival can wear masks, and users of social networks can hide their

personal information behind usernames and carefully constructed online persona. The exchange of memes between members of the online interaction becomes a political practice with low risks to personal safety and high capacity to escape censorship (Li, 2010; Zuckerman, 2013; Yang, 2013).

Carnavalesque resistance online has its limitations. Bakhtin's (1984: 9) medieval carnival was confined to a specific time of the year and was bounded by the limits of time and space; people knew when to expect the feast and where to participate in mass gatherings; they respected the location and closing dates. The contemporary e-carnival (Boje, 2001) is the virtual artful form of alternative media activism. It is not constrained by time, but by the boundaries of cyberspace. Social networks permit resistant users to exchange ideas and opinions, but may have little impact on the offline discourse. In the Russian case, social network users exploit the digital platforms to share jokes and politicised statements that would not normally appear in the mainstream media (Kiriya, 2012). Russian political elites exile the expression of alternative views to the online sphere and thus generate the version of the carnival which is limited not in time, but in space and style of discourse. Recent attacks on the independent Russian media indicate the discontent of the government with investigative journalism and critical reports (Suleimanov, 2014b). Nonetheless, the satirical communication in social networks is still permitted; it may be isolated from the mainstream and have little impact on the large offline audiences (Kiriya & Degtereva, 2010), yet it preserves the flow of alternative political deliberation among liberal publics.

Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque theory explains the application of selected censorship in the Russian media environment. According to Shirky (2011), even the authoritarian government faces 'the dictator's digital dilemma' and sanctions limited areas of free expression in order to maintain control over discourse and let the dissent crowds let off steam. 'The dictator's digital dilemma' refers to the quandary created by the development of new media that increase public access to information and discussion (Shirky, 2011). This liberating media ecology has a potential to put the dominant regime at risk, and the ruling elites have to respond either with censorship or with a shutdown of the whole Internet. However, the elimination of the Internet would not only silence those in dissent, but radicalise the pro-government majority that would immediately resist the measure. Therefore, the state has to impose selective censorship so as not to fall into another risk of advertising resistant digital

communities, groups and speakers. Inaccurate application of censorship may inflict high costs for the censors. For example, in 2008 Tunisian governor Ben Ali blocked Facebook for a week, and during that time an unprecedented number of Tunisians signed up for the network, using digital tools that helped to evade the blockage (Zuckerman, 2013).

Preservation of the digital political carnival in social networks is therefore expedient for the government, as members of the carnivalesque resistance do not normally seek to mobilise for a political protest or overthrow the elites. Carnival is the meaningful activity per se (Bakhtin, 1984; Boje, 2001). It falls short in expanding the joyful critical discussion into further resistant action – similarly, political deliberation via Internet memes is unlikely to encourage mobilisation and stimulate offline action. Furthermore, the most successful Internet memes often include vulgar, coarse and politically incorrect humour that can border on hate speech and insults (see Chen, 2012; Shifman, 2012). Although this finding establishes memes as the celebration of free speech (Chen, 2012; Milner, 213), critics condemn them as inappropriate Internet jokes that amuse yet fall short of informing the public debate on worthy topics (Chen, 2012). Nonetheless, memes can be instrumental in raising the awareness and spreading alternative viewpoints (Metahaven, 2013). Analogous to the carnivalesque mockery and prank, these ‘mindbombs’ wear a mask of a light entertaining or even vulgar joke, but contain a meaningful message that may stimulate critical thinking in the broad audience.

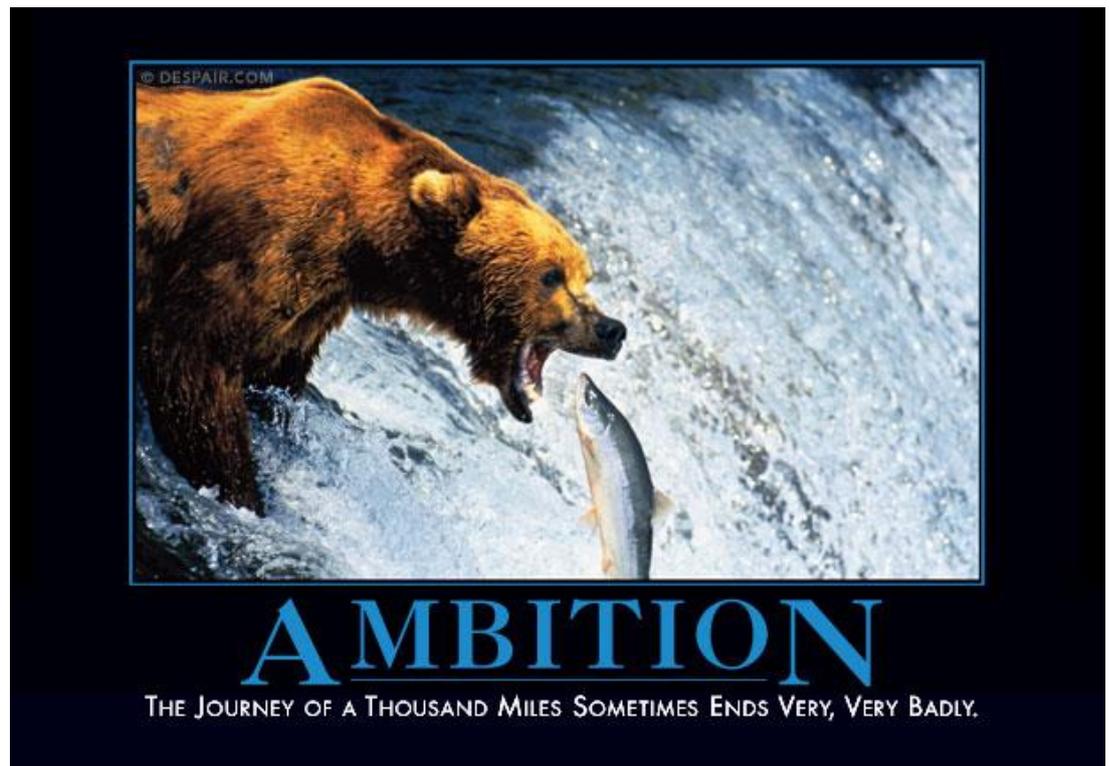
4.5 Memes as genre: visual language and global meme formats

Memes form the type of storytelling that entangles recognisable traditional patterns and motifs, but also accepts variation and adaptive modification (Blank, 2014). Despite local peculiarities and language differences, memes employ roughly the same range of formats worldwide. Owing probably to their Western origins in visual poster culture and advertising, memes preserve a number of highly recognisable configurations that may vary by colour, font, composition of elements, vocabulary, but retain trademark features of the original style. According to meme analysts (Börzsei, 2013; Milner, 2013; Davison, 2012), the pervasively used global outlines are

Demotivator, Image Macro, Photoshopped Image, LOLCats, Advice Animals and Comic.

Demotivator consists of a black frame exposing an image and text in white capitals. It originates from the satirical posters produced by Despair Inc. since 1998: the company mocked inspirational posters of the 1990s and manufactured parody versions where the sceptical, mocking text contradicted the solemnity of the image and title. Once these posters had spread over the Internet and penetrated meme aggregating platforms such as 4Chan, the meme format was born (Knowyourmeme, 2014). Nowadays, Internet users have almost forgotten the initial composition of a Demotivator; currently they utilise the layout of a familiar black frame to comment on any subject. Normally the text in bigger white capitals, second-line text in smaller white capitals and the image create a comic effect by their conflict.

Figure 6. Examples of Demotivator meme (top: Original demotivational poster by Despair Inc.: Stores Yahoo!, no date; middle: demotivational poster, Demotivate.me, 2010; bottom: different appropriation of the layout, Knowyourmeme, 2009)





EDUCATION

If you were a burger-flipper, you would be in bed right now.



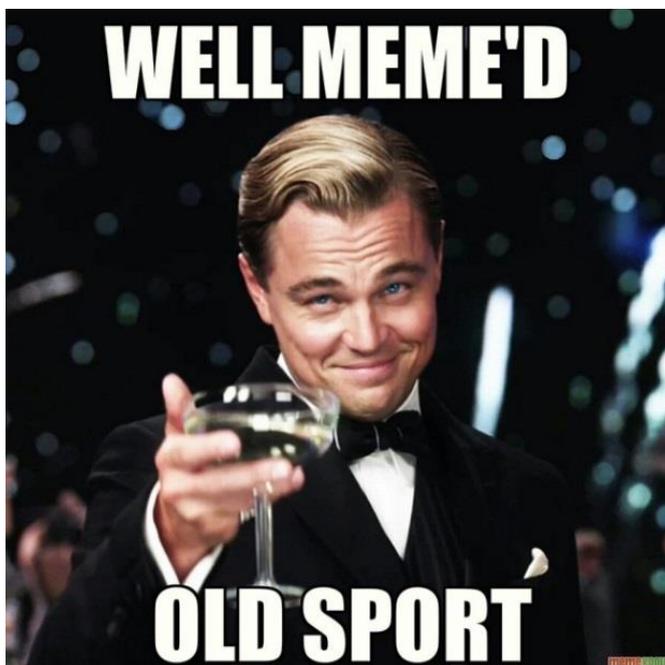
MIRRORS

Because not everyone is cool enough to have a friend to take their picture.

VERY DEMOTIVATIONAL .com

Image Macro is the image with text superimposed; normally it is formatted in white capitals with black borders and in Impact font (Börzsei, 2013), although any captioned image can broadly qualify for Image Macro. Sometimes Image Macro is used instead of emoticons to express the emotions and reactions of users (Knowyourmeme, 2015).

Figure 7. Examples of Image Macro (both - Knowyourmeme, 2015)



Photoshopped Image is vaguely any image that has been doctored to create a statement without added text (Milner, 2013). It often appears in close connection with Image Macro, as Photoshopped Images are likely to become elements of Image Macro memes.

Figure 8. Example of Photoshopped Image. "Rihanna's Met Ball Dress as a Pizza" (Knowyourmeme, 2015)



Advice Animals is the family of memes that originated from the popular Advice Dog meme. They depict a cut-out of the animal or its head placed over the generic, colour-wheel or rainbow-coloured background, with text in white pasted above and below the animal. The original Advice Dog meme was posted on the fan site of the videogame Mario the Mushroom Kingdom. One of the users asked for advice on having his first kiss, and among the replies was the image of the dog's head over the colour-wheel background and a comment "Just do it, man" (Börzsei, 2013). The humorous effect with the Advice Animals series is expected due to the absurd conjunction of the advice with an animal giving it (Davison, 2012). However, lately users have almost abandoned the original textual structure of an advice and superimpose all kinds of jokes around the animals' faces. The colour-wheel background is therefore simply used to demarcate a meme and attract attention.

Figure 9. Examples of Advice Animals memes (Börzsei, 2013: 16)



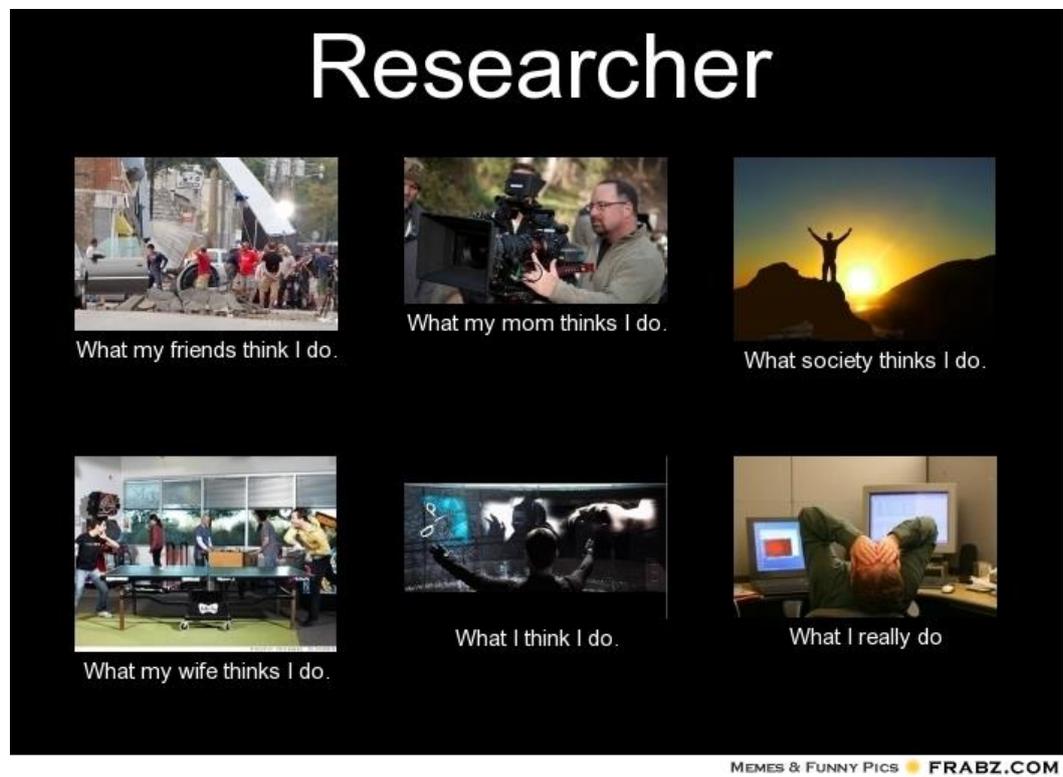
Figure 10. Example of LOLCats meme (Knowyourmeme, 2015)



LOLCats owe their popularity to the meme aggregator 4Chan that dedicated a specific thread to cat pictures and named it Caturday in 2006 (Börzsei, 2013). The most popular LOLCats site *I Can Haz Cheezburger?*, launched in 2007, was sold for two million dollars and its owner Ben Huh established the Cheezburger network consisting of 75 employees who sustain meme-focused aggregators and forums (knowyourmeme, memefactory, thememebase) (Goriunova, 2013). The LOLCats meme is normally an Image Macro with the entertaining or charming photo of a cat with the caption written in Internet slang.

Comics is the closest genre to the traditional newspaper and magazine cartoon and bears many features of storytelling: we can see subjects, sequence of events and their outcomes. Despite this seeming completeness of the narrative, actions are not as important in these memes as characters (Börzsei, 2013). Many principal heroes of comic memes have turned iconic: the reproduction of their signature reactions, deeds and catchphrases form the core of the meme’s virality. In other cases, comics place famous people in unusual circumstances and depict their imagined reactions or actions. Comics may also include juxtaposition of expectations and reality: the popular meme ‘How my parents see me’ is based on these rules.

Figure 11. Example of a Comics meme (Frabz, 2015)



Conclusion

The ever-developing sphere of social networks opens new possibilities for various types of human interaction, including engagement in civic action and political activism. Although the online sphere can be evaluated as the new medium for liberation and cooperation, many scholars refer to it as an extension of offline society and deny the revolutionary potential of the digital space for resistance and opposition. They emphasise the impact of the state and the market on the freedom and development of the Internet and social networks, noting that this impact varies greatly depending on the political regime, economics, culture and media ecology of a particular country. Political activists can employ the Internet for the circulation of information, discussion, mobilisation and coordination, yet they require offline organisational resources and political opportunities to develop a political movement and attract followers.

However, resistance by the means of social network conversations can become the entry-level point of political engagement for users in oppressed countries. The expansion of creative dissent online assists in the consolidation of the resistant masses, as it raises the awareness and complements the hegemonic discourse by additional information and analysis that may be expelled from the state-controlled media. Memes have developed in a popular tool of the Internet communication that can serve either as the inside language of the digitally savvy crowds, or discursive weapons, deliberately created arguments of persuasion in the debates on various issues. Those interested in political deliberation may exploit memes to shape meaningful ideas in an entertaining format and thus attract more attention from the general public. Users deploy memes as the mindbombs to overcome censorship, confront propaganda and point to the political wrongdoings of the ruling elites. As an accessible and humorous vehicle of communication, memes help to form a Bakhtinian ‘carnavalesque’ public dissent, which is limited to the virtual space yet constitutes a permitted practice of expressing dissent in the restricted media environment. By the utilisation of memes, users invite creativity of other users – they can adjust and share memes, add new themes or details to the discourse and nurture the exchange of ideas. Memes encourage personalised framing and fit into the concept of networked individualism; they do not

require the user to join any political party or reveal his or her ideological preferences, but allow getting involved in the shared deliberation of the alternative viewpoints.

Nonetheless, the Internet memes are limited in the capacity to generate and maintain a meaningful discourse. People are unlikely to form communities by the exchange of memes. Humorous format of the memes limits the sophistication of the content, and many Internet users perceive these units of expression as a rude billingsgate of the virtual space. Memes are symbolic, and various people can read the metaphors differently, hence the issue of misinterpretation also clouds the potential of memes in the political discussion. Moreover, governments have recently appropriated the format of memes to deploy ideological content to the digital space, thus demonstrating that memes can be exploited for the promotion of hegemony as well as for the opposition to it. They have no agenda and ideological inclination per se, but serve as empty conduits that any participant of a political communication process can appropriate.

The Russian media environment has demonstrated the increasing tendency towards censorship and regulation of the political expression in both professional media and social networks. Significant constraints on the freedom of speech and assembly in the 2010s have turned the Internet realm into one of the few available spaces for the expression of alternative political viewpoints. The Russian liberal public have widely exploited social networks to oppose state corruption and to call for fair elections in 2011-2012; people employed the virtual space for spreading the information and mobilising for the anti-government rallies. However, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has triggered new restrictions on the political communication in social networks and brought the intensification of the state propaganda in traditional and electronic media to a new level. The ruling elites have reinforced the rhetorical concepts of Russian nationalism, scapegoating the West and opposition, intensified praise of patriarchal family values and stigmatisation of any deviation from the hegemonic 'norm'. Since the Crimean annexation, the state media have been actively labelling the liberal public as non-patriots, and marked any criticism of the Kremlin as a treachery. This complex media and political environment became even more challenging for the liberal public, as pro-government users, voluntarily or on the government's payroll, have exploited the format of the Internet memes for the propagation of hegemonic perspectives. In this restrictive media ecology, memes have

started to serve as the medium of rhetorical struggles between supporters of various political forces. Both pro-government and anti-government users appropriate memes as the format of reflection and persuasion, discussion and comment, proving the rising importance of this vehicle of Internet communication for the deliberation of politics in the electronic era.

CHAPTER 5: Methodology

5.1 Research questions

This dissertation analyses Russian meme making from two main angles: practices and motivations of producers (how and why people create political memes), and meanings that these texts convey in the collective digital discourse (what do they tell about the hegemonic political environment and the opposition to it). The main research question is **“What roles do Internet memes play in alternative political communication in the Russian-language social networks?”** I am particularly inquiring into the following sub-questions:

- 1) Does satirical communication online facilitate alternative political talk?*
- 2) Can satirical framing and memes overcome censorship and serve as coded in-jokes to raise the awareness on political issues?*
- 3) Do memes connect people and assist community building?*
- 4) What themes and ideas do social networks users promote by the means of memes?*
- 5) Do supporters and opponents of the government employ political memes differently? What narratives do memes contribute to the pro-government and resistant communication flows on Russian Twitter?*

In order to tackle these questions my research employed mixed methods: content analysis, social network analysis, textual analysis and interviews.

I started my project in 2012 and aimed to explore the role of memes in the digital political resistance in Russia. However, I had to significantly alter the original plan in the course of my research, responding to the recognised limitations of the chosen methodology and to major developments in the political and media environment in Russia. At the beginning of my doctorate, Russian protest mobilisations online were at their peak. People were discussing civic issues and grievances on Facebook, Twitter, and the Russian social network VKontakte. They

raised the issues of corrupt government, fabricated parliament election results and accused the officials of manipulation; they also mobilised for campaigning against the corrupt officials and participation in street rallies. These processes looked very promising for the progress of civil society in Russia. My initial methodology consisted of two parts: collecting Internet memes from the 2011-2012 liberal protests and conducting in-depth interviews with major meme sharers. I intended to harvest all relevant data online, using search engines and the archives of social networks. I evaluated the social networking websites as an open platform for research and was positive that they had stored and cached the most prominent memes and discussions.

Yet, the first leg of my data collection demonstrated that Facebook was not an open and reliable source for the retrospective accumulation of data. I had been closely monitoring the liberal discussions online in 2011-2012 before the beginning of my doctorate and took notes of the most proliferate and expressive Internet memes. Nonetheless, during actual data collection in early 2013 I was no longer able to locate and retrieve the memes that I remembered. Manual search into personal accounts of main protest activists, journalists and bloggers did not harvest enough texts for a substantial analysis, and the small amount of recovered memes constituted a fragmented and incomplete picture.

I decided to expand my search to the secondary sources, such as newspaper articles, television reports, blog posts and images that were related to 2011-12 online/offline political resistance in Russia; I used Google and the main Russian search engine Yandex for this purpose. This approach brought more memes into my collection; however, the majority of them were documented as posters of the protest rallies and did not fully reflect the online deliberation. The fact that protest memes transferred to the offline posters of the protest activists could have become a precious finding of its own and an evidence of the link between online and offline activism, if only online memes were not so hard to trace. Two main challenges appeared that were highlighted by many Internet researchers (Neuman, 2014; Berg & Lune, 2004): difficulties in searching for imagery, as typing in keywords does not bring you all the images that are related to the subject; and that doing research of the Internet past is a perplexing task as the digital sphere keeps changing every second, and past events and texts get lost in tons of new data. Last but not least, Facebook's privacy policy

significantly limited my access to the personal pages and conversations of many protest activists and supporters.

Looking for other options, I decided to shift my focus from Facebook to Twitter and tried to evaluate Twitter's transparency and eligibility for the research on memes. I contacted my supervisors Dr Anastasia Kavada and Dr Peter Goodwin and other colleagues engaged in social media research, including Professor Graham Meikle, Dr Alex Bruns and Dr Daniel Trottier, who are known Internet experts, and asked for their advice on useful Twitter engines for data scraping. My consultations revealed that a suitable technical tool for the collection, identification and classification of relevant data on Twitter is yet to be established. Nonetheless, I assessed doing research on Twitter as a feasible approach as it is a public network, and a researcher is not limited by privacy settings. In the absence of advanced automatic tools, I settled to collect data manually and preferably in real time.

My supervisor and I concluded that the most suitable solution for my research would be focusing on a new Russian political case study. We decided to wait for a significant event to happen, so that it could possibly trigger another wave of memes from the politically active Russian users. I could then follow and collect these texts manually and live. Both supervisors and I agreed on the importance of identifying eminent Russian political activists, journalists, meme sharers and microblogging Twitter stars in order to follow their accounts and stay alert for the next meme-worthy case study. While waiting for the new wave of memes to emerge, I detected the popular meme sharers who had been active in the 2011-2012 online protest communication. Then I became able to locate other eminent politicised microbloggers, from pro-government accounts to the liberal media and personal accounts of liberal individuals.

My supervisor Dr Anastasia Kavada and I were much anticipating the Sochi Olympic Games in February 2014 as a controversial event for the Russian public. While the majority of Russians enthusiastically awaited the Games, many liberal journalists were raising concerns on the high level of corruption in spending, and pointed to the potential manipulation of the Olympic rhetoric. They were suggesting that elites could abuse the publicity on the Games to overshadow domestic problems and boost their own popularity. Nonetheless, the end of the Olympics brought a much larger case study than we had expected - the Ukrainian crisis that soon turned into the

Crimean crisis and further developed into a large Russian-Western conflict by August 2014. Subsequently, large flows of memes flooded the social networking sites throughout 2014. Luckily, I was prepared to trace them and monitored the popular politicised Twitter accounts that were generating, adjusting and redistributing plenty of memes.

During my participant observation of the political discourse on Russian Twitter throughout 2011-2014, I witnessed the shift from the anti-corruption resistance in 2011-2012 to the combined resistance to the government's corruption *and* its heavy propaganda that marked the public sphere in 2014. Pro-government media became much more persistent in imposing the Kremlin's ideology, and pro-government Twitter users have boosted their activity by sharing more pro-Kremlin texts and posts, memes and links. They were not only endorsing the Russian elites for their domestic and international politics, but were accusing the dissent part of the audience of treachery and lack of patriotism. The incorporation of these new themes in public discourse has affected the content and style of the oppositional deliberation. Resistant social network users tried to reiterate previous criticism of the corrupt government, but also implement new topics in their discussions. They were pointing not only to the corruption issues, but to media manipulation, boosted discourse on patriotism and stigmatisation of non-conformism. The liberal public also had to resist the allegation of treachery and confront the majority of the Russian population who endorsed Vladimir Putin and his allies.

I have picked the Crimean crisis as my case study as it combined the pro-government efforts in digital indoctrination with the resistant communication by the dissent public. The themes and actors from the alternative political talk of 2011-2012 remained active in 2014, but had to share digital space with the galvanised flows of pro-government propaganda. Furthermore, the Crimean case illuminated new challenges for the style of expression of the resistant public. Pro-government users have actively exploited Internet memes in their politicised communication, thus demonstrating that this vehicle of expression was not confined to the liberal audience and can serve propaganda as much as resistance.

One of the main advantages of my research is that it matched the radical challenges that the Internet communication and political activism faced in Russia in

the 2010s. The series of restrictions on the freedom of speech and assembly imposed severe constraints on the deliberation of alternative politics online. Thanks to the recent legislative initiatives, the communication watchdog has received the power to label practically any opposition in Russia as potentially ‘extremist’ and therefore lawless. My project had aimed to have documented the peak time of the protest political communication and mobilisation in the 2011-2012, but eventually recorded its decline to circumscribed deliberation in 2014.

5.2 Inductive approach

My research primarily sought to explore the *meaning* that meme makers and sharers ascribed to these texts, and the *role* of memes in the political communication online. As these goals were exploratory, my study employed the inductive approach that did not aim to test the existing theory, but generate concepts from the data (Bryman, 2014). Due to the novelty of the studies on Internet memes, I have relied on grounded theory as the most viable method to extract ideas from records and generate conceptual understanding of the ongoing social processes (Neuman, 2014: 177-178). The grounded approach permitted me to be sensitive to my data, engage in constant interaction between practice and theory, understand the phenomenon, create categories from my observations (Neuman, 2014: 177) and harness new concepts out of practice (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Charmaz, 2014). Comprehension of the context is vital for the grounded method (Neuman, 2014) and essential for addressing my research questions. This study relied on the contextual understanding of the socio-political environment of Putin’s Russia in the 2010s, which is a very particular setting for media professionals and political activists.

Subjectivity and the unrepresentative character of grounded analysis are among the restrictions of this approach (Neuman, 2014; Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Wasserman et al., 2009). Grounded theory provides limited opportunities for generalisation of the received findings (Wasserman et al., 2009; Charmaz, 2014). Nonetheless, it is an effective method for the study on human behaviours, attitudes and opinions (Neuman, 2014: 178). A researcher can defend the

validity of her conclusions by drawing links to previous scholarship. I applied grounded theory and, despite the commitment to primarily drawing insights from my data, substantiated the findings by locating them within the existing body of knowledge on Russian political resistance in digital space (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Wasserman et al., 2009: 359; Neuman, 2014: 204).

In order to address my research questions, I have utilised both qualitative and quantitative methodology. The qualitative part of this study comprised textual analysis of memes and in-depth interviews with meme sharers. I have chosen qualitative methods for my inquiry in the political expression of Russian social network users as they honoured “an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation” (Creswell, 2014: 4). Memes reveal how participants of the digital discourse interpret political reality, and the qualitative approach facilitated accurate comprehension of the subtle nuances of their experiences (Bryman, 2012: 36). Textual analysis of memes and in-depth interviews facilitated the investigation on memes as a social phenomenon and grasped the complexity of human interaction. These methods allowed me to focus on the “exploration of relationships or comparison among ideas” (Creswell, 2014: 124) and therefore address the research questions 1, 2 and 3: *1) Does satirical communication online facilitate alternative political talk?; 2) Can satirical framing and memes overcome censorship and serve as coded in-jokes for like-minded publics?; 3) Do memes connect people and assist community building?*

I have also considered semiotic analysis as a viable method for the research on the Internet memes. As a study of signs and symbols and their use in interpretation (Bryman, 2012), semiotics could have helped to explore the layers of meaning in each text. It would have exhibited the relations between the representation and what was being represented, so I could analyse the meaning-making practices of the meme-makers. Semiotic analysis would also be helpful to further investigate the references to the local and global visual cultural heritage in the meme’s graphic language.

However, I did not use semiotics for this study due to the comprehension of the ephemeral nature of social network communication (Leppanen et al., 2014). Users create tweets, remix and share, or just share texts and images (including memes) on a daily basis, sometimes even few times a day. An in-depth analysis of the multiple

symbols and meanings that these texts may carry falls at risk of over-analysis and over-interpretation. Leppanen et al. (2014: 115-116) accordingly note that the rise of social networks led to the emergence of “resemiotisation”. This phenomenon describes the changing patterns of circulation and flows of discourses across social and cultural boundaries, and collective meaning-making. It differs from recontextualisation: in resemiotisation, people change the components of a text and its symbolic underlining; they rearrange allegories in a new order in the process of communication. Each new text produced therefore becomes an artefact worth studying separately, as the unique assemblage of codes and symbols. In my research, I was interested in the discourses and narratives that memes, as the remixed texts, form together, and how they correspond to the broader political and cultural context. Therefore, analysing the broad range of transformation and resemiotisation of the memes would have drawn me away from the initial research questions.

Moreover, social media users make the decision on whether to like or retweet something within seconds, based on the earliest reaction (Yang and Counts, 2010). A semiotician would spend significantly more time and effort to read and interpret these texts in-depth, which would not reproduce the experience of the social media publics. An overly deep analysis would obscure the momentary relationship that the SNS users form with the text. From these grounds, applying semiotic analysis to the ephemeral and collectively remixed texts, which memes are, was considered counterproductive. However, this method could advance other studies on memes with different research goals, for instance, an inquiry in the way the symbols and signs from traditional media and dominant culture emerge in the Internet memes.

I have also exploited quantitative methods of research, such as content and social network analysis, which permitted me to classify the collected data, and substantiate and cross-validate qualitative findings. Content and social network analysis enabled me to categorise the main themes of the Crimean memes and draw a network map of meme sharers on Russian Twitter, thus addressing research questions 3 and 4: 3) *Do memes connect people and assist community building?*; 4) *What themes and ideas do social networks users promote by the means of memes?*

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods facilitated sensitive interpretation of the social practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003: 11), rich descriptions

of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003: 16) and induced broad indicative insights for further analysis (Creswell, 2014: 211). In my research, the amalgamation of content analysis, social network analysis, in-depth interviews and textual analysis enabled me to address the research question 5 in all complexity: 5) *Do supporters and opponents of the government employ political memes differently? What narratives do memes contribute to in the pro-government and resistant communication flows on Russian Twitter?*

Moreover, utilisation of a mixed method approach helped me to improve the validity and reliability of my research project. It enabled me to cross-validate findings from various methods and thus reduced drawbacks of the grounded approach (Bryman, 2012; Matthews & Ross, 2010). For instance, in this research, content analysis exposed the recurring themes (Bryman, 2012), which meme makers were not always able to distinguish in their interviews, and therefore added useful quantitative and qualitative findings on the themes of the Crimean discourse. I sought to utilise explanatory sequential design in my mixed method approach, as defined by Creswell (2015: 6-7): an explanatory sequential design applies quantitative methods prior to qualitative to inform the qualitative phase (see also Matthew & Ross, 2010: 144-145). This approach helped to identify a wide array of themes and narratives in the Crimean Internet memes, and then narrow down the scope of the study to scrutinise a sample of exemplary memes in detail. Besides, the quantitative phase of social network analysis enabled me to detect the major meme sharers with pro- and anti-government views and draw the list of potential interviewees.

The use of Twitter data enabled me to collect hundreds of memes and tweets in the real time perspective. The texts and profiles of users were publicly accessible. I subsequently benefitted from following the links between different accounts, which enabled me to harvest yet more memes that fitted in the scope of my project. However, the research on Twitter data has a number of limitations that were taken into consideration. A contemporary microblogging network, Twitter operates upon the number of technical algorithms that endorse popular texts and accounts and obscure the marginal ones (Cha et al., 2010; Kwak et al., 2010). This characteristic of Twitter may have challenged the accuracy of locating the networks of sharing and identifying the most popular memes among the resistant Russian publics.

Moreover, the research on Twitter is intrinsically linked to the challenge of “echo chambers”. Social media users often follow the accounts of the similar views and interests, thus intentionally and unintentionally forming the opinion and information “bubbles”, or “echo chambers” (Gilbert et al., 2009). Twitter’s own architecture does not help to overcome this issue, but rather amplifies its problematic influence on the accuracy of data collection. In order to minimise the effects of this hindrance, I conducted the network analysis and held interviews with the prominent meme makers. They allowed me to reflect upon the issues of technology-driven or conscience-driven choices in “liking”, “following” and “retweeting”. I have spoken to the interviewees about their ideological preferences and favourite accounts, tendency to follow other users due to the ideological similarities, personal sympathies or other reasons. In summary, manual data scrapping on Twitter is a beneficial research approach, yet it is limited in the capacity to provide a balanced picture of the texts and opinions shared; therefore, additional methods were required.

Twitter analysis has proven beneficial in adding insights to qualitative research (Cha et al., 2010). It exhibits how popular ideas and opinions take the shape of tweets, get shared and adjusted, retweeted and promoted. In this circuit of sharing, the ideas may receive new meaning, or get misinterpreted through reshaping. This feature of networked communication makes Twitter a valuable instrument in studying the interactive nature of digital conversations; it shows the ways users change not just the form, but content of tweeted texts through communication. From the quantitative perspective, Twitter is useful in analysing the hierarchies of sharing (Kwak et al., 2010) and networks of following. It can help to reveal how digital network users interact with each other and traditional media outlets.

As the microblogging website keeps developing, so does the academic approach on how to employ it in sociological and media studies. For this thesis, Twitter has proven to be an effective instrument for analysing the constantly changing, ephemeral social media communication. The open access and ease at downloading and archiving the tweets permitted a steady and consistent data collection. However, I have also acknowledged Twitter’s subjectivity in my inductive research strategy. I have balanced it by the interviews and several rounds of reflections during the interpretation of data.

5.3 Sampling

In the course of data collection, I have retrieved nearly 2,000 memes (image and texts, and texts) produced within the time frame of February 2014 – April 2015. This interval corresponds with the chronology of the Crimean crisis. The Russian-Ukrainian tension over the belonging of the Ukrainian peninsula started in February 2014 and resulted in the deployment of the pro-Russian forces in Crimea. Then the referendum on Crimean independence (16th of March 2014) led to the declaration of Crimean sovereignty and subsequent swift inclusion of the land into the Russian territory (18th of March 2014). The following polemic in traditional and electronic media proliferated throughout March-April 2014. Post-Crimean debates were still active in a year's time, by May 2015, when the saturation was reached and data collection stopped. The most recent discussions on Crimea and subsequent economic and political confrontation between Russian and the West (from May 2014 to May 2015) contain a broad array of disputes on Russia's international and domestic politics.

However, I decided to focus on the peak of the Crimean crisis in February-April 2014, as during that period many collected political memes were clearly focused on the Crimean case. I have narrowed the scope of studied memes down to this time frame. Preliminary filtering of my collected data revealed 624 memes that specifically discussed the Crimean annexation and circulated during February – April 2014. These texts formed the core database for the first quantitative stage of the research, content analysis. This sample may be limited in representativeness as it reflects my subjective collection of data and its analysis, yet the juxtaposition with the results from other methods improves the consistency. Moreover, the examination of the classified memes by my supervisor further validates the findings, as her inspection served as an independent expertise and improved the objectivity of my research. While it is implausible to attest that the collected memes were representative of all political deliberation on Russian Twitter, they nonetheless exhibited the significant themes, trends and patterns of political communication during the Crimean crisis.

I have focused on the collection and analysis of the memes that comprised an image and a text. It was necessary to specify the type of the researched memes in order to confine the scope of the study and ensure the comparability of texts. The memes

that consist of an image with a text employ both visual and textual framing, which makes them more multifaceted and rich than plain visuals or words. Nonetheless, I have also included a small amount of purely textual memes in the sample, when they were expressive enough and contributed to other themes expressed by the visual+textual memes.

Exemplary memes from the large content analysis sample of 624 coded texts formed the subsequent sample for **textual analysis**. In order to qualify as “exemplary”, a meme had to match one or a few of the following criteria: intelligible references to the recurring rhetoric concepts, common interpretation of these themes, and visual and textual expressiveness (many layers of connotations, interesting observations and popular references). Textual analysis was performed on the sample of 50 texts.

Besides, content analysis permitted the identification of the prominent politicised Russian Twitter participants who share memes. I have undertaken **social network analysis** on the 65 users who distributed memes on Twitter in the peak time of the Crimean debates. These accounts were the most active meme sharers in my data (each of them distributed at least one or a few memes on Crimea in the monitored period). This was a non-representative sample, but indicative for my particular study. Memes are a peculiar form of communication; they are hard to trace; hence it was not feasible to obtain a representative sample of meme sharers. Russian Twitter users vary in the frequency of sharing memes: some of them deploy these texts on a regular basis, others become more active during certain periods, while still others may employ memes randomly. This means that one cannot identify a user as a meme sharer per se, but can at least study the contributions of users to the particular case study, the discussion on Crimea. I categorised those accounts who shared at least one explicitly pro-government meme as “pro-government”, and those who circulated at least one resistant meme as “anti-government”. I employed non-representative social network analysis in my study to establish understanding of the ties and connection patterns among pro-government users, then inner relations between critical users, and finally explored the interrelation of the two ideological “camps”.

The fourth phase of my research comprised **in-depth interviews** with 15 prominent meme makers. In order to identify suitable interviewees, I had monitored the political debates on Russian Twitter long in advance of the start of data collection

and analysis. Besides, prior to starting a doctorate, I was working as a broadcast and magazine journalist in Russia for a decade, which made me familiar with the political and media environment. My expertise enabled me to distinguish a preliminary batch of influential individuals in the politicised digital conversation. I was judging their eminence by the number of followers, offline reputation (when known), number of retweets by other popular and established accounts, and the number of followers. Then an additional scrutiny of their networks of followers and retweets empowered me to identify other influential political microbloggers. Moreover, private consultations with practising Russian journalists and social media experts enabled me to draw a wider and more comprehensive network of the pro- and anti-government meme sharers.

For additional validation of my sample, I had been writing a Twitter Diary every day in July-August 2014 as an auxiliary practice that made me aware of the emerging topics, behaviour of the prominent active users and changes of tone in the discourse. The continuous juxtaposition of personal observations with the expertise of media colleagues enabled me to pinpoint approximately 200 main participants of Crimea-related meme sharing on Twitter. I contacted approximately 50 individuals and asked them to participate in my study; more than half did not respond, and a few others rejected the proposal. After long rounds of negotiation, I succeeded in conducting 15 interviews with the influential meme sharers.

Among the advantages of the qualitative part of my research was the ability to purposefully select individuals for the interviews; they did not need to constitute a representative or large sample (Creswell, 2014: 189). Unlike quantitative researchers who can generalise from a sample to population, qualitative researchers detect a sample of individuals who would be the most helpful in understanding the phenomenon at the centre of the research (Creswell, 2014: 76-77). Subsequently, I was able to design and limit my non-representative sample according to the saturation effect. Saturation refers to the point in data collection when a researcher realises that she has collected enough evidence and that adding new participants would not bring any new themes or substantial alterations from the existing codes (Creswell, 2014: 77).

5.4 Content Analysis

Content analysis refers to the quantitative method of “identifying the information contained within the texts which can be used to identify a reality external to the text” (Alaszewski, 2006: 86). A researcher formalises each category of the text being of interest to her in a set of categories that form a ‘coding scheme’ (Franzoni, 2004: 4, cited in Alaszewski, 2006: 86). This scheme systematically applies to all data to infer uniform and structured measurable findings. A coder’s consistency and strict devotion to the research purpose and question should ensure the sound interpretation of the material (Charmaz, 2014); her interpretation of data plays a central role in attesting the validity of the achieved findings. My research followed Alaszewski’s (2006) suggestion to rely on grounded theory and derive categories out of the coding process. The subsequent analysis of the recurrence and overlapping of categories permitted to identify patterns of their relationships (Riff at al., 2014: 3). Furthermore, the obtained results qualified as an indicative framework for further study (Alaszewski, 2006: 86-87; Creswell, 2015: 6-7) and informed my explanatory research design. Content analysis provided indicative grounds for further in-depth inquiries via qualitative methods.

A meme is a multimodal artful text that carries multiple connotations, hence it was challenging to identify memes that evidently addressed the Crimean debate. I acknowledged that they might have done so through ambiguous narratives. In order to overcome this hindrance, I relied on thematic identifiers and validation through contextual knowledge. The primary identifier for the inclusion of a meme in the data was the direct mentioning of “Crimea”. Other identifiers were the names of the politicians involved in the crisis (Russian, Ukrainian, European and American officials: Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, Viktor Yanukovich, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel and others); the allusion to the “unidentified gunmen” (“volunteers”, “self-defence forces”, “little green men”, or any other euphemism for the pro-Russian troops facilitating the referendum in Crimea – see pp. 17-18 of Context chapter for explanation) and references to Russian traditional media and journalists who produced many biased reports on Crimea.

I have manually organised memes in the list of broadly defined categories. These categories included a meme, its date of publication, the name of the publishing account, the number of retweets and favourites, tone of communication (humorous, dramatic or ambivalent), themes (the main targets of criticism and the rhetoric concepts involved) and format (e.g. Demotivator, Image Macro etc. – see Literature Review, pp. 75-81, and Textual Analysis Results, pp. 116-124, for more detail). The categorisation relied partially on the existing literature on meme classification, partially on the grounded theory, as I often had to identify the main themes and expressive means from my data. Each meme received at least one thematic identifier, although in most cases each meme was coded under several themes at once.

Initially I had included the category “tone of communication” to group memes as either “humorous”, “dramatic” or “ambivalent, yet a more detailed scrutiny revealed that the tone of wit in Crimean memes was a complex subject. Russian and Ukrainian pro- and anti-government users have contrasting attitudes to the accession of the peninsula, and, in most cases, it was implausible to guess whether the wit in the memes signified amusement or regret. In the absence of coherent filtering tools or validation strategy, I have dismissed the categorisation according to the tone of humour in my research. The category remains in the documented data (presented in Appendix 2), but does not appear in the analysis.

5.5 Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis developed in a particular field of academic studies in the 1970s and reflected the growing interest of social sciences scholars in the structure of ties between individuals (Scott, 2013: 1-2). They examined social links through the lens of network and graph theories. With the advent of the Internet and interactive media, researchers expanded their focus towards the ties that people establish in virtual spaces. Social network analysis concerns ‘relational data’, which includes contacts, ties and attachments; “the relations are treated as expressing the linkages that run between agents” (Scott, 2013: 2). I have employed social network analysis in my research on the digital media to project “complex network data into analytically

tractable information” (Ediger et al., 2010: 586); to detect streams, directions and evolving patterns of communication.

Social network analysis benefitted this research for two reasons: it permitted to explore the dynamic relationship between like-minded and oppositional users (see how much they retweet and comment on each other’s posts), and to inquire whether there were centres and peripheries in their communication networks. I have focused on these aspects of social network interaction to better comprehend how meme sharers respond to each other’s contributions to the digital environment, whether and how often they share or quote like-minded individuals or opponents. In this project, social network analysis investigates circulation of memes, while content analysis, textual analysis and interviews examine meaning-making and interpretation of memes.

I have manually imported the names of relevant Twitter accounts in NodeXL, an open-source and free network analysis software and visualisation package for Microsoft Excel. The programme enables the automation of a data flow that harvests network data, processes it through numerous filters and generates network visualisations and reports (Hansen et al., 2009: 1). Social media scholars often employ NodeXL for digital network analysis (see Hansen et al., 2010), as it permits scrutiny of emails, Twitter, Flickr and other social networks (Hansen et al., 2010: xiii). Having deployed the names of politicised Twitter accounts in the software, I set the data time frame as (UTC) 17/03/2014 00:00 – 21/07/2015 00:00. This period spans the initial heated debates over the Crimean annexation and accession to the Russian Federation (18th of March) to the later debates on the legitimacy of Russia’s actions, relationship between Russia, Ukraine and the West and so forth. The time limit was generously set as a year and 4 months to ensure prolonged and up to date monitoring of the networked relationships between politicised Twitter users.

NodeXL permits setting different dynamic filters to explore particular connections between texts or individuals. For my study, I set the dynamic filter as “Relationship” and focused on the examination of dynamic communication ties between users, not just static connections (such as “following” each other). This dynamic communication was studied by choosing three “edges” in the software: the amount of replies, mentions and retweets between users in the sample. A “reply” relationship occurs when a user mentions another user at the very start of a tweet and

responds to their text (ex: “@itaih just spoke about social media”)” (Hansen et al., 2009: 6). A “mentions” edge is created when one user creates a tweet that contains the name of another user and discusses them in the third person (ex: “just spoke about social media with @marc_smith”). A “retweet” edge is formed when a user shares a tweet by another user, while retaining reference to the source. A retweet normally starts with “RT” followed by the name of the author with the “@” in the front (ex. “RT @marc_smith: just spoke about social media”).

I have created visualised schemes of networked communication for three groupings: pro-government, anti-government and both groups of users in one display. I have included only 20 accounts in the pro-government map and anti-government map accordingly to preserve visual clarity of the networks and not overcrowd it with participants. I have visualised the ties between these accounts in an attempt to spot their inner connections and patterns of sharing; it was beneficial to see whether like-minded users acknowledged each other on Twitter and referred to each other by the means of meme sharing or mentioning. This attempt pursued the exploratory goal of identifying the structures and intensity of interactions among meme sharers (Hansen et al., 2010: 262); therefore, it did not require supplementary justification of a number of included accounts. I used it to complement other methods in my study and reveal the potential of social network analysis for research on memes. Hansen et al. (2010: 262, 266) accordingly argue that an exploratory visualisation can function as the platform for further investigation. Due to the relatively small sample size, my social network analysis did not produce any representative or generalisable results yet. Nonetheless, it enriched my understanding of the patterns of meme sharing and schematically suggested the hierarchy of meme sharers in a chosen sample. It further assisted in confirming the popularity of several Russian meme sharers mentioned in other parts of the analysis and exemplified how they link to other prominent accounts. In this research, social network analysis served as an additional tool and a trial of applying this method to the study on memes. However, inclusion of a larger sample of accounts and adding more relationship filters would increase the applicability of social network analysis to the research on memes and contribute to future studies on the politicised Russian Twitter.

5.6 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis reveals how people make sense of the world. It cannot provide a single truth, as no other methodology can either. However, it can produce a number of informed judgements of the people's sense-making in a particular environment (McKee, 2003), which suits the purpose of this research to examine the contemporary meme making, a particular communication phenomenon of the 2010s electronic discourse. When performing textual analysis, a researcher makes 'an educated guess' on the meaning that people extract out of a text (McKee, 2003: 29). This method unveils covert connotations, embedded patterns, implied beliefs and possible omissions (Fursich, 2009: 240-241). I followed the principles of textual analysis and analysed memes in relation to the political, social and cultural agenda. In order to do so, I was closely following the political news, blogs and microblogs, and overall media deliberation of the Crimean crisis. It helped me to gain awareness of the political, social and cultural context of the time and place of circulation of memes (McKee, 2003). Each text went through "the long preliminary soak" (Hall, 1973: 15, as cited in Fursich, 2009): a series of examinations resulting in the identification of allusions, narratives, rhetorical tools, and contextual meanings of a text.

A textual analyst can apply a number of filters to deconstruct hegemonic meaning and reveal hidden connotations (McKee, 2003: 106-107; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Gaskell & Bauer, 2000). A commutation test, for instance, suggests replacing one component of a text with an analogous one from a different part of culture, empowering the researcher to unveil the role and meaning of the displaced component (McKee, 2003: 107-108). For example, if one replaces a mouse Jerry with a rat Jerry in the Tom and Jerry cartoon, the substitution would reveal the embedded symbolism and hidden connotations of a mouse in a fictional narrative. Another method of preventing seemingly obvious interpretations is Structuring Absences. This technique invites the researcher to look for the omissions of certain kinds of representations in the text, and the meaning of them (McKee, 2003: 110-111). I have processed my sample through these filters to ensure a profound and exhaustive understanding of its nuances.

Textual analysis was chosen as the most appropriate method for in-depth examination of my data as it provides a flexible yet viable framework that can “elucidate the narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential” (Fursich, 2009: 239). Discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis were also considered due to their concern with power relations and ideological implications of a text (Fairclough, 2001). However, they, for instance, limit scrutiny to the text only, while textual analysis incorporates understanding of the context to interpret meaning.

Textual analysis is a qualitative method and is restricted in the level of reliability and replicability (see Creswell, 2014, or Halliday, 2005: 7-9). Nonetheless, I endeavoured to establish reliability by providing coherent justification for the conduct of the research (Halliday, 2005; Gaskell & Bauer, 2000: 342-344), and strengthening assumptions from the qualitative stages with quantitative insights. Furthermore, I followed the grounded theory approach that advocates such criteria for the excellence of qualitative research as authenticity, persuasiveness, fidelity, plausibility and trustworthiness (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, as cited in Gaskell & Bauer, 2000: 343). I therefore established the validity of my textual analysis on the grounds of fidelity, authenticity, relevance to context and theory, and reliability as a sophisticated amalgamation of authenticity, plausibility, persuasiveness and trustworthiness. Moreover, constant external checks and consultations with my supervisor throughout data collection and analysis provided additional validation to my research strategy and further verified its internal consistency.

5.7 Interview Analysis

The fourth phase of the analysis comprised in-depth interviews with the prominent meme makers and sharers. In-depth interviews were chosen as a reliable tool for the elucidation of personal motivations, experiences and opinions (Creswell, 2015; Bryman, 2012) on meme making and sharing. In-depth interviews permitted encompassing “the *hows* of people’s lives (the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life) as well as the traditional *whats* (the activities of everyday life)” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003: 62).

Acquiring access to meme sharers and securing their consent to participate in the research was a challenging task. Having had detected a list of almost 50 potential interviewees, I tried to reach them by various means of communication, from Facebook and Twitter messaging to emailing. In addition to this, I identified several Twitter users who not only actively shared memes and discussed political issues, but were known as the Internet experts. Anton Nossik, Sultan Suleimanov, Alexey Kovalyov, Pavel Borisov and Igor Belkin have been working in traditional and digital media for many years and were able to reflect on the changing patterns and trends of political deliberation in the public space.

Directly approaching people via Facebook was not effective, as none of the microbloggers responded. However, I applied a “backyard” research strategy and mobilised my personal networks of journalist contacts in Russia. The “backyard” method refers to the exploration of the researcher’s own organisation, or groups of friends (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Although I was not interrogating my current colleagues, this term is appropriate to define the method of addressing potential interviewees from the close circle of friends or acquaintances, or friends of friends, as it dramatically increases the interviewees’ trust and willingness to participate in the research. Moreover, my study advantaged from the “snowball effect” (Bryman, 2012): a sampling strategy where existing study subjects introduce the researcher to subsequent study subjects among their contacts. In my experience, building good rapport and trust with the first interviewees encouraged them to help me with accessing other meme makers from their circles; they kindly provided me with their contacts and introduced me to those speakers, convincing them to confide in me and contribute to my project.

The increased state pressure on freedom of speech and assembly had turned many prospective interviewees suspicious against any inquiries into their activities. A few dozens of potential speakers rejected my invitation to participate in this study. Nonetheless, I succeeded in obtaining 15 in-depth interviews with both pro- and anti-government meme sharers.

Russian meme makers agreed to talk to me via diverse channels of communication and in different settings, which varied from face-to-face meetings in Moscow and London to email correspondence and WhatsApp chats. Almost half of

my interviewees refused face-to-face communication due to privacy concerns. One of them even asked me to make a selfie with a sheet of paper saying “Привет” (“Hi” in Russian) followed by the hand-written name of that person, and send it to him immediately via Twitter chat. Upon me doing so, he loosened and appeared assured that I was not working for any government watchdog or secret services.

My personality could have also influenced the outcomes of the interviews. Any research is a social action (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000: 9-10); each person has their own individuality and communication skills, which inevitably influence her approach to the research, as well as how the participants perceive her as an interviewer (Neuman, 2014; Charmaz, 2009; Creswell, 2014). I have presented myself as an ex-journalist and academic with liberal views; born and raised in Moscow, but currently residing in London. Before starting my academic career, I used to work as the editor and reporter of the news programme at (by that time, 2003-2008) main independent television channel NTV. This broadcasting company had been known to openly challenge the Russian government and hold it to account up until the change of ownership and editorial board in the mid-2000s. When few of the interviewees asked me about my understanding of the Russian media landscape, I disclosed the details of my own involvement with the Russian journalism. I have also clarified to them the academic purpose of my study, which is an essential practice of good research (Matthews & Ross, 2010: 70-87). I honestly explained my own beliefs, when the respondents asked, assuring them in my genuine efforts to stay neutral and respectful throughout my research.

My liberal standpoint and professional experience in the prominent non-government media may have facilitated trust from the liberal meme makers, as they saw that I was sharing many of their opinions. However, my ideological inclinations and the fact that I was representing a ‘Western researcher’ could have limited openness and trust of the pro-Kremlin meme sharers. Russian microbloggers with pro-government views frequently express hostility towards Western journalists and academics. I acknowledged this challenge and tried to assure the interviewees in my intentions to analyse their responses with utmost respect and objectivity.

Furthermore, the majority of meme sharers in the sample were male, and I was in a position of a woman asking questions. My identity as a woman interviewing

the male interviewees in a rather patriarchal Russian society may have affected their answers – a male researcher could have yielded different responses. Interviewees could be less willing to “explain” things, but probably turn more self-assured and competitive with the male interviewer. In my case, many participants in the sample were eager to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise, and few of them even took a patronising approach.

The differences in communication settings of the interviews placed constraints on the comparability of results, yet, in the given circumstances, it was not considered a serious limitation. Conducting 15 in-depth interviews with the politically active Russian Twitter users is already an accomplishment. The differences between face-to-face and electronic interviews were taken into account during the process of interpretation. The lack of immediate eye contact and “balanced rapport” between a researcher and a respondent normally restrain electronic interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), and the tone of conversation may differ from face-to-face communication. Although the interviewer aims at imitating the casual and friendly conversational style in writing, it does not reproduce the respondent’s experience of interpersonal communication with a respectful yet directive interviewer (Converse & Schuman, 1974, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003: 69). I was unable to maintain “interested listening” (Ibid.), the style of following and rewarding one’s speech with non-judgmental attention, and had limited capacity to moderate the emailed interviews. However, I tried to exercise my control over the development of discourse by providing rewarding feedback and expressing gratitude to the interviewees via email swiftly after receiving their answers, politely asking for further elaboration. From the positive perspective, interviews via email provide flexibility in time and place of responding: an interviewee may refuse a personal meeting, but consent to participating in a research by answering at their convenience (Bryman, 2012).

Interviews via mobile phone texting, such as through WhatsApp messenger, are a new development of the 2010s. It is a convenient communication channel for the digital generation, yet giving an interview via text may limit the sophistication of responses. An interviewee has to type from his or her mobile phone, which is not as comfortable as utilising a traditional computer keyboard or taking part in an oral dialogue. This limited convenience may prompt the respondent to minimise their answers to laconic responses. At the same time, WhatsApp messenger allowed me to

conduct a real time chat with an important speaker and provided the atmosphere of an animated immediate exchange of ideas. I was able to instantly reply to the answers of the interviewee, asking them to specify unclear bits or steering the discussion towards the direction desired for my research.

Considering all these discrepancies, I relied on semi-structured interviews that guaranteed that all interviewees would at least receive a certain amount of the same questions. Simultaneously, I acknowledged the need to be flexible and adjust the set of questions to each particular individual. A thoughtful provision of the interview questions enabled me to demonstrate my awareness of each participant's Twitter activity and also show my diligent preparation for the talk (Bryman, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). It was essential to include references to particular tweets of the meme sharers in my questions to assure them of my genuine interest in their self-expression.

I acknowledge the limitations that my partiality brought to the analysis of the responses. Nonetheless, I am also aware that the subjectivity of my approach, personal passion for independent journalism and inclination towards liberal values are simultaneously its strengths. My expertise and networks of contacts permitted me to address influential speakers and speak "the same language" with the participants of my research, as I am familiar with the peculiarities of both political and media processes in Russia in the recent decades. During the analysis of my data, I paid specific attention to the sensitive interpretation of texts and aimed not to impose my own judgements upon them.

Subsequently, I took into consideration the importance of treating verbatim accounts of my respondents with high respect to the spoken word (Holliday, 2007: 171). Interviews went through several stages of interpretation and re-interpretation. The initial analysis of the interviews was followed by a second evaluation, when I assessed my transcripts again as *tabula rasa* and extracted valuable fragments as if no primary analysis had been performed. Then two variations of analysis were compared and amalgamated. This reflection was necessary to minimise the effect of researcher's bias and stereotypes on interpretation; it enabled me to promote authenticity in the representation of the views of my respondents. Furthermore, this practice allowed self-reflection and additional judgement on the selection and comprehension of the quotes, assuring "the textual room for the voice of the people" (Holliday, 2007: 171).

Various findings obtained in four parts of the research were converged in accordance with the “triangulation” effect, which is mobilisation of different methods that secure cross-referencing, objectivity and validity of the project (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Gaskell & Bauer, 2000). This quality measure derives from the triangulation principle in mapping when one determines the distance to the point by references to two other points (Matthews & Ross, 2010: 145). In my research, content and textual analysis relied on the same themes, but illuminated different aspects of the exchange of memes. Content analysis exposed the prevailing topics, while textual analysis explained their contextual connotations and significance for the political discourse.

Further juxtaposition with the interview analysis deepened the comprehension of these narratives and revealed the meanings that meme sharers attributed to the memes when producing them. It has also demonstrated how the prominent meme sharers interpreted the memes shared by other people and what roles they ascribed to the circulation of memes in political deliberation. Social network analysis provided further understanding of the hierarchy of sharing as it illuminated the potential patterns of meme distribution in the politicised Twitter communication. As small and indicative as this part of the research was, it nonetheless mapped an important area for future studies on the networks of pro-government and anti-government users on Twitter (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000: 345).

The integration of mixed method results can occur in various places in the project, depending on the type of study and logical flow of narrative: it can happen at the collection stage, in the analysis, or the discussion (Creswell, 2014: 82-83). In order to grasp the phenomenon of politicised meme making and sharing in Russia in its full complexity, this dissertation presents analytical findings from content, network, textual and interview analyses sequentially, and then amalgamates the mixed findings in the discussion chapter. This strategy facilitates a rich, rigorous and accurate interpretation of various groups of findings and offers grounds for the all-encompassing conclusion at the end (Driscoll et al., 2007).

5.8 Ethics

My research concerns the sensitive topic of political resistance in the authoritarian Russian environment; therefore, I had to regard the potential risks for my respondents. The majority of the interviewees in my sample are liberal meme makers who confront the state and may want to conceal their identity. I have clearly identified myself, my university, title and scope of the research, its purpose, background, research questions and potential publication options of the results to the interviewees (Matthews & Ross, 2010: 78-79). I have asked each of them for their consent to publish their answers in public (either in a dissertation, as a journal article or a book chapter), and guaranteed that I would include them in the research only upon receiving full consent.

Furthermore, I have asked the participants how they want to appear in my research and whether they grant the disclosure of their names and identities (when known). @KermlinRussia, @Twitted_knitter, Sergey Elkin, Igor Belkin, Pavel Borisov, Alexey Kovalev, Sultan Suleimanov, @FastSlon, Anton Nossik, @vezhlivo permitted me to utilise their real names, while @Fake_MIDRF, @StalinGulag, @FakeMORF, @Judge_Syrova_Ya and @Stalin_RF preferred to remain under their Twitter usernames, and I fully respected this decision. Moreover, when @Twitted_knitter noted that his Twitter activity had a negative impact on his career prospects and encouraged oppression from his employer (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014), I decided to hide his identity in order to ensure protection from any potential harm. In doing so, I followed Larossa et al. (1981: 303-313) who indicate that respondents may not be aware of the full risk of participating in the research, hence it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure their safety. At the same time, I made a deliberate choice to include the real identities of @KermlinRussia's account co-authors as they not only agreed to full disclosure in my research, but also had previously uncovered their identities in public long before the start of my project. They had already given interviews under their real names to many Russian media publications. In this case, inclusion of their names and professions bore no harm to the speakers, but enriched the analysis with precious insights into professional profiles of these meme makers.

I have obtained and stored the collected interviews in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) which covers personal data in any form and requires lawful and fair collection, procession and protection of the obtained materials. I acknowledge that my data should not be used for other purposes than those indicated to the participants. I have protected these records from unauthorised access, loss or deconstruction (Matthews & Ross, 2010: 79) by storing them on my personal password-protected computer.

Besides, I acknowledged my right to conduct academic research with respect to personal safety and privacy (Matthews & Ross, 2010: 84). In the course of preliminary negotiation with several meme makers, I faced rudeness and intrusiveness on their behalf. Good research practice implies that a researcher has the right to protect their personal details, refrain from taking unnecessary risks and make informed judgements on the feasibility of research tactics (Matthews & Ross, 2010: 84), so I ceased communication with offensive speakers. For instance, one of the popular pro-government meme makers agreed to consider my questions via email, but upon receiving them turned aggressive and demanded that I answered his set of questions first. They consisted of a dozen invasive inquiries on my personal background, biography, sources of income, ideological preferences and career plans. I assessed this interaction as potentially harmful, as I did not know the identity and professional affiliation of the user who was hiding behind his Twitter name, and found it appropriate to refuse responding to his questionnaire. I politely rejected the offer and asked if he or she would still be eager to answer my questions. Having received no response, I concluded my attempts to engage this user in my project. Besides, due to the increased level of censorship and state monitoring on alternative political voices and resistant communication, I had to take into account my potential risks from state persecution. I did not announce the scope and angle of my studies in my social network accounts and only elaborated into details of the research with the interview participants in private correspondence and conversations.

All the memes in my data were collected from the publicly available Twitter accounts. Recent scholarship on ethics of Twitter research (Zimmer, 2010; Zimmer, 2015; Nissenbaum, 2011; van Wynsberghe, no date) points to the obligation to elaborate the notion of contextual privacy for the digital era. Twitter is a public space, yet there are still concerns that not all users are aware of the potential utilisation of

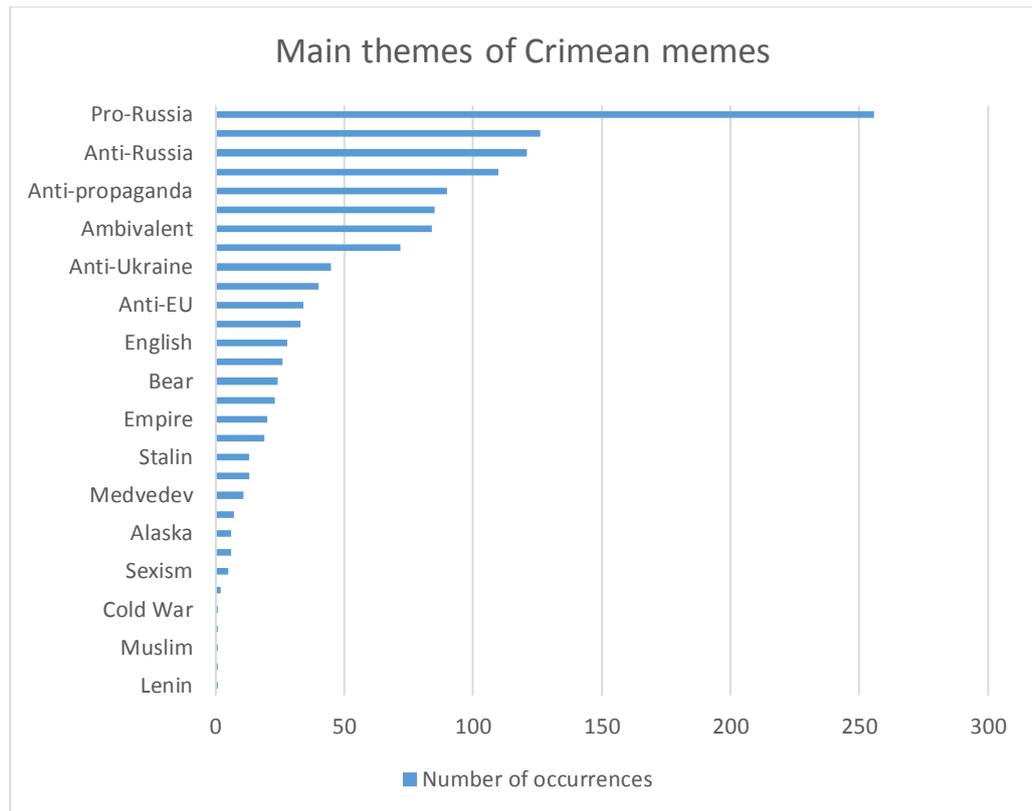
their virtual self-expression in academic studies (van Wynsberghe, no date). Nevertheless, for the present moment, interactive networks remain an open realm for data scraping. Supporting this, Zimmer (2015) remarks that the US Library of Congress announced in 2010 that it would archive every open tweet appearing on Twitter. Although the decision sparked a debate on the ethics of storing casual individual ephemeral self-expression as the unrestricted records (see Raymond, 2010), it nonetheless additionally validated the status of tweets as public data. For this research, tweets are considered de facto public data on the Internet; their collection and utilisation for research purposes does not require any permission from the users or digital platform owners (van Wynsberghe, no date).

CHAPTER 6: Results

6.1 Content analysis

Coding of over 600 memes related to the Crimean crisis has enabled the identification of recurring themes. I have divided memes according to the prevailing themes (explained in the Methodology chapter). According to the quantitative assessment, the most prominent themes were “pro-Russia” (256), “anti-US” (126), “anti-Russia” (121), “anti-Putin” (110) and “pro-Putin” (85).

Figure 12. Numbers indicate the amount of corresponding memes for each category in the collected data. Categories are in descending order, from the most frequent (pro-Russia) to the least popular (Lenin)



Main themes of Crimean memes (with exact numbers):

Theme	Number of occurrences
Pro-Russia	256
Anti-US	126
Anti-Russia	121
Anti-Putin	110
Anti-propaganda	90
Pro-Putin	85
Ambivalent	84
Resistance	72
Anti-Ukraine	45

Information war	40
Anti-EU	34
Anti-Obama	33
English	28
Nazism	26
Bear	24
Patriotism	23
Empire	20
Family	19
Anti-war	13
Stalin	13
Medvedev	11
Nationalism	7
Gay	6
Alaska	6
Sexism	5
Racist	2
Lenin	1
Mafia	1
Muslim	1
Anti-Semitism	1
Cold War	1

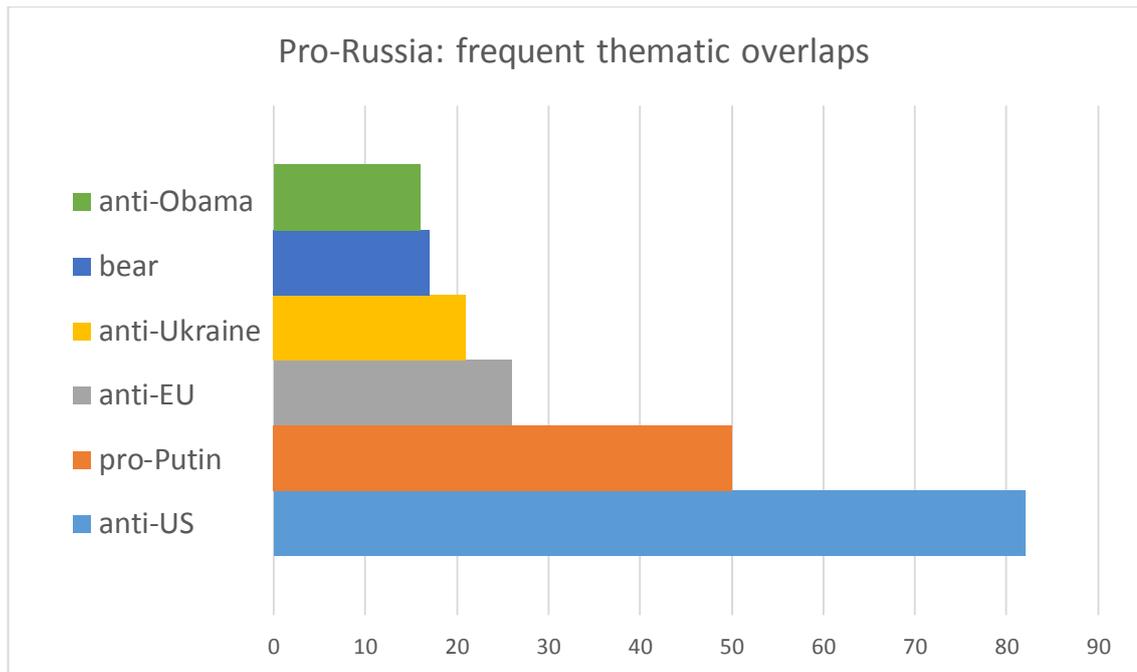
Content analysis of the main themes has revealed that the majority of memes in the Crimean crisis are focused on Russia and its leader. They either support or criticise the Russian position and activity. They often juxtapose Russia and its president Vladimir Putin to the US and its leader Barack Obama. However, the amount of personalised memes around Putin (pro-Putin – 85, anti-Putin – 110) is much higher than the amount of memes targeted at Obama (just 33). The number of critical memes against Russia almost corresponds with the number of critical memes against Putin (anti-Russia – 121, and anti-Putin – 110), suggesting that the president often appears as the embodiment of the country and its government. Moreover, both positive and

negative memes about Russia often employ metaphoric concepts, such as references to the allegories of the pan-Slavic family and Russia being a strong wild bear.

Pro-Russian memes frequently contain criticism towards the United States of America, and much less often target at other Western countries (anti-US – 126, and anti-EU – 34), suggesting an interesting rhetorical dichotomy of “Russia versus US”. The overlaps of themes also reveal the combination of narratives in memetic discourses. In the majority of cases (398), memes contained two or three themes (more than half of the sample); this finding corresponds with the high number of memes coded as “ambivalent” (84). The ambiguous character of many memes allowed detecting multiple themes in it, supporting the assumption that memes can be highly equivocal and appeal to various themes simultaneously. Less than one-third (170) of memes in the sample were considered straightforward and focusing to one theme, thus proving that besides being multi-layered, memes can also provide a comprehensible direct commentary to the political events. Moreover, the low number of memes with more than four themes (56) further suggested that memes are likely to refer to various themes, but are limited in their rhetorical richness and sophistication.

The most frequent overlaps in the memes’ themes exposed how various polemic narratives were conjoined in the supportive and critical discourses on Russian action in Crimea. For instance, “Pro-Russia” (256) memes often contained criticism of the US (82 cases), EU (26 cases) and Ukraine (21 cases). Besides, they also relied on the specific endorsement of the personality of Vladimir Putin (50 cases) and promoted the allegory of Russia as a wild mighty bear (17 cases). This amalgamation of themes suggests an intriguing narrative of pro-Russia activists that mostly base their praise for Russia on the opposition to its rivals. They additionally also support their claims by references to the personal strength and wisdom of the leader and links to the folkloric identity of the country. This blend illuminates that Russian pro-government meme sharers often mingle an individual with countries, producing a symbolic commentary on the international political power struggles.

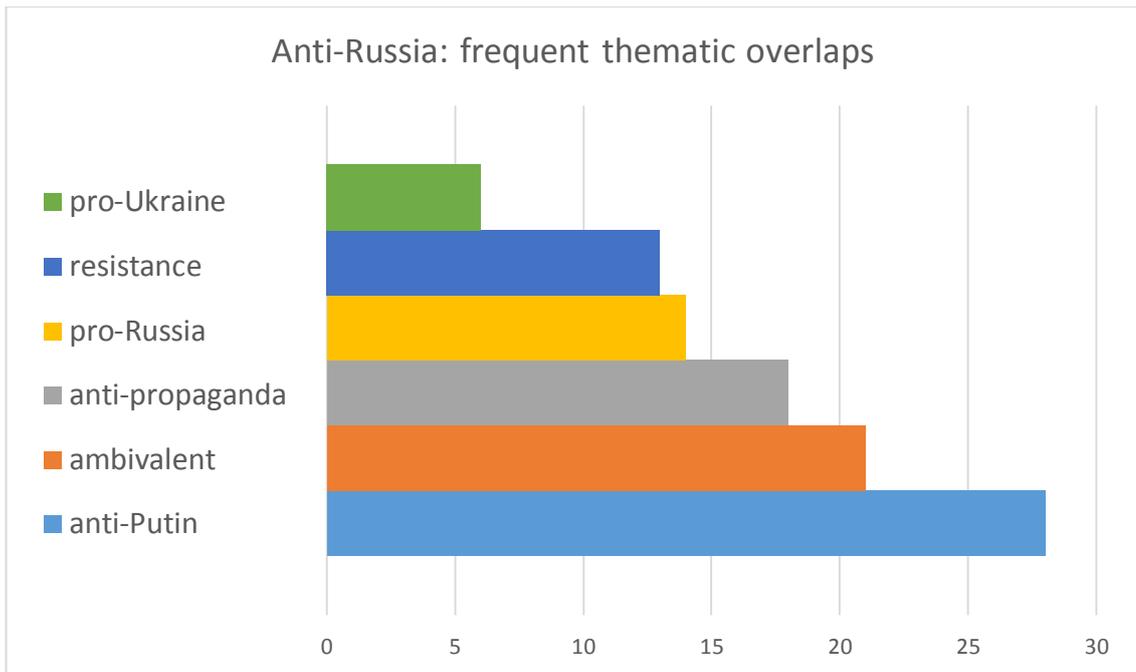
Figure 13. Frequent thematic overlaps of 'Pro-Russia' memes



“Anti-Russia” (121) memes also discuss Russian politics through frequent mentions of the country’s leader (28 cases). They do not exploit the US, the EU or Ukraine much as positive references (pro-US – 1, and pro-Ukraine – 6 cases), but discuss the abuse by the Russian government in much detail. Two main points of criticism include liberal accusations of corruption and poor management (coded as “resistance” – 13 cases) and manipulative character of state and media propaganda (18 cases). These results may indicate that memetic criticism to Russia often invokes internal problems, while pro-Russian narrative engages external referencing points. Critical meme makers often point to the domestic wrongdoings and link them with the international Russia’s activity on Crimea.

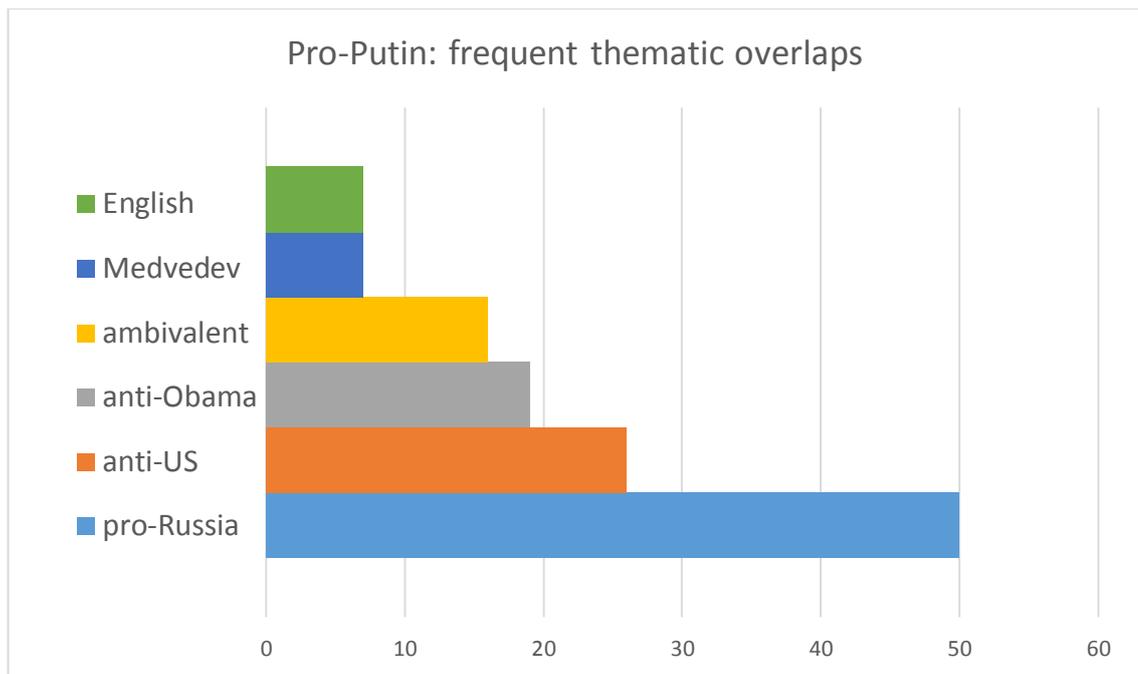
Besides, the “anti-Russia” theme often overlapped with “ambivalent” (21 cases). In these cases, a meme was entertaining and commented on Russian action in Crimea, but its ideological stance was unclear. Many memes of that category presented puns and remix of popular culture, resulting in a witticism that could be interpreted either as critical or supportive of Russia. On the one hand, this finding may insinuate that many meme sharers exploited the Crimean case as yet another opportunity to coin jokes. On the other hand, it may mean that political memes are not always explicit in their ideological connotation, and their interpretation may dramatically vary depending on the recipient’s views.

Figure 14. Frequent thematic overlaps of 'Anti-Russia' memes



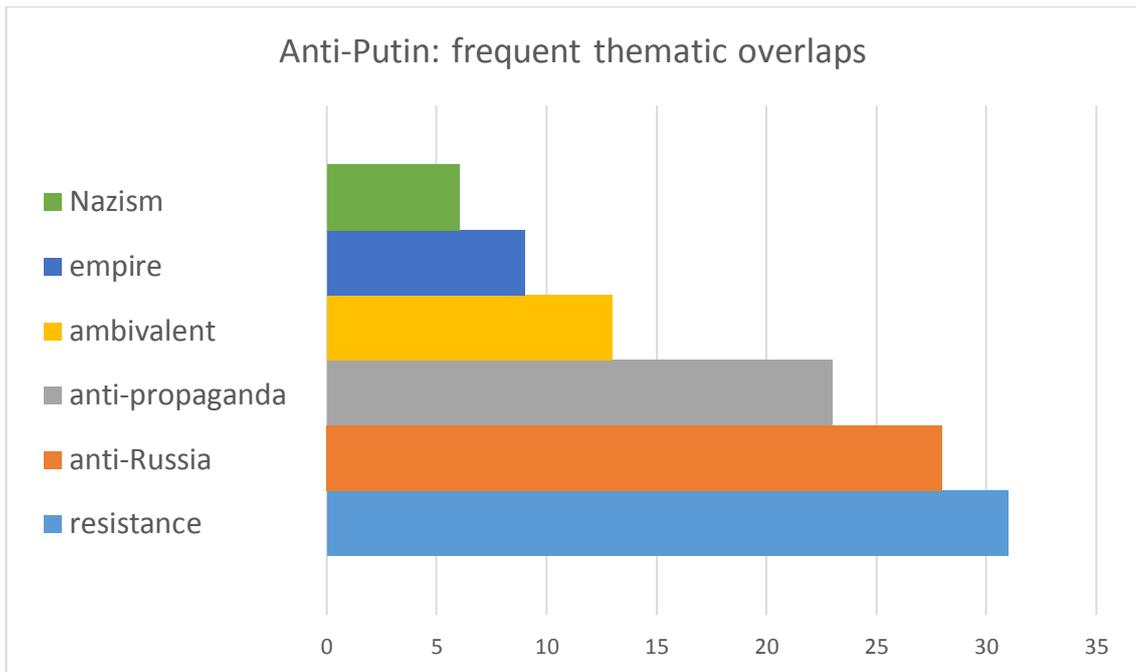
Memos that personally endorsed Vladimir Putin (85) relied on a similar number of themes as “pro-Russia” memes, but enforced more juxtaposition with the US (26 cases) and Barack Obama (19 cases) in particular. Interestingly, they sometimes employed mentions of the Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (7) as a supportive tool. In a relatively significant number of cases (7), pro-Putin memes came from English-speaking users, implying that either Western users adjoined the advocacy for the Russian president, or Russian-speaking netizens deliberately targeted their praise of the leader at the foreign audience. Putin’s supporters occasionally appealed to the narratives of empire (3) and patriotism (3), indicating that these rhetorical notions also form a significant part of the pro-Putin memetic discourse.

Figure 15. Frequent thematic overlaps of 'Pro-Putin' memes



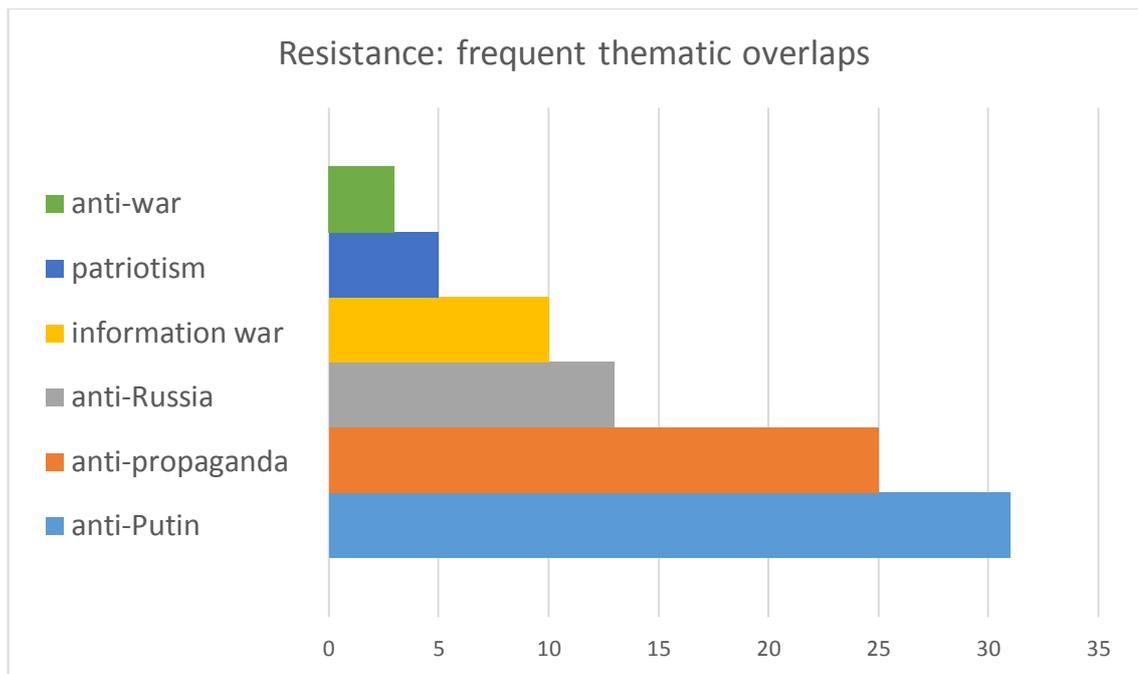
Intriguingly, anti-Putin (110) memes also referred to the popular metaphoric concepts, such as Nazism (7) and empire (9), but perhaps with a different connotation. Besides, anti-Putin memes often contained liberal criticism of corruption and abuse of power (31 cases) and aimed at deconstructing state propaganda (23 cases). These findings demonstrate that critical users were more likely to refer to particular cases, words or events (such as detailed corruption accusations, episodes from television news, and condemnation of particular activities or speeches) than to broad juxtaposition of Putin to global political leaders. Furthermore, a relatively high number of equivocal memes in the anti-Putin selection (13 cases) demonstrates that commentaries on Putin were not always clear in their ideological connotation, and in many cases the same meme could be simultaneously interpreted as criticism and commendation of the Russian president (6 cases). This correlation may indicate that Russian digital users project and interpret political values on Putin differently, and interpretations may vary.

Figure 16. Frequent thematic overlaps of 'Anti-Putin' memes



Resistance memes (72) were mostly targeted personally at Vladimir Putin (31). He received nearly twice more critical mentions than the country’s government and its politics in general (13 cases). Resistant meme sharers frequently pointed to the manipulation of state and media propaganda (25 cases) and the subsequent brainwashing and deliberation of politics on the Internet (10 cases). Surprisingly, relatively few memes directly condemned the military activity and called for peace in Ukraine (3), and only slightly more commented on the notion of “patriotism” (5). These findings illuminate that resistant meme sharers utilised the Crimean discourse as yet another point of criticism of Vladimir Putin and Russian hegemonic politics; they rarely called for the ceasefire, but mostly pointed to Putin’s involvement in the crisis.

Figure 17. Frequent thematic overlaps of 'Resistance' memes



Resistant users expose the manipulative nature of the patriotic discourse and denunciate it for obscuring the recognition of the existing challenges. For the liberal netizens, “patriotism” means realistic evaluation of the issues and rejection of deceitful rhetoric. The frequent recurrence of the “patriotism” theme in resistant memes highlights the importance of this notion for the Crimean narrative. Over 80% of Russian citizens agree that patriotism should encompass the complete support of the authorities and their initiatives (Ryzhkov, 2015). Criticising patriotism is almost a social taboo in Russia (Ryzhkov, 2015), therefore liberal publics who object to the propaganda of patriotism embark on a risky endeavour. “Patriotism” and “information war” constitute two of the most debated topics; users from the opposing sides of the political spectrum (pro- and anti-government) utilise memes to share their interpretation of these concepts.

6.2 Textual analysis

Based on the classification of main themes and expressive styles of memes, I picked 50 exemplary texts for detailed analysis. The scrutiny of this sample unveils the main angles of political criticism or endorsement in the Crimean discourse on Twitter and identifies the prevailing narratives:

1) **Anti-Propaganda memes.** Liberal users expose inconsistency of the state rhetoric and media representation of the annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian revolution and Russian resistance; they criticise the manipulation of traditional media and suggest an alternative interpretation of events.

1.1 A sub-section *Russian Economy* demonstrates how resistant netizens disrupt ultrapatriotic propaganda on Crimea to reverse attention to the domestic economic problems. They dub the appropriation of the peninsula an ideological act with burdensome consequences for the local population.

1.2 The *Welcome Home* sub-section links the powerful narrative of homecoming with the debate on Russian social issues. The government and loyal Internet users depict the annexation of Crimea as a happy act of homecoming, while the opposition hails it as a collapse into a trap.

2) **Imperial Ambition.** Pro-Kremlin users reinforce the popular rhetorical concept that Russia has the strength and responsibility to dominate in the region and inaugurate the pan-Slavic “Russian Empire”; resistant publics utilise memes to comment on the drawbacks of the imperial ambition and the Slavic unity concept. These memes are broader than “anti-propaganda” texts as they exemplify the collective ideas on the Russian domestic ideology and people’s complacency with the politics of sacrifices for the sake of expected glory. The discussion revolves around the possibility of returning to the USSR’s borders and incites contemporary reflection on life in the Cold War era. Besides, meme makers explore how Russian elites call Slavic countries a family and utilise the notion of brotherly responsibility as the justification for involvement in the sovereign country’s conflict.

3) **Russia as a Bear.** A highly popular metaphor depicts Russia as a bear, an unpredictable yet strong and reasonable animal willing to defend its land and offspring. Meme makers apply the allegory of a bear to justify the discourse on Russia’s original path in global history and politics and defend its

lack of compromise in the international diplomacy. The sub-section *The Olympics and the War* discusses the memes that draw symbolic ties between the Russian feast of sport and the following military campaign in Crimea.

4) **The Rule of Power/ Macho Politics.** Pro-government and resistant meme makers deliberate the issues of hard and soft power in domestic and global politics and praise the mounting cult of President Vladimir Putin's personality. The section includes sexist memes that amalgamate the discourses on conservative gender roles and authoritarian politics and conjoin the narratives on sex and power.

5) **Nazism Allegory.** Pro- and anti-Kremlin netizens apply Nazi labelling to either Putin or his international political opponents; evoke the stereotypes on fascism and draw parallels between contemporary leaders and dictators of the past, retrieving similar scapegoating patterns in their rhetoric.

6) **Feel Good Patriotism.** Pro-government users enhance the state media-promoted style of patriotism that involves uncritical enhancement of the military operation in Ukraine. They reinforce the significant feature of the offline pro-Crimean discourse – glorification of the Russian army, but do it by the means of soft digital propaganda. This sort of social media campaigning utilises methods of advertising and positive branding to make the texts appealing to the networked consumer society.

1. Anti-Propaganda memes

Russian traditional and electronic media have produced a colossal amount of coverage on the Crimean crisis. Professional outlets offered a highly biased interpretation of the events, aggressively endorsed the decisions of the Russian government and dismissed any criticism from its opponents (Kachkaeva, 2015). Social media became the only remaining public site of struggle over meaning and alternative reportage. Despite recent challenges to the free flow of information and opinion on

these platforms⁵, digital natives used memes to maintain a critical discourse and expose the lies of media propaganda.

Unable to oppose large media corporations with extensive budgets and excellent technical execution of reports, they fight for the truth by dismantling the polished television texts. As the following example (Figure 18) shows, opposition users reassemble labels and buzzwords from the official Russian rhetoric and glue them with contrasting images.

Figure 18



The Maidan fighters who received money from the West, equipment from NATO and education in European terrorist camps

The spontaneously emerged Crimean self-defence

This juxtaposition of texts highlights the gap between the reality and its mediated version. Russian television was assuring the audience that Crimean people organised the self-defence groups to resist the European and American pressure and preserve independence of the peninsula and keep ties with Russia. These alleged “self-defence troops” appeared in combat uniform and held guns thus casting doubt on the

⁵ The Russian government has hired hundreds of ‘Internet trolls’ that pollute alternative discussions in the cyberspace with meaningless comments and hate speech. This interruption of the social media discourse has received the name of ‘reversed censorship’ (Pomerantsev, cited in Bugorkova, 2015), as it does not limit the expression of ideas directly, but makes meaningful discussions hidden and lost in the noise and fights. See Literature Review chapter, p.17, for more detail.

spontaneous and independent character of this mobilisation. The Russian government denied having sent any professional troops to Crimea and argued that if local people wanted to gather in the name of Russia, it was solely their own will (see Context chapter for more detail).

On the other hand, Russian media enforced the opinionated coverage of the Ukrainian liberal mobilisation and called it the Western provocation, implying that the US and EU orchestrated the rebellion (Reuters, 2014; Kachkaeva, 2014, Kendall, 2014a). State media referred to the protesters at the main square in Kiev's capital, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, as "the Maidan fighters". Journalists labelled them as the recruits of the Western armed forces who receive a solid compensation for spending their time in the protest. Two narratives were developing almost in parallel, prompting the meme makers to comment on the contrast in coverage.

The meme maker attached the state journalists' markers to the images from Kiev and Crimea respectively and exhibited the incongruence of the media labelling. "Maidan fighters" are a group of volunteers who employ random hats as helmets and plates of wood as their armoury, while the "local Crimean self-defence" is fully equipped in professional military uniform. This popular meme (628 retweets, 128 favourites⁶) unmasks the propagandist tactic of Name Calling. The dramatic gap between media narratives and reality becomes obvious when the meme maker borrows the components of media discourse and attaches them to the assumed "real" photographs from the areas. Although one cannot check the authenticity of the images, the meme at least questions the validity of assertive labelling in this case.

Furthermore, this meme contains an array of polemic concepts that often function as the rhetorical weapons of contemporary Russian propaganda. There are references to NATO, EU and US as the source of potential threat to Russia (Riabova & Riabov, 2013). The meme maker ridicules the state rhetoric and shows how, in order to present the armed men on the left as evil, one has to associate them with the Western funding, NATO, European Union and terrorism. The first three themes borrow from the Cold War rhetoric on Western conspiracy, and the fourth theme owes to the 21st century global concern with the terrorism threat. The Soviet Union ideologists

⁶ From here onwards, the amount of retweets and favourites refer to the numbers obtained in February 2015, when the analysis of data took place.

assembled the Cold War propaganda on anti-Americanism and specifically on the conspiracy assumptions that the US was planning to attack the USSR (see Brockriede, 1968). Counter-terrorism rhetoric emerged from the other side of the Atlantic – American media engaged in such rhetoric in the 2000s after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 in New York (Jackson, 2005), and the concept spread out to other Western countries. The counter-terrorism narrative involves denominating certain individuals, groups, countries or regimes as terrorists or as “supporting terrorism”; the government can employ this labelling strategy to justify military invasion of other countries and call upon sacrifices inside their own country (Jackson, 2005).

The conjunction of two strands of rhetoric in Russian propaganda yields an interesting result: it accuses Europe of training terrorists. Traditional Western rhetoric links terrorism with the “clash of civilisations”, the dichotomous opposition of progressive Western lifestyle to terrorism groups as the agents of “barbarism” (Jackson, 2005). Connecting terrorism with Europe indicates an interesting meeting point of the post-Cold War and counter-terrorism narratives. The US was the primary rival for the USSR, but for the present day Russia it is the collective West that includes the US and Europe. Striving to incite more trepidation in the fellow compatriots (see Kachkaeva, 2015), the Russian propaganda accuses this collective West of conspiracy against humankind: they train terrorists and send them around the globe. The meme maker challenges these claims by showing the shabby looking random Ukrainian protesters. Besides commenting on the exaggeration of Russian propaganda, the meme also touches upon the flexible character of terrorism labelling in the modern day agenda. One can accuse an individual, a group or a country of supporting terrorism without any valid proof; it has become a versatile rhetoric label rather than a consistent reasonable charge (see Petersson, 2009; Riabova & Riabov, 2013).

This meme (Figure 19) also interrupts Russian state and media propaganda on the armed resistance in Crimea. It utilises a different principle – it exaggerates the

Figure 19



biased rhetoric to the point when it turns into a bad joke. Reflecting on the Russian government's persistent denial of any connection with the gunmen in Crimea, the meme mockingly marks these troops as “tourists”, as if they were voluntary travellers.

One can read this meme differently depending on your political position. The meme sharer is critical of the government and deployed the meme to renounce propaganda. However, the meme is ambiguous. A member of the resistant public is likely to interpret the text as a sarcastic acknowledgment of the Russian lies. Yet a person supporting Putin's politics may perceive this meme as a flattery to the smart propaganda, an appraisal of bold rhetoric that makes Russia influential and blameless at the same time. The hidden meaning of the two-faced rhetoric is that it exercises power: the Russian government feels confident enough to lie and laugh in the face of international politicians and call its own troops “voluntary self-defence”. The meme maker developed the joke and recommended to identify the gunmen as “tourists”, as

another humorous variation to include in the pro-Russian Crimean discourse. Calling the armed forces “tourists” has not transferred much to the traditional media, showing that neither pro- nor anti-government forces found the tag convincing enough⁷. Nonetheless, the term drifted in social networks and even appeared in the job description of an unusual offer that was spotted online. Several recruiting groups used the biggest Russian social network Vkontakte to invite men from 18 to 45 with military experience to go to Crimea as “Russian tourists” to help decide the fate of the peninsula (Sobytiya, 2015). It remains unclear whether these groups were pranking or actually hiring experienced troops for the Crimean campaign. Nevertheless, the fact that social networks users appropriated the term means that it has become a euphemism for the pro-Russian troops in the peninsula.

Memes have a remarkable capacity to absorb cultural codes and references. This meme (Figure 20) is multi-layered and draws references to many narratives. It suggests how the state media depict the elites and the population of the country: the government works hard to ensure the well-being of the lazy citizens. The Demotivator frame may indicate a witty detail: its black mount reminds us of a TV set, making the meme a symbolic TV screen reproducing the conventional representation of power relations.

⁷ A research on the ‘Russian military tourists’ and other variations of the idiom (in Russian) in the main Russian search engine Yandex did not harvest any substantial results. Those publications that labelled pro-Russian forces in Crimea as ‘tourists’ appeared only in minor media, mostly local and Internet outlets with a relatively small audience.

Figure 20



However, the image contains another joke and a specific reference inside, like the matryoshka doll. The galley slave on the right has Vladimir Putin's face. Comparing the President with a slave is an old joke, deriving from a 2008 meme. Back then, Putin declared at a press conference in the Kremlin, "All these eight years I have been working like a galley slave, for all it is worth. I am satisfied with the results of my work" ("Все эти восемь лет я пахал, как раб на галерах, с полной отдачей сил. Я доволен результатами своей работы.") (Putin-itogi, 2012). The quote was misspelled in the media: "(К)ак раб" ("as a slave") became "как краб" ("as a crab"). Liberal publics coined many jokes about Putin being a hard-working crab (Lurkmore, 2014). This meme functions as a meme in a meme, a sophisticated Russian doll of symbols that links the past with the present. Although the meme does not directly

comment on the conflict in Crimea, it nonetheless ridicules the notion of “news” in an environment of ‘hybrid warfare’ and ubiquitous propaganda. According to the meme, the state media broadcast symbols rather than facts, affirmations of the authorities’ influence and activity, but not the meaningful bits of information or analysis. The text, therefore, disrupts the convention and probes the availability of unbiased news journalism in the Russian media ecology.

Furthermore, many meme makers switch to irrational and artful formats that would expose the bizarreness of the indoctrinated media discourse. In March 2014, the Rossiya-1 channel broadcast a scandalous story. The Kremlin-backed television presenter Dmitry Kiselyov issued an unashamed threat to the United States. In his weekly current affairs show he announced to a massive audience “Russia is the only country in the world that is realistically capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash” (Kelly, 2014). The screen behind him showed a graphic mushroom cloud that appears after a nuclear blast. Kiselyov thus remarked on the success of the Crimean referendum and Russian resistance to any outward criticism, which illustrated Kachkaeva’s (2014) point that contemporary Russian television does not produce news, but generates an emotion and makes the audience hooked to the overly dramatic storytelling.

A number of liberal users replied to Kiselyov by releasing cascades of witty parodies and imaginative memes in digital networks (Suleimanov, 2014a). Many resistant users seized the opportunity to comment on other themes, such as Putin’s international ambition and inability to solve domestic problems. For instance, @roman_krupenik tweeted (translated from Russian): “Russia is the only country in the world capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash, but incapable of building normal roads in the country” (Suleimanov, 2014a: para 9). Other users suggested that Dmitry Kiselyov, who just returned from a family trip to Amsterdam, might consider spending his next holiday in North Korea, as both the US and the EU will probably refuse him entry from now on. In the meantime, pro-government users did not incorporate any other themes, but focused on defending the presenter. They argued that Kiselyov’s allegation was not a threat but explanation of what may happen if somebody attacks Russia.

Figure 21

Ученые выступили против Киселева
chronicle.pro/media-news/uch ... #Крым
#Euromaidan #Путин #Москва #Россия
#Болотная #Crimea

👤 Reply 123 Retweet 5 Favorite 111 More



Scientists have contradicted Kiselyov <weblink> #Crimea #Euromaidan
#Putin #Moscow #Russia #Bolotnaya #Crimea

Figure 22



Many meme makers offered doctored versions of the image of Kiselyov swaggering about the radioactive ash. The choice of meme making method illustrates the absurd character of propaganda journalism. By placing Kiselyov in the surreal environment (e.g. when the mental care nurses lead him away (Figure 21) or he carries a peacock's tail (Figure 22)) the meme makers deem the media agenda as surreal by the way it distorts truth. Absurdity contradicts logic; absurdity is unreasonable, foolish and ridiculous and offers an alternative way to defend a healthy critical mind. As the Theatre of Absurd in the 1950s-60s broke convention to express a sense of shock at the absence of sensible well-defined systems of values (Esslin, 1965), absurd memes also convey the feeling of disillusionment. Hence, many "radioactive ash" memes use incomplete communication – no clarification accompanies the edited image, and weird laughter becomes the last available resort to protect truth and reason. Following the Theatre of Absurd's principles of applying absurd critically, Kiselyov memes with nurses and peacock's tail disturb the shiny completeness of the conventional television picture, a habitual template of a tidy presenter in a bright-lit studio. By deconstructing the visuals, meme sharers question the transmitted content and the validity of the words and graphs.

Moreover, the reference to a peacock serves as the allegoric commentary on Kiselyov's public demeanour. Comparison to a proud and showy bird inflicts the

image of someone who flaunts his or her colours and revels in bragging. The meme casts doubt on the appropriateness of such department for the host of a federal news programme; it therefore questions whether Kiselyov's unprofessional and disgraceful claims owe to his personality or the necessity to serve the needs of propaganda. The meme subsequently examines the role of a journalist in the oppressed media environment, when a professional serves as a dependent mediator between the state and the publics. The meme makers point to the irony and idiosyncrasy of such pseudo-journalist employment: Kiselyov pretends to host a personal analytical programme, but lacks autonomy in judgements.

Figure 33



Meme makers can be frank in criticising their own attempts at digital polemic. This meme (Figure 23) grasps the essence of hybrid warfare's impact on the SNS users and scorns clicktivism. It mocks the enthusiasm and naivety of the "couch troops", the average citizens who turn to the Internet to express their views and fight the adversaries. Joining the impassioned, frenzied political debates in social networks can be pleasing for one's self-esteem and reputation. Getting engaged in these discussions becomes a rewarding and accessible self-identity in contemporary Russia – one can steam off and feel having contributed to the important public discussion (Kachkaeva, 2015). It is worth noting that this meme also features the postmodern characteristic of self-reference, the custom to represent the world not in the way the author experienced it, but through references to how the author and others had presented the world before (Noth, 2007). The creator of this meme critically remarks on his own practices of digital disputes and on those of his fellow social network users; this is a meme about those who coin memes. The visual language of the meme suggests protective helmets as a metaphor for the prejudices that people carry with them to their online debates. Many of these prejudices come from the propagandist discourse of traditional media. Subsequently, many users join the virtual discussions to promote their own perspective and dismiss any alternative points of view (Kachkaeva, 2015). Two characters in the meme look identical, and only the flags on their heads make a difference. The meme probably suggests that the existence of an open space for a free conversation does not secure a balanced exchange of opinions, and interconnectivity does not shorten the distance between people if they prefer to remain in their own bubbles.

In summary, Anti-Propaganda memes aim at disrupting the hegemonic media discourse and exposing its deceit. They deconstruct elements of state rhetoric and media propaganda and reassemble them to reveal the truth via irony and sarcasm. Moreover, the majority of memes in this category encourage a critical assessment of the "truth"; despite the exposure to multiple sources of information offline and online, people find it extremely challenging to find truth in the Crimean conflict. Moreover, Anti-Propaganda meme sharers invite us to reflect on the function and morals of journalism in Russia and the journalism code of practice that allows channelling of biased and distorted facts. Resistant users have adopted various defence mechanisms for keeping the sanity of their minds from propagandist journalism: rational, absurd and multi-coded humour. Anti-propaganda memes further explore the merit and

consistency of political debates online; they critically point to the incongruity of clicktivism and warn of techno determinism, suggesting that citizens bring their offline prejudices to shared digital spaces. Meme makers subsequently question the possibility of candid representation and interpretation of events during wartimes, either on the television or on the computer screen.

Russian Economy

Resistant meme makers have implemented other strategies in opposing state propaganda. Anti-Propaganda meme sharers exposed the inconsistencies in media representations by directly dismantling the specific components of media discourse that referred to the media coverage of the Crimean crisis. Other users pursued a more ambitious task and tried to discuss how the discourse on the peninsula fits the broader rhetorical narratives that had flourished before the Crimean campaign, but obtained new interpretation during the 2014 events. Two main prevailing propaganda themes arose from the content analysis: assertion of the thriving Russian economy, and the mythological narrative of the Russian empire in the process of regaining its power.

Many memes commented on the financial outcomes of annexing Crimea. In 2014, media and experts were divided on the economic benefit of incorporating the peninsula into the Russian territory. A few of them calculated that the region's development would cost Russia a total of 30 billion dollars up until 2025 (Shokhina, 2014). Other experts claimed that Crimea was primarily a strategic appropriation for Russia: the country secured control over the Black Sea coastline and did not have to pay rent to Ukraine for keeping naval bases there (Shokhina, 2014). Nonetheless, by cutting Crimea off from the Ukrainian infrastructure it obliged Russia to provide for the region and build power stations and transport links in a short period. Many financial experts agreed that obtaining Crimea was a strategic and ideological move with severe economic consequences. Despite initial public approval of the peninsula's annexation, by the end of 2014 60% of Russians acknowledged that the level of life would decrease in Russia because of the Crimean events (Levada-Centre, as cited in Parfyonova, 2014).

Memes on the Russian economy aim at drawing a link between Russian welfare and politics. The primary meme format of opposition publics here is Demotivator, the suitable expressive vehicle to compare optimistic forecasts and assumptions with reality.

Figure 24



THIS IS RUSSIA, which is ready to offer financial help to Crimea

One of the Twitter users accompanied this meme (Figure 24) with a tweet “Vladimir region sent 14 tons of humanitarian aid to Crimea”. The image exploits the iconography of canonical Russian landscapes displayed in museums. The photograph of the rural landscape in the meme reminds us of classic paintings produced hundreds of years ago (Figures 25 and 26), thus pointing at the continuously troubled existence of the Russian periphery.

Figure 25. V. Polenov, "Russian Village" (1889)



Figure 26. K. Korovin, "Village" (1902)



Figure 27



Another version of the meme (Figure 27) employs the same image, but with a more satirical tagline: “In the epicentre of stability”. This meme also attacks state rhetoric around Russian prosperity and ties it with another trademark propaganda concept – the worth of “stability”. The Russian authorities have persistently referred to stability as one of the primary achievements and treasures of the country’s management: they often warn of the turbulence of an economy and invite the population to worship stability instead of change or improvements (Belkovsky, 2003). The meme agrees that stability does indeed exist in many parts of Russia, but it takes the form of stagnation and scarcity. This observation casts doubt on the overall merit of the politics that present stability as an accomplishment.

Framing a meme as a painting is uncommon for Western meme makers and seems a local Russian peculiarity. Existing research on memes (Milner, 2013; Burgess, 2008; Shifman, 2013) does not identify remix of a classic painting as a specific meme

layout. The rising popularity of the pattern in Russia perhaps owes to the famous Russian idiom “kartina maslom”. It literally means “oil painting”, but people use it ironically to express one’s shock or amusement by what she sees. @ElenaMikhailova included the idiom as one of the tags next to the meme. The other tag is “Crimea is ours!”

Figure 28



Crimea is ours! Now we will start living in full!

This meme (Figure 28) confronts the patriotic excitement over the Crimean annexation and suggests that the exhilaration conceals social and economic problems of the country. The image represents many of those issues: lack of education, excessive drinking and smoking, early exposure to substance abuse, poor economic conditions etc. The meme received another alteration in the LiveJournal blog post of a user @teh_nomad (ranked #225 among Livejournal bloggers). He added, “Do you remember how everyone was happy back then, thinking that everything would get better? However, it turned out as it usually does. They keep robbing again”. He referred to the initial euphoria around the Crimean annexation and then included a

report by the Interfax information agency arguing that somebody stole the humanitarian aid sent to Crimea (Teh_nomad, 2014). Memes that employ a painting-like framing narrow the gap between the pompous and buoyant rhetoric and more realistic evaluation of domestic affairs. They also express the disillusionment of at least part of the public with the sanguine Crimean discourse and public celebration; these bitter and discouraging memes are in a polar opposition to the tone and content of the state propaganda.

Another popular layout of Russian Economy memes is matching expressive portraits of Russian citizens with motivating slogans or trending catchphrases (see Figure 28). They fit into the global rendition of the classic Demotivator meme: the clash of the image and text produce a shocking effect and confront the slogan. Russian Demotivators on socioeconomic issues display the average Russians who support the president, and criticise their blind conformism to the corrupt regime.

Figure 29



F***ing cool, Vovan has nicked Crimea!

The children's bad teeth (Figure 29) suggest living in poor economic conditions. Despite poverty, they nonetheless celebrate the recent Russian geopolitical achievement and praise the country's leader. Teenagers take liberties with the Russian president and refer to him by the familiar lad name "Vovan". The meme producer thus criticises the population's incorrect perception of a country's accomplishment – instead of looking for an improved level of life, citizens applaud ideological gestures

Figure 30



On the left: Is Crimea ours?

On the right (from top to bottom): It is not yours, but ours!

Let us rejoice!!!

with negative economic consequences (over 80% of the population approved of Putin's activity in 2014 (Levada-Centre, 2014, cited in Parfitt, 2014)).

@CatDemokrat adjusted the meme with two children (Figure 29) and included more characters (Figure 30) – a homeless man, laughing Putin and Medvedev and two old women probably taking part in a rally. This meme juxtaposes the elites with impoverished Russian people of various social categories and ages (a middle-aged man, teenagers and older women). The meme aims at emphasising the distance between higher and lower layers of society. It also comments on the success of propaganda – the nation perceives the interests of the elites as their own. The meme producer attempts at disrupting this crooked identification and argues that Crimea “belongs” to Putin and Medvedev more than to the Russians at large. It draws a line between Crimea's ideological impact on the domestic audience and the accompanying economic burden. The text can qualify as an educational meme: it encourages reflection on the obscured implications of alleged political triumphs and calls for a more grounded evaluation of the government's efficiency.

Figure 31



Crimea is ours!

Rarely do memes depicting an impoverished Russian population include facts and statistics. Normally the catchphrase makes a comprehensive statement and links the meme to the context. However, in this example (Figure 31) the meme sharer supplemented the dramatic monochrome image with numbers: the tweet says “A postcard to the patriots. Today we (Russia) buy abroad over 90% of fine works and machinery, 45% of our imports come from Germany”. These worrisome numbers counterbalance the superficial slogan of the Crimean campaign “Crimea is ours!”, and the portrait of the impoverished rural citizen glues the two components together. The meme suggests an awakening from the Crimean-induced euphoria and condemns the blind patriotism and trust in the government.

One of the drawbacks of the Russian Economy memes is their limited capacity to share data. The meme format facilitates locating the issue, but restricts argumentation: unlike the exceptional meme with statistics, the rest of the texts mostly call for an emotional reaction rather than rational consideration of facts. Russian Economy memes oppose government propaganda by remixing recognisable symbols of the promulgated discourse (“Crimea is ours”) with disturbing visuals. Surprisingly, this group of memes also draws on the historical perspective and employs the framework of a classic painting to emphasise the continuity of the poor management and sparse living conditions of rural Russia. The texts subsequently condemn the rhetorical concept of “stability” and suggest that it deceitfully masks stagnation and lack of progress.

Welcome Home memes

The idea that Crimea is coming home, returning to the place where it belongs, was very popular in public speeches and the mass media in 2014. The main Russian search engine Yandex returns 1 million pages when typing in Russian “Crimea has returned home”. Major television channels and newspapers used this slogan and narrative in their news reports on Crimea (Khudikova, 2014; Purim, 2014). Vladimir Putin applied this framing in his annual broadcast 2015 New Year address to the nation, asserting, “Love to the Motherland is one of the most uplifting feelings. It expressed itself fully in the fraternal support to Sevastopol and Crimea, when they decided to return to their home” (RT, 2014c: para 5). This narrative not only legitimises the Russian actions in Crimea, but also designates the case to an almost mythological realm. The Crimean narrative fits the classic fiction narrative of “Voyage and Return”, one of seven basic plots of human culture (Booker, 2004). The protagonist goes on a mysterious and dangerous journey, overcomes multiple threats and returns with invaluable experience. The Biblical Parable of the Prodigal Son and Homer’s *Odyssey* are among the most known examples of this plot in world culture.

Figure 32



The tweet: Welcome back, Crimea!

The text inside the meme: Welcome Home!

The liberal public criticised the homecoming rhetoric. They used memes to confront the notion of the “return” of the peninsula and insisted that Crimean people should think twice about whether to celebrate their new country. The meme (Figure 32) with ugly monsters opening their embrace towards the viewer emerged in March 2014. Apparently, it is a work of a well-known cartoonist Vassily Lozhkin⁸. Twitter users shared the meme multiple times, appending tweets like “Welcome back, Crimea!” (@CatMoriz) and “Crimea is coming back into the great country!” (@AndriyKoval). The lack of direct correlation to Crimea in the cartoon makes a

⁸ Vassily Lozhkin (or Vassia Lozhkin) is a known Russian cartoonist, blogger and musician. His works often go viral in the cyberspace and users deploy them to political discussions (Adme, 2014).

meme relatively safe for its creator. The artist’s website strongly rejects the assumption that he draws political metaphors; Lozhkin defines his own work as depiction of the imaginary world of weird creatures and lunatics (Vasya-Lozhkin.ru). However, Twitter users persistently tie the meme to the critical Crimean discourse. The folkloric expressiveness of the meme (aggressive and dreadful faces of imaginary creatures that embody new “compatriots”) suggests a new mythological narrative that contradicts the dominant discourse. Instead of returning to the comfort of one’s long lost home, Crimea is entering the abyss; the homecoming promise was a mirage that disappeared and unveiled an ugly reality.

Intriguingly, pro-government users also incorporated the meme in their discussion on Crimea. Without changing the image, the pro-Kremlin account @Myrevolutionrus completely reversed the tweet: “Are journalists of Novaya Gazeta publishing photos from their family album? #Crimea #Ukraine #Antimaidan”. He or she thus pointed at Novaya Gazeta, which is among the few remaining independent newspapers famous for their fearless impartial investigations. The altered meme labelled liberal journalists as dreadful monsters and criticised their coverage of the Crimean campaign. This example demonstrates the ambiguity of such visuals as cartoons in meme making, as users can appropriate them to convey very different messages.

The iconography of this meme (Figure 32) may contain references to cartoons, comics, posters and even recent social media hits, such as Ellen DeGeneres’ Oscar

Figure 33



selfie (see Figure 33). The composition is densely packed with unpleasant carnivorous zombies. The colour scheme – brown, greenish yellow and red – connotes dead flesh, darkness, decay and despair. Individuals stand in three dense rows, and this compressed composition implies that a viewer can hardly escape the offered embrace. The feelings aroused by the meme may resemble the sensations of those Crimeans

Figure 34



“Sir! Go back to your place! This is not your home! |PR Post #Putin #Crimea”.

who were not willing to join the Russian population, but were obliged to. Lozhkin’s cartoon became one of the recognisable symbols of the anti-annexation narratives in social media (see, for instance, Kasparov.ru, 2014).

Ukrainian users also commented on the “homecoming” narrative. One of them, a very popular resistant account @EuromaidanPR⁹, used an edited Soviet poster to make a point (Figure 34). While propaganda paints Russia as a happy home for

⁹ @EuromaidanPR is a popular pro-Ukrainian anti-Russian Twitter account with over 40,000 followers. It defines itself as “#1 independent citizen media about #Ukraine” and tweets many times a day, providing news and images on the Russian-Ukrainian war conflict (see more in Appendix).

Crimea, the Ukrainian people feel like somebody has robbed *their* home. The change of angle from one “home” to the other invites the audience to reflect on the homecoming narrative’s legitimacy. There is an important motif of invasion in this image. It was not feasible to track down the original poster and distinguish the narrative it belonged to, as the Internet search for the visuals has substantial limitations. Nonetheless, the iconography suggests it is the 20th century placard supporting the rightful claim of civilians to protect their homes and families. Power relations in this narrative imply mercy for the vulnerable individuals, a woman and her children. The meme maker introduced the Russian president’s face in the poster, and he personifies the attack on Crimea. The allegory is direct and explicit: the meme maker depicted Russia’s activity in Ukraine as Vladimir Putin storming an innocent peaceful home; the Russian president looks like a direct threat and aggressor to the Ukrainian civic life.

Meme makers who attack the homecoming narrative operate on the symbolical level: they carry off to earth the mythological exaggeration of the state discourse and contaminate it with touches of reality. By dissolving the celebrated concept of returning home, they question the applicability and flexibility of the notion of “home” in two dimensions: as time and place. Russians, Ukrainians and Crimeans have opposing opinions on what to define as “home” for the disputed peninsula. Moreover, the Russian liberal public inquires whether it is the right time for “Odysseus” to return “home” as Russia is struggling with domestic issues and may not be the most welcoming homeland for new territories and populations.

2. Imperial Ambition

The term “Imperial ambition” defines a country’s desire to create an empire and project power over neighbouring states (see Chomsky & Barsamian, 2010; Galeotti & Bowen, 2014; see pp. 23-27 of Literature Review for more analysis of the Russian Idea and Imperial Ambition). The Imperial Russia idea implies that the country has the obligation to reinstate its longstanding glory and global significance. The state, therefore, demands sacrifices from its citizens in the areas of comfort, safety and financial stability for the benefit of the awaited political magnificence of the country

on the world map. The authorities invite the population to evaluate their living conditions not by the global standard, but by the unique local paradigm thus making the government practically unaccountable (Dubin, 2014). In Crimean memes, Imperial Ambition rhetoric appears in two main instances: as the enhancement of the Soviet myth and claim to restore Soviet borderlines of the country, and as a milder narrative of the alleged familial ties and shared history between Russia, Ukraine and the Crimean population in particular.

The New USSR Project

The following meme (Figure 35) illustrates how digital publics respond to the imperial narrative. The meme proposes to return Russia to its Soviet borders. The tweet says, “Russia is not getting angry. Russia is concentrating. It is time to get things together!”

Figure 35



“We were born to make the fairy-tale true!”

The map of the Soviet Union carries a Soviet slogan borrowing from the first verse of a 1923 popular song “Aviators’ March”. It used to be the official hymn of the Soviet Air Forces and military orchestras often play the song at parades. This meme indicates that the myth of the Soviet prosperity is becoming increasingly popular in the 2010s. Levada-Centre (2014) reports that 40% of Russians assess the economic and political system of the USSR as “almost perfect”. Sociologist Lev Gudkov (2014) believes that people’s longing for the USSR owes to the gaps in collective memory. Russian citizens have forgotten the real life conditions and remember mostly positive key points such as a free healthcare system, housing and public utilities. The ruling elites promote the romantic vision of the Soviet past: television frequently broadcasts movies of those times that promote an idealised portrayal of the society and lifestyle. At the time there was a wave of media reports and investigations, public discussions and workshops on the de-sentimentalisation of the Soviet era in the 1990s-2000s, but it has not affected public opinion in the long-term perspective and on a deeper level. Prokhorova (2015) believes that the de-idealisation required more repetition,

introduction to the school curriculum and establishment as the state's official standpoint.

Besides, the population's tendency to sentimentalise the Soviet past may also signify an unexpressed criticism of the current government which is unable to provide the same availability and quality of public services. The majority of pro-Soviet publics reside in small towns and villages (Gudkov, 2014) and often depend on the infrastructure remaining from the USSR. Old Soviet factories and enterprises may be the only job providers for the whole town. The population from peripheral areas, Gudkov (2014) notes, are frightened that they would not be able to survive in the market economy and dream of a strong socialist state; they are willing to pass responsibility for their well-being to the authorities and hence idolise the Soviet system of distribution of goods.

The meme (Figure 35) contains a curious reference to the realm of a myth – the verse mentions the “fairy-tale” that should be made true. The meme maker is self-contradictory as he or she classifies the Soviet dream as an unattainable myth yet still demands the revival of the USSR. The map creates an intriguing symbol here: it serves as the verifiable evidence that Moscow's dominance over such a colossal land was once a historical fact. If the USSR happened before, the meme maker implies, it can happen again. The presence of a map turns the idea real and presents the possibility as the completed act.

The majority of memes represent the USSR in memes through symbols, as either a map or a flag (Figure 36). For instance, a Ukrainian opposition user @Dbnmjr published a meme containing a Russian flag that conceals the flag of the Soviet Union underneath. This framing may attract manifold interpretations. Many Russians yearn for the USSR's reunion, while the citizens of the ex-Soviet countries detest the “back to the USSR” rhetoric. Notably, memes promoting the New USSR idea rarely specify which ex-Soviet states should be absorbed. Clarity on the geopolitical victims of reunion may repulse users from those countries and invoke their opposition to the memes praising the New USSR.

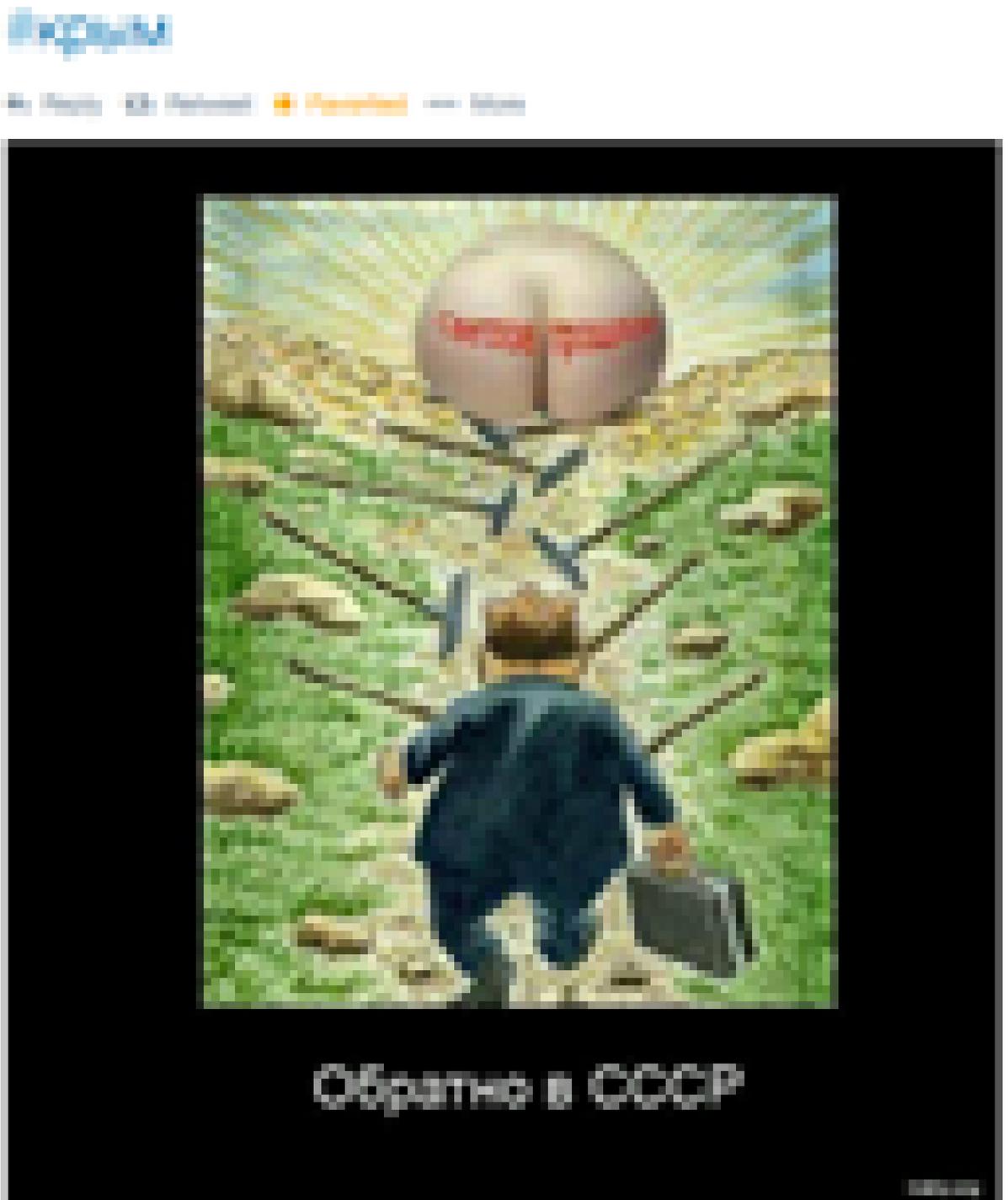
Figure 36

Putin's dream.

Reply Retweet **Favorited** More



Figure 37



Back in the USSR!

Critics of Russia's imperial ambitions refer to folklore and proverbs to ridicule the imperial narrative. This meme (Figure 37) uses the contemporary Demotivator frame, but other components belong to the traditional vernacular humour. A man walks directly into what looks like shiny buttocks, and the text says "Back to the USSR".

Numerous rakes on the road in front of him symbolise the well-known idiom “step on the same rake” which means, “repeat the same mistake”.

Figure 38



Reinforcement of the Soviet myth may play against the current government. Several memes (see, for instance, Figure 38) on imperial ambition encompassed the figure of Joseph Stalin, a very controversial figure in Russian history. In 2013, almost

50% of respondents positively evaluated the role of Stalin in the country's history (Levada-Centre, 2013). The Soviet dictator also led the rating of the most distinguished persons of all times, beating the likes of Lenin, Marx, Peter the Great, Pushkin, Putin and Great Patriotic War commanders (Levada-Centre, 2013). Only 25% of Russian people treat Stalin negatively, with disgust or fear.

Sociologists admit that the attitude towards the Soviet leader is gradually becoming positive over the years (Ria, 2013). The following meme creates a fertile soil for debate. It does not explicitly reveal the author's attitude towards either Putin or Stalin. We observe a confident and demanding Joseph Stalin confronting an awkwardly looking Vladimir Putin from the mirror. The meme consists of a cartoon; there is no text to shed the light on the author's intentions. The account that circulated it defines itself as Ukrainian, hence the meme is most likely to vilify Putin and the Kremlin. The analysis of the meme's iconography further proves the critical character of the meme. Putin holds the pose of a soldier saluting the officer of a higher rank or a guilty child in need of confessing something to his parents. Stalin appears cold-hearted and powerful, keeping his signature posture and wearing a combat uniform.

Although the meme slates Putin as the successor to the notorious dictator, it can also serve as the endorsement of this controversial "inheritance". Those in favour of Stalin may admiringly notice that Putin adopted many traits of Stalin's political strategy: from rigid vertical hierarchy of governance to the cult of personality. Those condemning Stalin as the oppressor would find it alarming to see him equated to Putin. The third interpretation would be to see Stalin as a much more powerful historical figure, an aspiring role model for the Russian president. The fourth interpretation is that Putin is obsessed with Stalin and fantasises of following in his footsteps so passionately that he starts envisioning Stalin in the mirror.

The juxtaposition with Stalin sheds light on the potential trajectory of Putin's public representation. Travin (2014) claimed that Vladimir Putin had to decide on a rebranding strategy for his public persona after he turned 60 in 2012. The Russian leader faced a challenging choice on whether to stick to the "Macho" image, or invest in either "The Wise Elder" or "The Saviour of the Motherland" identity. According to Travin (2014), Putin chose the last title and utilised the Crimean crisis as an opportunity to earn it.

Figure 39



Putin of Taurida

This meme (Figure 39) favours Travin's (2014) assumption as it endorses Vladimir Putin as the Saviour of the Motherland. It presents the Russian president as a noble leader from the past who has already earned a classic portrait with a uniform full of medals. The tagline says "Putin of Taurida" and rephrases the title given to the 18th century Russian Duke Grigoriy Potyomkin. "Taurida" is the ancient name for Crimea. Potyomkin successfully annexed Crimea from the Tatars in 1783 under the

rule of Catherine the Great. The empress granted him the honorary Title “Duke of Taurida” for that achievement (Prodan, no date).

The parallels between Putin and Potyomkin appear reasonable as they both obtained Crimea, yet some rumours from the Duke of Taurida’s biography can disrupt the glorious comparison. Not by chance, the meme does not mention the full name of the Duke. “Potyomkin” is a part of a well-known Russian idiom “Potyomkin villages”. It refers to the legend that Grigoriy Potyomkin installed the fake perfect looking villages full of happy citizens to convince the empress of the opulence of the Russian province. Catherine the Great went on an inspection trip in her carriage and Potyomkin deceived her with the cardboard houses, fortresses and actors-peasants (Ria, 2010). The idiom “Potyomkin villages” functions as a metaphor for deliberate treachery and falsification of the results of your work to astound your superior commander.

Although a pro-government user posted the meme, it divulges an ironic intertwining of two sides of Russian politics – imperial ambition and corruption covered by propaganda. This ambiguity makes the Duke of Taurida a dubious choice as a point of comparison with Putin. The public may not link the two episodes of the Duke’s biography, but the more educated will notice the contradiction.

Figure 40

Q: How does Putin call Alaska?

A: Ice-Krim

46 Reply 12 Retweet 1 Favorite 1 Map



Kiev, here I come

Alaska Memes. Memes that discuss the possibility of returning Alaska to Russia form a special strand (see Figures 40 and 41). It can be attached to many other narratives (for instance, Macho Politics), but is mostly related to the Russian imperial ambitions. The Kremlin justified the annexation of Crimea as the “correction of a historical mistake”. Bloggers suggested applying the same pattern to Alaska, the American state that used to belong to the Russian territory (Tetrault-Farber, 2014). Tsar Alexander II sold this land to the US for \$7.2 million in 1867. It is unclear whether politicians or pro-Kremlin journalists started the Alaska memes, yet the narrative has been present in political speeches, media publications and social networks (Tetrault-Farber, 2014). Putin acknowledged the Alaska narrative, but did not elaborate on it in his public appearances. However, a woman asked the President about the possibility of annexing

Alaska during his traditional broadcast open line with the nation in 2014. Putin joyfully remarked “Faina Ivanovna, my dear, why do you need Alaska?” (Ria, 2014), thus closing the topic with everyone laughing.

Figure 41



“Keep on moving! Take away your cloth and get the f*** out of here!”

A common trait of Alaska memes is that users realise the mock character of the claims to “bring Alaska back”. Jubilant and light-hearted memes help the users to overcome fear regarding sanctions and global tension that followed the Crimean annexation. Netizens turn the appropriation of Crimea into a mythological act, a folkloric joke; they scorn the real consequences of the event and exaggerate the phantasmagorical dimension. They brag about snatching Alaska, Kiev, the Moon and other lands with the same facility. Alaska memes interpret global politics as a reality game or a show,

where Putin always wins. This framing invites the Russian public to celebrate that they stay on the winning side.

Family Narrative

Meme makers widely exploited the themes of brotherly unity and pan-Slavic camaraderie both in pro-government and critical texts. The ambition to dominate the global political arena drives the Russian authorities to propagate the concept of Russian patriarchy over other countries and draws parallels with traditional family ties. Hegemonic Russia often identifies itself as the “older sister” or “older brother” to demarcate the country’s hierarchical status in relation to neighbouring countries and diplomatic partners. A high-ranked Kremlin-related diplomat Andrey Kortunov elucidated the subtle gender connotations of these family-related metaphors: “Who are we now for the Chinese? Perhaps, older brother no longer... They have a notion of “older sister”. Older brother is the one you necessarily have to obey, while older sister is the one you respect and whose advice you follow, but must not conform to. I think now we are “older sister” for China” (Kobzev, 2015). The evolution of the “older brother” in the “older sister” rhetoric symbolises Russia’s attempts at projecting soft power instead of hard power over influential counterparts.

The Russian public rhetoric has also progressed from patriarchal to neo-patriarchal in recent years (see Snyder, 2003, as cited in Stein, 2005). Opposed to the dominant, conservative, highly hierarchical state established over rigid traditional gender roles and an unyielding family order, the neo-patriarchal state tolerates more flexibility. Neo-patriarchal narratives exhibit a smoother, gentler version of traditional masculinity: media portray men as caring fathers and husbands, compassionate protectors and sympathetic caretakers (Snyder, 2003, as cited in Stein, 2005: 604). An overly dominant conservative male conveys aggression, while a neo-patriarchal man consents to a compromise. When transferred to politics, these notions correlate with hard power and soft power (or at least a softer version of hard power, for authoritarian regimes). Memes appealing to fraternal bonds communicate soft power. Instead of issuing a direct order to obey, the Russian state validates its involvement in the

Figure 43



Russia: If you misbehave, I will take Crimea away from you!

Ukraine: But Mom, I am a grown up!

Germany & the UK: Who raises children this way? You have no right.

USA: I will send you to the psychiatric institution!

Another mutation of the meme (Figure 43) loses on rhetoric ferociousness, but adds more remarks on Russia's dialogue with the West. The confrontation expands beyond mere politics to the broader contested themes of "tradition" and "norm".

The scene reminds us of the modern debate on the Western Juvenal laws. The Russian media have been negatively reporting on many cases of the Juvenal laws' implementation in European countries, claiming that courts take children away from their parents to turn them gay and into drug addicts (see Kozlova, 2015; Golosa Gorodov, 2015). The meme maker presents the involvement of European countries in the Crimean conflict as the intrusion of strangers into Russia-Ukraine's private family matters. The categories of "public" and "private" are vague; the meme maker identifies Russia as the righteous parent, and Europe as the aggressor who imposes own imperatives without respecting the local situation. The author of the meme does not mind Russia's intrusion in the neighbour's local issues: he or she portrays Ukraine as a Russian property or at least a dependant. By doing so, the meme maker may be unconsciously exhibiting the collective fear and confusion over the rights and

boundaries of international diplomacy. As a result, the meme endorses communal living and an old-fashioned reliance on kinship over the social structures of the modern society.

Despite the efforts of the Family narrative apologists, resistant meme makers denigrate the caring nature of the neo-patriarchal Russia. They paint Russia as the demagogue and assailant; cast doubt on the idea of a family reunion and suggest it was an act of robbery instead. This meme (Figure 44) points to this forced relationship.

Figure 44



“Ukraine, wait! We are brothers...BROTHERS, I said!”

This is a peculiar comment on the dynamic of the Russian-Ukrainian relationship over the years, as it actually remarks that Russia's influence over Ukraine is dramatically limited. The seeming historical-cultural connection and suggested mutual affection deteriorate when Russia insults the neighbour's sovereignty. The meme implies that Russia can keep the "little brother" attached only by means of violence and threats, "hard power" instead of "soft power". Russia has a prolonged tradition of perceiving Ukraine as part of its own territory and political influence over the neighbour has been "an existential imperative" for Moscow for centuries (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012). According to the Chatham House's analysis (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012), Russia of the 2010s possesses limited socio-economic resources for projecting authority over Ukraine. The lack of pertinent instruments of control prompts the exploitation of national myths around the "common future" of the ex-Soviet states. Such ideological apparatuses as the Russian Orthodox Church, the media and non-governmental organisations have access to the Ukrainian public due to the common language and historical influence: the majority of Ukrainians speak Russian fluently and many churches belong to the Moscow Patriarchate. These institutions are capable of deploying narratives on the might of pan-Slavic unity to the Ukrainian people, acting as the enforcers of "soft power".

Nonetheless, the Kremlin of the 2010s cannot afford a soft power rhetoric. A country has to retain a significant political and economic authority to appear invincible and influential to the foreign states (Nye, 2004, as cited in Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012: 2). The power struggles in Ukraine over 2013-2014 have divulged the growing ineptness of Russia to oppose the soft power of the EU and US; the failure of Moscow's diplomatic schemes resulted in the success of the Maidan Nezalezhnosti protests and a complete change of rulers in Ukraine. The loss of influence in Kiev exhorted Moscow to the open execution of "hard power" and the physical capture of Crimea. Russia's endeavours to resuscitate the narratives of familial bonding and a common past are now stumbling upon a watershed, the Crimean case. The meme emphasises the gap between two dimensions of power that Russia projected over Ukraine and an inability to switch between them without damage.

Figure 45



@XIIINON tweets: "Sisters can quarrel, but robbing your little sister is the last thing to do #Ukraine #Russia."

The depiction of Russia and Ukraine as two sisters (Figure 45) illustrates an interesting combination of a general approval of the Family narrative and condemnation of its role in the Crimean case. @XIIINON validates that Russia and Ukraine can be called sisters, but disagrees with Russia's right to take the possessions of her 'sister'. In a surprising twist, the Sisters meme progressed to the offline realm, but appeared in a completely different context. In March 2014, Russian opposition leaders organised the March of Peace in Moscow against the Kremlin's military invasion in Ukraine (Luhn, 2014). Thousands of people gathered in the streets of the

Russian capital to condemn war: among them was a woman holding the Sisters poster (Figure 46).

Figure 46. A woman holding a poster at the March of Peace, Moscow, March 2014



Although many Twitter users shared this meme to validate Russian involvement in the conflict, the protesting woman utilised the image to call for peace. This appropriation of the Sisters meme proves that one meme can yield a diversity of interpretations as its incomplete and flexible nature allows for adjustment to various discourses and narratives. However, this case also alerts us to the discursive unpredictability of memes; they are unstable symbols. On the one hand, transformation of a meme’s meaning extends the discourse; on the other hand, through the rows of miscomprehension a meme can lose its rhetoric sharpness and subsequently drop in popularity.

Ukrainian users resisted the Family narrative by suggesting the concept of a Broken Family. One of the most popular memes started as an offline poster. Someone hung the image of two hands, the damaged Ukrainian and the augmented Russian, and asked in Ukrainian “Brothers?” (Figure 47).

Figure 47



Brothers?

The meme maker employed classic iconography to make his text archetypal: it reflects the act of giving and receiving, and condemns unwanted “help” as the violation of good practice and loyal relationship. The image uses the symbolic depiction of two hands and refers to Michelangelo’s fresco “Creating of Adam” (circa 1512) (Figure 48).

Figure 48



The meme calls for the reassessment of a centuries-long Russian rhetoric of calling Ukraine “a little brother” (see Literature Review chapter, p. 24-27). The continuous exchange of Sisters and Brothers memes by pro-government and

opposition users exemplifies that Family narrative is a Trojan horse, especially on the Ukrainian side. The over-simplified nature of this allegory no longer suits the political context, as many inner contradictions and questions emerge - are Ukraine and Russia still “siblings”, why does Russia consider it appropriate dictating to Ukraine, are there any benefits for Ukraine to comply with or reject the dated narratives and so forth. By seizing Crimea, Russia has broken the code of conduct and shattered the previously promoted narrative of two countries embracing the same routes and interests. The memes exemplify the hypocrisy and perhaps the fatal dissolution of the Family narrative for the Ukrainian publics.

The study of the Imperial Ambitions narrative manifests a fascinating amalgamation of the Orthodox Church’s doctrine of the Imperial Russia, the myth of the Soviet prosperity, the demand for neo-patriarchal state hegemony and Moscow’s failing attempts at projecting soft power in global diplomacy. References to religion are relatively rare, but the pro-Soviet sentiments of the idealised life under the Communist authoritarian rule are ubiquitous. Pro-Kremlin meme makers express their longing for the stable, prosperous super-state that can endeavour to dominate the globe. However, this public demand may in fact conceal the unacknowledged request for better management of the country, more efficient public services and financial security. Memes reflect the recurring message of the state rhetoric that ideological and cultural dominance should prevail over material needs of the population. The Russian government has a remarkably high approval rating, which proves the triumph of the patriotic rhetoric within the country. At the same time, pro-government social network users express their approval of conservative gender roles, vertical social hierarchy, rigid discipline and traditional family. Intriguingly, pro-government memes frequently link the two components: a stable super-state and patriarchal society. This finding is particularly interesting, as the Soviet Union required women to be equal counterparts to men in labour and social duties. Nevertheless, this trend towards equality does not appear in the memes, which mostly celebrate the mythological, idealistic comprehension of the traditionalist social order.

Many memes discuss the inconsistency of Russian imperial claims and familial narratives on Ukraine. They also point to the gap between the domestic worship of the

Soviet myth and international denunciation of hard power and patriarchal ideologies. Twitter users remain divided in their evaluation of the current Russia's level of affluence on the global arena; therefore, they project either Soviet or Western values in the desired vision of Russia's identity. Liberal meme sharers also expose the lack of clearly identified alternatives to the remnants of Soviet ideological and social system: contemporary Russia struggles to design an original identity on the global arena and still refers to the glory of the USSR and ambitions of the Cold War era.

3. Russia as a Bear

The Olympic Games in Sochi in February 2014 seemed to have called a temporary "ceasefire" in the exchange of political memes. Although the liberal public kept criticising the government for corruption and minor issues, they paid much respect to the Olympics and did not ridicule the organisers or sports federations much - patriotism won over protest (Walker, 2014b). 81% of respondents felt more proud of their country thanks to the Games in Sochi (Levada-Centre, 2014, as cited in Poroshina, 2014). Even the leaders of political resistance praised the professional organisation, the beauty of the opening ceremony and the achievements of the winning Russian athletes.

Figure 49



One of the well-known memes on Sochi and Crimea (Figure 49) looks like the work of an English-speaking user and seems more appealing to the Western rather than Russian publics. The meme uses advertising techniques and advances an ironic rebranding of the Games. It involves three official mascots of the Sochi Olympics: polar bear, hare and leopard (Olympic.org, no date). The meme implies that the Kremlin may have used the Olympics to turn the public attention away from the Russian military campaign in Ukraine. Mascots here may represent the unidentified gunmen in Crimea. It can also mean the failure of the Games as the festival of good spirit and sport. In this case, the meme may imply that people would remember the Sochi mascots as the symbols of war, not peace. The supporting tweet points at the Russian reputation abroad and says, “Bear, Bunny, and Leopard are taking a field trip! #Crimea #Крым #война #war”. Russia has made such a big and costly effort to modernise its economy and reputation by means of holding the Games (Fedyashin, 2014), yet the following Crimean crisis may have destroyed all this good work.

Figure 50



“We won over them all!”

Pro-Russia accounts also included the Olympic mascots in their memes (see Figure 50), but utilised them to conjoin the narratives on the Olympics and Crimea. They hail the military success together with the achievements in sports. Tiny flags attached to the plush toys applaud the unity of ex-Soviet countries not at the Sochi slopes and sports arenas, but in the geopolitical arena. The meme appeals to the patriotic sense of the audience and praises an abstract victory “over all”. The Olympics as the hallmark feast of sport allowed people to experience the boost of adrenaline when they were following their favourite teams and individuals in their battles to the medals. The Crimean crisis followed the Games so shortly that many pro-Kremlin individuals may have switched from one drama to the other. They transferred the feelings of excitement from sports to war and rooted for the Russian soldiers as they had been rooting for the athletes weeks before. Sport and war share a similar semiotic system, and the elites have articulated and mobilised the tropes related to sports in many armed conflicts (Jansen & Sabo, 1994). Power holders have frequently deployed sports/war rhetoric for nation building, and in the Crimean case, two narratives mingled into one to bypass the social divisions and political discrepancies of various

groups in society and buttress loyalty to the ruling elites (see Jansen & Sabo, 1994). This meme manipulates the post-Olympic euphoria to advocate for the unity of the Slavic family; the reference to the feeling of shared triumph invites Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians to relinquish their local wrangles and unite in pan-Slavic patriotic solidarity. Although Belarus was not involved in the Crimean conflict, the meme drags it in for the sake of mobilising the Slavic myth.

Many Olympic memes present Russia in the form of a bear. 2014 marked a conscious revival of that centuries-long emblem of Russia, and memes help to shed light on the reasons why.

Figure 51. "Turkey is in danger". British cartoon commenting on the Russian plan of conquering Constantinople. 1853 (RT, 2010)



The portrayal of Russia as a land of bears first appeared in the writings of 16th century Western explorers. They reported that these wild animals had been wandering freely in the streets of Russian settlements. Although Russian fairy tales and folklore frequently feature a bear, the stereotype of depicting Russia as a bear in politics came from abroad. Western political cartoonists of the 18th century first rendered Russian emperors as bears (RT, 2010). Since then, both international and local cartoonists, writers, journalists, philosophers and politicians persistently articulated the metaphor to lay emphasis on Russia's nonconformity, unpredictability and confrontational

demeanour (see Figure 51; De Lazari, 2012; Riabova, 2012). De Lazari (2012) draws a socio-historical explanation for the domestic regard of the allegory. He blames the Soviet social oppression for inflicting hatred towards discipline and order on the Russian mentality. The trauma of collectivism, negligence of personal freedom and economic independence, made people perceive the state and the law as an enemy. Russian philosophers and writers insisted on the importance of the Internal Law (moral values, religion) for Russians over the External Law (social contract, judicial system and welfare state) (De Lazari, 2012: 276). A bear is an allegory of a wild spirit, a creature strong enough to resist pressure and retort violently to any attack and threat to its land or breed. The connotations of power and safety make the bear metaphor alluring for Russian collective identity. However, Riabova (2012) notes that the West mobilises a bear as a symbol of Russia more than Russia does for itself, and often in a negative sense.

The USSR government employed the bear in an attempt to rebrand the country in global discourse. They made an amicable bear “Misha” a mascot of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow (see Figures 52 and 53): this bear was not the wildlife barbarian, but resembled a benign teddy bear. Organisers of the 1980 Games closing ceremony ended the show with a meaningful detail - they let the giant inflatable bear fly away in the Moscow skies (see Figure 53). For many people this was a symbolic farewell to the hostile tension of the Cold War: Russia let go of being tumultuous and feral; the bear metaphor is outdated and deserves to rest in peace (Platoff, 2012).

Figure 52. A bear called Misha, the legendary symbol of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games



Figure 53. The peak moment of the 1980 Olympics closing ceremony, Misha flying away in the summer skies. This was a very touching scene for the audience

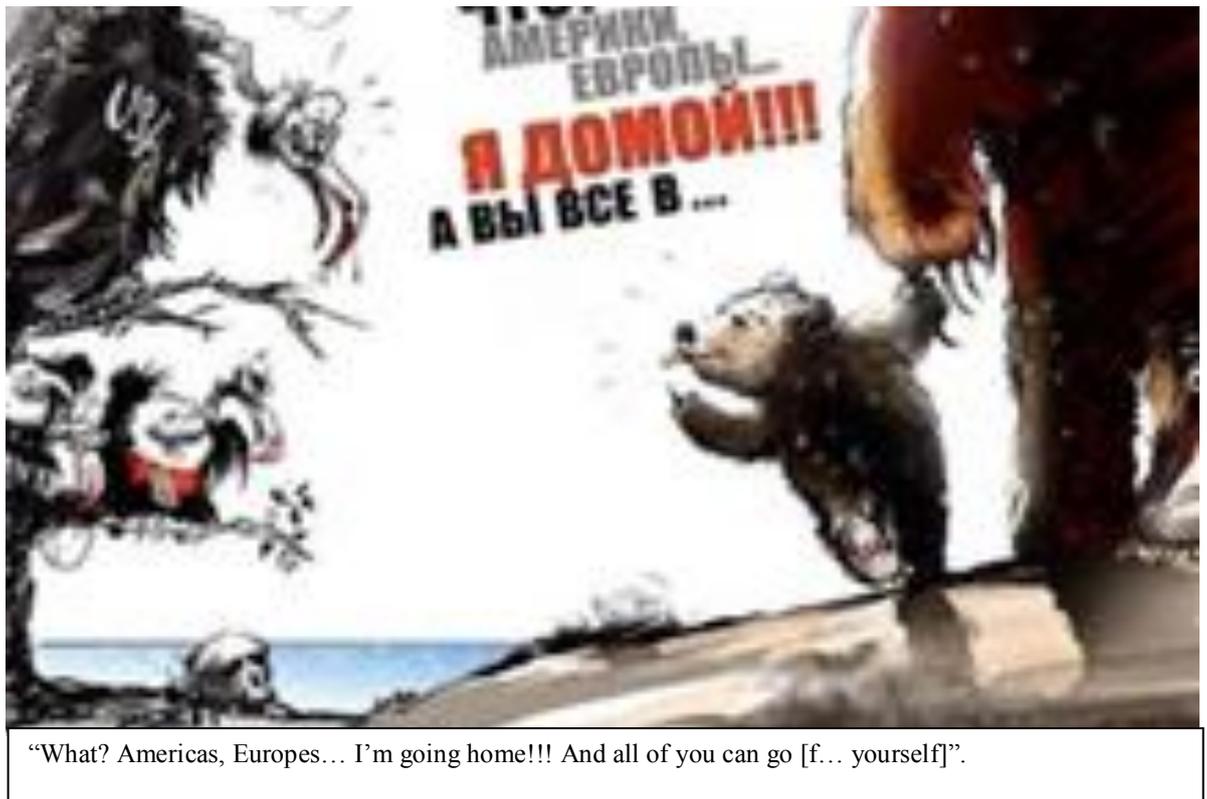


Figure 54. The official mascot of the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi



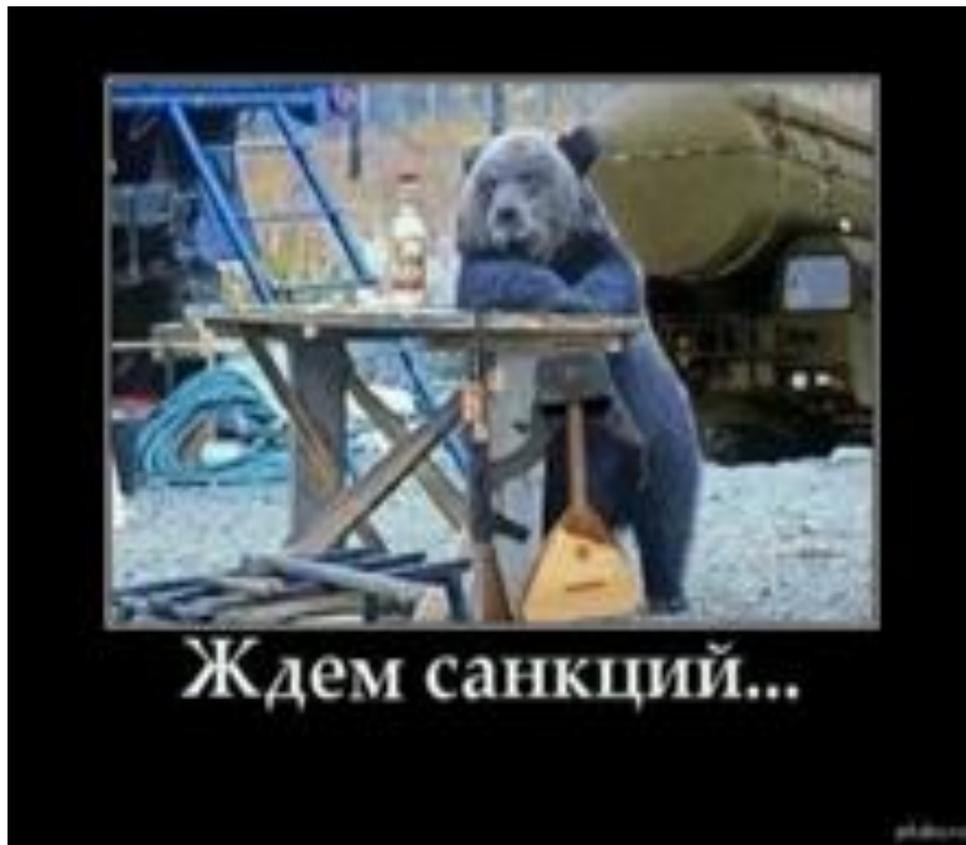
The revival of the bear metaphor for the Olympic Games in Sochi, where a bear re-appeared as a mascot (see Figure 54), creates a surprising continuity between the 1980s and 2010s. The post-Cold War environment of the last century was marked with the desire to cease the hostility and establish a global balance, while the rise of 2012 marked a new round of tension between Russia and the West. The 1980s Olympic bear promoted peace and the 2014 Olympic bear has high chances to be associated with war (Koshkin, 2014). The perpetuation of the bear trope in the war/sports narrative indicates that the bear still functions as the allusion to Russia's hard power and reminds us of the Cold War-like antagonism between Russia and the rest of the world.

Figure 55



This meme (Figure 55) appeals to the archetypal idea of Mother Russia taking the baby bear (Ukraine) home. It uses two popular narratives – Russia as a Bear and Family. The meme reinforces the official Russian position on the annexation of the peninsula and propagates the Family narrative via folkloric symbols: two bears signify a long awaited reunion.

Figure 56



“Waiting for the sanctions”

This very popular image (Figure 56) appears in many memes related to the Crimean crisis. In most cases, the photo alone makes a statement, in other versions users add a commentary. The meme of a nonchalant bear surrounded by the symbols of Russian national glory (from the traditional music instrument balalaika to a tank) articulates the narratives of the Russian special path of development and unconventional standpoint in global politics.

The exchange of sanctions between Russia and the West resulted in a partial economic isolation for Russia. Nevertheless, the cultural isolation has become even stronger. In December 2014, Vladimir Putin deemed the economic turbulence in Russia as “the price to pay for our natural desire to self-preserve as a nation, as a civilisation, as a state” (Kremlin, 2014a, para 3). Putin notably and proudly included a bear metaphor in his speech. He gave a highly allegorical address to the crowd of 1,200 Russian journalists gathered in Moscow’s World Trade Centre. The annual

meeting with the press coincidentally followed the collapse of the rouble a few days before. Putin reassured his guests that the economy would rebound and compared Russia to a bear protecting his taiga. *“(S)ometimes I think that maybe it would be best if our bear just sat still. Maybe he should stop chasing pigs and boars around the taiga but start picking berries and eating honey. Maybe then, he will be left alone. But no, he will not be! Because someone will always try to chain him up. As soon as he is chained, they will tear out his teeth and claws. In this analogy, I am referring to the power of nuclear deterrence. As soon as – God forbid – it happens and they no longer need the bear, the taiga will be taken over. <...> And then, when all the teeth and claws are torn out, the bear will be of no use at all. Perhaps they will stuff it and that is all. So, it is not about Crimea but about us protecting our independence, our sovereignty and our right to exist. That is what we should all realise”* (Kremlin.ru, 2014: para 4).

Putin’s speech both explains and mystifies the analogy with the bear. He portrays him as a reasonable creature protecting his land; his hostility is the direct result of the pressure from the outside. At the same time Putin draws a parallel with nuclear deterrence, looping in the Cold War narrative of nuclear threat (see also Sen, 2014). Reference to the bear’s control over nuclear weapons suggests that his enemies should refrain from pressure. This speech points to the bear’s unpredictability and relates to the classic centuries-old allegory of a bear for Russia. The 2014 Putin address squandered all the rhetoric efforts of the 1980s bear rebranding.

Bold framing of the bear memes (expressive photo or laconic cartoon with minimum text) implies that many Twitter users endorse and approve Putin’s vision. The bear serves as a positive self-representation of Russian self-defence – celebrated inside the country and feared from the outside. It signifies an important shift towards the rule of power as opposed to the rule of law, liberalisation and compromise.

The bear rhetoric has another particularly significant function; it fosters the atmosphere of threat and danger surrounding Russia from the outside, but describes the decision makers as the indomitable guardians of their people. The new wave of approval of the bear metaphor indicates the population’s content with the government’s course to hard power and harsh actions. Russia appears in memes as a bear either waiting for an attack or succeeding over weaker adversaries. Bear memes

also fit into the Russian Imperialism discourse – they present the animal as a solitary custodian of the forest, a fierce fighter for his land and offspring. The controversial nature of the bear symbolism – sturdy and fair, yet unpredictable and savage – stimulates the domestic endorsement of Russia as a special character in global politics. By promoting the narrative on Russia as a bear, the authorities reserve the right to implement unreasonable and erratic measures inside the country and disobey international diplomatic principles. They may call for sacrifices for the preservation of the “sieged land”; the bear protects his environment by all means, not only those approved by civilisation. This rhetoric assigns the blame for internal issues to external enemies and presents the elites as mighty guardians of their people.

4. The Rule of Power / Macho Politics

Content analysis of the Crimean memes has revealed a strong pattern – plenty of them depict the Russian leader and his allies as members of a gang or a group of lads. Machismo and mafia discourse often intertwine in the memes on Putin and promote the authoritarian politics when power and domination prevail over rules and negotiation. Many pro-government users make Vladimir Putin personify Russia; these two have become interchangeable actors in recent political memes. The missing distinction between the leader and the state owes to two peculiarities of the Russian politics: centralisation of power and a tradition of the leader’s cult of personality. By 2015, Vladimir Putin had evolved as a leader who is “revered, even feared, to the point where no one will contradict him; aloof, isolated, a digital hermit who is never out of touch; broadly supported, but very narrowly advised by an ever-tighter group of confidantes” (Walker, 2014a: para 2). The president has sweeping control over the parliament dominated by the highly loyal Edinaya Rossiya party; Moscow appoints local governors and faces little opposition at the regional level.

Soon after Putin’s election as the president in 2000, his portraits appeared on the shelves in many bookstores and his biography was introduced in the school curriculum. Vladimir Putin was the first Russian leader to restore the features of the cult of personality that Joseph Stalin had previously established (Cassiday & Johnson, 2010). Max Weber outlined three types of leadership: traditional, rational-legal and

charismatic (Rees, 2004). Charismatic leadership entails integration of the social and political institutions around the alluring figure of a leader; either mass adoration or fear secure the collective veneration of the leader's personality and subservience to his power (Rees, 2004). Joseph Stalin was a prominent example of a charismatic leader who centralised power, secured a rigid vertical hierarchy and built his prestige on the myth of his extraordinary personal talents and skills. The late Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev coined the term "cult of personality" ("kult lichnosti") in 1956 at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party; he started the notable course to the deformation of the cult of personality and condemned the despotic regime of Stalin as the abuse of power.

The Russian audience of the 2010s has witnessed many popular attempts either to restore Stalin's popularity or dismiss him as a violent tyrant responsible for taking thousands of lives (see Rees, 2004; Cassiday & Johnson, 2010). Putin's cult borrows few traits of Stalin's worship yet lacks the sacramentalisation (Rees, 2004) that it had during the Soviet times. Ideological state apparatuses such as the media and cultural institutions refrain from portraying Putin as a godly man; instead, they present him as the man with excellent talents and skills yet obeying to God and church. The communist regime appropriated many concepts and principles from the Orthodox Church, forging the cult of the head of the Communist Party as the living god. Similarly to Stalin, Putin promotes his own personal cult to unite the society around it and offer "psychological and emotional reassurance, a focus of stability and unity, in a world of uncertainties" (Rees, 2004: 13). The Russian president's public persona has many facets that can please various strata of the population: they span from the military action hero to the violent gang leader.

Putin as an Action Hero – Militarised Masculinity

The post-Soviet reality comprises the strong influence of global technological advancement, the Western consumer culture and local restoration of the leader's cult of personality. Cassiday and Johnson (2010: 686) suggest that two pervasive cultural practices shape Putin's cult: nostalgia and consumption. The ongoing myth of Soviet grandeur stimulates positive public regard towards the charismatic leader. Putin has also established an effervescent public image of an action hero, a physically strong

and energetic male whose representation borrows many details from consumer and pop culture (Travin, 2015). The media largely featured the Russian president's machismo escapades, from hunting to diving to the seabed for the antic amphorae. These public appearances contained many traits of popular stereotypes and visual icons from the film industry, linking the public persona of Putin to the characters of action movies. Besides, Putin's exaggerated and demonstrated physical health responds to the nostalgic longing for the strong and dominative rule of the Soviet leaders (Goscilo, 2012). After the unreliable and physically unstable Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, many Russian citizens expressed their desire to have an authoritative figure in top administration (Bjelica, 2014) and return to the vertical hierarchy in the government and society (Belkovsky, 2003).

Russian audience mainly endorses Putin's mediated machismo, while the Western public express mixed attitudes, from mockery to adoration (see Williams, 2013; Weil, 2014). The enthusiasm over sexualised public appearances of Putin has reached even Western social media users – they, not Russians, mostly produced memes celebrating the physical abilities of the Russian leader. Many Western memes depicted Vladimir Putin as a boxer in a ring with Barack Obama (Figures 57 and 58). They reimagined Rocky Balboa's fictional fight with Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV* (1985), where Sylvester Stallone and Dolph Lundgren played the main characters.

Figure 57



Figure 58

[@RoyalTXGirl](#) Hey ...lets knock the crap outta this guy over the weekend oK!! :-)

Reply Retweet Favorite More



In many memes in the collected data, Putin appears physically stronger and even much taller than the American president does. American writer Josh Weil (2014) speculates that the Russian president enchants the Western audience with his ruthless energetic activity and ability to “do things”. Putin’s actions may not be democratic, yet they show a decisive active man in power. The reference to the box office hit about Rocky acts as a versatile popular reference and can connote support either to Putin and Obama, as the meme is flexible.

Figure 59. Image from the feature movie Rocky IV (1985)



In the formulaic film that celebrated the American dream (Arnold, 2013) the hard-working Balboa overcame many obstacles and defeated the fearsome Soviet boxer Drago. However, if the audience is not familiar with the plot, the overwhelming physical presence of Drago-Putin in the meme suggests his victory. Another peculiar finding about Rocky’s meme is the return of the Cold War symbolism. Hollywood movie culture offered reassuring narratives to the American population; producers utilised Rocky’s opposition with Drago as the allegorical explanation of the nerve-racking conflict between two superpowers (Arnold, 2013). Memes involving references to Rocky Balboa appeal to the legendary popular culture narrative and subsequently amplify the gender politics of crude brutal masculinity. At the same time, one can read the metaphor of boxing as a compromise between soft and hard power, a

meeting point between war and sport. Those who fight in a boxing ring confront each other with passion and often brutality, but retain respect to the opponent. Overall, the memes on Rocky Balboa indicate that the audience perceives the new wave of confrontation between the US and Russia in two instances: as a familiar encounter (reference to the past) and a spectacular duel (reference to the fictionalised character of the battle).

Figure 60



The Olympics may have finished, but the games are just starting

Figure 61. Daniel Craig as James Bond



The fictionalisation of Vladimir Putin's charisma mobilises parallels with other movie characters, and one of the most frequent appearances is James Bond. The memes (see, for instance, Figure 60) operate on the visual iconography of the British secret service agent (see Figure 61) and refer to Putin's past as the officer of the Soviet secret service KGB. This reference exemplifies another ambivalent trait in Putin's forceful masculinity – besides acting simultaneously as a father and a lover, he also tethers two types of war roles: as an open warrior and a secret agent.

War discourse as the display of muscle and influence has been especially efficient in Putin's public identity. His anti-terrorism military campaigns in Chechnya increased his popularity in the 2000s. The two last times Putin's rating was as high as now (80%), were in 2000 and with the wars in Chechnya and Georgia respectively (Levada-Centre, 2014, cited in Parfitt, 2014). Parfitt (2014) accordingly observes that Putin's popularity jumps up when he performs strong-minded energetic actions.

Putin as the Gang Leader - Criminalised Masculinity

The political memes of the 2010s not only amplify the traits of Putin's cult, but also enrich them with a new component, the "criminalised" variation of the masculine identity. Mafia discourse has a mixed perception in Russia. Many people negatively

associate it with the dangers of the wild 1990s and at the same time positively link with insuperable power and an attractive dominant masculinity. The rise of mafia culture in the 1990s-2000s reflected fundamental changes in the country. The decomposition of the USSR in the 1990s led to the emergence of 'violent entrepreneurship' (Volkov, 2002): lawless individuals proliferated in the ruins of the Soviet economy. The market sank into deep depression, and nearly 40% of Russians were living in poverty by 1993 (World Bank, cited in Milanovic, 1998).

Private business had to develop under pressure from criminal gangs. They consisted of ex-sportsmen and the enforcers who offered protection from competing mobs and corrupt police (Koltsova, 2006). Nearly every business in the country had to pay an interest rate to a chosen ring. The boundary between state and non-state agents of violence was blurred. Only later on, by the end of the 1990s did Russian mafia godfathers adapt to the market economy and converted to executives and politicians (Koltsova, 2006).

Many ex-gangsters invested in media outlets and upheld the glamorised media representation of organised crime. Besides, Volkov (2002) noticed a general trend among Russian journalists towards romanticising criminals – media professionals would rather call them 'mafia' than 'organised crime'. The choice of term is important. The members of the audience who were not familiar with the ugliness of the organised crime envisaged mafia in the terms of movie images. Mafia discourse has been notably infiltrating Russian television and films since the early 2000s. Many popular TV series and films (see, for instance, *Brother* (1997), *Brother 2* (2000), *Banditskiy Peterburg* (2000), *Brigada* (2002), *Bummer* (2003); see Figures 47 and 48) tell the stories of the talented likeable youngsters who frequently disobeyed the law and succeeded in criminal business. Although a few critics have accused these dramas of aestheticizing mafia culture and violence, the movie industry awarded them prestigious prizes.

The popularity of mafia culture affected the norms of public behaviour, fashion and slang. Many Russian politicians and celebrities, including Vladimir Putin, have been notoriously exploiting vulgar prison and mafia slang since the late 1990s (Yaroshevsky, no date). For instance, in 1999 Prime Minister Putin made a famous comment about air strikes on terrorists in Chechnya, promising to hunt them everywhere: "Even if we find them in the toilet. We will rub them out in the outhouse"

(Brown, 2012). Putin mobilised a harsh slang expression “mochit v sortire” (“rub them out in the outhouse”), which is not used in literary Russian and belongs to the rude and abusive vocabulary (Yaroshevsky, no date). An established philologist Chudinov (2001: 34) states that the development of language reflects the decline of the Soviet faith in a glorious future; the deterioration of the linguistic norm expresses the public accord that one has to be a criminal to survive in modern Russia. Conversely, Krongauz (2014) points out that Putin normally speaks in literary Russian, but uses occasional slang to provoke the audience and draw their attention to specific statements. In propaganda studies, this practice classifies as the Plain Folks rhetoric technique when the leader deliberately turns to colloquial vocabulary to shorten the distance and establish bonds with the public.

The utilisation of colloquial slang and mafia jargon may serve as the linguistic ornament for Putin’s machismo. Human beings exploit slang from as early as teen age. Adolescents use slang as a bonding tool in their communities; it helps to build confidence and present oneself as “cool” and persuasive in the group that approves of this type of expression (see Grossman & Tucker, 1997). Furthermore, slang normally buttresses the conservative gender rhetoric and tends to denote women in sexist derogatory terms (Grossman & Tucker, 1997), thus nurturing macho narrative.

A political and environment activist Evgeniya Chirikova (2015) accordingly notes that the proliferation of prison and criminal slang promotes the corresponding lawless norms of public behaviour and reflects the collective trauma of the USSR’s detention system. 18 million Soviet people passed through the gruesome experience of the forced labour camps of the Soviet era, known as Gulag (Gulag History, no date), many of them guilty of no crime. Between 1928 and 1953, Joseph Stalin sent to the camps his political enemies, rich peasants with all their families, eminent military officers and doctors, priests and dissident intellectuals, and many other innocent people, forcing them to starve, die of harsh climate conditions and illnesses and exhausting manual labour (Gulag, 2015).

This long-term exposure to the fear of arrest and prison experience has gravely affected the Russian population: many people have prison survivors in their families or know somebody who does. The prison’s “kingpin” is the centre of absolute power for other convicts, he communicates supremacy and violence, and there can be no

debate or compromise. Chirikova (2015) suggests that the Russian nation lives in the “forced labour camp mentality”, which explains the neurotic conformism to the state and relentless circulation of criminal slang. “It became clear why there is so much thieves’ talk in a fairly stable and prosperous society. It varies from the songs and words that parents neglectfully use when talking to their children, to the prison norms of behaviour, which imply that to “scam” or cheat on somebody is an indication of smartness and audacity, but not the asocial behaviour. The society holds a lot of fear of the authority; people perceive them as a kingpin who demands incontestable acquiescence” (Chirikova, 2015: para 9).

Prison and mafia cultures still influence the mentality and social practices in the 2010s. Even in the 2000s-2010s with its regulated market economy and structured law and enforcement systems, the population still envision the criminal underworld as one of the most pungent forces in the country. An exemplary survey took place among undergraduate law students in the Russian city of Saratov in 2006. Sociologists asked future law professionals whether they would turn to criminals for help in the most critical personal situations. Almost half of the respondents admitted they would seek aid from the mob, if legal measures proved ineffective (Kovalenko et al., 2006). This means that in contemporary Russia, the mafia still sustains the reputation of the last resort, the dark power holders who can solve problems when no one else can.

Figure 62. "Brigada" (2002), a cult TV series about a group of friends forming a gang



Figure 63. "Bummer" (2003), a very popular mob flick about a group of Russian gangsters going on a road-trip in post-Soviet Russia



Figure 64



Don't worry, Vityok,
We'll sort it out!

Memes often present Putin and his allies as a gang. Figure 64 depicts Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Ukraine's ex-president Viktor Yanukovich and the Russian president Vladimir Putin as a criminal unity. The textual component has references to mafia symbolism as much as the visual elements – masculine postures and dark coats resembling mafia's trademark dark leather jackets. The user added a third component – a tweet - cementing the overall mafia connotation of a meme.

@MedvedOfRussia posted (translation from Russian) “We figured it out. Now, Vityok, you ought to pay us interest rate for the job. Give us Crimea”. By “figuring it out” the meme sharer probably means the anti-government protests in Kiev and the EU’s pressure – they disturbed Yanukovich’s rule and made him flee Ukraine. Russian leaders welcomed Yanukovich in Russia and offered him protection in the Russian territory.

In the context of the enduring popularity of mafia culture, Putin’s criminalised masculinity becomes a conscious choice for his public promotion. The meme above expresses strength and authority. The audience may enjoy perceiving three leaders as a united gang living by their own principles. On the other hand, the meme can act as a criticism to Putin and his allies who allegedly apply criminal methods to global politics. The meme sharer condemns the fact that the rule of power is preferred over the rule of diplomacy. In fact, there can be a third interpretation – the group may look comical to the audience due to the inequality in heights and the difference in facial expressions.

Figure 65



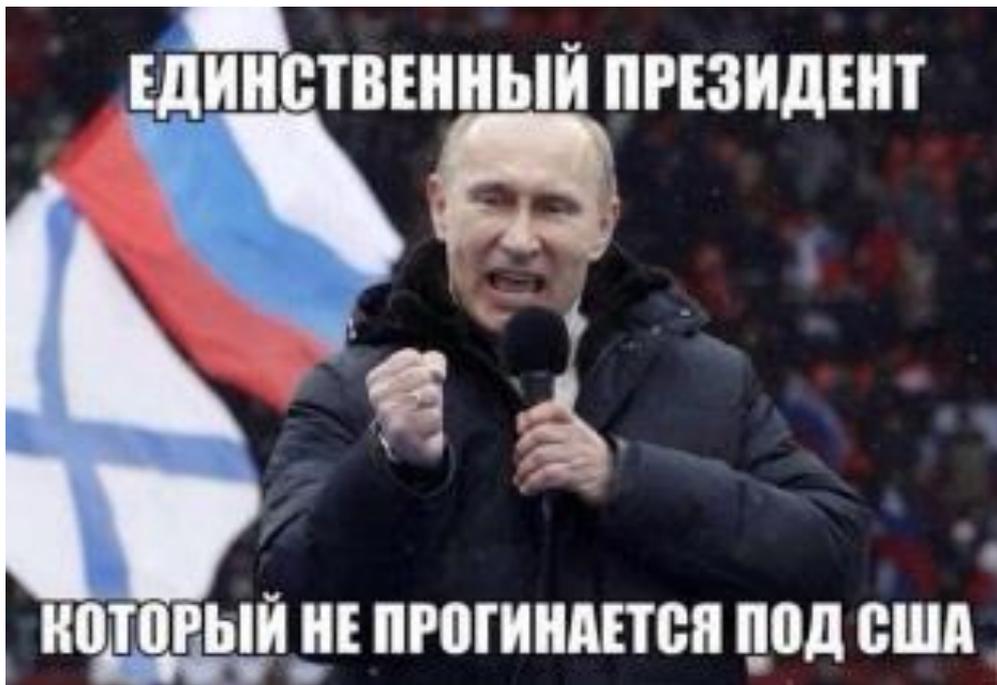
"Move your ass and get some wood" Yeah, that is how I will write it

This meme (Figure 65) also employs a very vulgar expression to ridicule Ukraine. Russia, as one of the world's largest producers of natural gas, manipulated prices and discounts to secure Ukraine's loyalty and oppose the EU's increasing influence on Kiev. Putin is writing something on the gas pipe bearing the colours of the Ukrainian national flag. The text in the Demotivator frame explains that the Russian president advises the Ukrainian authorities to go grab some wood in the forest to keep their houses warm – they will not get any cheap gas from Russia anytime soon. This meme suggests the narratives of blackmailing and crude justice at the same time: it presents Putin as a fair leader who boldly punishes disloyalty and retains confidence and good humour. The ironic framing – we follow Putin in his brainstorming on what to write to the Ukrainians – assures us of the president's assertiveness and optimism. He is not afraid or doubtful about his own decisions – conversely, Putin even swanks his harsh judgements and actions by the witty jargon expression.

Putin as the Embodiment of Russia

Putin's macho discourse has obtained not only new connotations, but also new platforms of circulation in the 2010s. The president's communication team has successfully expanded the media strategy to incorporate the online realm (Goscilo, 2012). One of the most active pro-government accounts @Pravdiva_pravda publishes memes almost every day. Many of them reaffirm Putin's rhetorical identity of an authoritative confident leader who represents the interests of all nations (Goscilo, 2012). The iconography in this meme (Figure 66) further supports the personification of the President with the country – Putin is glowing in the middle of an image, backed by the Russian flag and blurred masses of people.

Figure 66



The only president who does not cave in to the US

The tendency towards close identification of Putin with Russia becomes especially vivid in memes with juxtaposition. The following text (Figure 67) audaciously compares Putin to...Israel.

Figure 67



Israel: has been fighting with the Arabs over a piece of land for 60 years.

Putin: nicked Crimea in one month

There are three particularly interesting features in this meme. First, it juxtaposes a state and a human being, instead of comparing two countries or two leaders. This is just more evidence of how inseparable Putin and Russia are becoming in the public consciousness. Second, the meme uses slang that helps to recognise mafia culture. “Nicking” Crimea is not the same as negotiating for it. The word “отжать” (“nick”) belongs to the lad and mafia slang and appeared in many discussions on Crimea in traditional media and social networks. Russian/Soviet dissent poet Lev Rubinstein commented on the linguistic connotation of the expression: “They nicked Crimea in a blokey way, as they know it. But I saw it as a typical robbery during a fire” (Volodarskiy, 2014). When studied together, these two peculiar traits of a meme (identification of Putin with Russia and the linguistic reference to mafia politics) evoke a third feature. The meme maker identifies Russia with a “bloke” who prefers the rule of power to the rule of diplomacy.

This insight signifies a rhetoric paradox that marks the transformation of public rhetoric between the 2000s and the 2010s. While in the beginning of his rule Putin’s energetic public persona signified law and order and opposed the wild 1990s with their mafia chaos, by the mid-2000s he has evolved to a mafia patriarch in the public eye. Opposition bloggers (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014) insist that top Russian oligarchs belong to the close circle of Putin’s friends and he endorses the clan system, based on loyalty and hierarchy. Besides, plenty of ex-secret service officials have also become the most influential politicians in the government and

parliament, further proving that Putin has been promoting his ardent ex-colleagues and acquaintances for the merit of their reliability and obedience rather than professional skills and merit (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Figure 68 is a rare example of a meme that touches on Putin's private life. It employs an uncommon format of a mobile phone screen. Imagining for a moment how Putin's smartphone would look like creates an interesting effect. The image is almost interactive – it makes you want to unlock the screen to see what else Putin's phone is hiding. Yet for now, the only texts visible are those related to the Crimean crisis. The locked screen's one-sided communication from Barack Obama is a metaphor of the international power relations around Crimea, it reaffirms that the Russian president is in control and the American leader is frustrated. Putin's self-composure represents his

Figure 68



uncompromising stance in negotiations. Fifty missed calls from Obama signify the latter's trepidation and further endorse Putin's hard power and Macho Politics. According to the meme maker, this poise is a winning one as it makes your enemies afraid.

The meme further elaborates on the macho depiction of Putin. Reading between the lines (behind the lock screen, in this case) is a more intriguing task than making sense of displayed messages. One may wonder why Putin has his own portrait on the lock screen: is he an egomaniac or the meme maker could not think of any personal picture he or she would dare to present as Putin's wallpaper? Would it be his alleged mistress or daughters who never appeared in public? The straightforward character of the image actually poses more questions than it hides. To a certain extent, it unveils the constructed character of Putin's public profile – almost everyone is able to reproduce stories of Putin's macho acts, yet his private life is a blank page where many truths are concealed. This lack of personal information complements the representation of the Russian president as the lone hero, an irreplaceable and passionate patron of his people.

Sexism

The visual and linguistic depiction of forceful (often militarised) masculinity coexisted in many memes with the sexualised representation of women. Meme makers often objectified women and emphasised that men should be in charge of conducting politics, while women can serve as either a trophy or a decorative background to their battles.

Figure 69

Красота спасёт Крым

Reply Retweet Favorite More



“Beauty will save Crimea”

@vezhlivo's meme (Figure 69) places an attractive female figure in front of the heavy state-of-the-art-vehicle to pursue two goals: praise the macho splendour of military men and validate the deployment of forces to Crimea. A woman supposedly welcomes the arrival of the heroes; she is not involved in the operation, but poses passively next to the tank. The accompanying tweet "Beauty will save Crimea" is hypocritical and further diminishes the woman's role – the image explains that her beauty does not affect the future of the peninsula as much as weaponry and gunmen do. Men in power justify their actions by the needs to protect the weak, women and children.

The approach of portraying women in the media as objects has been criticised by feminist media scholars (Gill, 2007; Mulvey, 1975; Byerly and Ross, 2006; Carter, 2014). The media frequently depict women as the objects of sexual desire (Ross, 2014; Carter, 2014). Another belittling pattern of representation is placing a woman in the position of a victim, which has been prominent in the news discourse in both Western and non-Western societies (Byerly and Ross, 2006: 40-43; Gill, 2007: 121-124). Byerly and Ross (2006: 42) refer to this phenomenon as "the media's fascination with the fragile female form and her vulnerability to violation."

However, when the political regime demands the propagation of patriarchal values, such as, for instance, the case of the unification of Germany in 1990, the media emphasise the societal role of women as mothers and wives (European Commission, 1999). Similarly, the US authorities promoted a comparable celebration of protectorate masculinity and caring femininity after the attacks at the World Trade Center on 9/11 in 2001 (Godfrey and Hamad, 2014). The media claimed that the state was responsible for the protection of its citizens and amalgamated this narrative with the reinforcement of patriarchal gender framing. "(T)he role of the masculine protector puts those protected, paradigmatically women and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience" (Young, 2007: 116, as cited in Godfrey and Hamad, 2014: 170).

Figure 70



Crimea - Russia

Support Russian Crimea! Call to 565 from your mobile!

In the Russian case, patronising approach to Crimea overlapped with patronising approach to women. Pro-government users reinforced hegemonic gender roles and promoted ‘action-oriented machismo’ (Godfrey and Hamad, 2014: 170), which means celebrating one’s masculinity through actions. In the Russian case, Putin’s allegiance to bold statements in rhetoric and deployment of troops to the peninsula served as the confirmation of his “macho” status and political approach. The Russian media praised the leader for taking the active lead in the Ukrainian crisis and taking care of the citizens of Crimea. Further enforcing the conservative gender paradigm, they included references to the traditional family and presented the Russian president as the head of the clan. The state television referred to the Crimean annexation as the return of a long

lost relative and called for the celebration of the Slavic family's unity (Rothrock, 2014a).

Many users depicted Ukraine and Russia as two sisters (see Figure 70), while very few portrayed the two countries as brothers. However, at least one meme of the Family Reunion discourse featured a startling lesbian vibe in the depiction of Russia and Crimea. This could have signified the approval of non-traditional gender relations. Yet, a closer examination revealed that the sexualised depiction of two females conforms to the hegemonic gender regime. Pro-government meme makers exploited a manga-like drawing of two girls hugging and kissing each other and adjusted it to the political context: the colour scheme of the girls' clothes was changed to resemble national flags of Russia and the Russian fleet. The visual language suggests tenderness and sexual appeal, which are characteristic for the manga genre Yuri that involves an erotic encounter of two females (karuhi, 2011, see Figures 71 and 72). The meme fits into the neo-patriarchal discourse because it presents two females as the objects of desire. Their feminine clothes, hairstyles and body language conform to traditional femininity (see Connell, 2005). The sexual nonconformity here does not communicate emancipation and therefore does not contradict the patriarchal discourse.

Authoritarian regimes persistently amalgamate discourses on sex and power (Sperling, 2014). Sexualisation has two instances: "the extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms, as well as [...] the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls', women's and (to a lesser extent) men's bodies in public spaces" (Gill, 2007: 256). Wouters (2010) adds that public discussions on sex and the right of an individual to take control of their sexual choices benefits the emancipation of women. Yet, Gill (2007) and Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) argue that the media tend to endorse traditional masculinity in the discourse on sex: they "contribute to a context in which individuals' choices are structured towards a sexual agency while letting them think they are all individuals" (Krijnen and Van Bauwel, 2015: 164). It is specifically evident in the authoritarian male-dominated media ecology where the media impose predetermined sexualised roles on men and women (Sperling, 2014). This approach results in consistent reinforcement of sexism as the allocation of societal roles, exploitation and underrepresentation (see Fraser and Nicholson, 1994: 252). Russia's case proves that women's activities and

responsibilities in this perspective lie within the domestic realm, while men's agency and domination expands to the extra-domestic level.

Figure 71. Example of Yuri manga



Figure 72. Example of Yuri manga



The memetic representation of the only notable female Crimean politician adds more understanding to the sexist phenomenon of the Crimean discourse. Digital citizens exploited the manga visual language to create memes of the Crimean Prosecutor General Natalya Poklonskaya (see Figure 73). This young woman has become popular in the Russian cyberspace for her wide round eyes and baby face that conflicted with her solemn statements. The fame expanded to the global level, and even Japanese users created numerous fan clubs of Poklonskaya on the Web (Fredericks, 2014).

Figure 73



Mememes with Poklonskaya rarely discuss her professional skills and background, but superficially lay emphasis on her uniform and title to emphasise her sexual appeal. Natalia Poklonskaya did not approve of the fandom and notably reacted with embarrassment, reminding her admirers that she is a high level attorney with serious duties and responsibilities, “not a Pokemon or something” (Broderick, 2014). The refusal to be “something” expresses her rejection of objectification. Despite this statement, Poklonskaya nonetheless conforms to certain aspects of conservative gender roles. For instance, she confessed that she deliberately exploited gender stereotypes to secure a job with the Crimean newly appointed pro-Russian Prime Minister. She deliberately came to his office on the 8th of March, which is a state holiday International Women’s Day in Russia. “I came to see Sergey Valeryevich (Aksyonov) specifically on the 8th of March to ensure that he accepts me. A real man cannot reject a woman on the 8th of March; and he let me in,” Poklonskaya confessed (KrymInform, 2015: para 2).

The sexist mememes portray Poklonskaya as the object whose future depends on the decisions of male actors. Vladimir Putin has acquired the peninsula with the attractive trophy on it, the charming Prosecutor General. The rising number of mememes (see, for example, Figure 74) link filthy Putin with the wide-eyed Poklonskaya and

serve as yet another example of the promotion of ‘action-oriented machismo’. Sexist narratives that proliferate in contemporary culture and media often rely on the simplified scenarios of gender relations that are omnipresent in folklore and classic fairy tales (Fraser and Nicholson, 1994; Byerly and Ross, 2006). Russian memes on Poklonskaya uphold this point by framing the Crimean annexation as the plot of the hero defeating his enemies and seizing the princess as a prize.

Last year the President’s supporters thrilled him with the calendar *The Putiniada*, a series of paintings depicting his Twelve Labours in the manner of the ancient Greek hero Hercules (see Figure 75; Sperling, 2014). The labours comprised defending Russia from the Western sanctions and beheading the Hydra, namely the USA. Although the calendar did not feature Poklonskaya, her stylised appearance has formed a strong visual emblem of a Crimean beauty, a “sex symbol” of the crusade to the peninsula (Optimist, 2015). Since the 1990s, the prominent feminist scholar Rosalind Gill has been advocating for the introduction of the term “the new sexism” (Gill, 2014). She referred to the subtle, mobile and flexible ways of how the gender discrimination is enacted in the liberal societies (Gill, 2014: 518-519). Russian study demonstrates that the media discourse is yet far from the “new sexism” paradigm: it openly evokes “old sexism” and promotes gender discrimination. The mythologisation of Putin’s accomplishments adds substance to this ongoing rhetoric (Amic-polit, 2014).

Figure 74



Figure 75. Paintings from the exhibition *Twelve Labours of Putin*, 2014



The rise of Poklonskaya's memes coincided with a high-profile trial over a female military pilot from Ukraine accused of murdering two Russian journalists. Ukrainian authorities swiftly appointed the pilot Nadezhda Savchenko (see Figure 76)

a parliamentary deputy in Ukraine shortly after her arrest to add resonance to the case. As a result, Savchenko became the highest profile Ukrainian prisoner retained by the Kremlin in 2014-2015. The trial blames Savchenko for disclosing the location of Russian journalists to fellow troops, resulting in them being killed by the gunfire (RT, 2015; Sperling, 2014). The authorities remarkably abstained from accusing her of other deaths of Russian citizens. Kimmel's (2004) contribution to the comprehension of conservative gender relations, "old sexism", is helpful here: he argues that dominant masculinity projects itself through binary opposition to femininity. Being a real man in this context means "not acting like a woman" (Kimmel, 2004: 185, as cited in Ross, 2014: 414). Only men are allowed to participate in the wars. Women are severely punished for trying to be a part of the military discourse (Sperling, 2014). Treating Savchenko as a warrior and charging her with war crimes would mean regarding her as an equal to men; an approach that clashes with the patriarchal masculinity. The prosecutors prefer to identify her merely as a pilot and traitor of the war code of honour (Sperling, 2014).

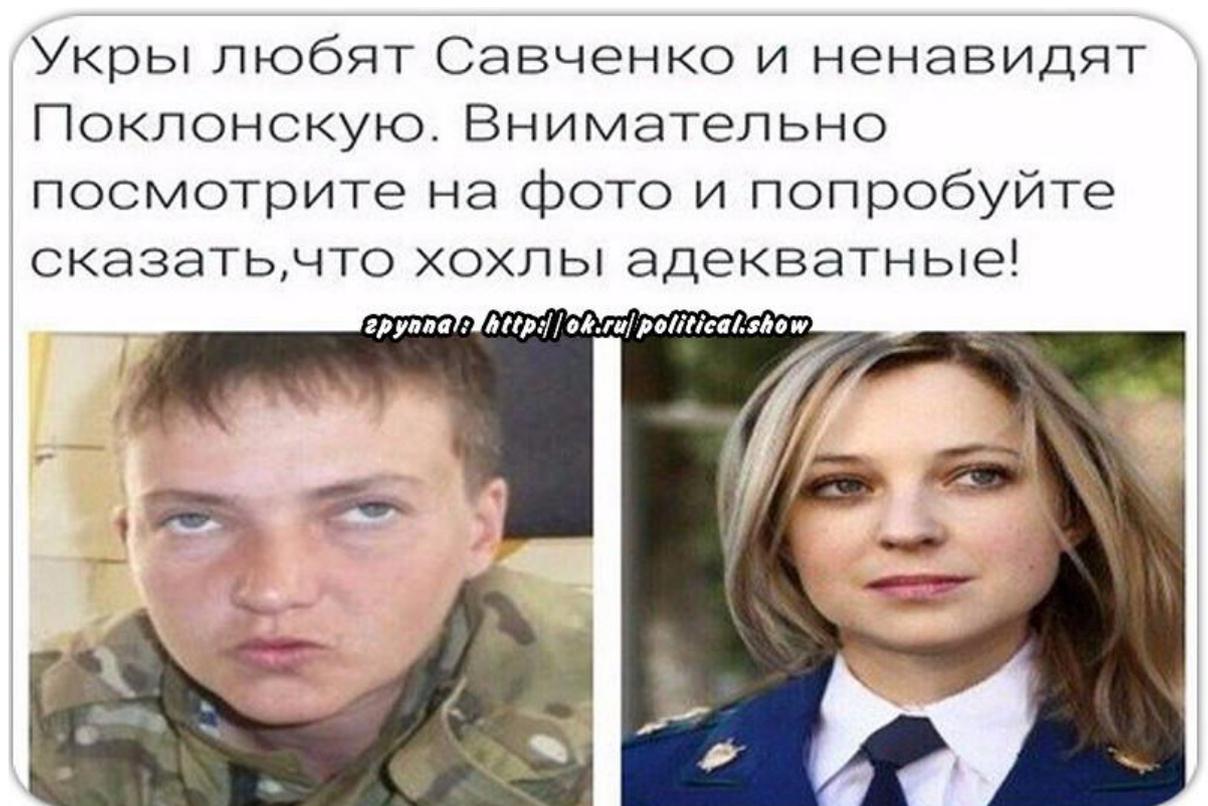
Figure 76. Nadezhda Savchenko, the Ukrainian military pilot accused of provoking Russian journalists' deaths in Ukraine



The juxtaposition of discourses on Poklonskaya and Savchenko creates an expedient metaphor for the roles of women in public politics in contemporary Russia. Even the visual differences in women's publicised appearances are significant in this narrative. The blonde, womanly and well-groomed Poklonskaya is opposed to the

rough media portrayals of Savchenko: no make-up, mannish short hair and stony stare (see Figure 77). Apparently, a woman is welcome in the high-rank Russian politics when she is feminine; she is able to flash her femininity to boost her career and find her way in the man's world of politics; non-feminine women astound conservative Russian users as enemies, they incite suspicion and disdain. This meme (Figure 77) found in the Russian social network Odnoklassniki displays the conventional line of thought towards gender and politics:

Figure 77



“Ukrainians love Savchenko and hate Poklonskaya. Look closely at the picture and try to say that the khohols (*the slang name for Ukrainians – AD.*) are adequate!”

Two females embody Ukraine and Crimea; the juxtaposition celebrates a woman's feminine attractiveness as the endorsement of healthy politics. Meme makers continuously employed Poklonskaya's image as the celebration of the “norm”, order and safety. For instance, this meme rebukes the anti-Russia rebels seizing power in

Western Ukraine and opposes them to the pro-Russia forces taking control of Crimea and the East of the country.

Figure 78



Prosecutor of a healthy person/ Prosecutor of a smoker

The meme (Figure 78) contrasts Poklonskaya with the bedraggled criminals who reportedly overrun the prosecutor’s office in Ternopolskaya oblast in Western Ukraine. The contraposition of the two images explains to the audience what happens when Russians do not take control of the shambolic political life in regional Ukraine – felons conquer power. It may seem at first that the meme makers ultimately depicted Poklonskaya in relation to her title of the officer in command. Yet, the visual representation of the Prosecutor General does not transmit the confidence of a power holder, but rather the intimidation and vulnerability of someone in need of protection. The text’s layout employs a popular meme pattern “something of a healthy person against something of a smoker”, that derives from the warning images of anti-tobacco campaigns (see Figures 79 and 80).

Figure 79. "Lungs of a healthy person and lungs of a smoker"

Лёгкие здорового человека и курильщика.



 MyShared

Digital citizens employed the layout to provide a funny juxtaposition pattern: something good and normal looking would habitually confront something weird, ugly and unhealthy.

Figure 80. "Harry Potter of a healthy person. Harry Potter of a smoker"



The producer of the Crimean meme does not discuss smoking or health, but uses the idiom to joyfully ratify the tidy, innocent-looking female in uniform as “healthy”, as the alluding to a good standard, appropriate style, law and order, that antagonises the messy rebels who embody disobedience and sickness. The meme maker does not render the fragility of the Prosecutor General as a drawback, but perhaps as a normal trait of those patronised by Mother Russia. It is acceptable to be weak as long as you are willing to accept help from the established power player that the Kremlin is in this case.

Another very important female figure in contemporary Russian gender politics and sexist memes is Alina Kabaeva, who is rumoured to be dating Putin. The rumour of Vladimir Putin courting the Olympic-gymnast-turned-parliamentarian Alina Kabaeva has never been confirmed. In 2008, a newspaper *Moskovskiy Korrespondent* was shut down for announcing the upcoming marriage of Putin and Kabaeva on the front page (Anufriyeva et al., 2008). Nonetheless, many journalists and bloggers kept discussing this alleged affair at their own risk. In 2013, Putin suddenly divorced his wife, making an unpredictable move for the conservative Russian society (see Denisova, 2014). In 2014, despite having no experience in media management, Kabaeva took the lead of a large and powerful corporation National Media Group.

Figure 81



I swear I asked him for the cream, not Crimea, as a gift for the 8th of March!
(8th of March is the International Women's Day, a state holiday in Russia
since the Soviet time; men present flowers and gifts to women – AD)

Figure 82



The cream, Vova, I asked for the cream.

I need a baby carriage. Am afraid to ask

Absent from the traditional media, the Kabaeva narrative nonetheless flourishes in social networks. Her alleged relationship with Vladimir Putin is caged in the realm of a myth, a city legend and Internet folklore. Having the Olympic gymnast as the partner is flattering yet Putin prefers to conceal his alleged relationship. Meme sharers demonstrate that they do not credit Kabaeva as a business professional and almost never mention her recent high profile job assignment in a top media group. They accordingly dismiss her Olympic achievements, presenting the champion as the female trophy of the country's leader, not as a legendary athlete. In the realm of memes, Kabaeva is a traditional passive female asking her male partner to bring home the goods – in this case, the cream or Alaska. The reference to the Women's day, the 8th of March (Figure 81), reinforces the impression that this couple preserves the traditional gender roles of a male breadwinner and female homemaker. The scope of Kabaeva's interests and influence is limited to the domestic realm, which fits in Fraser and Nicholson's (1994: 252) concept of sexism. The memes praise Kabaeva's commitment to taking care of her feminine beauty and looking after the house. Joyful puns in Figure 82 include references to the domestic life. "Alaska" sounds like "kolyaska" (baby carriage) in Russian; "Crimea" sounds like "krem" (cream). Memes suggest (in a mocking way) that Putin's main motivation in the Crimean case was pleasing his lady and treating her to a nice souvenir. However, the meme makers do not appear serious in this assumption – they refer to it merely to exploit the pun to a humorous effect. In the rigid sexist gender relations, men act as they please, and would hardly take the desires of women in their account (Ross, 2014; Gill, 2007).

One of the reasons for the concealment of Kabaeva from the public space may be the complex role of a hero's mistress in classic narratives. Such relationships are a contradictory issue for popular culture heroes, from Superman to James Bond (Garland, 2009). Superman is the symbol of truth, justice and (super) power, and when he becomes emotionally and sexually attached to a woman, he may lose it all. For James Bond, women facilitate the plot progression, celebrate his macho masculinity, but at the same time make him vulnerable. This finding explains why private life is missing from Putin's macho persona – it expels any sources of vulnerability and continues the Soviet tradition of the leaders mostly keeping their wives on the periphery of media coverage (Lipman, 2015).

The sexism of Crimean memes strengthens the leaning towards the Rule of Power in Russian politics. Pro-government users approve of the leader's macho bravado and subsequently authorise conservative gender relations. Memes exhibit how the public rhetoric on "traditional values", family and patriarchal social order shield the discourses on criminalised authoritarian politics and objectification of women. Any transferral from "tradition" immediately receives the label of deviation. According to the Kremlin, the worst nightmares of the Russian society, such as revolution or homosexuality, come from disobedience to the norms and customs. Putin's anti-gay law during the Olympic Games, for instance, banned "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" (CBS, 2014), laying a strong emphasis on the virtue of tradition. Sexist memes expose the prevailing societal stereotypes as much as they comment on political power struggles; the two are intrinsically united and praise the neo-patriarchal political order and conservative gender hierarchy. Many meme makers celebrate the value of convention and the conservative male roles of the breadwinner, protector and, if needed, aggressor. They use them to validate Putin's assertive political demeanour in the Crimean campaign.

2. *Nazism Allegory*

Various actors have employed Nazism rhetoric in the discussions on Crimea: from politicians and experts to the state and opposition media. They all exploit Nazi labelling as a classic rhetorical tool, which is not limited to wars or particular countries. Nonetheless, Nyhan (2006) noted that opponents are more likely to compare each other to Nazis on disputes of foreign policy rather than on other political subjects. Proving this, British Prime Minister David Cameron recently compared Russia to Nazi Germany because of its actions in the Ukraine, marking the annexation as an example of "a larger state bullying a smaller state" (Swinford, 2014). The American former secretary of state Hillary Clinton was more specific in her condemnation: she compared the Russian offer of issuing passports to ethnic Russians outside the country to Hitler's claim to protect ethnic Germans from oppression in other states (Rucker, 2014).

Nazi labelling has an inflammatory power in any dispute (Godwin, 1990), and the digital realm is no exception. The Internet users exhaust Nazism rhetoric in the most casual conversations, not necessarily the political ones. Mike Godwin (1990: para 3) coined the Rule of Nazi Analogies and suggested that the more heated the discussion becomes, the more likely someone would throw in the Nazi label as an obscenity and aggressive epithet at the same time: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one". The flexible character of this label leaves room for manipulation and constant renegotiation – one can define what constitutes "Nazism" according to one's own agenda and political preferences.

Vladimir Putin ignored his Western colleagues' remarks and issued his own Nazi-label for the Ukrainian authorities. The shelling of Eastern Ukrainian cities by Ukrainian troops reminded him of Nazi Germany's shelling of Soviet cities, including Leningrad (RT, 2014a). In fact, the Russian government employed Nazi rhetoric before, and flexibly adjusted it to fit into various agendas. After the 9/11 terrorist attack at the World Trade Centre in New York, Russia issued a statement calling terrorism "a Nazism of the 21st century" (Simons, 2006: 8). In the mid-2000s, Putin often alluded to the horrid outcomes of the Nazi regime to emphasise the unity of suffering among Russian and European countries. In 2005, the year of the 60th anniversary of the Great Victory, he spoke publicly about the necessity to reconcile, to overcome mistrust and establish cooperation between nations to fight Nazism, racism and xenophobia (Simons, 2006).

In 2013-14, Putin's government exploited the Nazism threat in mass propaganda to invoke hatred towards the anti-government protests in Ukraine. By the time of the Crimean annexation the Russian television had educated the audience on the figure of Stepan Bandera. The Ukrainian political leader of the nationalist movement, he declared the independence of Ukraine in 1941. According to Russian media, Bandera has a questionable reputation for allegedly collaborating with the Nazis. Powell (2014) suggests that Bandera sought Hitler's help in gaining independence for Ukraine in 1941, but ended up being arrested by the Nazis.

The Kremlin used Bandera as a nickname for the neo-Nazi – "banderovets" was the newly adopted term. When anti-government protests at Maidan Nezalezhnosti

succeeded and Ukraine obtained a new government in 2014, the Russian media began associating the new administration with Bandera followers (Syomin, 2014). Vladimir Putin included many references to the neo-Nazi and Bandera in his address to the nation after the referendum in Crimea. He emphasised that “nationalists, neo-Nazi, Russophobes and anti-Semites” (Putin, 2014: para 4) executed coup d’état in Kiev and now rule in the country. Putin mentioned that the new government of Ukraine was plotting legal action against the Russian minority and added “We can all clearly see the intentions of these ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler’s accomplice during World War II” (Putin, 2014: para 5). The Kremlin thus offered its services to defeat the assumed new wave of Nazism and presented itself as the saviour of the Russian minority in Ukraine.

Russian sociolinguist Maksim Krongauz (2014) points out that the rhetoric of hatred replaced reasonable argumentation. By introducing ritual, emotionally charged appellations for enemies, such as “banderovets” and “neo-Nazi”, the state forms a new ideology which is strongly in demand in the absence of other established state doctrines. Linguistic clichés offer shortcut solutions and opinions that can arise in doubtful situations (Krongauz, 2014). The newly invented “public threat” of the Bandera neo-Nazis, on one hand, fits in the old collective fear of fascism, but on the other, supplies new narratives for the confused public.

One of the smartest memes attacking the Russian Nazi-related propaganda came from @Dbnmjr. Supposedly a Ukrainian user, he has published plenty of popular anti-Russia and anti-Putin memes throughout and after the Crimean crisis. This one is a text without images, and it is full of recognizable media-enforced symbols. It is called “An average day of a banderovets”.

“Yesterday morning I woke up in my extremist bed, brushed my fascist teeth, had a cup of Lvov coffee made of crushed St George ribbons; went to work at Bandera gestapo; got bored at lunchtime and brutally beat up a defenceless “berkut” who was picking field flowers by the road; on my way home drew a swastika on all of the neighbourhood’s synagogues; treaded the sprouts of Slavic unity down with a bloody boot; had a dinner, shouting “Beat the Moskal!”; watched a gay parade in Berlin on TV; kissed Shukhevich’s portrait on the cheek and went to sleep. This was my day”.

The author created an Orwellian exaggerated image of a neo-Nazi, an absurd conjunction of media buzzwords and symbols assorted in an amusing manner. The decoding of the text requires knowledge of both the Russian and the Ukrainian context. “St George ribbons”, for instance, refer to the symbolic ribbon that used to be part of military decoration in the USSR. Since the 60th anniversary of the Russian Victory Day (May 9, 2005), the state launched a campaign to encourage civilians to wear the ribbon as an act of commemoration and remembrance. During the 2014 tension with Ukraine, the St George ribbon also evolved as a symbol of pro-Russian separatism (Biggs, 2014).

«Defenceless “berkut”» refers to the Ukrainian government’s special police forces Berkut – fully equipped riot police that gained scandalous fame for the harsh suppression of protests at Maidan. BBC (2014e) declares that since 2013, “Berkut” has become synonymous with police brutality in Kiev protests. The phrase “treaded the sprouts of Slavic unity down with a bloody boot” links this meme with the narrative of the Russian Imperial Ambition and mockingly denounces Russia’s aspiration to install command over other Slavic countries.

“Beat the Moskal!” means “Beat the Russian!” as “moskal” is a Ukrainian nickname for Russians. Roman Shukhevich was the military ally to Bandera. Altogether, this mock diary presents a utopian perfect Enemy as depicted by Russian propaganda. The meme, therefore, reveals the absurdity and the exaggerated, hysterical character of the emotionally charged labels coming from the television screen.

Another wave of resistance against Nazi-related Russian propaganda appealed to humour and reason. Many users claimed that Maidan protesters of 2013 were not even familiar with the figure of Stepan Bandera and his nationalist ideology. It was largely due to the Russian media that Russian and Ukrainian citizens learned about the neo-Nazi threat and became afraid of pro-Bandera activists (Alifanov, 2014). This meme (Figure 83) exposes the constructed character of the Bandera rhetoric and the imposed fear. A popular anti-Russian meme maker @Dbnmjr posted the meme and then got retweeted by @gruppa_voina, an account held by Pussy Riot members.

Figure 83

КОРОТКАЯ КЛАССИФИКАЦИЯ ДЛЯ «ЧАЙНИКОВ»



БАНДЕРОВЦЫ



БОНДЕРОВЦЫ



БЕНДЕРОВЦЫ



БИНДЕРОВЦЫ

PORNOLITICA

“Brief classification for amateurs: Banderovtsy, Bonderovtsy, Benderovtsy, Binderovtsy”.

The meme supplements the text with images of Antonio Banderas (for Banderovtsy), James Bond played by Daniel Craig (for Bonderovtsy), a Russian movie character Ostap Bender (for Benderovtsy) and Mr. Bean, Rowan Atkinson’s legendary sitcom character (for Binderovtsy).

The meme is not explicit. It invites the audience to laugh at the similarly sounding surnames of such a variegated group of popular characters. Yet putting these faces and names together may suggest that Stepan Bandera was not a household name at least for Russians until 2013; people frequently misspelled his surname and misidentified him in social network debates. By 2009, Russian state sociologists conducted a survey of the Russians’ attitude towards Bandera, and 24% of respondents admitted that they had never heard this name (Ria, 2009).

Moreover, there are three fictional characters and only one real person in the group of people with Bandera-sounding names. This may imply that propaganda reimagined Bandera, and his mediated persona belongs to the realm of fiction and popular culture. The meme may also tease the clumsy choice of a propaganda object – Bandera’s name is easily confused with the other mentioned surnames. Moreover, looping in the popular fictional character Bender adds another connotation to this narrative. Ostap Bender is probably the most famous con artist in Russian culture. He first appeared in the much-loved book *The Twelve Chairs* written by Soviet writers Ilya Ilf and Yevgeniy Petrov in 1928. The book prompted many film adaptations in the USSR, Russia and in the West. This association with the legendary impostor points to the deceit of popular propaganda and calls for an informed reading of its symbols and stories.

The following meme (Figure 84) also involves Ostap Bender, but compares his art of treachery with the methods of Russian foreign diplomacy.

Figure 84



Churkin at the UN Security Council	Putin – to the journalists
Yanukovich is illegitimate	Yanukovich is legitimate
Agreement with the opposition is invalid	Agreement with the opposition is valid
Soldiers are ours	Soldiers are not ours
We will not send our troops	We will, if necessary, send our troops

By using images from a well-known con movie, the meme maker suggests there were lies and fraud in the Crimean case. He or she further develops the suspicion by juxtaposing the alleged statements of the Russian representative to the UN Vitaly Churkin and Vladimir Putin, making both of them appear as con men. There were two main characters in the original story, the mastermind Ostap Bender and his naïve and insecure wingman Kisa Vorobianinov. The meme compares Putin to Bender, and Churkin – to his puppet sidekick. According to the meme, neither of the two is telling the truth, so they are either disorganised or more likely the duo are executing a well-designed plot. The interpretation of a meme is ambiguous and relies on one's exposure to popular culture. In fact, Bender is an archetypal name for a charlatan who is so charming that he attracts public adoration. The meme thus can be studied on three levels: 1) linking Bandera to Bender, thus exposing the ridicule of the neo-Nazi propaganda; 2) criticising Putin and his team by calling them con men; 3) praising Putin and his team by calling them successful con men who managed to fool the UN and journalists.

The resistant publics also contributed to the Nazism narrative by associating Putin with Hitler, aiming to place the Crimean case in a historical perspective. This Demotivator (Figure 85) employs a photo of the gate of the Auschwitz concentration camp and draws a parallel between Hitler's occupation of Europe and Putin's annexation of Crimea. The meme maker deconstructs the narrative of "Putin's tourists" in Crimea and develops it into a Nazi discourse. He or she argues that soldiers came not to bring peace, but to turn the peninsula into a war zone or concentration camp.

Figure 85



On top: Holidaymakers! Welcome to the Crimean resorts!

The bottom line: Touristic agency “Russian World”

Generally, Nazi memes do not require much knowledge in order to be decoded, yet several anti-Putin memes included supplementary information for reflection, such as the concept of the Russian World in this meme. This idea stems from Vladimir Putin’s public rhetoric and implies the Russian cultural and moral superiority over other nations. Putin announced his vision of the “Russian world” by the end of the television marathon with the nation in 2014 (Kremlin, 2014a). He introduced the term “a person of the Russian World” defining this abstract individual as a broad thinker and apologist of high moral principles, who is concerned about the world beyond his private space. The president counterbalanced Western values of personal gain and individual success

to the Russian values of patriotism and sacrificing oneself for one's friends, nation and Motherland (Kremlin, 2014a: para 5). The concept of the "Russian world" infers that a Russian has the moral responsibility to care for the well-being of other nations; the ambiguous targeting of this responsibility seems to worry the meme maker. The author of this Demotivator compares "Russian World" to the Nazi project of global dominance and imposing one's own rules and beliefs over others. Naziist labelling often coincides with the narrative of imperial ambition, raising intriguing questions on the borderline between the nebulous humanistic responsibility to help thy neighbour and intruding on one's privacy or sovereignty.

Meme makers further elaborate on the fear of nationalism and imbalance of power. Reflecting on the Russian leader's pro-nationalist claims made them draw a parallel between Putin and the leader of ex-Yugoslavia Slobodan Milosevic (Figure 86). "Ruthless manipulator of Serbian nationalism" (Traynor, 2006), the ex-president of Yugoslavia founded his media-enabled propaganda on the dehumanisation of other ethnicities living along the Serbs: he called the Croats fascists, the Albanians rapists and terrorists, and the Muslims of Bosnia Islamic fundamentalists. Milosevic became the first European head of state to be prosecuted for genocide and war crimes; he notoriously used nationalist propaganda to justify cruel ethnic cleansing (Traynor, 2006). The meme that unites Hitler, Milosevic and Putin functions as a highly condensed political analysis: it matches documentary photos with expressive images of the dictators and their claims.

Figure 86



Hitler: “Let’s protect the Germans!” Milosevic: “Let’s protect the Serbs!” Putin: “Let’s protect the Russians!”

Will the Russian Federation face the destiny of the German Empire and “Great Serbia”?

The iconography of the meme is powerful – it captures all the leaders in a moment of inspired rage and charismatic performance. The meme stimulates people’s reflection on the lessons of history, on the direct link between pompous rhetoric and ugly motives; it places Russia in the context of two other failed “empires”, and hence warns of the misleading propaganda of imperial ambitions.

Figure 87



The meme sharer added a tweet to this meme: "Seen it before"

Figure 88. Image from the March of Brotherhood, 16 March 2014, Moscow



Another meme (Figure 87) in the Putin-Hitler discourse involves an element from the state media propaganda that turned against its purpose. The pro-Kremlin movement organised a patriotic March of Brotherhood on the 16th of March 2014 in Moscow. The mobilisation demonstrated a remarkable level of discipline, with thousands of participants wearing the same jackets and walking almost in unison (see Figure 73; Young, 2014). Ironically, television images of the assembly unequivocally resembled the highly ordered marches for the Führer. The meme sharer's comment was laconic: "Seen it before". Reassembling visual symbols from the past with the coverage of the present day patriotic demonstration evoked the memory of Hitler's rule marked by obedience, discipline and blind conformity to malign state ideology. The juxtaposition of Putin's Russia and Hitler's Germany invites the public to reflect on the threats posed by the assumed similarities and reconsider their opinion of the Russian leader.

In conclusion, the comparison to Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler can be quite powerful as it refers to a horrendous time in human history and triggers an emotional response from the audience. Alternatively, drawing a comparison to Hitler and labelling one as a Nazi has become common place in political rhetoric. The majority of Nazi memes lack depth and justification of claims. Only the memes that criticise

the Nazi discourse on propaganda offer additional grounds for reflection - they invite the audience to critically assess information that they receive from the state-controlled media. The Nazi analogy needs supportive arguments to create a complex message. “A usual day of a “banderovets”” meme is a remarkable example of how one text can absorb many layers of narrative and symbols, and expose their inner contradictions and inconsistencies.

3. Feel Good Patriotism

Pro-Russia SNS accounts habitually borrow plotlines and slogans from traditional media propaganda. The majority of them reproduce narratives from television, yell patriotic slogans and fight violently with virtual enemies, while the minority provide a more unconventional and sophisticated stance. Twitter user @vezhlivo (which in Russian means “polite”) is exceptionally skilful at branding and serves as an example of digital propaganda that picks ideas from the state rhetoric and elaborates on them in a creative manner. @vezhlivo has been posting photos of military men in Crimea since March 2014, supplementing them with sentimental uplifting captions. The Twitter user has also popularised the term “Vezhliyie Lyudi” (“Polite People” in Russian), a crucial definition and rhetoric symbol of the Crimean hybrid warfare (see Context chapter, pp. 18 on the emergence of the term “Polite people”).

Figure 89



Japanese tourists and their new victims

@vezhlivo has been promulgating the new image of the Russian troops as polite, well intending, brave people coming to protect the weak (Ria, 2015b) through the memes published on their Twitter page. Two examples of @vezhlivo's memes illustrate the account's style. One (Figure 89) emerged on the 13th of March 2014 amidst an intense international dispute on the legitimacy of sending any external forces to Crimea. The accompanying tweet said "Japanese tourists and their new victims". @vezhlivo seems to have aimed at adding an amusing turn to the discussion and reducing the level of tension. The meme reverses power relations: gunmen appear harmless, while tourists seem more assertive and in control of the situation; nothing can stop their desire to have a photograph with the soldiers. Besides using humour to take the edge off aggressive social media fights, the meme also emphasises the idea that gunmen arrived to the peninsula to protect the locals and tourists. The meme maker avoids calling the gunmen "Russian", as by the time of publication the origins of troops was unconfirmed. This ambiguous light-hearted meme does not praise Macho Politics or the Rule of Power. On the contrary, it pays tribute to the kind and caring character of the military operation, emphasises the need to serve the civilians and to act on terms of compromise and respect.

In another example (Figure 90), @vezhlivo portrays a soldier with a cat, thus mobilising this well-regarded Web darling – the cat - to point to the humanity of the Russian troops. The cat here functions as the metaphor for all the weaker creatures in need for protection. The visual contraposition of the relaxed furry animal with the heavy deadly armour boosts the impression of safety: the soldier is on guard and the citizens can enjoy protection and peace.

Figure 90



@vezhlivo’s meme. The tweet says: “The polite photo of the day”

Figure 91



Another pro-government account @anti_maydan appropriated the meme created by @vezhливо to criticise the Western media for their coverage of the Crimean crisis (Figure 91). This is a particularly interesting example of a meme mutation. What started as a sentimental postcard praising military glory turned into a harsh condemnation of media fabrication. @anti_maydan creates another level of meaning: he presents the soldier with a cat as if seen through the eyes of Western journalists. He imagines how they may pervert the image and suggests that global media would blame the warrior for torturing the poor animal in front of the astonished locals.

Two versions of the meme belong to different genres. @vezhливо is "selling the product" and applies advertising techniques to promote the mellow, peaceful vibe around the Russian army. @anti_maydan acts as a tabloid and reproduces the

scandalous, obnoxious expressive style of the sensationalist media. Besides, one can interpret @anti_maydan's meme from two angles: it may condemn either Western propaganda or local liberal users who largely use Demotivators and subvert media texts through memes.

Overall, @vezhlivo is in a league of its own among other patriotic accounts. It preserves a recognisable romantic style, uses memes to construct a positive identity for the pro-Russian self-defence troops in Crimea (and later – for the Russian army in general). The account depicts military presence in the peninsula in the visual language of advertising and branding, selects expressive photos, often applies filters and matches images with airy slogans. These catchphrases generate a favourable emotional response as they appeal to the notions of safety, peace, protection and fairness (Zaidi, no date). Polite People memes are a peculiar example of “soft” propaganda. They supplement the hegemonic state media by offering a non-direct endorsement of the Russian government's activity in the Ukraine. Congenial design, discreet ideological underlining and branding of this media campaign made the “Polite People” a household name in Russia, prompting the mass production of Polite souvenirs (see Figure 92).

Figure 92. A T-shirt saying “Polite People”, a popular garment for the patriotic publics



@vezhlivo's memes generate a positive yet simplified perspective on the Crimean case. They refrain from discussing politics, but refocus the audience on the themes of military pride, safety, peace and shelter. Branding the Russian army in polished postcards and promoting their benevolent character via methods of advertising generates a special flow in the meme exchange on the Crimean subject – non-argumentative, but assertive and sentimental.

6.3. Network analysis

Network analysis of the connections between meme sharers has pinpointed the emerging trends in memetic interexchange. This research is based on a non-representative sample of meme distributors and so therefore the findings cannot be generalised; yet they illuminate certain characteristics of the memetic networks. For instance, in my sample, pro-government and anti-government accounts distributed an almost equal volume of memes on the Crimean crisis. Besides, prominent pro- and anti-government meme sharers demonstrated comparable levels of Twitter popularity.

Figure 93. Top 20 meme sharers (both pro-government and anti-government views)

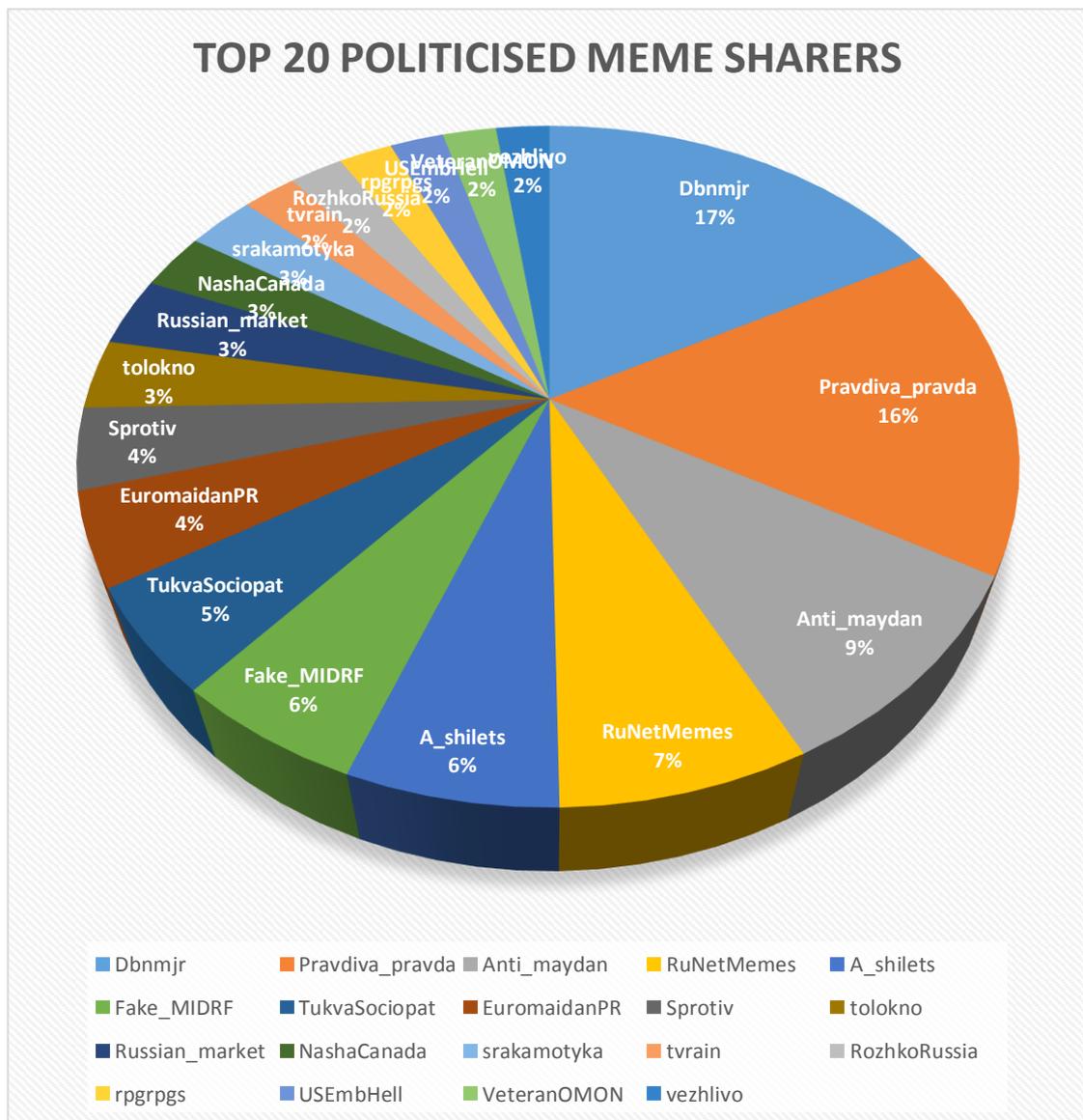
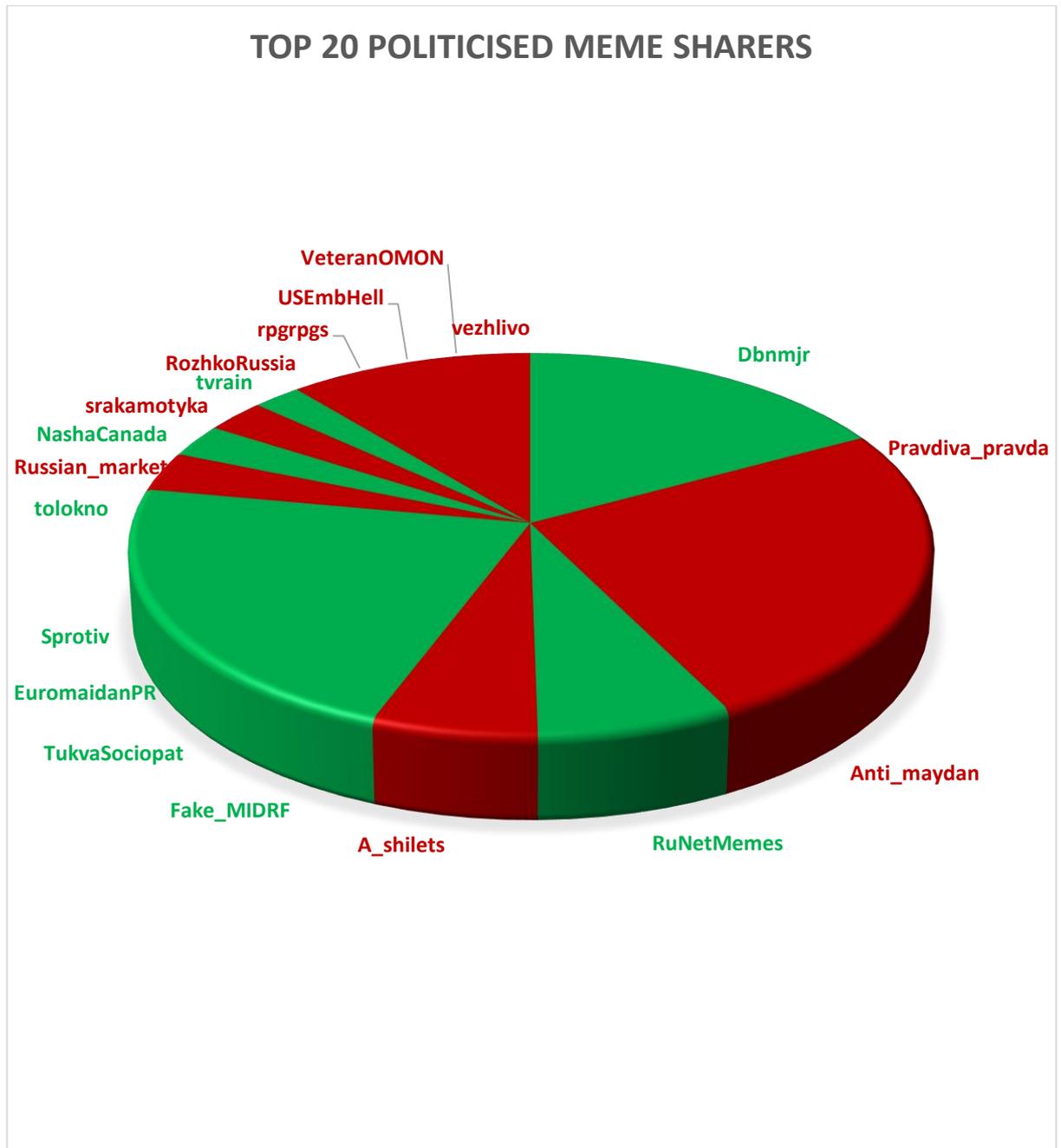


Figure 94. Top 20 meme sharers with the ideological identification (red – pro-government users, green – anti-government users)

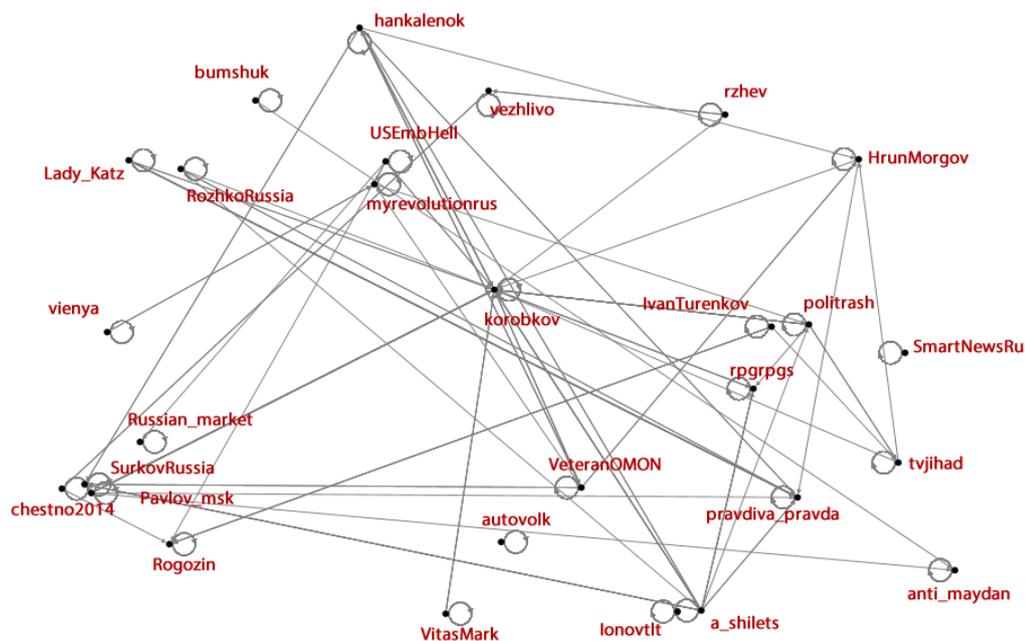


Network analysis has also indicated that pro- and anti-government meme networks have similar structures with a small number of central hubs, few peripheral clusters and overall decentralised communication. Nevertheless, the pro-government chains of users demonstrate more bonding to the leaders and more interconnection between minor users on the margins of the network. The anti-government community of meme sharers is more fragmented on the interpersonal level; there is a number of

small aggregations and generally poor cross-links between remote groups or users. Resistant network assembles around two ideological themes: the Russian citizens' resistance to the Russian government and the Ukrainian population's opposition to the Russian authorities involved in the Ukrainian politics. The graph below demonstrates a NodeXL-generated network of pro-government users, linked by three parameters: following each other, retweeting or mentioning each other. It exposes a number of "hubs" which engage with many other users (e.g. @korobkov, @myrevolutionrus, @USEmbHell, @SurkovRussia, @pravdiva_pravda).

The most popular and active pro-government users in the sample are also the most interconnected with each other and a wider network. Surprisingly, the greater part of the accounts studied within the flows of pro-Kremlin meme dissemination are linked to each other; very few minor accounts (only @autovolk and @SmartNewsRu in our scheme) are left outside the network. This is an interesting finding, provided that Twitter is not based on communities (like blogs) or networks of "friends" (like Facebook).

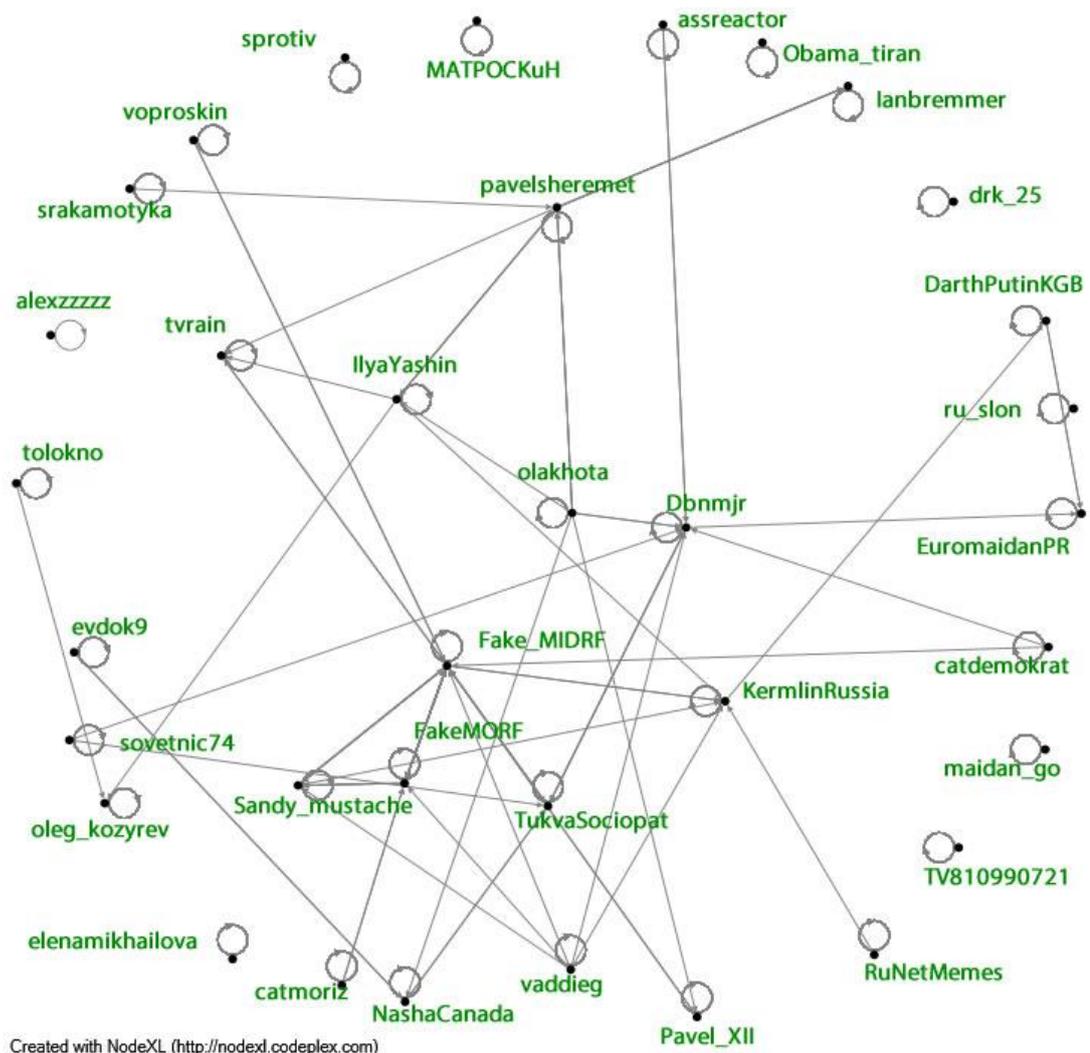
Figure 95. The network of pro-government meme sharers



Created with NodeXL (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>)

Intriguingly, there is a flexible hierarchy in the pro-government meme sharing. Although several users do indeed serve as hubs of major interaction, smaller accounts do not always connect to these centres, but connect well on the periphery. They bypass grand players and establish their own smaller and shorter links. This insight opens the discussion on the potential of meme sharing for conjoining diverse and remote individuals and their networks.

Figure 96. The network of anti-government meme sharers



Opposition networks are less centralised. Curiously, the top-4 noticeable liberal meme sharers with thousands of followers are aware of each other and generously disseminate each other's tweets. @KermlinRussia, @Fake_MIDRF, @FakeMORF and @Sandy_mustache constitute together the main "board", or a "committee" of visual political satire on Twitter. There is no explicit centre of the opposition

communication, but the interrelation of these four top accounts generates an enduring structure touching on many expanding circles.

Opposition meme makers' network lacks established secondary centres of dissent communication. Even the celebrity microbloggers (@tolokno, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, frontwoman of the Pussy Riot band, 78,500 followers, or @IlyaYashin, one of the leaders of political opposition, 150,000 followers) fail to attract many 'shares' and 'mentions' by other reputed opposition users. Yet, it is essential to acknowledge that current research is limited to the meme sharers; @tolokno and @IlyaYashin do not share as many memes as ideological texts of other genres, hence their presence in the meme-focused circles is relatively weak.

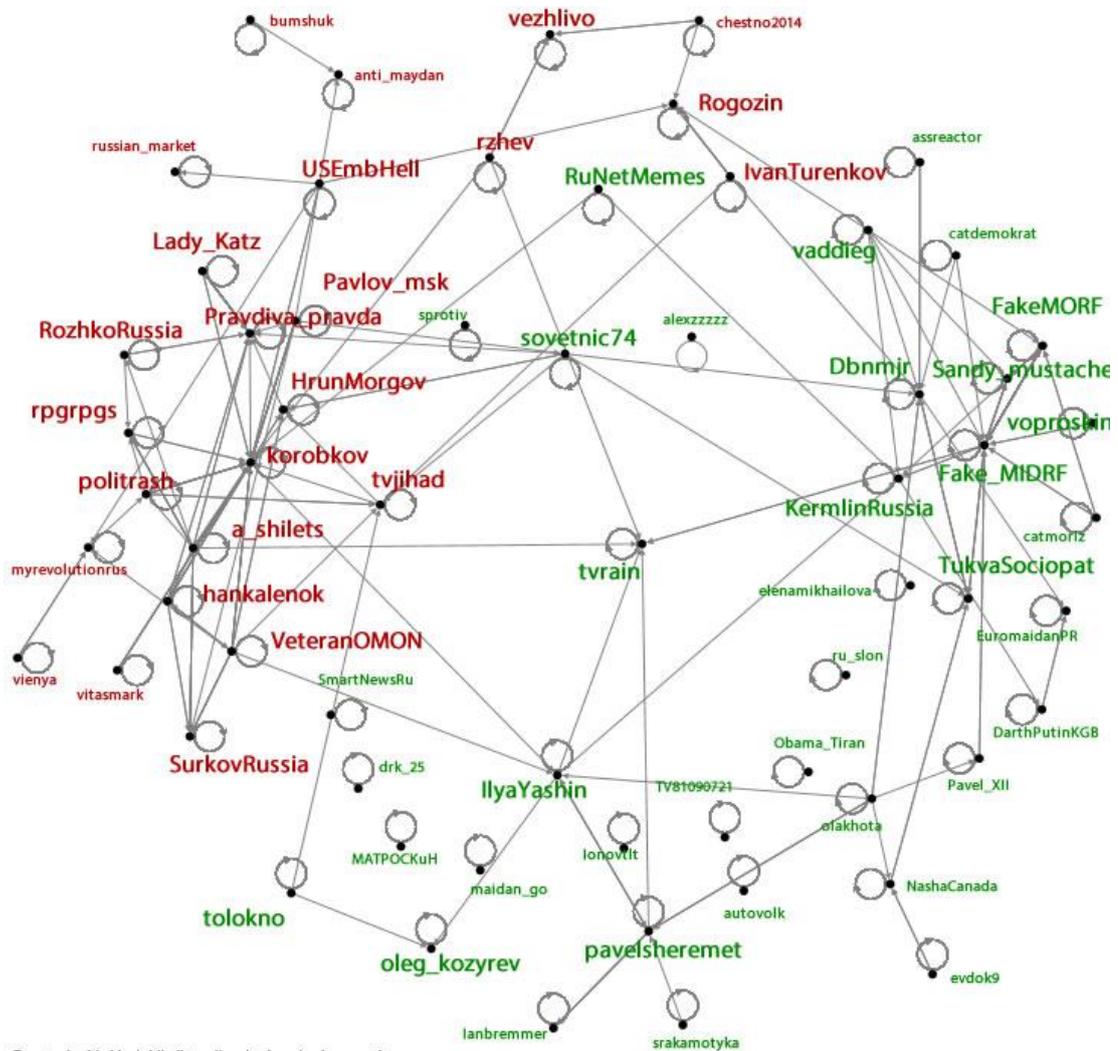
Compared to the pro-government networks, opposition networks exhibit a larger number of isolated users. Many meme sharers do not possess evident ties to the eminent opposition microbloggers and liberal media (such as @tvrain, @ru_slon and, to a certain extent, @RuNetMemes). Even the top liberal account on Twitter @KermlinRussia (a well-known satirical commentator to the government's activity with over 1,300,000 followers) fails to outreach to marginal users. Contrasting with the pro-government network, small liberal accounts do not form tangential ties on the fringes.

Another trend that emerges from the indicative scrutiny of the opposition meme network is the segmentation of the anti-government publics in at least three circles: the Russian resistance, the pro-Ukrainian revolt and the circle of the occasional liberal discontent. @Dbnmjr, the distinguished meme sharer who advocates the independence of Ukraine from any Russian influence, is closely connected with other (presumably) pro-Ukrainian accounts @EuromaidanPR, @TukvaSociopat and @assreactor (all of them retain Ukrainian national symbols in the accounts' framing). The Russian opposition circle (the top-4 leading accounts, joined by @oleg_kozyrev, @vaddieg and others) form the second cluster. Curiously, the Ukrainian community often overlaps with the Russian dissent as they both oppose Putin's authoritarianism and corruption, but the circles do not mingle or retweet each other much. Two English-language anti-Putin accounts (@DarthPutinKGB and @Ianbremmer) loosely relate to the Russian dissent circle and do not tie to the pro-Ukrainian revolt. The third group, the occasional dissent, consists of users who cannot be indisputably added to either of

the two previous groups. Their profile pages and recent tweets contain a low number of ideological signifiers; therefore, this research identifies them as weakly involved politicised meme sharers. The majority of meme sharers in this circle are disconnected from each other; their only sparks of interaction happen through the prominent users.

Displaying pro-government and resistant meme sharing networks in one graph illustrates interesting relationship patterns between them.

Figure 97. The pro-government (red) and anti-government (green) networks of users displayed in their interconnection



The two networks share very few intersecting points and these are mostly represented by the media outlets (@tvrain and @RuNetMemes) or established professional politicians (@Rogozin and @IlyaYashin). This seeming estrangement of the ideologically conflicting crowds may suggest that people mostly distribute memes that match their pre-existing assumptions or reflect the opinions of their closest contacts in the social network. In my sample, even the leaders of both aggregations (@korobkov in the pro-government cluster and @Fake_MIDRF in the resistant crowd) never mention or retweet each other, even for the sake of criticism or disdain.

Furthermore, the “lone riders”, those users who seem secluded and detached from any observable circle, do not float between “camps”. They may share a meme

that fits their beliefs, but do not seem to borrow inspiration from different sides of the political debate (at least in this scheme). The juxtaposition of two aggregations establishes that pro-government users feature a slightly higher level of unity, as they have fewer lone riders than the liberal cluster.

Social network analysis subsequently attests that the exchange of memes in the cyberspace is a non-linear process; one could hardly capture the chain reaction of the meme spread. Popularity of the accounts probably accelerates the memes' propagation, but does not guarantee that they would reach users outside of the usual array of followers. In summary, this non-representative network analysis implies that memes do not need established and developed networks of users for dispersion, but can benefit even from the minor remote accounts with limited networks of contacts. At the same time larger channels of communication, such as popular accounts with many followers, significantly facilitate and boost the memes' circulation.

6.4 Analysis of the Twitter Profiles

Content and network analysis permitted detection of the prominent meme sharers of the Crimean case study. I have identified the need to further scrutinise the profiles of the eminent accounts. Self-presentation of users contributes additional data to the qualitative findings of research, as it facilitates comprehension of the individual practices of Russian politicised meme sharing.

Twitter does not require disclosing one's personality, hence there is a high level of ambiguity and playfulness in the way people establish their online presence. Political accounts on Russian Twitter demonstrate impressive creativity in their appearance: both pro-government and resistant users create meaningful narratives and even imaginary public personas to broadcast their views and texts. Noteworthy, many of them benefit from Twitter's acquiescence to anonymity and exercise their right to conceal personal information. On the one hand, this finding contributes to the envisioning of Russian political resistance on Twitter as a digital carnival, where participants mask their identities and engage in parody and mockery. On the other hand, anonymity and authorisation of imaginary identities shelters anti-government

activists and protects them from potential persecution from the government and its supporters.

The analysis of the Twitter profiles included examination of the publicly available personal information, geolocation (if determined by the user), profile picture, background image that a user can upload as a wallpaper on top of his personal page, the number of accounts followed and own followers, and overview of recent tweets. Eminent political microbloggers frequently rely on symbolism and metaphors in the accounts' framing, refer to the collective identities and at the same time reflect on the popular slogans and populist concepts.

Top pro-Kremlin accounts generously employ national emblems of Russia: the coat of arms, the flag, the bear as the folkloric allegory and the panorama of the Kremlin or Red Square as the wallpaper. Moreover, they often represent themselves as the only reliable broadcasters of truth and attempt to appear as almost official sources of genuine knowledge. Their names are straightforward and bear little irony. @pravdiva_pravda (31,400 followers) translates as "the truthful truth"; @Russian_market (137,000 followers) literally means "Russian market" and endeavours to represent the overall monitoring of the events happening in Russia; and @anti_maydan (53,400 followers) refers to the revolution in Ukraine in 2014 that happened at the main square Maidan (or Maydan) Nezalezhnosti (hence the name "anti_maydan"); it solemnly condemns the current Ukrainian government and any ties with Europe, gravely asserting in the profile: "We preach up against the Euro-slavery and in favour of the union with Russia. We stand for keeping the old friends and do not dream of the future with Europe" (see Appendix for the detailed description of each account). The seriousness and lack of humour in the pro-government accounts' framing may imply that they identify themselves as the digital counterparts of traditional state media; they promote the hegemonic perspective and pretend to present the only truthful presentation of events.

Figure 98. @pravdiva_pravda's Twitter profile page

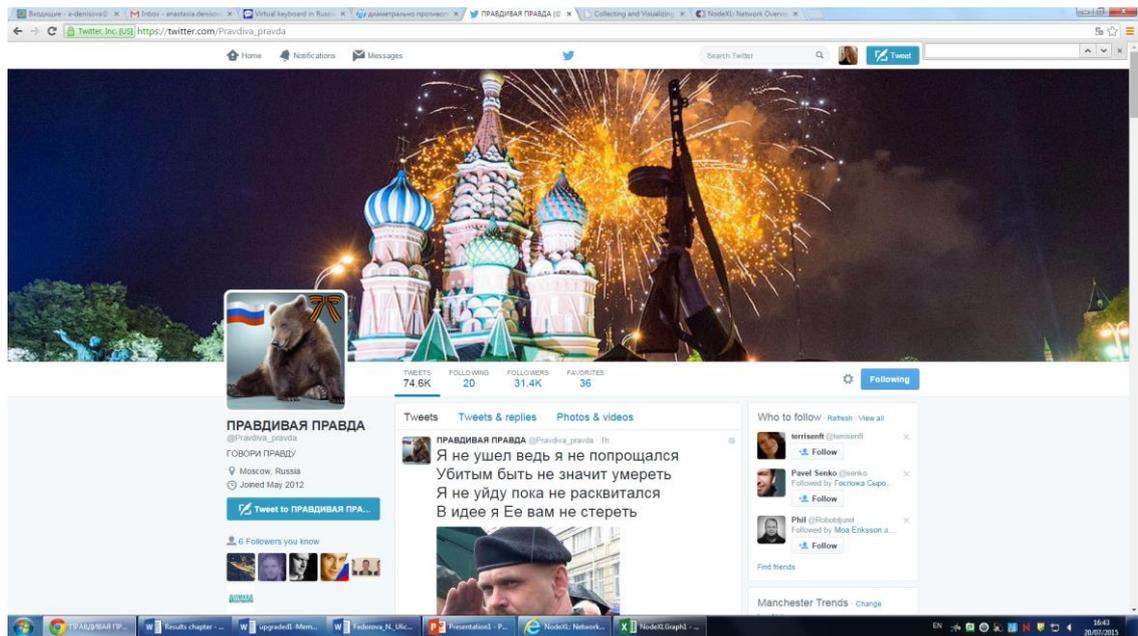
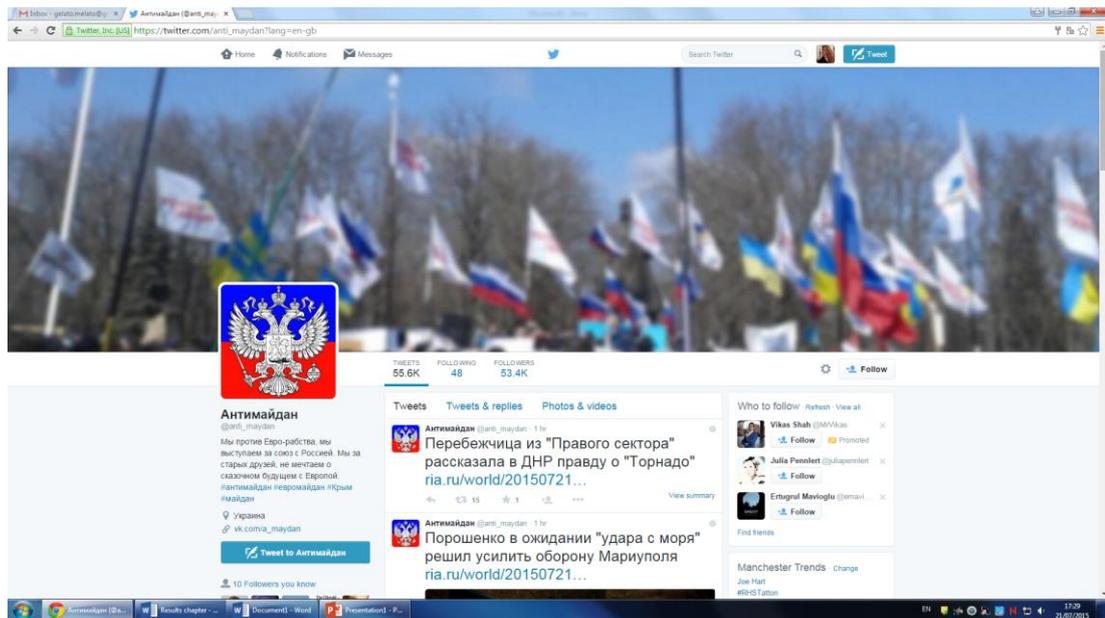


Figure 99. @Russian_market's Twitter profile page



Figure 100. @anti_maydan's Twitter profile page

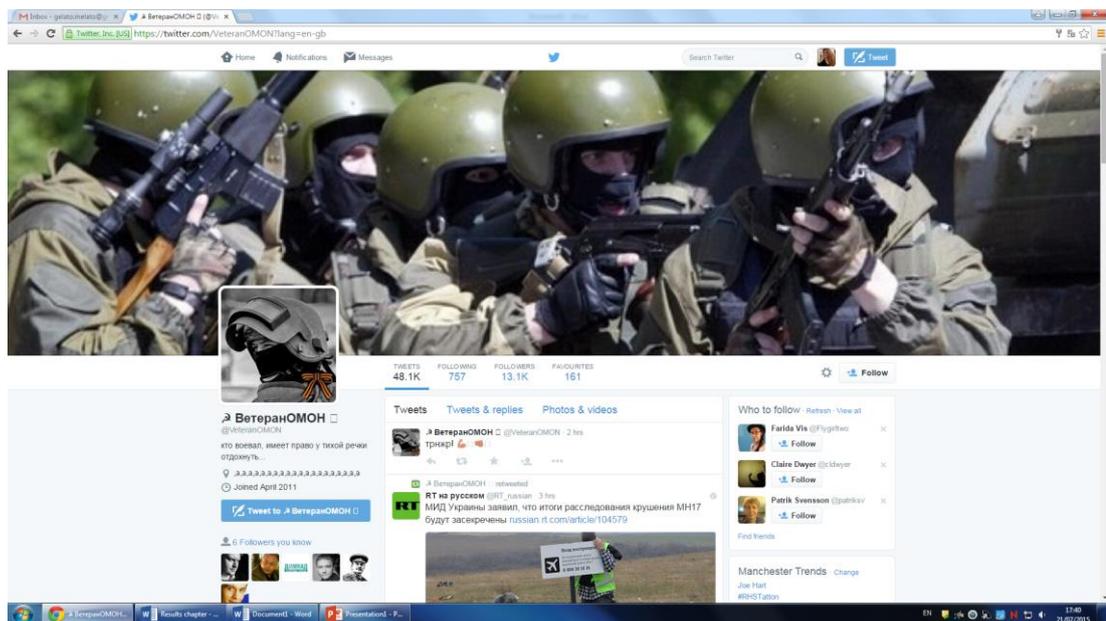


Another remarkable trend in the pro-government Twitter framing is the referral to the Russian military glory. Several accounts contain the images of guns or armed men in the profile, and a few popular ones even introduce themselves as members of the Russian army or Special Forces. @RozhkoRussia (56,500 followers) claims to be the Russian conscript soldier serving his duty in the Far East. He publishes many agreeable portraits of a young man in uniform and tweets under the tag that translates from Russian as #ArmyRoutine; he promotes patriotism and invites the audience to follow the life of a “common soldier” of the Russian army by enclosing details of his routine. Another politically active account that utilised military references is @VeteranOMON (13,100 followers); the name translates as “the ex-serviceman of the Special Forces police unit”. Unlike @RozhkoRussia, @VeteranOMON does not publish many noticeable details on the experience of having worked in the Special Forces; he or she retweets a lot from other prominent pro-government users; his own tweets are often rude and sexist and attack Russian opposition leaders and the liberal media. Popularity of the military discourse and references to patriotism suggest that these notions have added a meaningful layer to the pro-government narratives in traditional and digital deliberations. Besides, the attempts at broadcasting individual voices of the Russian military men contribute an informal extension to the official propaganda of masculinity, militarised politics and rule of power.

Figure 101. @RozhkoRussia's Twitter profile page



Figure 102. @VeteranOMON's Twitter profile page



The most popular pro-Kremlin account in the Crimean sample discloses his real identity and utilises Twitter for promoting his offline activity. @korobkov (132,000 followers) is involved in politics offline, which perhaps explains his openness on Twitter. The account belongs to Anton Korobkov, a journalist, blogger and public personality who shares many details of his biography in the profile and tweets under his own portrait on the userpic; the creativity of framing is minimal.

A few pro-government accounts demonstrate an exceptionally creative branding, such as @tvjihad (21,000 followers). One can interpret @tvjihad as the parody of the liberal Internet channel TV Rain (@tvrain on Twitter). Their Twitter name sounds similar, the profile picture employs a similar logo, but @tvjihad mockingly presents an imaginary television channel called TV Jihad. The profile information says “A joint project of the Caucasus-Centre and TV Rain. We fight Kafirs, Murtads, Mushriks, Shabikhs, Harbiyahs, Munafiks and Rafidites. The account is a parody”. The location is set as “VILAYAT MOSCOW” (“vilayat” translates as “province” from Persian or Turkish – AD.); there is also a link to the VKontakte page of the same name.

Figure 103. @tvjihad’s Twitter profile page



The account regularly comments on the activity of the liberal community: opposition politicians, journalists and media outlets, and frames criticism in the complex Islam terminology. For instance, in July 2015 it commented on the news that Russian opposition politician Maria Gaidar would join the Georgian ex-president Mikhail Saakashvili in his work in Ukraine, in the government of the Ukrainian city of Odessa. @tvjihad posted “HAREM. Maryam-al-Gaidar will become the favourite wife in the harem of the governor of the Ukrainian province of Odeshan Ishac Ash-Shvili” (17 July 2015). The account adjusts real names to make them sound Arabic and uses Islam concepts to depict mockingly the situation as if it happened in a conservative Muslim country.

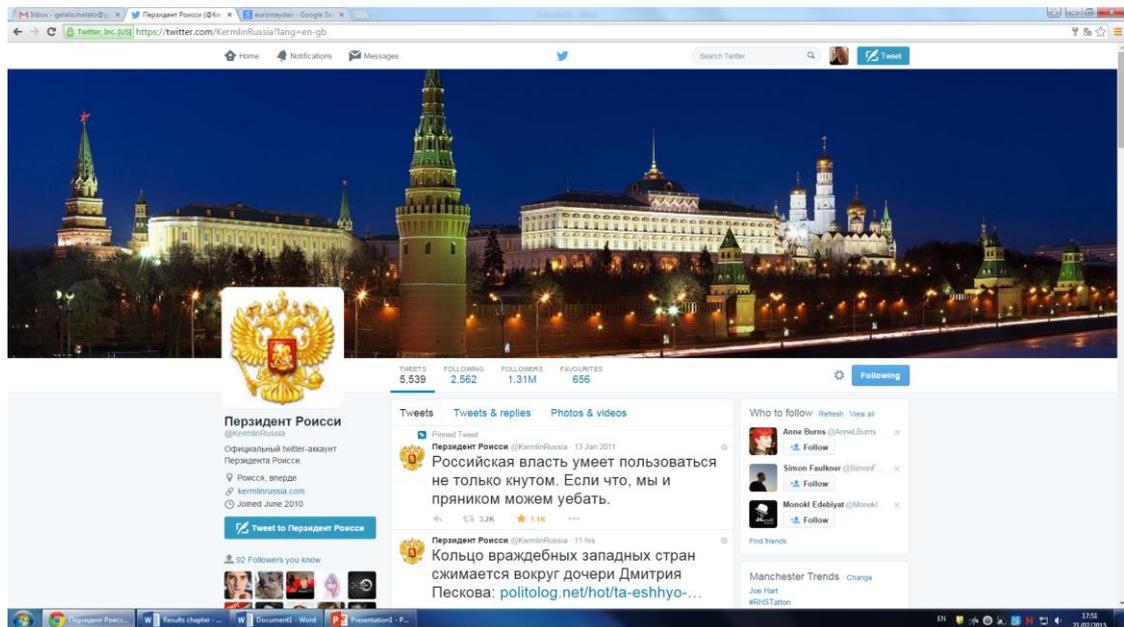
On a different occasion, @tvjihad coined a joke about the terrorist group ISIS: “In the Islamic State a mujahidin has occasionally cut off his own head while attempting to make a selfie with a knife” (4 July 2015). @tvjihad’s tweets are generally very challenging to comprehend without knowledge of Islamic vocabulary, especially taking into account that this user applies them in a sardonic sense, overlaying and twisting meanings. One has to be aware of the basic concepts of this religion to be able to decipher irony in the tweets. The persistence and regularity of @tvjihad’s tweets and its anti-liberal criticism suggest that the government could fund it.

Prominent pro-Kremlin accounts establish themselves as the mouthpieces of truth and patriotism. In some cases, they act as the allies to the traditional media and reproduce the similar discourse in the Twittersphere; in other cases, they appear as representatives of contemporary Russian citizens. Many of them claim to belong to the military and reinforce the images and ideas of patriarchal masculinity. The framing of these accounts – notwithstanding their tweets – intriguingly correlates three notions together: patriotism, government loyalty and militarised masculinity. The interrelation of these themes constitutes a noteworthy identity pattern for political “patriots” online: apparently, in order to appear a loyal citizen of your country, one has to conform to the dominant official patriotism and conservative gender roles. Besides, the straightforward branding in recognisable folk and cultural symbols (bears, Russian coat of arms and panoramas of the Kremlin) is more prevalent and efficient than more intricate styles of microblogging (@tvjihad’s example is rather an exception due to the unusual abundance of allegories and postmodern multi-symbolism).

Anti-government users employ more creativity, humour and travesty in their Twitter presence. Profiles of the eminent liberal accounts rely on parody and subversion. They play-act as the “unofficial” feeds of the Kremlin (@KermlinRussia), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@Fake_MIDRF), Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov (@Sandy_mustache) and the Ministry of Love (@FakeMORF; previously it was branded as the mock account of the Ministry of Defence, then the owner changed the title to the Ministry of Love). The allusions of close relation to the official political bodies and influential individuals expose the liberal users’ need to rely on a famous person or institution to gain recognition online. Anti-government users have created an almost theatrical representation of their

subjects; in the beginning, many of them feigned speaking on behalf of their “characters”, but then expanded to voicing the grievances and comments of the liberal community in general. @Judge_Syrova_Ya (6,355 followers) is exemplary for this pattern – the account is named after Marina Syrova, the federal judge who sentenced the punk band Pussy Riot to two years in prison for singing and dancing in the main Moscow cathedral (RBK, 2012). In the beginning, in 2012, the account holder simulated tweeting on behalf of Syrova, pointing to the details of her biography and ongoing professional activity (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014), but then almost obliterated any references to the judge and turned the microblog into a non-personified reflection on Russian politics. All these parody accounts monitor daily news and offer a commentary, deconstruct and expose the deceit of propaganda, provide analytical reflection and put the new events in the broader context (see Appendix for a detailed explanation of the top liberal accounts’ framing).

Figure 104. @KermlinRussia’s Twitter profile page



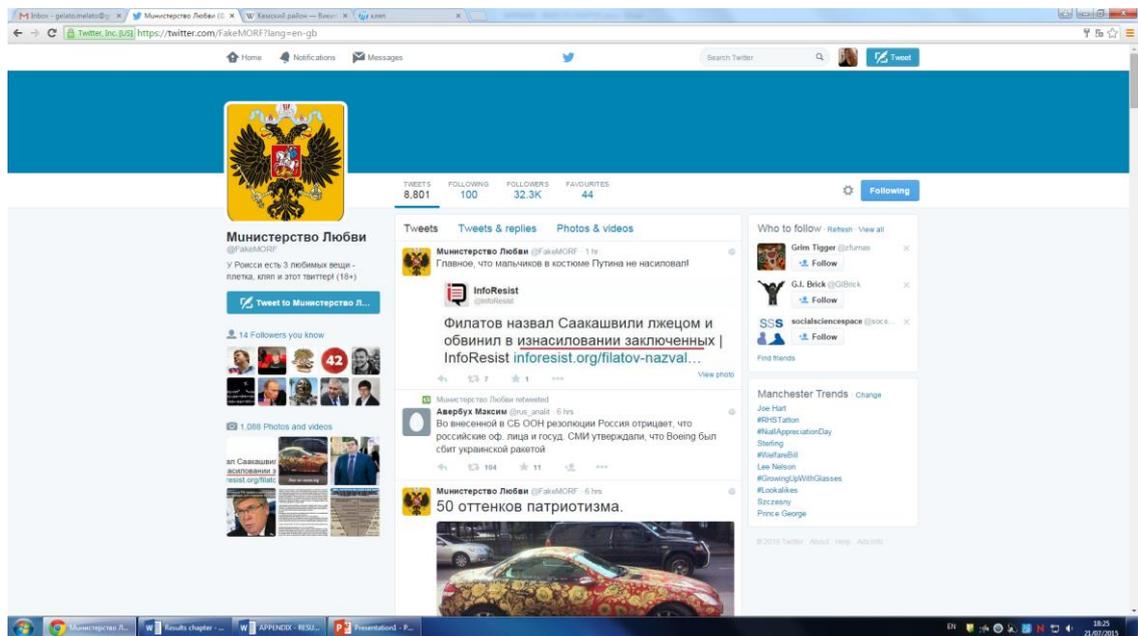
@KermlinRussia is another exemplary parody account that has evolved into a liberal mouthpiece of the digital realm. The top Russian liberal account on Twitter (1,300,000 followers) playfully misspells “Kremlin Russia” for “Kermlin Russia” and “President of Russia” for “Persident Roissi” to pursue a comic effect and avoid prosecution for exploiting these names. The profile description says “Roissiya, vperde!” which is also a misspelled slogan: instead of “Rossiya, vperyod!” (Go,

Russia!), it reads somewhat like “Russia is in the ass”. Remarkably, the account owners started their microblog as the imitation of the official account of (then) president Dmitry Medvedev and published sardonic observations and self-reflection on behalf of the leader. @KermlinRussia’s owners admit (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014) that many people believed that Medvedev was leading the account himself and were horrified with the freedom of criticism and self-irony that he expressed on Twitter. Later on they moved away from parodying Dmitry Medvedev and engaged in general criticism of the Russian authorities. It was only when the account reached massive popularity that the two co-authors revealed their identities. Both Arseniy Bobrovskiy and Yekaterina Romanovskaya are young professionals who live in Moscow and work in public relations. This occupation, along with journalism, law, entertainment, are among predominant professions among the eminent liberal meme makers (see Interviews Analysis).

Figure 105. @Fake_MIDRF’s Twitter profile page. The account uses the portrait of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov and image from the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s speech at the UN in 1960. See Appendix for more detail



Figure 106. @FakeMORF's Twitter profile page. The owner introduces the account as *The Ministry of Love* and exploits the Russian coat of arms



The tendency to exploit Russian national symbols (the coat of arms, panorama of the Kremlin, photos of politicians etc.) in the framing relates liberal accounts with the pro-government ones. Although they both adhere to the symbols of authority and power, they employ them for different purposes, striking an intriguing dichotomy. Pro-government and anti-government users cover the news from opposing perspectives, yet they both tie their narratives to the Kremlin as the centre of decision-making and influence. None of the accounts studied included pictures of the White House, Parliament or ruling party's representatives.

Several popular liberal accounts call themselves a “Ministry” (as @Fake_MIDRF and @FakeMORF do), perhaps pursuing two goals: I am drawing the assumption that it makes the accounts appear significant and weighty and at the same time explain their activity as “serving the nation” in the English sense of the word “ministry”.

Liberal accounts employ substantially more humour than do their pro-government counterparts, which probably owes to the necessity to appear harmless to the state communication watchdog: any calls to resistance or expression of unsupported criticism of the authorities may be subject to prosecution under the Anti-Extremism Law (see Context chapter for more detail). Several liberal account holders used to have a clearer reference to the notable decision makers, but then removed any

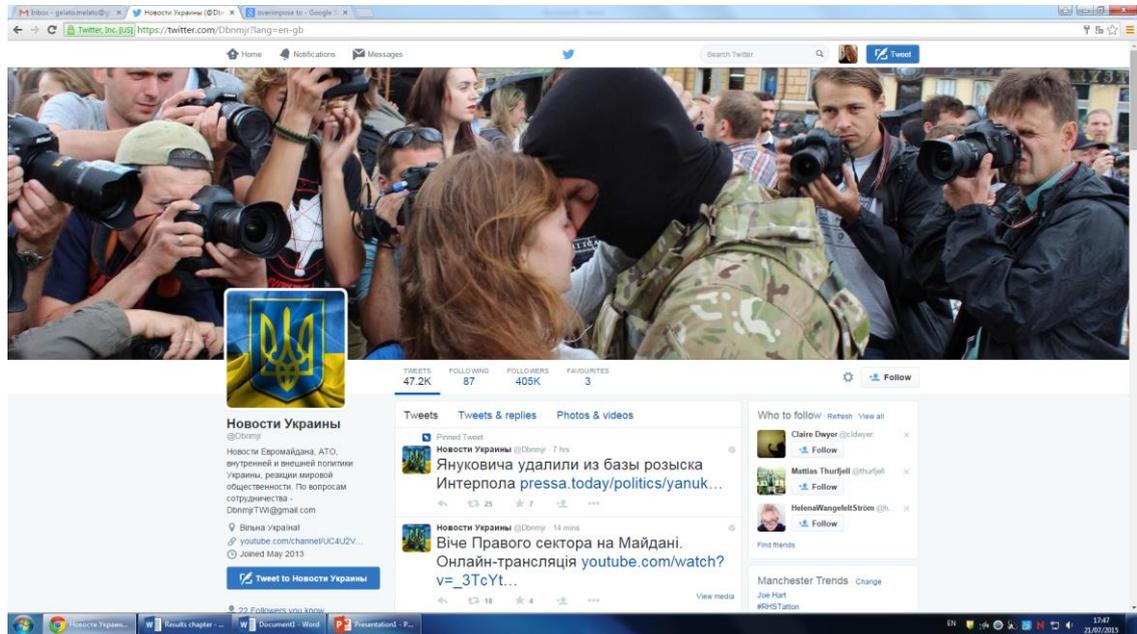
direct relation to public personalities. For instance, @Sandy_mustache pretends to tweet on behalf of the facial hair of the president’s representative Dmitry Peskov. The profile description previously said “Peskov’s moustache. We move regularly”. However, the recent amendment to the Russian legislation on privacy banned the inappropriate exploitation of the individuals’ identities online (see Context chapter, pp. 41). @Sandy_mustache protected their account by removing the full name of Dmitry Peskov and his photograph, retaining an ambiguous drawing and vague self-description.

Figure 107. @Sandy_mustache’s Twitter profile page



Although parody and impersonation are popular styles of framing, other liberal accounts studied are less theatrical and more reserved. They include personal pages with no theatricality. For instance, @Dbnmjr (a fierce Ukrainian opponent of the Kremlin, 408,000 followers) persistently attacks the Russian government for the involvement in Ukrainian affairs and presents the account as the mouthpiece of Ukrainian anti-Russian resistance. Another eminent liberal meme sharer, @vaddieg (400 followers in 2015) calls himself “Father Vadim” and thus employs partial theatricality. A remark on being the “Father” (meaning “the priest”) may be a satirical comment on the religious rhetoric that habitually emerges in the Russian state propaganda. The account’s tweets do not hold many references to the Russian church or anticlerical rhetoric; therefore, this theatricality remains unwrapped.

Figure 108. @Dbnmjr's Twitter profile page. A popular Ukrainian politicised user, @Dbnmjr persistently and aggressively criticises the Russian government for the involvement in Ukrainian affairs



Overall, anti-government Twitter meme sharers tend to exercise in creativity and humour, while the pro-Kremlin accounts aspire to appear austere to manifest the hegemonic ideology in the digital space. Conservative users conjoin recognisable symbols of the Russian state and exert in imperious patriotic rhetoric; their Twitter feeds promote and expand the state media discourse. Liberal accounts deconstruct the components of the dominant political and media discourses, dismantling symbols and metaphors. By doing so, they intend to unmask the distortions in media representation and evoke the alternative interpretation of the news. One of the drawbacks of this framing is that it is dependent on the state and media narratives: liberal accounts require the stimulus to react, be it the news or quotations they could ridicule. At the same time, liberal accounts often offer a compound analytical examination of the events and exhibit their hidden meaning and implications. However, the pro-government accounts have more freedom in generating original narratives. As our sample shows, they dragged the Muslim rhetoric into the loop (@tvjihad) and encompassed additional sociocultural narratives such as traditional masculinity and military dignity (@VeteranOMON, @RozhkoRussia) to broaden the range of supporters.

Liberal accounts notably benefit from Twitter's anonymity and conceal their identities behind playful profiles and usernames with various levels of theatricality. They probably exploit these carnivalesque identities to ridicule the official discourse, but at the same time protect themselves from the state persecution. Moreover, the absurdity of content and expression in many popular critical accounts suggests a postmodernist commentary on the political reality – users refuse rational deliberation of events and shape their revolt in an artistic densely allegoric form. Conclusively, the pro-government accounts propagate the dominant lines of thought and possess the capacity to add supplementary discourses, but offer less analytics and expressive creativity than liberal users.

6.5 Meme travel analysis (tentative study)

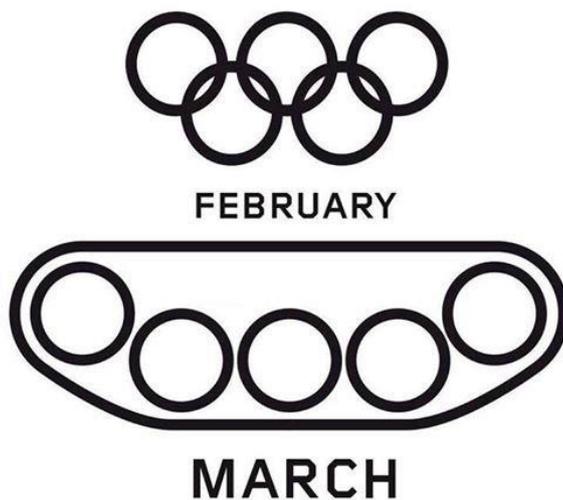
I have attempted to trace memes in their metamorphosis through their travels on social networks. The task proved challenging, as there is currently no automatic tool or software available to trace the trajectory of memes that change on their way. Scraping has turned out problematic, as the Internet search engines have limited capacity in identifying and releasing the visuals; restrictive privacy settings on major social networks prevented further data collection from closed personal pages. I have endeavoured to collect the transforming memes manually. I located several memes of interest and studied the profiles of the users who shared them in my sample network (200 active politicised accounts). Then I scrutinised the networks of their followers who retweeted the meme in the original or adjusted shape to analyse the potential mutations of meaning and changes of discourse. This was an experimental non-representative and non-replicable approach, which nonetheless highlighted a number of trends in Russian politicised meme sharing. These tentative findings suggest areas of future research on the Internet memes and provide evident examples of chains of memetic transformations that illustrate the adaptive nature of memes and ways people alter their meaning in different contexts.

This test study has revealed that, instead of contributing their alterations to the same thread, individuals tend to publish the adjusted memes to other networks, personal and group accounts; uploading to meme aggregators and humorous websites.

This research includes two case studies on the highly popular Crimean memes that enjoyed rampant circulation on the Web, hence their trajectories were more visible than those of their less prolific counterparts.

The “February-March” meme (see Figure 109) emerged in social networks in early March 2014, soon after the end of the Sochi Olympic Games and along with the start of the Crimean campaign.

Figure 109. The February-March meme allegorically comments on the proximity of two major events concerning Russia and its global reputation: hosting the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi and intervening in the Ukrainian territory to facilitate the Crimean independence. The Olympic circles are juxtaposed with the caterpillar track.



The very process of following the trajectory of this meme turned into an industrious investigation. The meme was first located on the personal Facebook webpage of a public figure, television celebrity Rovshan Askerov. He had obtained the text from the entertaining Facebook portal and web magazine Theories of the Deep Understanding of Things. This website has a large community of followers (over 130,000), and a few of them shared their doctored versions of the meme and additional memes, fitting in the narrative linking the Olympic Games and subsequent war. Other sharers included Facebook communities of art posters and gags (Alt, Ctrl, Del, 275,940 followers, and That’s Messed Up, 13,233 followers – see Appendix for more

detail). Uneven popularity levels of the sharers did not indicate any recurring patterns of dissemination: prominent and minor accounts, personal and group pages both distributed the meme. Still, the larger distributors attracted a larger audience and higher number of comments; many individual users added their own modifications of the meme to the discussion.

Figure 110. Comparison of popularity of the main accounts involved in the distribution of the February-March meme (numbers demonstrate the amount of followers of each account)

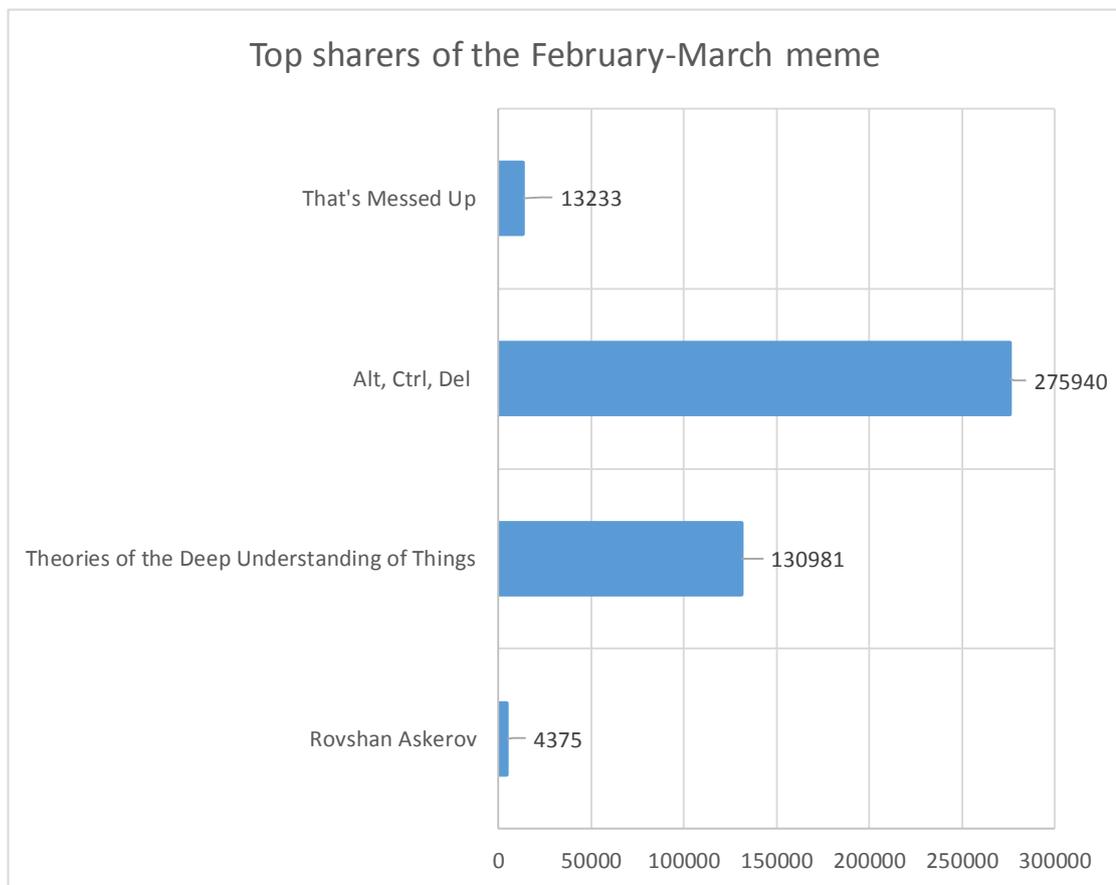
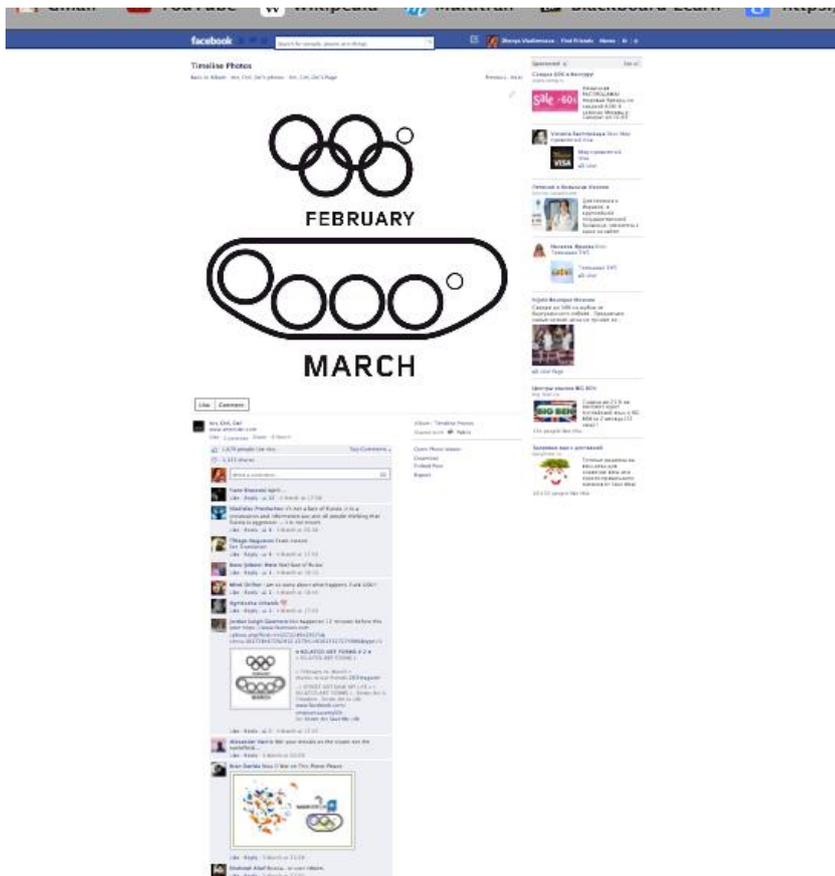
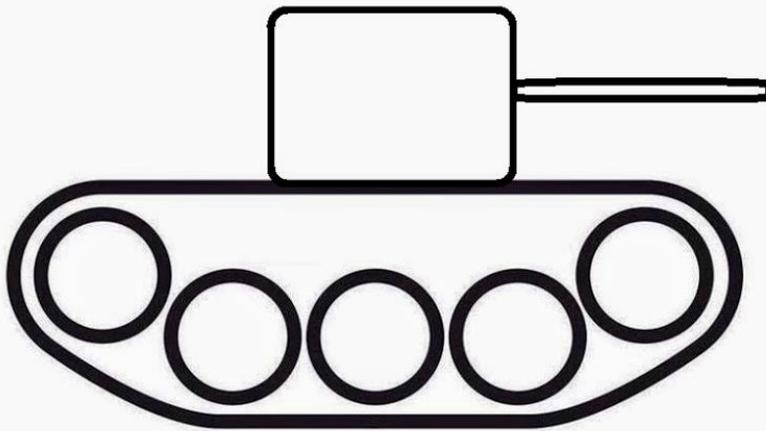


Figure 111. The additional memes that were contributed to the Theories of the Deep Understanding of Things' thread. These users are (from top to bottom): an art/community webpage Alt, Ctrl, Del and four individuals: Jordan Leigh Guerrero, Bran Darida, Marcelo Prezende and Jody Porter





MARCH



The reference to the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico draws an astonishing parallel between Mexico of the 1960s and Russia of the 2010s. Days before the start of the Games in Mexico, students organised mass protests against the military occupation of the National Polytechnic Institute. The government sent the troops to the main square, and the conflict resulted in a 90-minute gunfire that brought 25 deaths (BBC, 2005). The original Mexican resistant poster that depicted a tank with the Olympic circles instead of the caterpillar track commented on the tragic intersection of war and peace around the Olympic spirit. By introducing the historical meme to the current context, users link global and local discourses and unite remote periods. Juxtaposition of the February-March meme with the Mexico-68 poster warns citizens about the governments that reach for guns even in close proximity of the celebration of sports and good spirit, as the Olympic Games are supposed to be.

In several cases, clicking on the image provided the original source of publication. By expanding the investigation to other group pages on Facebook, I was able to identify the entertaining community That's Messed Up (over 13,000 followers and 160,000 mentions). The distribution of the February-March meme on this page attracted more memes on the subject of war and the Olympics. Although users did not adjust the February-March meme, they nonetheless contributed other related texts. At this point, tracking of the February-March meme revealed no other significant alterations and came to a dead end. Additional searches through personal webpages of individual meme sharers (those mentioned in Figure 9) did not harvest any more memes either.

Figure 112. New memes published in the thread started by the February-March meme on the *That's Messed Up* community page



The analysis of the meme travel proved that memes pass through communities and individual pages and are not limited to either interpersonal or intergroup communication. Netizens can also enrich the discourse by adding other related memes to the conversation, and hence broaden the scope of ideas and invite reflections from the others. The dispersion and aggregation of memes in social networks can facilitate the accumulation of ideas in a shared virtual space, but does not seem to stimulate the community formation. The correlation of various memes in one thread creates an interesting mixture of ideas, but there is no evidence that people take these viral texts as a starting point for the political discussion in the comments.

My second case study of meme travel analysis also placed Russia-related memes in a global context, but incorporated more Russian users. In the previous case, international, English-speaking members of Facebook expedited the expansion of the February-March meme over many popular pages and communities. The graphic clarity of the image, along with the absence of any text in need of translation, facilitated its distribution. The focal point of the second case, Doors meme (see Figure 113), also contains a little text and is comprehensible without a dictionary. However, it exhibits a slightly different role of a meme – users employed the meme as the discursive weapon, dramatically remixing it to change the ideological content, and oppose the political opponents.

Figure 113. The Doors (also known as Death Walking Door to Door, or Death Go Away) originated as the professional cartoon that turned into a meme during the first weeks of March 2014, along with the escalation of the Crimean crisis



The Doors meme is the allegory of the US invasion of other countries. It portrays the male figure of a figurative Uncle Sam, symbol of the US, who walks from door to door that are labelled as “Iraq”, “Syria”, “Libya” and others; flames and blood are coming from these rooms. The protagonist is shocked to meet the Bear, the metaphoric representation of Russia, greeting him from the Ukrainian door. There are two main versions of the Doors meme that first circulated in Russian social networks; one

belongs to the unknown, perhaps Western cartoonist, and the other is the work of the Russian cartoonist Vitaly Podvitsky.

Figure 114. The tweets says “Instead of a thousand words. #Ukraine”.

Work of the unknown cartoonist

 **WiseOwl** @philoxenia29 · Feb 26
Вместо тысячи слов. #Украина pic.twitter.com/Wpxr1CluWr



RETWEET 1 FAVORITES 3



Figure 115. The tweet says, “Who are you looking for? #Crimea #Russia #Putin #Ukraine #Maidan #Antimaidan #Donetsk #Kharkov #Odessa”.

The cartoon carries signature of the professional cartoonist Vitaly Podvitsky in the right bottom corner



Both versions of the meme travelled through Russian and English-speaking accounts on Twitter, receiving multiple alterations (see Appendix for the detailed protocol of the investigation). Some users have turned it into a comic, while others have completely overthrown the ideological argument, revolving the satire against Russia.

Figure 116. The cartoon turns into a two-part comic. American Death keeps knocking on the doors, but the Russian soldier (as the flag on the green uniform suggests) kicks it away from Ukraine. Shared by @RuNetMemes, the popular Russian-English account that monitors the Russian blogosphere



RuNet Memes
@RuNetMemes



Following

Some Russian bloggers believe that Moscow is defending Ukraine from American aggression.



RETWEETS
147

FAVORITES
52



Figure 117. Further reiterations of the meme incorporated the likes of Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin: the latter kicks the American president on the bottom, resting against the door labelled as “Ukraine”. @AOkunew tweets: “Sorry, the wrong door!”



Alexandr Okunew @AOkunew · Mar 5

Извините, Вы ошиблись дверью! pic.twitter.com/LKY0tl5b4Z



RETWEETS
22

FAVORITES
7



Figure 118. In this version, the bear with the Russian flag on the forearm represents Russia. @MarkRowe tweets in English: “#Russia #Ukraine Capitalist expansion”.



Mark Rowe @MarkRowe10 · Mar 6

#Russia #Ukraine Capitalist expansion pic.twitter.com/hIWUoEac5P



RETWEETS

18

FAVORITES

14



1:12 AM - 6 Mar 2014 · Details

Flag media

Figure 119. @chashka_dm tweets #Russia #russiaukraine and posts a meme that presents Russia as the aggressive Death; the labels on the doors indicate previous Russian war zones (from left to right): Caucasus, Chechnya, Dagestan, Abkhazia, North Ossetia, and now – Ukraine



The circulation of the Doors meme encouraged an array of opinions on the Crimean crisis and the roles of Russia and the US in it. Users utilised memes to point at the previous debates on the abuse of power by the US and eventually linked it with the current dispute on the abuse of power by Russia. Versatile mutations of the meme exposed the ambivalence of this rhetoric tool and proved that ideological content is not static in it, but can transform through a quick remix. The bare replacement of labels on the doors and painting various flags on Death's contours alternated the whole content and twisted the targets of criticism. Besides, this meme's flexibility to adjustment exposed the conversational power of the cartoon format – users adapted this professionally executed coded text and applied it as a rhetoric weapon.

Similarly to the February-March meme, the Doors meme is also historically routed and relates to another conflict. According to the Israeli blogger David Guy, the Doors meme derives from the anti-Israel Internet campaign of 2013 (see Figure 121; Guy, 2013; Rothrock, 2014b).

Figure 120. The pro-Israeli version of the Doors meme coming from 2013. David Guy, a pro-Israel blogger at the lawyers' blog "Five Minutes for Israel" declared that the cartoon appeared as a criticism of the Israeli-American plotting of the Arab Spring (Guy, 2013; Rothrock, 2014b). The Star of David on the American Death's figure indicated the alliance between the two states in their conspiracy over Arab countries.



Figure 121. In another alteration, the blame fell on the Wahhabi movement, the ultra-conservative version of the Islam that dominates Saudi Arabia, and had no mention of Israel and the US (Guy, 2013).



The roadmap of the Doors meme journey includes individual Twitter accounts, the Twitter feeds of established media sources, independent electronic media, local Russian social network VKontakte's page and the Israeli blog for advocates. The broad scope of platforms demonstrates the meme's potency in surmounting the limits of individual and public spaces. The limitation of this fluidity is the constant change of audience: digital crowds were unlikely to trace the metamorphosis of a meme and witness the transfiguration of discourse, given the diversity of the meme's voyage. The only exception was @RuNetMemes Twitter, but the account's aim is the collection of prominent memes of the Russian Twitter (RuNetMemes Twitter profile, no date), hence they deliberately monitored the Doors meme and linked its editions. In conclusion, the analysis of the Doors meme travel validated the high capacity of memes for trans-platform circulation and rhetorical metamorphosis. There are no proofs that memes conjoin digital users in a debate. Nevertheless, the study on the Doors example suggested that memes could be encouraging for individual creativity

and expression of political position through memes. Multiple ideological transformations of the Doors meme further sustained the discursive strength of cartoons as the meme material – the audience found the initially metaphorical and coded text appealing and recoded the symbols to one’s political preferences. This insight informs that memes are more likely to link ideas and narratives than individuals: they bypass the margins of the established groups and virtual communities and flourish in the larger spaces of loosely connected digital crowds.

6.6 Interview analysis

As the second part of the fieldwork, I held interviews with the most popular politically active meme makers and sharers of the Russian segment of Twitter. The analysis of their responses allowed the identification of a number of recurring themes as well as discrepancies, which demonstrate that meme exchange is a contemporary, evolving digital practice that requires further research.

Among 15 speakers interviewed, two express pro-government sentiments, and the rest either openly confront the government in their daily expression on Twitter or criticise it occasionally, when triggered by any specific events.

The pro-government meme sharers are @vezhливо and @Stalin_RF. The first account emerged in March 2014 and has been publishing aspirational images of Russian military men and hardware with sentimental slogans. Three people lead the account: two public relations and new media professionals Alexander Fayb and Stanislav Apetyan and their third anonymous co-author (@vezhливо, personal communication, 5 June 2014).

@Stalin_RF is held by a pro-government individual who posts harsh tweets against any opposition or criticism of the Russian authorities and occasionally pretends to speak on behalf of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

There are 13 anti-government meme sharers. @KermlinRussia is the most popular parody liberal account of the Russian Twitter (1,350,000 followers). It was born as a prank of Dmitry Medvedev’s Twitter when he was Prime Minister in 2012,

but evolved into a highly critical and analytical independent liberal mouthpiece. By the time of the interview, it belonged to two public relations professionals in their early 30s, Arseniy Bobrovsky and Ekaterina Romanovskaya; in early 2015 Romanovskaya announced on her Facebook page that she was no longer co-authoring @KermlinRussia.

Pavel Borisov and Igor Belkin used to co-author the acclaimed Twitter feed of the popular independent news media outlet Lenta.ru. @lentarofficial attracted hundreds of thousands of followers by its colloquial language, humour and memes. It existed until March 2014, when the owner of Lenta.ru ousted the highly respected chief editor Galina Timchenko for the coverage of the Ukrainian conflict (Rothrock, 2014a). Dozens of journalists deemed this dismissal an act of censorship and turned in their acts of resignation in protest. The new staff turned Lenta.ru into a conformist media and adjusted the Twitter account @lentarofficial accordingly. Borisov now works for the liberal news portal Meduza.io, which Galina Timchenko established in the capital of Latvia, Riga, to shelter it from the Russian government's influence. Belkin has migrated to the US and has been working remotely for the digital marketing agency in Moscow.

Anton Nossik is one of the best-known media and Internet experts and visionaries in Russia, who also belongs to the list of top-10 bloggers. He founded Lenta.ru, a prominent Internet newspaper Gazeta.ru and many other digital media projects; he now owns a digital marketing agency and employs Igor Belkin.

@StalinGulag (200,000 followers) occasionally pretends to tweet on behalf of the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, but mostly shares his own views and critical assessment of the Russian government's activity. The account holder describes himself as working in finance (@StalinGulag, personal communication, 15 September 2014).

Sultan Suleimanov used to work for Lenta.ru until the crackdown in 2014 and then moved to TJournal, a popular web magazine that monitors social media and summarises valuable stories and trends. Known for his digital expertise, Suleimanov later joined his ex-Lenta.ru colleagues and moved to Riga to provide digital monitoring for Galina Timchenko's portal Meduza.

@Fake_MIDRF (110,000 followers) is co-authored by a group of people. One of them admits to living in London and working in public relations in the sphere of technologies (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014). The account mocks Russian politics on a daily basis and draws analytical comments, placing recent news in a broader agenda and context.

Sergey Elkin is one of the leading political cartoonists in Russia. A Moscow-based artist in his early 50s, he started his career as the editor of a small local newspaper. When he ran out of stories, Elkin decided to fill the pages with cartoons and has evolved into an acclaimed cartoonist (Golubock, 2014). Electronic media and newspapers of various ideological standpoints (from the national news agency Ria Novosti to the liberal The Moscow Times) commission his cartoons on a regular basis.

@FakeMORF (34,500 followers) presents itself as the Ministry of Love and offers daily critical reflection and jokes on political news. The account holder works as a lawyer in Moscow (@FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014).

@Twitted_knitter (42,400 followers) is authored by the Senior Lecturer in Law in one of the Siberian universities. In 2012, the authorities put pressure on the university to fire their liberal employee for his Twitter publications, and only the involvement of the liberal media, including TV Rain, saved the academic from losing his job. Since then the local government has forbidden loyal media to access him for any commentaries whether on politics, law or education (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014).

@FastSlon (51,000 followers) is the informal Twitter feed of the independent news media Slon.ru. A few journalists of ex-Lenta.ru lead the account to spread the news and “speak with the reader in their language” (@FastSlon, personal communication, 11 December 2014). The account mostly circulates news in a neutral manner, yet seldom adds memes and irony to the tweets.

@Judge_Syrova_Ya (7,000 followers) named his account after the federal judge Marina Syrova who scandalously sentenced punk band Pussy Riot to two years in prison for their performance in the main Moscow cathedral. The user initiated the account as a parody of Syrova and included details of her biography and references to the cases she was in charge of, but later developed this Twitter into a mouthpiece of civil and political criticism. The author works in transport logistics and manages

public campaigns against bad roads and corruption, including the notable “Blue Buckets” mobilisation that opposed the abuse of automobile sirens by the state officials.

Alexey Kovalev is an experienced Russian journalist and blogger, ex-editor-in-chief of InoSmi, the Russian media portal that monitored top Western media and translated them into Russian, and a regular contributor to Guardian, GQ and Forbes.

Genesis of political memes in the Russian protest

The majority of interviewees agreed that memes became visible and influential in Russian politics in 2011-2012, when the first large anti-government protests took place. They attribute the intensifying attractiveness of this new media format both to the peculiarities of shape and content. The playful form of a meme organically derived from the entertaining, casual expression of the social media banter.

During the protests, social network users filled popular general meme templates (such as Demotivator, Image Macro and others) with criticism of the government and references to burning social and political issues. Memes were a familiar and casual language for the digital natives, who carried this habitual format of online expression down to the streets and transformed it into posters (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014; S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015). During the political mobilisation of 2011-12, social network users utilised them to vent aggression and concern in a concise, symbolic way.

“Memes evidently gained political weight in the 2011-12 protests. It is explainable. The accumulated people’s fury at injustice emanated in the form of angry jokes. Citizens actively shared them to express their point of view again and again” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

Digital expert Sultan Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) and journalist Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) agree that the format of memes facilitated a spontaneous expression of one’s disagreement with the government. Anyone was able to go online, generate or borrow a joke and then fuel

the digital discussion with it within minutes. Many interviewees highlighted the imperative power of memes in channelling emotion. Bold, rude and stinging texts transmitted the vehemence of people's annoyance.

"I think that an image with a funny text was the easiest way for people to convey an emotion. So many memes burgeoned during the protests because people yearned for sending a message to the authorities: we did not come here for a "May Day demonstration"¹⁰, but because we are truly fed up" (@FastSlon, personal communication, 11 December 2014).

S. Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) remarks that Internet memes were an important means of communication and identification of the individuals with similar views. Political memes on Twitter often served as the digital "passwords" or markers that vaguely distinguished the audience of traditional media from the audience of social networks.

"They [Navalny¹¹, @KermlinRussia and other prominent liberal bloggers - AD] sent the message to the audience that appreciated memes, "Guys, I am the same like you, we are on the same page". This worked especially well because it demarcated the digital audience of memes from those people who perceive not only memes, but the whole Internet as a hostile environment" (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

Curiously, even pro-government meme sharers concede that memes formed a refreshing emblem, or a branding element, of the 2011-12 resistance (@vezhливо, personal communication, 5 June 2014). Yet the co-author of the pro-Kremlin account @vezhливо claims that these texts were not organic stems of digital debates, but

¹⁰ This belittling allegory refers to the Soviet tradition of disciplined workers' marches on the Labour Day that falls on the 1st of May every year. In the Eastern bloc, these marches were obligatory for the labourers, and the party leaders in every town greeted the highly organised crowds who bore red flags and Communist placards. The allegory here means a "futile staged demonstration".

¹¹ Alexey Navalny is the leader of the Russian political opposition. Before founding his own party, he used to work for other liberal parties, combining this with the career of a lawyer. Navalny gained recognition in the 2010s with his highly popular sarcastic blog and acclaimed crowd-sourced campaign against corruption. The politician extensively exploited the Internet's interactivity: inviting legal expertise and financial input from his followers to pursue the bribe takers in the government.

deliberate weapons of an organised campaign. While this comment dismisses the memes' authenticity, it nonetheless affirms their value in the mobilisation of the resistant public.

“If one assesses [the 2011-12 memes] by the principles of media technologies, he or she would admit that they were manufactured with competence. Alexey Navalny, who promoted and animated many of those memes, is primarily a public relations specialist. He is by no means a politician, but a public relations and new media expert. He knew how to pull all of this off. However, the memes have soon turned against their creators. The meme against the “party of crooks and thieves”¹² revolted against rampant liberal propaganda and mocked its prejudice. This proves that the orchestrated media campaign lost its persuasiveness when the public demand for it vanished. People understood the quality of the 2011-12 protests and the motives of the organisers. All these memes, as saggy balloons, went from our life to the scientific papers, Wikipedia and history” (@vezhливо, personal communication, 5 June 2014).

Liberal journalists and bloggers P. Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) and S. Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) also render homage to the leading liberal politician Alexey Navalny for his exemplary employment of memes in raising the political awareness of citizens. A blogger-turned-politician, Navalny vigorously identified his potential audience as the public who inhabit digital networks, operate its specific slang and favour memes. He has been utilising memes as the Internet jargon that helps to draw attention to his large analytical texts and investigations into state corruption. Moreover, Navalny has notably exploited memes to establish contact and sympathy with the digitally savvy crowds.

“An image always works better than a text. Navalny has become popular thanks to the blogosphere, people began paying attention to his account and support him with

¹² In February 2011, Alexey Navalny launched the Internet campaign against the ruling party Edinaya Rossiya. He termed it as “the party of crooks and thieves” and invited other users to insert this definition in as many webpages as possible, aiming to make it a prevailing search engine output for the searches on Edinaya Rossiya. Many protesters included this critical definition on their placards during the 2011-12 protests, and by July 2012, 42% of the population identified Edinaya Rossiya as “the party of crooks and thieves” (Levada-Centre, 2012).

“likes”. *This environment was very attractive due to the use of humour”* (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

An experienced journalist and ex-author of the popular Twitter @lentarofficial Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) believes that liberal users employed memes in those cases when they did not want to express their political views explicitly: *“People share memes to pass the idea without using their own words”* (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014). Memes allowed resistant users to draw a distance between their identities and the messages they passed; a meme sharer could always say that he or she only redistributed a meme, but did not originate it. This practice became an often-necessary precaution in the highly censored environment of Russia of the 2010s.

Since the early 2010s, Twitter and memes have celebrated informal communication among liberal publics and filled the void between the constructed image of reality in traditional media and the life offline. Russian journalist Igor Belkin founded the most popular informal Twitter account of a news media in Russia – Lenta.ru’s famous @lentarofficial, which was active in sharing oppositional news and perspectives during 2010-2012. According to Igor Belkin (personal communication, 26 June 2014), many readers became conscious of the fabricated character of broadcast news and longed for a human touch and sincerity in journalism. The 2011-2012 protest communication online largely celebrated informality and authenticity, and Internet memes became one of the means of expression for the resistant crowds. Despite being an information resource, Lenta.ru’s Twitter feed was similar to Navalny’s style in its open mockery of the established politicians. It contributed bold sarcasm, politically incorrect jokes and Internet memes to raise the awareness of the audience on political issues. It also included news from the opposition activists and thus maintained the flow of alternative information and communication that largely fuelled the 2011-12 protests.

“We shared our endless conversations and laughs in the office with the audience, made it our brand. This helped us to turn from the potbellied people with cabbage in their beards, as they may have imagined us, into likeable dudes just like themselves; the dudes who also sneer and laugh at the news” (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014).

What Igor Belkin calls the informal presentation and sharing personal reactions to the news may in fact be treated as immediate attempts to analyse the news. The genre of the independent analysis has almost vanished in the restricted Russian media environment, hence ironical Twitter insights of the likes of @lentaruoofficial partially occupied this niche.

Igor Belkin (personal communication, 26 June 2014) unveils that the editorial team widely employed memes as the bridge between the website's experts and mixed audience of social networks. The staff of Lenta.ru followed the standards of professional objective journalism on their main website, but allowed subjectivity and interpretation on Twitter, aiming to encourage critical thinking in the audience. They were hinting to the hidden meaning of events, exposing corruption or ridiculing the government by the means of memes. A joyful yet vividly politicised communication united many liberal members of the audience around @lentaruoofficial by the time of the protests. Belkin uses the recent example of Crimea, yet refers to the editorial principles of 2011-12:

“For instance, you have the news that the government has fucked up with the funded part of pension and you need to explain it to the young dude who is going out to get trashed tonight and plans a trip to the cinema with his friends tomorrow. You ought to explain that the money coming from his taxes are all of a sudden diverted to the chunk of land which we have no idea why we ripped off [meaning – Crimea - AD], and the state is basically now nonchalantly screwing us all. We helped people to see beyond the headline, and they started thinking. It is a big issue how you turn the angle” (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014).

Besides, Pavel Borisov, another journalist behind @lentaruoofficial, (personal communication, 10 May 2014) points to Twitter's capacity of channelling sentiments; the microblogging platform became an important tool for the collective experiencing of joy and grief. The informal opinionated Twitter feed made the journalists seem trustworthy in the eyes of the liberal users: *“People want live communication, not a robotic sharing of the web link. Editorial staff appeared on Twitter as a human being, a likeable lad, a “warm”, not a cold media”* (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

Sarcastic political talk on Twitter burgeoned in response to the social request of the early 2010s. A part of society was dissatisfied with the authorities and sought immediate channels of expression for their frustration. Nonetheless, opposition users @Twitted_knitter (personal communication, 26 August 2014), @KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014), Igor Belkin (personal communication, 26 June 2014) and many others shared their concerns that protest communication online jumped ahead of the offline activity; it preceded the mobilisation of masses and merely sketched the potential of the Russian resistance movement. From a more positive view, many meme makers agree that protest communication in social networks facilitated the shaping of the civil society. Thanks to the digital mobilisation and the following Bolotnaya square protest in 2011, both the liberal public and the government realised that the civil society existed and was relatively large in number.

“The Internet has played a crucial part in it [establishment of the civil society - AD]. An excellent proof to this is the recent Kremlin’s crusade on the Internet and the freedom of speech. Before this crusade, they killed TV Rain¹³, suggesting that independent television had also played a significant role in the Bolotnaya protest. Yet the Internet was way more influential” (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014).

When ephemeral texts from social media transferred to the offline mobilisations, social network users were pleased and intrigued to see the familiar communication templates in a new environment. For the 2011-12 protesters, memes acted as the beacons that denoted one’s belonging to the stratum of digital citizens and avid users of social networks. High digital literacy and habit to utilise the Internet as the source of alternative information and opinion were important characteristics of the “angry townspeople”, the driving force of the 2011-12 demonstrations (Kiriya, 2012). Moreover, there are indications that the Bolotnaya square manifestation was to a large extent the march of successful city dwellers; many belonged to the middle and upper middle classes.

¹³ TV Rain is a large independent television channel that broadcasts online and via cable networks. In 2014, it fell under the state pressure for their reports on corrupt officials, and major cable operators withdrew the channel from their packages, hindering the channel’s income and future.

“First protest at the Bolotnaya square gathered many businessmen, with the monthly salary of \$10,000” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

The government reacted furiously to both the online and offline activity of the Russian protesters. Interviewees believe that the Kremlin underestimated the size of the liberal public and therefore rejected the idea of a compromise with them. Since 2011, @KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014) assumes, the government has declared war on protest mobilisations and treated opposition as a state traitor:

“We were told that the Presidential Administration was shocked by this rally, it was as extraordinary for them as if a domestic cat started talking. They thought “We gave it food, cleaned its litter box, and it suddenly raised the voice at us! Look at it, the cat is complaining that the system is unfair and needs corrections!” We are in touch with Kovalchuk’s¹⁴ circle, these people dub the protesters “the Bolotnaya trash” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

@StalinGulag (personal communication, 15 September 2014) develops @KermlinRussia’s (personal communication, 10 July 2014) view and argues that Russian authorities comprehend politics as the business of a closed circle of elites. This hypothesis explains the aggressive suppression of the protest moods.

“The Russian political system is a closed one and rejects any external influence. Only those political elites inside it are capable of having an impact on it. In order to understand the nature of this vacuum, one has to analyse the Russian mentality. We are a highly hierarchical nation. The Russian character perceives authority on the metaphysical level, not by chance, the tsar was distinguished as the top power, obeying only to God. This tendency has not eroded but bolstered over time” (@StalinGulag, personal communication, 15 September 2014).

@KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014) enriches this viewpoint with the observation that the elites perceive themselves as holders of uncontested power and draw references to the pre-revolutionary Russia.

¹⁴ Yury Kovalchuk is the Russian billionaire who allegedly belongs to Putin’s close circle of friends.

“Patrushev¹⁵ called his colleagues and himself “a new nobility”. The elites seriously consider themselves a new nobility despite having been raised as working class, who had been known for hanging all the old nobility. Now three generations have passed and they appropriated the title. We should answer to this: “We will raise you a new proletariat” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

During the 2011-12 protests, the government started persecuting not only liberal media, but also individual users with popular Twitter accounts for their political activity. This increase in state pressure has further demonstrated the significance of individual political communication in social networks. For instance, @Twitted_knitter, a university lecturer in law in one of the Russian cities, has almost lost his job because of his critical Twitter, and only the publicity provided by the liberal media saved him from dismissal.

“There are no risks in leading a protest account except for the hazard of being fired or beaten in the porch of your own house. They almost fired me from the university in 2012, but with the help of TV Rain, we defended justice” (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014).

@Twitted_knitter (personal communication, 26 August 2014) and @KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014) agree that the exchange of satirical texts and memes on Twitter made the protest communication accessible and understandable. It helped to connect politically active members of society, awaken and connect active citizens who wanted to express their discontent with politics. Yet the popularity of their accounts (@KermlinRussia has over a million followers) would never protect them from the attacks of the government: as the account holders reveal, the elites are not afraid of public opinion and could suppress any alternative media or individual account at any time. For these reasons, @KermlinRussia remained anonymous for more than a year. The account authors scrupulously veiled their identity, protecting IP addresses and never logging into the account in public spaces. They were terrified by the 2012 attack on independent journalism - the top liberal

¹⁵ Nikolay Patrushev succeeded Putin as director of the Federal Security Service (the successor organisation to the KGB) from 1999-2008; he has been Secretary of the Security Council of Russia since 2008.

journalist Oleg Kashin was almost killed, and other media professionals received threats.

“We started the account in the turbulent times, when Kashin was beaten almost to death and we had no clue what to expect from the System¹⁶. I had a job. In a year’s time when the account skyrocketed in popularity, we still retained anonymity and hid. We attended the show on TV Rain under fake names and wearing masks” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

When @KermlinRussia’s account holders Ekaterina (Katya) Romanovskaya and Arseniy Bobrovskiy revealed their names, Arseniy’s car was vandalised, and they received many personal threats:

“Someone put a giant wooden cock on my car. Many mentally disabled people write nasty comments such as claims to beat up Arseniy or rape Katya with a champagne bottle. We respond: sweeties, pray that nothing happens to us, that no brick falls on our heads. We do not feel the real danger. We are not public figures. We have attended the protests as average participants, without speaking from the stage. We are not opposition leaders and do not call people to do anything. <...>

However, we are not fooling ourselves that nothing could ever happen to us. I do not know whether they consciously keep us free or are just busy to take any action against us. We are indeed the biggest satirical account on Russian Twitter, but any person can write a post that would be better than ours and receives more “likes” and shares. We are not a newspaper, not a media. Eliminating us does not eliminate the problem. It is not the communication that is the issue, but the reality. There will remain a large number of people who reside online, monitor the reality and write about it” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Other meme makers reveal similar reasons for staying in the shadow in the aftermath of the 2011-12 protests. They are unsure what to expect from the state that puts pressure on its enemies, and the criteria of becoming one are extremely vague. @Fake_MIDRF (personal communication, 9 September 2014) resides in London and admits to going online in Russia only in public places so that the government’s

¹⁶ “The System” means the state, it is a popular idiom to call the government in Russia, along with “the regime” or “the Kremlin”.

watchdog cannot locate his mobile phone. @FakeMORF (personal communication, 10 September 2014) and @StalinGulag (personal communication, 15 September 2014) refuse to disclose their names and only tell their profession. @Judge_Syrova_Ya (personal communication, 1 September 2014) does not hide his name and details, but understands the potential risks. He also divulges personal reasons for bravery:

“People are in fear. After Bolotnaya square, everyone became very frightened. The authorities probably would not kill you (who cares about you!), but they can accuse you of something and send you to prison. You would spend there a couple of years, maybe two or more, depending on your luck. You could attempt to appeal to the Human Rights Council or whoever else, to no avail. Others would be boiling over Twitter and call for different actions, but with no result. ...I would not personally want to go to prison, but I have already spent some time in detention, so I know what it is. I know that I would survive there. The only thing that worries me is that I have a family and in the worst case scenario I would send them away for protection” (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

Circulation and role of memes in the Crimean crisis

The escalation of the Crimean crisis has widely affected the distribution of sarcastic commentary and memes in social networks. In addition to restricting freedom of speech and assembly, Russian authorities tried to curb the memetic communication on the Internet. Meme making and sharing have become an increasingly menacing public activity. According to @KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014), satirical communication presents challenges for the elites and the communication watchdog as they have not yet decided how to respond to this ambiguous mockery. Even the average users of social networks seem confused on whether to assess political satire as the entry-level political activism or purely a joke. When @KermlinRussia started their Twitter account, they framed it as a parody to the official Twitter of President Dmitry Medvedev, and many users mistook one for the other:

“Initially people really thought that Medvedev owned the account and were horrified to see the tweets he posted. I copied and pasted the official logo, slightly changed the name, and @KermlinRussia looked extremely similar to the official Medvedev’s Twitter channel. Plushev¹⁷ mentioned that users retweeted us in the manner of trolling, to scare their friends. People reckoned it was the president replying something like “Not all the businessmen are sitting on their suitcases, some are just sitting”¹⁸. There were heated discussions; people were shocked that the country’s leader could express himself so freely. I was horrified myself!” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Satirical communication and parody created more inconvenience to the state during the Olympic Games in Sochi. As the fascinating insight by the Russian Internet expert Anton Nossik (personal communication, 26 June 2014) reveals, the ruling elites despise the Web’s vernacular of the liberal users. For them satirical communication, such as memes, is an obstacle that the propaganda machine cannot constrain. The state had declared war on the derisive digital communication by the start of the Sochi Olympics in early 2014:

“There was a ground-breaking meeting with top media managers in the Kremlin right before the Olympic Games in Sochi. They were strictly instructed on the topics and tone of media coverage. They were allowed to speculate on the stolen money or bad preparation, but by no means could the media use irony and sarcasm in discussing the authorities. The current government does not allow any mockery. I cannot answer why. “Why” and “Why the fuck” are two main questions striking in my head every day when I read Russian news” (A. Nossik, personal communication, 26 June 2014).

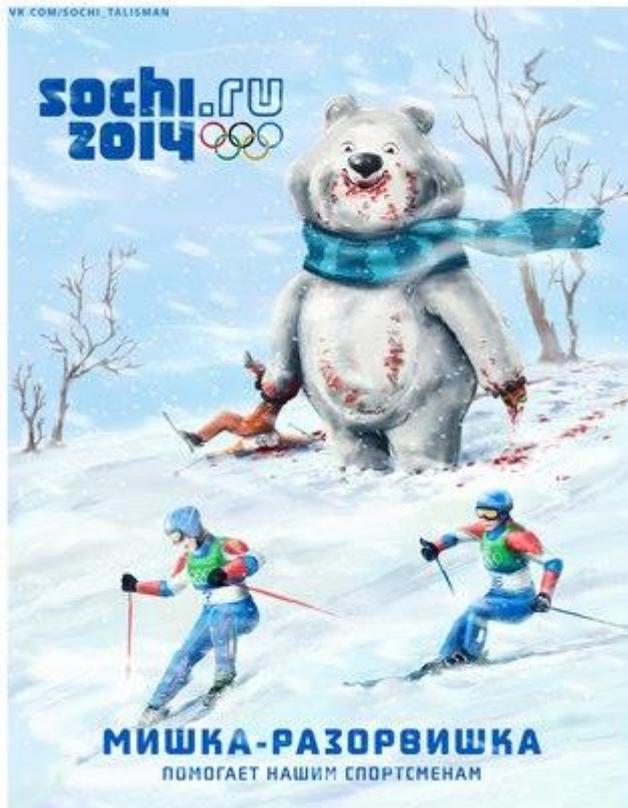
Igor Belkin (personal communication, 26 June 2014) confirms that mockery has become forbidden, as the shallowest and light-hearted memes are now on the government’s radar: *“Even in the USSR you were able to ridicule the authorities, but not in the current regime. During the Sochi Olympics we [journalists working at*

¹⁷ Aleksander Plushev works for the liberal radio station Echo of Moscow and leads a popular blog online.

¹⁸ This is a wordplay that jokes around two meanings of the verb “sitet”: “to sit” and “to stay in prison”. In this case, the phrase “Not all the businessmen are sitting on their suitcases, some are just sitting” reads as “Not all the businessmen are planning to leave the country, some are already staying in prison”.

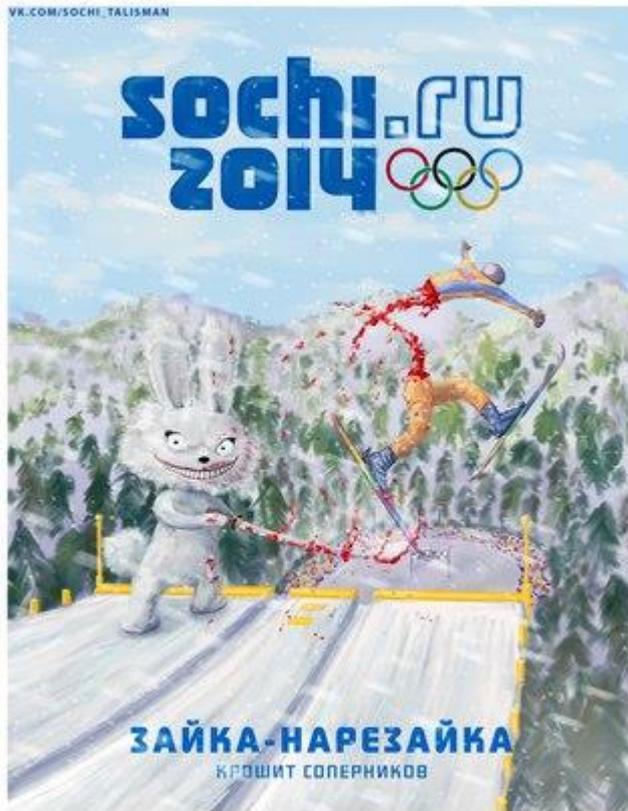
Lenta.ru - AD] received a call from the very top: they demanded the deletion of a meme from our Twitter. It was called “Mishka-Razorvishka and Zayka-Narezayka [Bear-Ripper and Hare-Cutter – AD, see Figures 122 and 123]¹⁹”. There is no analytical or logical way to explain this madness. They are just messed up dudes with a total absence of humour.”

Figure 122.. “Bear the Ripper is helping our sportsmen” (transl. from Russian)



¹⁹ The meme ridicules the official mascots of the Sochi Olympics, the Bear and the Hare, and includes reference to the corruption of the Russian Olympic committee and, perhaps, aggressive methods of the Russian government in reaching their goals. “Ripper” and “cutter” insinuate the methods of stealing from the Olympic budget and the ways the Kremlin deals with rivals.

Figure 123.. “Hare the Cutter is crushing the rivals” (transl. from Russian)



Digital expert Sultan Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) explains the crusade on memes and satire by the spontaneous and liberating nature of this style of communication; the government goes amiss in the attempts to comprehend the inner logics and spirit of the frenzied interactions on social networks.

“The government is not as much afraid of memes as offended by them. The authorities find it insulting that somewhere there are people who make good jokes and mock the state. The elites fail to confront these people in their environment. It is impossible to “produce a meme” that would silence the opposition therefore they put pressure from above” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

Non-conformity to the hegemonic agenda became a risky path. Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) assumes that the Crimean campaign increased pressure on the freedom of discussion online. People became more cautious of what they were sharing in the public space. Resistant users were still exchanging political memes, but deployed them more to closed communities and personal rather than public pages.

“Social networks that facilitate the exchange of memes are becoming the analogue of the home kitchens from Brezhnev’s era,²⁰ or samizdat” (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

Besides, the Crimean campaign not only triggered new disputes between pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin publics, it became an apple of discord inside the opposition crowds. @Judge_Syrova_Ya (personal communication, 1 September 2014) believes that the government deliberately challenged the liberal unity by appealing to patriotic feelings and aiming to incite animosity within resistant circles.

“The government constantly poses questions to the nation by its actions. For example, the annexation of Crimea was one of these questions. Imagine that before Crimea there was an X number of protest public in Russia. What Putin, or the authorities did, they posed this question. Do you approve of the annexation of Crimea or not? Many of Putin’s opponents among my friends and good mates contemplated: “Putin is not that bad, apparently”. Therefore, they forced the opposition public with different political preferences and leaders, supporting Navalny or whoever else, to respond to this question, either approve or denounce. <...> Currently Putin enjoys colossal support among Russians as he successfully exploited the imperial ambitions, insisted that everyone hates us and created the enemy image. The society will eventually wake up, but it is hard to predict when” (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

Meme producers realised that in the post-Crimean political environment their seemingly casual expression of views became a risky endeavour. With the increase of ideological indoctrination in traditional media and rising number of court cases against liberal protesters, meme sharers have become aware of the political implications of their creative Twitter communication.

²⁰ Borisov refers to the private kitchens as the only unrestrained place where people were able to meet and discuss political issues without fear of repression in the 1960s. These “dissident kitchens” have become synonymous with concealed ideological discussions that people have to hide from state’s censorship and intrusion (NPR, 2014).

Personal motivation for meme making and sharing

The acknowledgement of the plausible jeopardy in leading a protest account affects the users' self-identification. The majority of interviewed meme makers persistently reject any ties to traditional organised politics. They declare independence from any instituted ideology and prefer to frame their own political views in civil terms. This rejection of political activism is emblematic and signifies self-censorship and fear of prosecution.

"I do not consider my account political, it is actively civil. When you call a thief a thief, it is not politics" (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014).

"I have a wide scope of political interests and take interest in both Russian and European politics. I tend to cling to the right-wing liberal doctrine, but in general, it would be best to describe my ideological position as the priority of personal rights and freedoms of the citizens, limited government's involvement in economy and denunciation of the Byzantine and Oriental practices of nepotism and idolisation of the authority. I am a supporter of the regular change of the government; without power shift the authorities turn corrupt and become a problem" (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014).

"I would assess my political stance as libertarian, and I have felt this way since the age of 15. Before having moved to Moscow, I had resided in a city where people had two favourite pastimes: complaining about life and recalling how wonderful it was under communism. Nonetheless, very few were trying to generate an actual change, and those 3-4 individuals I knew finally moved to Moscow and succeeded there. This is why I get furious when I think of the Russian laziness, passion for freebies and irresponsibility. Each person is the host of their fate and this is my life credo" (@FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014).

@FakeMORF's observation sheds light on the importance of the Soviet myth for the conservative public. His note that people find comfort in *"recalling how wonderful it was under communism"* (@FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014) reflects the efforts of contemporary Russian propaganda in reviving

the idea that the USSR provided people with good life conditions. However, none of the liberal meme sharers interviewed expressed any positive sentiment towards the Soviet times.

A legendary liberal cartoonist Sergey Elkin (personal communication, 13 August 2014) also prefers to define himself as ideologically neutral, despite harsh criticism of Putin in his works: *“I feel like a sniper on the vigil: whoever raises his head, gets the shot”*. Elkin created a variety of highly recognisable and sharp cartoons denouncing Putin’s actions in Crimea and his post-Crimean rhetoric.

Figure 124. Sergey Elkin’s cartoon comments on the Russian government’s continuous rejection of having sent troops to Ukraine.



Figure 125. Sergey Elkin's cartoon. The punchline says "Russian politics is one hour late for the 21st century". The woman's suitcases have labels "Dictatorship" and "War"



Figure 126. Sergey Elkin's cartoon comments on the appropriation of Crimea by comparing Putin with the Terminator from the famous Hollywood movie.

I need your clothes,
your boots and your
PENINSULA



Despite admitting to repeatedly chastising the Russian president (S. Elkin, personal communication, 13 August 2014), the acclaimed cartoonist nonetheless disengages from any opposition movement. He hides behind the alleged antagonism to any authority: *“I have been criticising Putin since 2003 after the arrest of Khodorkovsky²¹. Nonetheless, I am against any authority. When I was working with Americans, I told them I did not support the bombing of Serbia and all their international politics. Any state and authority are an apparatus of violence. I swear allegiance only to my family”* (S. Elkin, personal communication, 13 August 2014).

@KermlinRussia’s authors also refuse to declare loyalty to any party or mobilisation. They do not see themselves as political activists, but rather impartial journalists.

“We will always remain in opposition no matter what, this is how our minds operate. If tomorrow Navalny or whoever else is elected as a president, we will keep whacking so that people keep “pulling their hands off the kettle”. This is the function of journalism. Your body does not report every minute that your right hand feels truly marvellous, but it sends you a signal when you burn your left hand. In this moment you do not care about the right hand, but of the other one that is in pain! We will keep writing critically on anyone in power” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Only @Judge_Syrova_Ya (personal communication, 1 September 2014) confirms utilising his Twitter account for promoting a civil mobilisation. In 2010, he initiated a Blue Buckets campaign against the misuse of spinning blue lights on VIP cars of Russian parliament members (Black & Johns, 2013:109). What started as civic activism nonetheless turned political. Twitter helped the user to attract public interest and collect signatures against the abuse of blue lights. His team submitted signatures to the parliament to no avail but threats from the bureaucrats.

“They screwed us at the Parliament with our one hundred thousand signatures, because they were exactly the targets of our campaign, the people who abused the

²¹ Mikhail Khodorkovsky was one of the richest Russian oligarchs of the 2000s. In 2003, he declared the intention to run for President. He was sentenced to a long prison term for economic crimes and was released only before the start of Sochi Olympic Games in 2014.

light bars to travel around. It is comparable to saying “Folks, you need to earn less!” What they can say, “Yes, sure, you are right”? They almost accused our representative of inciting social discord. I beg your pardon, but maybe the parliamentarians are those who actually incite social discord by their ugly misbehaviour on the road?” (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

With the same bitterness, @Judge_Syrova_ya acknowledges the lack of constructive support and coordination among politically active popular Twitter users. He argues that liberal publics engage in clicktivism and fail to consistently transfer online debates into the mobilisation of resources for offline activism.

“People are not afraid to join our mobilisation online, but it takes us nowhere. Writing posts is one thing, most of us do it well and even without grammar mistakes, but it is a dead-end road. Here is a simple example from the recent practice: we produced stickers against the abuse of blue lights and offered them free to anyone eager to place them on the car. Just 35 people came from all over Moscow. Then we initiated an automobile rally against the demolition of road safety barriers at Varshavskoye shosse. Only 20 cars took part. Meanwhile, our Facebook page is bursting with pleas to take an active role and do something” (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

Contrary to @Judge_Syrova_Ya in his ambition to unite and mobilise resistant crowds, many other meme makers gave up on the idea of gathering protest public for offline mobilisation. They point to the lack of trust in the established politicians of the Russian opposition and therefore absence of appealing leaders for the liberal public. Politically active microbloggers also share their disappointment with the results of the 2011-12 political activity – the government did not respond to the criticism in a constructive manner, which decreased motivation and hope in the liberal crowds.

“The Bolotnaya square protest was an outstanding event. Dozens of thousands of people coordinated via Facebook, went out in the street and let off steam. However, less people attended the manifestation at Sakharova square because the leaders of the protest messed it up. When dubious personalities were allowed on the stage with their questionable claims, my family and I turned around and left the march” (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014).

“The euphoria of 2011-12 halted when people learned that there were no easy ways, and it was not enough to go out in the square with a poster. The falsified Presidential election brought Putin to reign again (actually, even if they were fair, there was no alternative to him). Protests continued with no clear goal or perspective and soon diminished. People lost the motivation to go, got tired, angry and confused” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

“We need a convincing leader, but I cannot spot any. What will sanctions²² do? They may dismiss one person, but the clique behind him will appoint another one. Putin may fall deadly sick, but his power will simply be passed to another individual” (Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

The insights of meme sharers illustrate that the liberal public in Russia experience difficulties in the pursuit of political goals. In the absence of opportunities and trustworthy organisations, social network users dwell in the realm of individual accountability and self-assigned obligation. Many meme makers (@Fake_MIDRF, @Knitted_Twitter, @FakeMORF) define their motivation in leading protest accounts as the urge to express their discontent with the ruling elites. With no aim to mobilise anyone, they nonetheless seek to spread an alternative message and raise the political awareness of other users.

“This project [@Fake_MIDRF account - AD] was created by three people who follow the political news in Russia and abroad. Several years ago, we started noticing the growing Kafkaian character of the news from Russia. <...> As all three participants of the project are devoted to the liberal values, the country’s throwback to the close-minded conservatism after 2011 brought disappointment. We decided to respond to it with the special satirical Twitter account where we could show our criticism through satire and humour” (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014).

@Knitted_twitter (personal communication, 26 August 2014) and @FakeMORF (personal communication, 10 September 2014) concur with

²² @Judge_Syrova_Ya refers to the economic and political sanctions on Russia from the Western countries after the annexation of Crimea. They helped to exacerbate the challenges that the Russian economy was already facing. The liberal public were speculating whether the deteriorating economic conditions would prompt the Russian population to rebel against the government.

@Fake_MIDRF, but also add that the yearning for the fair deliberation of politics coalesced with the need for individual self-expression. Their contribution to the liberal resistance borders on creative, even artistic self-actualisation.

“I am enchanted by the possibility to condense a smart/deep/witty idea in 140 symbols. This challenge gives me shudders, jokes apart. I am not willing to expand to larger formats, as there are already established masters who I would not dare to compete with. Navalny’s posts are almost pieces of art, not to mention Bykov’s²³ opuses that are 100% art. I am trying to shoot a joke as if it was my last one, so that there was nothing to add or cut. When I succeed I receive an array of subsequent jokes from the followers, and many of them make me envious” (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014).

“Before starting this Twitter account, I used to coin anecdotes and send them to Anekdot.ru²⁴ and soon realised that I was capable of writing good jokes on a regular basis... I need this account for self-expression and speaking out on political issues. Besides, since the start of the war in Ukraine, I feel that I am obliged to keep authoring this Twitter because I want to express my support to the Ukrainian readers, who make 38% of my followers. I am moved by the hatred to injustice and, a little bit, by narcissism” (@FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014).

@FakeMORF’s opinion invokes a peculiar need to speak on behalf of Russian liberal citizens and express support to the Ukrainians. This comment signifies the high level of responsibility that liberal meme makers often demonstrate – despite calling themselves apolitical, they cannot disengage from Russian politics and seek to take an active role, at least in the digital realm.

Liberal user @StalinGulag (personal communication, 15 September 2014), who often feigns to tweet on behalf of Joseph Stalin, also admits the pleasure of self-expression in public networks. He further adds that the practice of discussing politics by the means of bitter humour corresponds with the Russian mentality and culture.

²³ Dmitry Bykov is one of the eminent liberal journalists and a writer. He contributes to the most prolific media and acts as one of the leaders of the opposition.

²⁴ Anekdot.ru is the large user-generated Russian website that accepts jokes from the users and invites others to rate them online.

“My expressive style is callous, occasionally angry, but unchangeably doomed, dystopian, touching a sore spot, which is quintessential for a Russian citizen. One need not forget that we are a tough Northern nation accustomed to living in unforgiving climate; we prefer bitter laugh to joyful tears” (@StalinGulag, personal communication, 15 September 2014).

There is yet another motivation that turns Twitter users into satirists and meme makers. The professional activity of @KermlinRussia’s owners involved close collaboration with high-ranking Russian officials. They were providing business and media marketing services for them and could see the corrupt Russian political system from within. Besides the urge for self-expression and voicing political criticism, they wanted to ridicule their clients, breaking the cycle of cynical hypocrisy in the business of political media relations.

“I was working in a PR agency and realised that four out of five of my clients were state officials. These people have a very specific approach and a completely different system of values. They are not interested in real communication, but only desire to flash before Putin, get their foot at the door of the offices of higher bureaucrats. You cannot rely on logic when you negotiate with these people, and this is very exhausting.

“For example, a person owns a badly functioning television operator company; it consists of two broken networks and employs one and a half persons. However, these people would spend enormous money on buying a ticket to the event with Putin; through their connections, they would receive the state investment money and spend them to their own liking. People of this breed throw events and promise to the others that higher officials would attend; thus, they sell the ticket to other bureaucrats for incredible prices. They aim at selling a Potyomkin Village²⁵ to the state; this is how this business operates. I am more than aware of the rules of this game and utterly

²⁵ “Potyomkin village” is an idiom referring to the fabrication of results to present to the higher authority. The expression derives from the name of Katherine the Great’s duke who installed fake happy villages on the way of her carriage so that she would perceive Russia as a joyful and prosperous country. See Textual Analysis p. XX for more.

detest them. @KermlinRussia was born as a “fuck” to all these people” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Another type of motivation for meme sharing derives from the professional journalist responsibility to supply unbiased information and fair commentary. Co-authors of the successful satirical Twitter feed of Lenta.ru @lentaruoofficial admit that they were struggling to remain neutral in the coverage of social and political news. @lentauroofficial was by no means a political outlet, but the impulse to provide unprejudiced analysis and sound argument compelled journalists to lambast the officials intermittently.

“There were no forbidden subjects in the Russia where I grew up. I was bred on the programmes of the old NTV channel²⁶ that showed that there were no untouchables. We were making honest journalism. Lenta.ru had an enormous amount of readers. We employed Twitter to attract those people who were not interested in the news and considered them dull crap. I am convinced that news are utterly exciting, it is the same as watching a television series – a big drama, you can witness how the world is running to hell. Now we have a generation that does not have the habit of news watching. After Nord-Ost²⁷ and especially Beslan²⁸, propaganda is flourishing

²⁶ NTV was the largest independent broadcasting company in Russia from 1993 until the early 2000s when it fell under the state pressure, which resulted in the implementation of soft censorship and change of the top management. What used to be the channel for the educated public turned into a broadcaster of gloomy criminal news and shows.

²⁷ “Nord-Ost” refers to the Moscow theatre hostage crisis in 2002. A few dozens of armed Chechen terrorists seized 850 hostages during the performance of the Nord-Ost musical and demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya and an end to the Second Chechen War. After a two-and-a-half-day siege and murder of two hostages, the Special Forces pumped an undisclosed chemical agent into the building’s ventilation system and then raided it. All of the attackers and 130 hostages died, spurring debates on the rationale of the toxic substance application. Putin was reportedly unhappy with NTV’s coverage of the hostage crisis and demanded the change of the channel’s general manager in 2003 (Newsru, 2003).

²⁸ “Beslan” refers to another hostage crisis. On the 1st of September 2004, a group of Chechen terrorists occupied a school in North Ossetiya with 1,100 hostages in it (including 777 children). The gunmen demanded recognition of the independence of Chechnya by the UN and withdrawal of Russian forces. On the third day of the standoff, security forces stormed the building, which resulted in the death of 385 hostages. The tragedy led to security and political repercussions in Russia; most

in the place of information and news” (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014).

However, the amplified state pressure on the media since the Crimean crisis has curbed the creativity and nonconformity of liberal journalists on Twitter. The account @lentaruoofficial now belongs to the new editorial team who are loyal to the state. The author of @FastSlon, who also used to work for Lenta.ru before its crackdown, detects the trend towards the return of formal and cautious expression in social networks. @FastSlon is the Twitter channel of Slon.ru, one of the few remaining liberal news websites; it seldom jokes about the news and occasionally spreads memes. @FastSlon translates as “Fast Elephant”, and puns on the website’s unconventional name and on the stereotype of an elephant being a sluggish mammal.

“We have been leading @FastSlon since April 2014 with two-three colleagues from the old editorial team of Lenta.ru. We had the task to swiftly form a professional news department, and Twitter is the quickest channel of conveying the news to the audience. So we had no choice ☺. This account has recently turned unofficial after the request of the Director General (and now editor-in-chief) Maksim Kashulinsky who believes that the informal way of expression may harm the reputation of our “Serious Business Media” ☺” (@FastSlon, personal communication, 11 December 2014).

Intriguingly, pro-government users share similar motivation for leading their Twitter accounts as anti-Kremlin users. They disclose that they wanted to support the preferred ideology and communicate with the like-minded public. Both @Stalin_RF and @vezhливо call themselves passionate patriots who seek to celebrate Russia’s glory and political leaders.

“I consider Twitter a formidable political weapon for the overthrow of power and mobilisation. <...> My aim on Twitter is, on the one hand, to unite patriots, and on the other hand, attract the support of like-minded people for my activity, even in the shape of retweets. <...> It would allow me to create a bank of followers and then push forward my ideas, demand something and open a non-governmental organisation. <...> During the Second World War, there was the Foundation of the

notably, it resulted in a series of federal government reforms that enhanced power in the Kremlin around the president.

Russian, or USSR, Defence. I, as a patriot, want to open the equivalent foundation, but devoted to the Red Army in its current state” (@Stalin_RF, personal communication, 10 September 2014).

“We created the account on the 1st of March 2014 when the Federation Council approved the deployment of Russian troops to Ukraine in accordance with the Chief Commander’s directive. The idea emerged spontaneously and had no relation to my colleagues’ and my professional activity²⁹. We have been working in media and public relations for a long time, but have not planned any organised campaigns around the Crimean situation. At the same time we, as the people competent in the subject (the Internet, blogs and social networks), saw that there was a clash of two and more propaganda machines. I personally craved to do something less classical in the sense of contemporary political propaganda in the Internet” (@vezhливо, personal communication, 5 June 2014).

@Stalin_RF’s statement contains an interesting reference to civic activity – he contemplates the inauguration of a patriotic NGO thus mirroring the anti-government civic activity. This parallel can be yet another evidence that “civic” and “political” are almost interchangeable in the Russian socio-political environment. The blurred boundaries between the two illustrate that many users are not aware where the involvement of the state ends and mobilisation of the citizens begins. @Stalin_RF’s interpretation of “patriotism” means loyalty to the government and pursuit of the national foes.

@Stalin_RF and @vezhливо equally acknowledge the need to express their passion about their native country, though @Stalin_RF additionally nominates hatred as the driving force behind his Twitter feed. This self-expression is not about creativity, but venting fury towards the liberal targets suggested by the state propaganda.

“Patriotism includes everything that concerns the support of your country, your Motherland, and you can do it by all possible means, be it war, friendship, clans or

²⁹ @vezhливо refers to the offline occupation of at least two out of three co-authors of the account: they are new media and public relations professionals.

sections. I am fully championing Putin's and the Kremlin's politics, I have bought all T-shirts with the depiction of Vladimir Vladimirovich.

"I have had a chat with the owners of the accounts @tvjihad and @US_progress - I do not know these fellows personally, but we have decided that the authorities of the West and the EU are a joke, and agreed to write about them with mockery and scorn. This Psaki³⁰ cannot possibly be a normal person, US State Department appointed her specifically to make fun of Russia, and we respond back in the same way" (@Stalin_RF, personal communication, 10 September 2014).

"We are citizens of our country and wanted to help Russia not for the sake of counter-propaganda, but to present the situation as we saw it. We aspired to depict the Crimean event as we comprehended it: as the peninsula's return home, to Russia. <...> I would refer to our format as the "polite propaganda". In brief, it is a positive representation based on the pride for Russian people, the Russian army and sincere feelings of the Crimean citizens who have returned home" (@vezhlivo, personal communication, 5 June 2014).

Pro-Kremlin meme sharers identify with state propaganda in their vision and goals, yet differ from it by offering more personal motivations. The cases of pro-government social network users exemplify how individual users interpret and amplify the indoctrination that comes from the media. @Stalin_RF propagates combative patriotism, while @vezhlivo appeals to soft unobtrusive persuasion. Remarkably, pro-government users concur with the opposition public in exhibiting a high level of concern over the country's future and perceived personal responsibility over it.

The potential of Twitter for alternative political activism in Russia

The majority of meme makers are cautious in their judgements of Twitter's potential in addressing the society at large, and this corresponds with the statistical data on the network's popularity. Only 9% of Muscovites and 4% of Russians use

³⁰ Jen Psaki is the current White House Communications Director. She previously served as a spokesperson for the United States Department of State and appeared in many Russian pro-government memes.

Twitter (Volkov and Goncharov, 2014). From the positive perspective, the majority of meme makers hail Twitter for its capacity to inform and raise awareness. Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) believes that the Russian Twitter has a younger audience than other social media and communication is informal thanks to the similar age and interests that members share. @vezhливо (personal communication, 5 June 2014) corrects this by calling Twitter a premium platform and accounts for at least two reasons for that: 1) *“almost all the journalists use Twitter, spending there much time and discussing the social and political situation”*; 2) *“opinion leaders also reside on Twitter, and they pass the information further down”*. @vezhливо’s example demonstrates how Twitter can become instrumental in reaching opinion leaders who would disseminate the message in their circles and then popularise it among the larger masses. Sultan Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) agrees with @vezhливо as he lauds Twitter for its networking power. Unlike other popular social networks based on the principle of holding a certain relationship with other individuals (a friend, a colleague, a family member etc.), Twitter encourages you to follow accounts out of interest for their content. Many meme sharers seek to locate the like-minded Twitter users and establish reliable communities that can further their political engagement:

“I am inclined to assess social networks as the instrument which can be used as the uniting tool for people in search for a change. They are not only useful for coordination during mass events; a person may go to social networks and see that he is not alone and there are thousands of people with the same ideas and aspirations. It would encourage him to be braver, act bolder and, in summary, all these activities can generate political changes” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

An experienced journalist and blogger Alexey Kovalev (personal communication, 15 June 2014) explains how the pressure from the government shaped and influenced the utilisation of social networks for political debates over recent years.

“Previously all Russian political discourse was based on LiveJournal, which has recently experienced a dramatic loss in popularity. The fall of politicised LiveJournal came as the direct result of the Russian state's pressure. The authorities have been deliberately and persistently destroying this platform by all means, from frightening the bloggers and filing lawsuits for particular blog posts to polluting the

discussion with verbal rubbish. A cohort of specially trained people close to the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs was releasing massive floods of nonsense in the blogosphere.

“Currently, the most intellectual political debates happen on Facebook; VKontakte has a more lumpen and young audience that mostly enjoys the so-called “shitstorms”, and Twitter functions as the quick dissemination tool for on-the-spot information. However, you can also utilise Twitter to tilt with a federal politician or editor-in-chief of a big pro-Kremlin media (many of them are quite active specifically on Twitter)” (A. Kovalev, personal communication, 15 June 2014).

The state has been monitoring the resistant discourse and persistently intruded to disrupt the conversation. Alexey Kovalev (personal communication, 15 June 2014) and Igor Belkin (personal communication, 26 June 2014) agree that due to the fragmentation of publics and state control, Russian networks tend to divide into niche streams of communication, making liberal discourse more dispersed.

“Very soon there may only remain niche platforms. I predict that Russian cyberspace will fleetly mimic the Chinese one: Chinese bloggers can also discuss something and then get a prison sentence. People get detached easily. Remember how soon the audience neglected the anti-terrorist operation in Dagestan³¹: first, the media reported on it every day, people were eagerly reading the news and then it became part of the routine. When they detain terrorists on a daily basis, the narrative gets boring. The same happens with the news of the Russian nightmarish existence – the audience gets used to it and consents. In Russia a state official receives promotion for his project to block Twitter, while in any reasonable country he would be fired” (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014).

@KermlinRussia refers to the unequal presence of various age groups and classes in Russian social networks. The overall numbers of the Internet penetration are relatively high: 73% of Muscovites and 57% of Russians regularly go online (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014). One third of the population turn to the Internet for the latest

³¹ Belkin probably refers to the 8-month counter-terrorist operation in the Russian republic of Dagestan in 2014. However, he may also mean either of any other counter-terrorist operations conducted by Russian Special Forces in Dagestan in 1999, 2005, 2008-2009.

news, and half of the country is on social networks (45% of Russians and 53% of Muscovites, (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014)). However, the majority of social network users, including older citizens and dwellers of smaller Russian cities and towns, visit top social network Odnoklassniki (translates as “Schoolmates” from Russian), while Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are mostly successful in big cities (for instance, twice more people on average use them in Moscow than in the rest of Russia). Liberal meme makers call Facebook and Twitter primary platforms for the aggregation of opposition crowds and complain about the limited popularity of these boards among a larger audience.

“The gap between the digital opposition public and the rest of the audience is a tremendous problem. We discussed this issue with Navalny and he insisted on going offline and printing traditional newspapers for the non-digital public. I argued that those people whom he wants to access are already online, but reside not where we do, but on the neighbouring sites such as Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte. These citizens are very close, but we do not know how to reach them” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Quantitative data supports @KermlinRussia’s concern that various segments of the population divide in the virtual realm. Liberal activists either need to access larger crowds on their mainstream platforms, such as Odnoklassniki, or remain locked in the more loyal, but limited circles of Twitter and Facebook spaces.

“I think there is a noticeable close-knit community of opposition users on Twitter. If you look at the number of Navalny’s followers, you can estimate the size of this clique as hundreds of thousands. However, even half a million are a drop in the ocean, less than one percent of the country’s population” (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014).

Social network users praise Twitter as the replacement to traditional media (I. Belkin, P. Borisov, A. Kovalev, @Fake_MIDRF and A. Nossik). It has become an open battlefield of viewpoints that supplanted traditional journalism. The latter had proven unable to perform this function. According to Soldatov and Borogan (2015), the erosion of journalism had a direct impact on the migration of analytical discussions to Russian social networks. Ousted from established media platforms, journalists

relocated their writing to blogging and microblogging spaces: “A phenomenon was born: highly opinionated, sometimes brilliantly written journalism that was highly critical of the Kremlin, spurring the government to find new methods to drown them out” (Soldatov & Borogan, 2015: para 7-8).

“Unfortunately those Russian media that used to be liberal have experienced a massive degradation in the recent years. <...> Many interesting and burning news arrive in the daily newsfeeds, but barely receive any deeper analysis or commentary in the media. This is why Twitter has turned into a highly important tool of raising awareness.

“This transformation of the media sphere has affected our account’s format. Initially we tried to be funny and not post too often, but in the last year, our account has grown into a steady bulletin of the most significant, from our point of view, news of the day. We comment on many of them in a jokey form, but also present some as they are without adding any humour at all” (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014).

The majority of meme makers strongly believe that the Russian media have fallen victim to state pressure (@KermlinRussia, @FakeMORF, @FastSlon, Igor Belkin, and Pavel Borisov) and self-censorship (Alexey Kovalev) and no longer serve as reliable sources of information. @FastSlon (personal communication, 11 December 2014) additionally notes that the government keeps expanding its censoring efforts to cover not only professional, but interactive media and networks. The state encourages anxiety and paranoia by implementing ambiguous laws, for instance the one on extremism prevention in the digital space. The nebulous definition of “extremist” reporting makes this legislation prone to abuse by any executive: *“All these laws are not written to have an actual impact on things, but to provide tools to prosecute a politically undesirable blogger”* (@FastSlon, personal communication, 11 December 2014).

“There is no straightforward censorship, but a lot of pressure on the media. <...> The state communication watchdog blocked the website Grani.ru³² on the pretext that “In the context of various publications, one can get an impression that the website contains calls to the unsanctioned actions”. However, the watchdog did not provide any specific links to the harmful materials” (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

The top opposition satirical account on Russian Twitter, @KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014), explains that the lack of clarity in the laws’ implementation and random execution foments self-censorship: *“The law that requires the keeping of personal details of the Russian citizens on Russian servers was passed to frighten and potentially shut somebody down. The state nonetheless is not capable to keep up with technological progress, and no one knows what technologies will thrive in 2016. Schizophrenia is spread through our society; the lack of universal laws and rules makes everyone nervous”.*

These findings illuminate the importance of Twitter as an information hub merged with a discussion platform for Russian liberal users. In the absence of truthful sources of news, social network users adhere to their social networks’ flows of data, hand-picking reliable accounts and creating what Negroponte (1995) and Sunstein (2001) called the “daily me”, the information package where a person chooses and mixes components according to personal preferences. In the Russian media environment, the necessity to create such a package comes from not only individual interests, but also restrictions on free circulation of information.

Besides dissemination of information and commentary, there is a third highly precious component that makes Twitter so appealing to politicised publics – interactivity, the ability to relate to others, tweet or retweet, link and comment. @Judge_Syrova_Ya (personal communication, 1 September 2014) and @FakeMORF (personal communication, 10 September 2014) praise Twitter for the opportunity to

³² Grani.ru is the popular Internet portal that publishes news and liberal criticism of the government, supports opposition and political prisoners. On 13 March 2014, the Russian General Prosecutor’s Office banned the access to it from the Russian territory on charges of "calling for unlawful activity and taking part in mass events held with breaches of public order" (Torocheshnikova & Bigg, 2014).

“get involved” in the events: *“Many prominent opposition leaders have narrowed their communication down to writing solely on Twitter. It gives a fascinating effect of involvement in the events and allows the immediate spread of information”* (@FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014).

Two major obstacles challenge the potential of liberal Twitter in influencing public opinion. It has limited outreach to broader audience and tendency towards echo chamber formation. These two constraints limit reflection and critical thinking in the members of liberal discussion; activists need to overcome many prejudices to access the broader public and contemplate their views.

“The black-and-white thinking reigns in the Internet; separate segments live in isolation from each other, cherish their own ideas and consider the opponents wrong” (@vezhливо, personal communication, 5 June 2014).

Moreover, the state media have excelled at indoctrination, and even digitally savvy users familiar with Twitter and alternative discourse, are predisposed to preserving the pro-government point of view. Sociologists (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014: 14) confirm that a sheer 5% of the population retain news only from the Internet and do not watch television, while others employ the digital space as the supplement to the daily portion of traditional media. Furthermore, Volkov and Gocharov (2014: 14) came to a surprising observation that even those citizens who absorb information from at least four different sources (including electronic ones), do not turn any more critical in their judgment than an “average” television-addicted Russian. These findings contradict the previous assumption of the liberal press (see, for instance, Gazeta.ru, 2010) that people were likely to develop a critical political stance by garnering news from the Internet.

@KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014) confirms from their own experience that availability of digital resources does not mean that one would use them to harvest alternative opinions. He or she would more likely settle on soothing ideas or feelings.

“There is a lovely story of our friend Maya Usova whose mother complained that television and newspapers were all saying the same thing and she was confused

whom to believe. Maya suggested that she picked her news from the Internet. In a few days her mother calls and says “Now I get it all!” and enthusiastically blethers about reptiloids, underground bunkers³³ etc. When a person jumps from one extreme to the other, exaggerations occur. When a person holds a rigid system of values, he or she is more resistant to manipulation; the inner filter sifts the incoming facts and opinions. Reconfiguration of one’s values is a long and complex process” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Furthermore, the Internet realm offers not only open and uninhibited deliberation of politics, but holds plenty of manipulative and distorted discussions. The government persistently intensifies its efforts to influence the online discourse. Although @KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014) calls Twitter “*the last uncensored space*”, @Judge_Syrova_Ya (personal communication, 1 September 2014) points to the unavoidable drawbacks of free flow of information:

“Social media are the ultimate space where you can discuss politics and learn news first. You receive news on Twitter faster than from any news agency. However, when a video, say, from Ukraine appears, one should not trust it and boil over. Fabricated news come from both sides, and you need to get confirmation of authenticity first, and only then disseminate the video, and reproduce the buzz around it. I am very suspicious these days” (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

In the 2010s, the Russian government has utilised advanced tactics in the distortion of opposition discourse in social networks. Many users have noticed the emergence of multiple pro-government accounts that were flooding the discussions with either hate speech or thousands of similar comments. These bundles of text interrupted valuable threads and conversations. Alexey Kovalev (personal communication, 15 June 2014) calls this practice a pro-government “trolling” and defines it as a newly acquired state strategy of controlling digital deliberation. Internet trolls are users on the payroll who load electronic media and social networks with

³³ @KermlinRussia refers to the sensationalist journalism and user-generated websites that focus on conspiracy theories and pseudo-scientific investigations and reports. Reptiloids are reptile-looking aliens, and underground bunkers are probably related to the fear of nuclear threat and secret shelters.

praise of the Russian authority and negatively label Putin's enemies (see also Fanaylova, 2014). A digital media expert Anton Nossik (cited in Fanaylova, 2014) adds that when a user copies and pastes the same text twice in various threads, he is most likely to be a troll who floods conversation with spam. Nossik observes that Russian authorities have never allocated as much funding to the Internet manipulation as in the 2010s. They try to censor social network communication from the inside by commissioning paid users and attempting to mimic the style of the uninhibited Internet debates. Bobrakov-Timoshkin (Fanaylova, 2014) additionally remarks that in 2011-12, the Russian government utilised automatic bots, the Internet programmes that were encumbering social network accounts of opposition leaders.

“The state does not know how to manage Twitter. They have the experience of imposing control over traditional media, but not the digital sphere. They tried to promote pressure groups and influential bloggers, but these efforts failed. Then they filled the cyberspace with Internet bots paid 80 roubles³⁴ each. Now they are considering shutting down the global Internet in Russia and creating a local version called Cheburashka” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Since the 2014 Kiev protests and the Crimean annexation, heavy pro-government trolling has grown into a major challenge for resistant discussions. A liberal journalist Elena Fanaylova (2014) notes that besides trolling, the state hires popular individual bloggers to insert desirable topics in the discourse. These users lead their social network accounts as they fancy, but then occasionally post state-funded ideological blogposts or opinions. Pomerantsev (cited in Bugorkova, 2015) defines trolling and fabricated discourse as “reverse censorship”: instead of curbing communication, the government overloads it with excessive amounts of texts that obscure authentic arguments. Nonetheless, many interviewees disagree with attributing much significance to this practice. For example, Sultan Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) follows Nossik (as cited in Fanaylova, 2014) and declares that experienced social network users are resilient to the artifice of paid trolling.

³⁴ Less than one pound.

“If the government-funded Internet troll centres exist, their work seems a shallow waste of the state money. What goals do they pursue? Publishing blog posts? Polluting opposition hashtags with rubbish? All this activity is a meaningless hustle that does not influence anything and cannot change anybody’s opinion or position. These trolls only supply extra work for the moderators of the Internet forums who are obliged to sweep this rubbish out.

I am noticing the planting of pro-government memes out of the corner of my eye and do not remember if any of their memes turned successful. One of the recent attempts was calling the opposition coalition by the abbreviation “PORNO” (based on the first letters of the members’ names (see Figure 127). This joke was so strenuous that was doomed to failure in the beginning. However, the instructions had already been issued, and the pro-government media and blogs picked on the abbreviation and discussed it as if they had coined it themselves” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

Figure 127. Poster against opposition leaders was installed on Moscow’s Pokrovka Street on April 29, 2015. It reads: “Parnas Open Russia Navalny Others - PORNO stars of the opposition”. Parnas and Open Russia are the names of opposition parties



From a more sceptical perspective, not all users are capable of distinguishing toxic accounts from authentic ones. Besides, people tend to follow popular accounts favoured by other people and join busy threads of comments. They are not aware that the number of followers may be fabricated. The pro-government user @Stalin_RF (personal communication, 10 September 2014) confesses:

“I can obtain one million followers in a day; I have a service that automatically generates retweets. I can fabricate 500-600 new followers today. They are bots. If you see a person with 200,000 followers, there is a possibility they are not real people. Half of my followers are real, the rest are bots. I made them before the account became “the comrade Stalin”. I am against this, but I also have a personal account as a blogger and participated in a contest that required me to fabricate a large amount of followers.”

Sultan Suleimanov, however, suggests that pro-government trolls share and retweet each other’s activity, yet fail to copycat vibrant naturally occurring communication. *“Although there is a large number of pro-government users on Twitter, they mostly express themselves to counterbalance the opposition and are not as closely connected with each other”* (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

Twitter’s aptitude for political mobilisation causes doubts in many meme sharers. They refer to the absence of a commonly approved liberal opposition leader or party as an immense obstacle to political activism and bonding on Twitter. However, several meme makers share a more positive perspective on the future of civil protest online. @Fake_MIDRF (personal communication, 9 September 2014) maintains that, while recent Russian laws restrict offline mobilisations, online mobilisations can still occur. He notes that liberal resistance needs more offline triggers that would mobilise resistant publics: he refers to the actions of the government that may incite fury or disappointment and motivate people to join online deliberation. If more offline triggers arise, a virtual dissent can find the way into the streets.

“Social networks in Russia can affect the political situation. Remember the events of the summer of 2013³⁵ when Navalny’s detention and social media response led to the mass gathering in the centre of Moscow. Remember Kiev in autumn 2013³⁶, when social networks became the centre of social mobilisation. There is much fear in Russia nowadays, but this fear is not eternal. Social networks can mobilise people online and offline. I am sure that we will see many protests and manifestations resulting from the communication on social networks” (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014).

The role of political memes in liberal resistance

The role of political memes in the Russian virtual resistance has changed dramatically over just a few years. Having emerged as the expressive language of the digital protesters in the 2010s, memes travelled to the offline posters during the Bolotnaya square and Sakharova square manifestations, turning from casual jokes into condensed and humorous political claims. Later on, memes have evolved into a tool of continuous political communication in digital networks – a vehicle for the quick transmission of a concept or idea, used by different sides of the political spectrum.

@FakeMORF (personal communication, 10 September 2014) and Alexey Kovalev (personal communication, 15 June 2014) suggest that the format of a meme is easy to consume and therefore has more chances to reach more people than, for example, lengthy blogposts or opinion columns. Social network users are too busy drifting between endless flows of information offered by the media and the Internet; they prefer quick condensed communication. *“The simpler the idea and the brighter form it takes, the quicker it affects your mind. It is the main principle of neuro-*

³⁵ In 2013, the court sentenced Alexey Navalny to five years in prison for embezzlement, and thousands of protesters organised peaceful rallies in many Russian cities to deem the case political and demand freedom for the politician.

³⁶ User refers to the massive Maidan Nezalezhnosti protests that sparked after the break of the historic Ukrainian trade deal with the EU. Tens of thousands occupied the streets to protest the president’s decision to collaborate with Russia and abandon European agreements.

linguistic programming. People who invented Twitter were fully aware that 140 symbols are quite enough to form a specific mind-set. <...> I doubt that more than 1% of people read serious political or economic analysis, the human race is much simpler, like it or not” (@FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014).

“Memes exist for the same purpose as anecdotes. Political satire is, on the one hand, a pleasant and unhindered way to let off steam, express one’s indignation or wrath, but on the other hand, a specific lens that can often convey the essence of a political event much sharper than ten highly intellectual newspaper columns” (A. Kovalev, personal communication, 15 June 2014).

In the current socio-political environment, liberal users of social networks praise memes as one of the few remaining mouthpieces of political communication. Under increased surveillance over the digital sphere, opposition publics use memes as the vehicles to express grievances and to let off steam. Unable to permeate the public space dominated by the hegemonic media, SNS users share memes to maintain an alternative flow of ideas and opinions.

“Satire and humour permit keeping a sane mind when reading Russian news bulletins. If you stay serious perceiving all that stuff, there are not many options left for you, either a suicide or a mental institution” (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014).

“Tweets will not solve problems. Yet if sharp humour helps someone to see differently from how the television instructs, it would be a significant achievement” (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014).

Not by chance, the juxtaposition format is one of the most popular ones when meme makers criticise media propaganda. This approach allows presenting facts in a different light and exposing the distortion of truth.

“We had a number of operational formats that always worked. For instance, the Bolotnaya square protester is sentenced to 6 years of colony for the overthrown toilet cabin and the police officer guilty of rape is just suspended for 2 years; we push these two stories towards each other, and this is it. We used Pussy Riot’s sentence in our memes multiple times. People who were sentenced to 10 years for stealing borscht were juxtaposed with the state officials who stole 300 billion on construction and

received promotion in the following years. We were contrasting the absurd that surrounds us in the news” (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014).

The production and spread of memes often function as the coping strategy for liberal users who struggle to reconcile with the disturbing political reality. The degree of comforting stands in direct proportion with the degree of deceit in traditional media. The intensification of emotional pressure from media propaganda propels users to coin more absurd memes and thus release their rage and despondency.

“Many people think that laughing at Hitler is wrong and makes us forget how gruesome and serious the story of Nazi Germany was. I disagree. When you turn the likes of Dmitry Kiselyov into a joke, you find a coping mechanism. It is easier for me to perceive all this absurd in the form of a joke, turn the absurd into a bigger absurd and somehow reconcile with it” (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

However, the habit of liberal users to instantly react to any government initiative by satirical commentary and memes can sometimes turn against them. Curiously, in 2014-2015 Russian authorities had proposed or passed a high number of the odd laws that immediately gained attention from social network users. The absurdity of the initiatives stimulated citizens to respond with memes and compete for the creation of the best joke. @KermlinRussia (personal communication, 10 July 2014) believes that frenzied debates on the bizarre government actions cloud other important legislative measures. The innovation of the Russian elites lies in distracting social network users in the age of memes; digital inhabitants take the challenge to express themselves on the entertaining topic in the public eye and often miss important news behind the weird ones.

“State Duma’s trashy laws play the role of distraction and hide from people that Rotenberg has obtained yet another company³⁷. An amendment here, an amendment there – little laws steal your money and freedom. Everyone is discussing the penis on

³⁷ Arkady and Boris Rotenberg are Russian billionaires who allegedly belong to Putin’s inner circle and used to be his sparring partners in martial arts. They are known to seize the most prestigious state contracts (including a 7 billion dollar worth construction deal for the Sochi Olympic Games) and own dozens of companies, including the offshore ones.

*a 100-ruble banknote*³⁸, meanwhile State Duma is deciding how to withdraw the accumulative part of pension in 2015. <...> Blogosphere takes this bait. This is how human's psychology works: put your hand on a hot kettle and you will immediately react and pull it back" (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Meme sharers divide on whether to define memes either as creative artworks or as mundane Internet vernacular. Alexey Kovalev (personal communication, 15 June 2014) and Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) insist that production and distribution of memes is not a privilege of the creative professionals or intellectual elites. Social network users of all backgrounds and skills can discuss any possible subject by the means of memes. Pro-government meme sharer @vezhливо (personal communication, 5 June 2014) supports the point and adds that people in all epochs enjoyed "*simplification, labelling and brevity*".

Simultaneously, memes are not limited to silly humour or absurdity, they are open to different sorts of humour including more complex and demanding wit. This versatility enables memes to attract different types of audience.

"My Lenta.ru's ex-colleague Andrey Konyayev who was also responsible for our social networks' channels, is a genius of weird jokes. He is a university lecturer and a mathematician who manages to effortlessly coin degenerative jokes and mathematical jokes and sometimes even mix them. I would not call memes primitive; they are just an instrument, a vehicle that you can fill as you please. There can be a highly intellectual joke understandable to five people yet it would still be designed by the same principles as much simpler memes" (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

The spontaneous nature and essential anonymity of memes proliferate the equality of social network users: anyone could design a successful meme and witness its rise to fame. Memes arise spontaneously, but meaningfully, as they probably hit

³⁸ In 2014, one of the Russian parliamentarians proposed to withdraw the image of male genitals from the 100-ruble note. The object of the outrage shows the façade of the Bolshoi Theatre, adorned with a world-famous sculpture of a chariot driven by the Greek god Apollo. Apollo's intimate parts caused Russian MPs moral panic. Liberal journalists called this move a ridiculous and worrying manipulation of the popular "traditional values" discourse (Lipman, 2014).

the right spot in the public perception of a particular person or situation. Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) affirms the significance of memes as blueprints of trending themes and recalls the example of a random photograph of Putin and Medvedev that triggered plenty of memetic appropriation. The relaxed composure of two leaders in the image became a symbol of their domineering and self-assured political stance.

“It has happened hundreds of times that people produced billions of punchlines to the same image. There is a wonderful photograph where Putin and Medvedev joyfully chuckle, and users have applied it in numerous contexts. This is digital version of the casual human humour, the contemporary folklore, like anecdotes” (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

Although some creative individuals may be more successful in creating amusing texts and attracting large numbers of followers, they cease owning memes as soon as they travel beyond the borders of the initial account. *“No one holds a patent on a good joke. All are equal, you cannot trace the author. Three thousand monkeys can type Hamlet”*, Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) concludes. Anonymity of memes is also a strong asset when it comes to censorship – by spreading memes with no authorship details, dissent users protect their identities and evade any scrutiny by the vigilant state.

Political memes present a specific case within the large family of memes. They require a larger intellectual input from the social network users to produce, share and comprehend. As @Twitted_knitter (personal communication, 26 August 2014) puts it, crafting political memes requires reflection, informed judgment and even self-deprecation that suggests a healthy mind: *“Memes are popular among the liberal public because these people are more open to self-irony than, say, Orthodox patriots”*. Liberal political memes persistently rely on irony, the intelligent type of humour that involves reflection over facts and opinions:

“This environment [interactive media - AD] has become very attractive due to the use of humour. The people who inhabit it do not seek violence or coup d’état, they are not criminals, but seemingly affluent citizens. Viral pictures, gags and memes are full of irony, and irony indicates reasonable judgement and comprehension of the situation. This is an intellectual sphere. A marginal alcoholic will hit you with a bottle,

while educated people would rather make jokes in strained circumstances” (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014).

Memes are still recognised as a language of the limited number of people, the publics of the Internet (see, for instance, S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015). Digitally savvy users can distinguish other avid users of social networks by the way they use memes; they also feel disturbed by the commercial appropriation of this format:

“Firstly, memes are incredibly contagious and importunate just as they are. When a new meme emerges, everyone covets to utilise it in his or her creative input, be it a jokey tweet or an advertising campaign. Secondly, the advent of memes outside the Internet environment (in advertising, for instance) still looks too bewildering thus triggers an emotional response – either positive (wow this is so funky and bold!) or negative (how could have they dared to spoil the whole thing)” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

“Navalny and other politically active users employ memes to demonstrate that they closely monitor the Internet trends. By doing so they display that they are not fixated on serious topics, but are also able to enjoy the Internet’s folklore, even the most recent one” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

The majority of meme makers doubt that memes can trigger and maintain a steady political discussion. Only very few smart and timely memes can draw attention to certain topics and encourage a debate. Cartoonist Sergey Elkin (personal communication, 13 August 2014) declares that only in a rare number of cases his memes elicited a meaningful argument that even affixed users with the opposing political views: *“A cartoon can arouse a hundred comments and go viral. I have witnessed my cartoons encourage a good debate five or six times. They concerned the public opinion and the statistics that 90% of the nation approve of Putin. Social network crowds are mixed, so participants from both parts of the spectrum took part in the heated debate”*. Igor Belkin (personal communication, 26 June 2014), Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014) and Alexey Kovalev (personal communication, 15 June 2014) also recall a few examples of when memes encouraged a substantial discussion – social network users even exchanged links to additional analytical pieces to provide their opponents with new food for thought. Moreover,

Alexey Kovalev (personal communication, 15 June 2014) testifies having witnessed rare cases with *“the discussions consisting of 100 comments that were mostly doctored pictures, Demotivators and so forth”*. Nevertheless, meme sharers perceive these instances as the exclusions from the rule.

Besides, memes are limited in their potential to trigger a meaningful discussion as various users read memes differently. Understanding of a meme depends on one’s intellectual level, education, digital literacy and comprehension of the context (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014). Moreover, in the most peculiar cases, users even notice how their personal perception of the same meme can change over time.

“Sometimes memes are so terribly unfunny that it makes you laugh, and then you find them horrible again, and then you laugh about it, finding amusement not in the joke itself, but in the context of your perception dynamics” (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

The short expiry date of a meme and its direct dependence on digital “fashion” present a constraint for the meme’s bonding capacity. Sultan Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) points to the volatility of memes’ “reputation”: an incompetent misappropriation can repulse the digitally savvy public and ruin the worth of a meme as the “inside joke”. Contrary to this, the conservation of a meme inside a close discourse diminishes its chances to evolve and appeal to the more general public. This dichotomous nature of memes’ dependence on digital vogue and context makes them unstable communication equilibriums:

“By the time you coin a political slogan that exploits a fresh meme the audience might already be tired and sick of it (or will get tired in a few weeks). An expired meme <... > makes users wince. In a half a years’ time, no one would be able to remember why the meme seemed so amusing. The other issue is that memes are not always clear to the audience. When you pick an extremely fashionable meme and attempt to use it for your purposes, you may need to spend quite a lot of time explaining its meaning. Explaining the jokes is always a deadly idea” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

The potential of memes in uniting or gluing protest communities is also a challenging question. Liberal users acceded that retweeting occasional jokes and

memes can maintain the discourse on specific subjects; yet these acts of sharing are incapable of becoming connecting joints between loose individuals. Despite distributing each other's work, opposition users nonetheless feel disconnected from any large dissent community.

“There is a number of other popular accounts that we like, and we retweet them regularly. They, in turn, retweet us. Those are @navalny, @FakeMORF, @Sandy_mustache and others. We also keep a number of pro-government accounts in our networks, but solely for the sake of trolling. For example, the accounts of Ernest Makarenko³⁹, Maksim Ksenzov (deputy chief of Roskomnadzor), Ashot Gabrelyanov. Margo Simonyan and Mizulina have unfortunately banned us, and it is a pity, as trolling them was a pure delight!” (@Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014).

“Popular liberal accounts have a substantial loyal audience, but its borderlines are so vague that I cannot spot any unity. It is not as much Twitter's problem as the Russian society's. There is no opposition in Russia” (@StalinGulag, personal communication, 15 September 2014).

Conclusion

Meme makers have become the new journalists, civil activists and political protesters at the same time. The vague structure of the Russian political system and lack of established social institutions and platforms of negotiation with the state makes the Internet the only vibrant site of the public discussion. Highly censored traditional media produce multiple propaganda flows, and liberal citizens resist via social

³⁹ Ernest Makarenko is a local councillor in Moscow known for his highly patriotic and loyal Twitter account. Maksim Ksenzov is the deputy head of Russian communication watchdog Roskomnadzor known for the campaigning to block Twitter in Russia. Ashot Gabrelyanov is the owner of the largest Russian tabloid Lifenews.ru and a loyal supporter of the government. Margo Simonyan is the head of the Russian propagandist English-language channel RT. Elena Mizulina is the ultraconservative Russian parliamentary famous for her highly criticised proposals such as, for instance, introducing a ban on cursing, divorce and homosexual relationship.

networks. They employ the ambiguous digital folklore, the Internet memes, to share their grievances and disrupt propaganda's deceit. By exploiting these interactive, adjustable communication vehicles, social network users articulate their alternative view at the reality and invite other users to reflect, juxtapose and accept different truths.

The format of a meme has evolved to become instrumental in these circumstances. The quick medium that offers a half-baked joke and a layout to fill, a meme facilitates one's self-expression and disclosure of criticisms to the state. The most important functions of memes in the contemporary Russian media environment are raising the awareness of digital publics, directing their attention to the burning political topics and providing mental self-defence against the aggressive indoctrination of the state. Additionally, as the majority of meme makers agree, political memes allow to let off steam, locate the like-minded individuals and restore confidence in one's principles, political beliefs and aspirations.

Contrary to this, memes have proven feeble in triggering or maintaining a substantial discussion. Their short-lived nature and reliance on agenda makes them a wobbly building brick of the virtual deliberation. Memes can facilitate political discussions in the established bonded communities, but appear inefficient in linking individuals or groups. Russian Twitter demonstrates low capacity in uniting protest public in sound communities. Digital dissidents indicate a high level of self-censorship and caution – they persistently reject any engagement with political activism and refer to their accounts as civil mouthpieces. This tendency towards detachment from organised politics exposes a lack of trust in established political structures, freedom of speech and disappointment with the existing systemic opposition. Politically active social network users emphasise the prevalence of personal responsibility over any group affiliation; they demand more unity and clarification of ideological claims from liberal politicians, but for the time being reside in the individual realms of independent Twitter accounts.

The practice of meme making and sharing stands on the edge of artistic self-expression and articulation of active citizenship, the necessity to voice one's opinion and confront injustice. This peculiar equilibrium explains why memes attract very diverse crowds of people – they are not limited to either art or politics, entertainment

or activism, but amalgamate many motivations and styles and fit into various discourses. The accessibility of memes to citizens of different social backgrounds links them to the carnivalesque resistance. Anonymous, entertaining and easily consumable, most memes travel in between various communities. Meme making is not restricted to creative elites, as anyone can craft a successful joke and encourage artistic contributions from other users. This means that memes provide the ever-flexible possibilities for the change of power relations, they are not fixed or limited to elites or intellectuals.

The Russian government attributes much influence to memes, as the recent legislative measures and pursuit of meme makers illustrate. Memes remarkably irritate the government that struggles to handle spontaneous mockery and counterbalance it with fabricated texts. The authorities have deployed massive forces online, trying to contaminate meaningful politicised discussions with pro-government memes and commentaries. Yet digitally savvy users report that artifice is notoriously visible in the realm of memetic exchange.

From the alternative perspective, memes are not as much the language but the blueprint of the collective digital identity, a Polaroid of the Twitter sphere in any given moment of time. Memes can be compared to plankton that absorbs remnants of the sea life to nurture and feed other inhabitants of this particular ecology. Memes sensitively ingest the existing moods and trends in society and politics; they vigorously echo the main points of the offline agenda in the virtual space. Memes cannot survive without public demand; they represent public request and interest in certain types of information or debate in the present moment. Furthermore, memes facilitate the communication of complex political issues to larger publics. Although the Russian audience is generally very loyal to the traditional media, few citizens nonetheless take modest interest in the digital sources of information and opinion. Prominent politicians and journalists habitually utilise memes as the bait to direct the attention of the general Twitter public to meaningful investigations and analytical pieces. This practice also fits into the changing pattern of media consumption – people prefer laconic concentrated texts to long explanations, and memes have this capacity to pass the message in a highly condensed and entertaining frame.

Overall, the analysis of the interviews with top liberal and pro-government meme makers and sharers illustrates that the role of memes as discursive weapons is constantly evolving. The challenges of the authoritarian environment that puts increasing pressure both on traditional and new media, on the one hand, curb the outreach of liberal microblogging, but on the other hand, encourage the liberal accounts to sustain alternative discourse by all available means. Social network spaces are becoming the ultimate sources of uninhibited data and commentary. Although many liberal users perceive memes as pleasurable additions to the meaningful textual discourse, they nonetheless affirm their potential in addressing apolitical crowds, infiltrating casual conversations and providing symbolic manifestation to the burning resistant debates.

CHAPTER 7: Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Memes as the means of political communication in the challenging Russian media environment

The Russian political and media environment of the 2010s poses many challenges to liberal resistance. After the rise of protest activity in 2011-2012, the government has introduced a range of restrictive laws that significantly curbed the freedom of speech and assembly. This project started as an inquiry in the deliberation of alternative politics and mobilisation for protest in Russian social networks, but evolved into the study on the networked resistance to propaganda and state oppression. The period of 2011-2012 seemed an emancipating time for the resistant-minded Russian citizens: they were able to discuss corruption and mobilise for a protest against the government that gathered around 100,000 people in the central square in Moscow in December 2011 (BBC, 2011). The ongoing discussions, reports of wrongdoings of the state and promotion of the opposition politicians and journalists continued throughout the first half of 2012, with further offline protests spreading in large Russian cities. Nonetheless, the state harshly responded to the rising dissent activism, prosecuted many members of peaceful demonstrations and imposed severe restrictions on free discussion and public gatherings.

The Crimean crisis in 2014 became a game-changer in the communication between the state, its supporters and protesters (Kachkaeva, 2015). What started as a conflict between the European Union and Russia over Ukraine has evolved into the confrontation of Russia with the West, which had an immediate effect on domestic media communication in Russia. The intensification of pro-government rhetoric in traditional and electronic outlets challenged the deliberation of alternative views and criticism of the government; several liberal media were shut down and an independent social network owner was pressed to leave the country (The Moscow Times, 2014; BBC, 2014a; Yuhas, 2014). In these difficult circumstances, resistant crowds preserved dissent communication in social media yet had to adjust their expression styles and ways to deliberate politics to avoid state persecution and potential prosecution (see Results chapter: 166-210).

Since the early 2010s, resistant social media users in Russia have actively expressed their views on politics via the means of Internet memes; viral texts that proliferate on mutation and distribution, encourage user participation and promote ambiguous quirky humour (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Esteves & Meikle, 2015; Shifman, 2013; Meikle, 2014). During the preparation for the first large protest rally in December 2011, dissent users exchanged satirical memes on Facebook and Twitter: these texts exposed the corrupt government and suggested critical evaluation of hegemonic politics. This practice was refreshing and attractive to the Internet crowds who appreciated protest communication that was framed in the Internet language (Interview Analysis, see Results chapter: 262-271). Participants of offline marches in Moscow in 2011-2012 transferred many of those memes to the offline posters, thus providing the evidence that many digital users who discussed politics on the Internet through memes, went out in the street to turn online activism into the real offline action.

In my initial intention, I wanted to study the creative, artful and ambiguous communication of the protest crowds in Russia, to examine how and why they employ memes to promote alternative politics and for what reasons this joyful contemporary style of communication became meaningful for the Russian politics in the 2010s. However, the increased state surveillance and crusade against free speech in liberal media and social networks has diminished the amount of protest communication via memes. Besides, protest activists were largely discouraged by the re-election of Vladimir Putin to another term in 2012 despite all the demonstrations and investigations of corruption that had preceded the elections. As a result of this disappointment and fear of state prosecution, politically active users have significantly curbed their public opposition to the government.

In 2014, the Crimean crisis unfolded, adding new dimension to my research and establishing new context to my study. Vladimir Putin and his allies exploited the domestic conflict in Ukraine as an opportunity to seize control over the peninsula that had once belonged to the Russian territory. The campaign to 'return' Crimea to Russia has challenged the alternative political deliberation and imposed new challenges, mostly at political and legislative levels. From the political perspective, the Kremlin employed state media to advance its role as the saviour of ethnic Russians in Ukraine; this indoctrination established Putin as the forceful action man on the arena of global

politics and fortified his high public support within the country (Kachkaeva, 2015; Kendall, 2014a, 2014b). The Russian government facilitated an independence referendum in the peninsula in March 2014, and soon after the pro-Russian Crimean authorities pledged to include it into the Russian territory.

Russian state propaganda around the Crimean campaign evoked the ideas and concepts of the Cold War rhetoric and presented Russia as a bearer of justice and truth, while labelling Western countries as the sources of threat and manipulation. Most importantly for the resistant Russian users, it portrayed any deviation from the hegemonic agenda as treachery. State media and leading politicians publicly labelled the opposition as non-patriots on the Western payroll (Yaffa, 2014) and promoted antagonism of the Kremlin-supporting majority towards protesters (Kates, 2014).

This challenging media environment has reshaped the deliberation of alternative politics. As one of the participants of my interview analysis revealed (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014, see Results chapter: 271), the elites exploited the Crimean campaign to disrupt and confuse the resistant crowds. They posed a question to the population of whether they support a decisive president who stands for his people or oppose this highly attractive figure in favour of vague protest goals and unpopular opposition leaders. The Crimean question has diminished the weak uniformity of resistant users, which had already been quite low by 2014. Many liberal activists endorsed Putin's activity in Ukraine and therefore curbed their criticism of the government's corruption and oppression (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014, see Results chapter: 271). The remaining opposition activists were significantly excluded from the public space and also had to invent new strategies to communicate with the indoctrinated audiences after the Crimean campaign. As the result of amplified pressure on independent media and social networks, the alternative voices were mostly confined to the 'information ghettos', a limited number of small liberal media, Internet outlets and social network conversations (Kiriya, 2012; Kachaeva, 2015). In these circumstances, the production of alternative political communication and spreading awareness of non-conventional viewpoints started to resemble the Soviet dissent practices of 'samizdat', 'kitchen talk' and clandestine media production (see Klishin, 2014; Omid, 2014).

Recent adjustments to the state legislation (see, for instance, Law on Extremism 2007, adjusted in 2012, Context chapter: 42) enabled Russian elites to label practically any expression of alternative political views and criticism of the government as “extremism” and impose harsh fees and prison sentences for it. Human rights activists dubbed the vague definition of “extremist” communication in the law as “casting a wide net” (Eckel, 2007; see also Oliner, Crane, Schwartz & Yusupov, 2009) on the enemies of the state and any opposition. In the series of further legal initiatives, the Kremlin required social media users to disclose their personal details to the state watchdog and qualify as ‘media’ as soon as their audience reached 3,000 visitors per day. Then the ban on profanity in media and arts was introduced, followed by the prohibition to exploit images and personalities of real people in Internet memes, among other laws. The increase of state surveillance over traditional and interactive media forced users to refrain to allegoric forms of expression and employ even more humour and satire in their political discussions (see Results chapter: 273-274).

Moreover, by the mid-2010s, the government had initiated a digital strategy that put social media communication at risk of infiltration and distortion: the elites have deployed hundreds of ‘Internet trolls’ to disorder and pollute meaningful political conversations on social networks. These state employees invade forums, blogging platforms and social networks with the praise of the government, and hate speech and demeaning comments against the opposition. (Bugorkova, 2015; Toler, 2015; Volchek & Sindelar, 2015). As an aftermath of the Crimean campaign, the most popular Russian social media, such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, hold a large number of pro-government groups and communities (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014). Virtual space serves as yet another platform for the propagation of hegemonic discourse, and many users exploit social media communication to reinforce the pro-government agenda rather than seek for the alternative voices. Despite the availability of non-conventional perspectives and analytics online, the majority of Russian citizens check the Internet media and interactive networks to confirm their pre-existing views picked from the mainstream discourse (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014).

The current government largely reproduces the Soviet media system: the main national media, such as television and radio, are available to the population free of charge yet deploy politicised information between the layers of popular amusement. In these circumstances, resistant users are limited to the realm of digital sphere where

they can harvest more objective news and alternative interpretations; use allegory and inventive formats of political deliberation to escape the state surveillance and maintain critical discussions. The role of Internet memes as the language and format of dissent communication had evolved by the mid-2010s. From the supportive elements of highly visible anti-corruption campaigns and wide discussions of the 2011-2012 period, they transformed in the clandestine communication of the limited number of protest aggregations. I had to adjust my research aims and design to the changed circumstances. I moved to examining Internet memes as the means of bypassing and confronting censorship and surveillance, spreading information and awareness and linking the like-minded resistant citizens with each other. I have exploited the Crimean crisis as my case study to examine the role of memes in maintaining critical discourse and opposition to propaganda.

The potential of Internet memes for political communication and mobilisation is a relatively new topic in academic studies. Internet memes are the viral units of digital communication that flourish on user adjustment and replication (see Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2013). Media and communication scholars have offered various conceptualisations of this phenomenon of Internet culture: they assessed memes as the folklore and casual language of the digital crowds (Milner, 2013; Esteves & Meikle, 2015, among others), aesthetic artifacts of electronic communication (Goriunova, 2013) and strategic discursive weapons of political activists (Metahaven, 2013; Li, 2014, among others), among others. According to the latest group of thinkers, politically active citizens exploit memes as the 'mindbombs', or symbolic texts with condensed ideas and ample connotations, that help to attract attention to the political issues, suggest alternative interpretations to the news and encourage debates among users (see Shifman, 2013; Zuckerman, 2013). The existing literature on the political uses of the Internet memes highlights their power in overcoming censorship due to the allegoric style of expression and ambiguity of the commentary that they carry. In order to read a meme, members of the audience often have to be aware of the broader political context and be familiar with this format of Internet communication. The characteristic of memes as 'in-jokes' has further advanced their exploitation for political deliberation in oppressed media environments, for instance in China (Li, 2010) where users have employed memes to create puns. These metaphoric codes have proved to effectively escape the government

surveillance yet inform other users of alternative viewpoints and spread the critical perspective.

Apart from the studies on memes in repressed environments, the existing body of research on memes has also examined their role in the Western mobilisations, such as Occupy (Milner, 2013) and other global movements. Remarkably, in both democratic and non-democratic countries users have habitually exploited memes for 'connective action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). A new concept of networked resistance and protest coordination, connective action suggests that people bypass organisations and institutions and unite for political mobilisation via individual accounts on social networks. It differs from 'collective action', which requires the involvement of established leaders and offline structures for maintenance and organisation of the protests (see Juris, 2012; Olson, 1965). From the perspective of connective action, Internet memes serve as individual action frames that promote casual deliberation of politics that does not require one's commitment to established political parties (see also Diani, 2011; Zuckerman, 2013). However, this approach does not suggest clear routes to how connective action online transforms in the offline activity. I have considered the promise of connective action for my project and used it at the preliminary stage of research design. Russian liberal users of the 2010s tend to avoid established political parties and refrain from swearing allegiance to any political viewpoint; they monitor liberal media and blogs, but prefer to discuss politics from their individual social network accounts, which fits with connective action logic. Nonetheless, after the decay of offline manifestations in 2012, liberal users have rarely expanded online deliberation and activism in the offline mobilisations; therefore, the connective action concept may not be fully applicable to the Russian case.

Nevertheless, the Internet-enabled contestation of nonconventional politics via memes still preserves much potential for the propagation of alternative discourse online. In order to embrace the peculiarities of this digital phenomenon in Russia, I relied on the concept of carnivalesque resistance to inform my study. Bakhtin's (1984) idea of the carnivalesque resistance to hegemony derives from the research on the medieval carnival that involved satirical, rude and polyphonic performances in the marketplaces in the established periods during the year. The elites tolerated these expressions of free spirit, nonconventional criticism and joyful outbursts of rage in order to let the crowds let off steam and simultaneously monitor their agenda. The

circulation of critical, humorous, impudent and compelling memes in Russian social networks resembles a few traits of the carnivalesque resistance: by exchanging these texts, opposition users can generate and advance the alternative discourse and let off steam.

The existing research on the use of Internet memes for political resistance does not explain to what extent memes can maintain a meaningful conversation; whether memes can link protest individuals in a community; whether they have a potential to spark a debate or rather act as the finishing point in a discussion; if they are more proliferate in reinforcing stereotypes or suggesting bizarre interpretations; what is conventional and what is innovative about their content and framing; and why Internet crowds in the oppressed media environments adhere to memes among other creative means of communication to discuss politics. In my research, I was looking to analyse the roles that meme producers attribute to memes, to understand their motivations, risks and constraints in meme making and distribution. Besides, I also intended to draw attention to the potential of memes in negotiating national, individual and group identities, to contest popular stereotypes and rhetoric concepts on politics, society and culture in a nonconventional manner. Current research highlights the power of memes in carrying condensed snapshots of the popular ideas, trends and lines of thought: when a text becomes viral, it means that the audience endorses certain concepts or interpretations of the popular opinion. From this perspective, I envisioned examining what concepts, identities and claims do resistant and pro-government publics endorse in their communication via memes; where do they contradict or support each other; what are the stumbling points of discourse over national identities and symbols, and to what extent can memes facilitate the contestation of pervasive propaganda themes in the public space.

Furthermore, current literature on Internet memes points to the ambiguous nature and short lifespan (Esteves & Meikle, 2015; Pearce, 2014; Morozov, 2013a) as the obstacles to consistent deliberation of politics through Internet memes. Users may decode a joke differently and identify various meanings. Besides, viral texts emerge and disappear constantly in the overwhelming ever-changing realm of the Internet communication. Besides, memes can draw attention to the specific topics or claims, but are limited in the capacity to promote complex concepts or explain ideas. Therefore, they may be more instrumental as momentary mindbombs rather than

instruments of prolonged political education for the Internet crowds. Finally yet importantly, memes are anonymous by nature: they bear no traces of authorship, which helps the liberal activists to escape state prosecution, but restrains their capacity to identify and connect with the like-minded individuals in the digital discourse (Esteves & Meikle, 2015). One can recognise a meme sharer, but would probably be unable to trace the author of a meme. In this instance, Internet memes are a produce of the digital collective and are limited in linking meme-producing individuals. In my research, I aimed to verify these assumptions from the previous scholarship and further examine the potential of memes for the enhancement of unrestrained political speech, raising the awareness and linking the news with the context, connecting individuals and ideas. I specifically aimed to address the gaps of the existing research in analysing the role of memes in the oppressed political environments; studying the motivations and risks of meme production and distribution; assessing the potential of memes in contesting the narratives of hegemonic politics and media, and evaluating the roles of memes in alternative politics in contemporary Russia. Moreover, by this research I sought to fill the gap for the non-Western studies on the political uses of the Internet memes. Only in recent years has the scholarship from Eastern Europe and Asia started contributing academic articles on the appropriation of memes by alternative thinkers and activists (Li, 2014; Pearce, 2014), yet the existing research is scarce and should benefit from my inquiry into the Russian case.

This dissertation has analysed Russian meme making in two main aspects: practices and motivations of producers (how and why people create political memes), and meanings that these texts convey in the collective digital discourse (what do they tell about the hegemonic political environment and the opposition to it). The main research question was “What roles do Internet memes play in alternative political communication in Russian social networks?” The sub-questions were: 1) *Does satirical communication online facilitate alternative political talk?* 2) *Can satirical framing and memes overcome censorship and serve as coded in-jokes to raise the awareness on political issues?* 3) *Do memes connect people and assist community building?* 4) *What themes and ideas do social networks users promote by the means of memes?* 5) *Do supporters and opponents of the government employ political memes differently? What narratives do memes contribute to the pro-government and resistant communication flows on Russian Twitter?*

I have narrowed my research down to the Russian-speaking users of Twitter as this platform became especially popular during the 2011-2012 protests in Russia (Kelly et al., 2012). Liberal media and political activists exploited Twitter to report on the issues of corruption (Soldatov & Borogan, 2015), and monitored elections in real time (Roberts & Etling, 2011). Twitter facilitates rapid spread of information and addressing other users directly, without the need to belong to their immediate list of contacts or “friends” (A. Kovalev, personal communication, 15 June 2014). *“Many prominent opposition leaders have narrowed their communication down to writing solely on Twitter. It gives a fascinating effect of involvement in the events and allows the immediate spread of information”* (@FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014, see Results chapter: 293). Besides, Twitter tolerated anonymity of the liberal users who often hid behind pseudonyms and parody identities to conceal their personalities from the communication watchdog. Last but not least, Twitter is a public platform open for data scraping both in the past and present (unlike Facebook that keeps many pages private), which made it a feasible choice for my retrospective research into the communication of 2014.

I have undertaken content analysis of over 600 memes that circulated on Twitter during the Crimean crisis in February-March 2014 and then performed textual analysis on 50 exemplary memes from the sample. I have collected 15 interviews with the eminent Russian meme producers and sharers, whom I had identified through preliminary research and consultations with my networks of contacts in Russian journalism and social media. The selection of speakers was justified by the criteria of providing consistent circulation of memes, high number of followers, reputation of a resistant account, or endorsement made by other featured meme makers in this study. Additionally, I conducted a small-scale network analysis on the circles of pro- and anti-government meme sharers in the Crimean case, yet this part of the research did not bring generalisable results, and therefore they can mostly serve as the indicative trial for further studies. Besides, I have attempted to trace the transformation and distribution routes of several celebrated memes in my sample, and this part of the research functions as the additional indicative tool for further research and comprehension of Internet meme ethos.

Interview analysis included both pro- and anti-government meme sharers. The majority of the interviewees in my sample are young professionals who work in

creative industries, public relations, law or finance. Half of them refused to disclose their real identities and preferred to appear in this research under the names of their accounts; others revealed their names and occupations, but agreed that the production and circulation of memes can become a dangerous activity in the censored Russian media environment. Several of the popular meme sharing accounts featured in this study employ parody framing for their Twitter channels. Such accounts as @Fake_MIDRF, @KermlinRussia, @FakeMORF, and @Judge_Syrova_Ya mock the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, official Twitter page of the President of Russia, the Russian Ministry of Defence (later renamed as the Ministry of Love) and the scandalous federal judge. The analysis of the framing of these accounts suggested additional insights into the joyful carnivalesque character of dissent communication in the Russian Twitter, and helped to better comprehend the potential and constraints of satirical communication via memes in the Russian digital environment.

7.2 Russian politicised users benefit from the reputation of memes as the Internet folklore in their political deliberation

The exchange of resistant memes on Crimea in the Russian Twitter was not a consistent, organised protest campaign but the result of many individual efforts, the interview analysis revealed (see Results chapter: 271-275). The participants of my research did not give memes much credit as the weapons of political mobilisation, but acknowledged their significance as the supplementary devices of political deliberation. Many meme sharers (see Results chapter: 263-264) pointed to the power of memes as teasers that attract attention and direct social media users to the investigations in resistant blogs or articles in liberal media. Meme producers also suggested that Internet memes are instrumental as the medium that enables people to swiftly respond to the atrocities they find in the news and share their discontent or rage with hegemonic politics (see Results chapter: 263-266): they endorsed the easiness of coining a meme and deploying it to the digital networks in response to political news and grievances.

Besides, since 2011, Internet memes have gained a reputation as the in-jokes of the digitally savvy users: the main opposition politician Alexey Navalny has been

constantly using memes in his Twitter, blog and standalone website. Many meme sharers from my sample agreed (see Results chapter: 263-264) that this was a smart rhetorical strategy: independent liberal users enjoyed memes as the celebration of informal Internet communication. From this perspective, the exploitation of memes by liberal users enhanced the role of memes as discursive weapons and ‘mindbombs’. In the Russian political environment, interviewees agreed, satire and memes can be meaningful and precious in offering “*a specific lens that can often convey the essence of a political event much sharper than ten highly intellectual newspaper columns*” (A. Kovalev, personal communication, 15 June 2014, see Results chapter: 299). In political discussion on Russian Twitter, dissent users employed memes as symbolic manifestations of protest discourse that operated the language of the Internet crowds and appealed to other dwellers of digital networks.

However, the efficiency of employing memes as discursive weapons and condensed political statements also upholds their status quo as the Internet vernacular. As one of the interviewees Pavel Borisov (personal communication, 10 May 2014, see Results chapter: 301-302) suggested, Internet crowds use memes to communicate on all possible topics, from popular culture and sports to politics and personal affairs. Many interviewees linked digital literacy with a higher level of analytical skills; they assumed that one’s ability to understand and enjoy memes exemplifies their critical comprehension of traditional media and familiarity with the ethos of Internet communication. This finding correlates with the concept of Russian sociologists who believe that the country is divided into Russia-1 and Russia-2, the educated Internet-savvy minority who live in big cities and critically assesses the government, and a less advanced majority of the population who reside outside major centres, get their news and opinions from the state media and mostly endorse the government (Rogov, 2012; Dmitriev, 2012; Gudkov, 2012). Nevertheless, other scholars (see, for instance, Lipman (2010) and Aron (2012)) dismiss the rigid polarisation and argue that the inhabitants of less-developed Russian regions are heterogeneous in their social statuses, income, education and political awareness.

The findings from interview analysis suggest that digitally savvy users tend to oppose themselves to the population that gets information and interpretation from traditional media. They blame state-controlled media for manipulated news and praise the Internet as the source of diverse ideas and judgements. Digitally savvy

interviewees acknowledged the role of memes as identifiers of experienced Internet users who, subsequently, were defined as people who are more likely to share a critical and progressive perspective on politics. “(I)t [Alexey Navalny’s communication via Internet memes - AD] demarcated the digital audience of memes from those people who perceive not only memes, but the whole Internet as a hostile environment” (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

Familiarity with the logic and formats of communication in social networks may signify tendency towards independent thinking yet does not serve as an objective steady identifier of liberal users, other interviewees (@KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014; @Fake_MIDRF, personal communication, 9 September 2014) pointed out. Furthermore, the pro-government public also employ digital networks; half of the country is registered on and frequently logs in to social media (45% of Russians and 53% of Muscovites (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014)). However, these users are more likely to spend their time on major domestic networks, such as Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, which are mostly in Russian and unite people of various ages and backgrounds, with a significant number of middle-aged and senior users (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014). Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are considered trendier among the citizens of large cities with the ability to post in English and share links in different languages. Liberal meme makers from my sample (see, for instance, @KermlinRussia, personal communication, 10 July 2014) complained that the majority of the country’s population is online yet prefers other realms than those with progressive views. From this perspective, communication in social networks and digital literacy are not reserved to the liberal users. Pro-government users also share memes and post them to various networks, from Odnoklassniki to Twitter, as textual analysis revealed (see, for instance, Results chapter: 198-199). Therefore, there is not enough evidence to claim that meme literacy is the identifier of the politically active and digitally savvy user. Memes are the casual format of expression, contemporary lingua franca of the Internet crowds, which people with various political standpoints can exploit to their liking.

Yet liberal meme makers pointed to a specific feature of memes that helps to employ them in liberal communication and building trust among disperse critical users. One of the popular liberal media Lenta.ru largely exploited Internet memes in their Twitter channel in 2011-2012. This style of communication enabled the

journalists to oppose the verbose formal narrative of traditional media and promote more personal relationship with their social media followers. Through jokey tweets and memes, this popular liberal news website appeared as a ‘warm’ media that consisted of people with emotions, sympathies and opinions, rather than a distant, cold information outlet (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014). This finding suggests that dissent users may attribute more value and meaning to the communication via memes than pro-government crowds. For the resistant social media users, networking platforms and memes are among the few remaining conduits of free expression and deliberation of ideas, which makes every element of them more precious.

In the Crimean case, dissent users employed memes to formulate the alternative interpretations of media-covered events in social media. They deconstructed elements (images, labels, rhetoric idioms) from the state propaganda and rearranged them in a different manner in the Internet memes, thus exposing the manipulation of the traditional state-controlled news and analytics (see Results chapter: 117-142).

For instance, in late-February to early-March 2014 the groups of unidentified pro-Russian troops appeared in Crimea to defend the pro-Russian local authorities and facilitate the independence referendum. The Kremlin denied the deployment of armed forces in the peninsula, and the state media and officials referred to them as ‘volunteers’ or ‘tourists’. The meme makers responded with the photographs of these ‘volunteers’ that featured full professional uniform and armoury. They supported images with sarcastic taglines, such as ‘Russian tourists are coming to Crimea on a mass scale and in an orderly manner!’ (see Results chapter: 121-122), thus mocking the state rhetoric and vaguely accusing it of lying.

In a different case, meme sharers questioned the state propaganda on the Homecoming: Russian media portrayed the annexation of Crimea as the return of the long-lost child that was finally joining his original family of origin. Meme makers exposed the manipulative character of this rhetoric by combining gloomy photographs and facts on Russian poverty with the government’s idiom “Crimea, Welcome Home” (see Results chapter: 138-142). By coining resistant memes in the Crimean crisis, liberal users intervened in the public discourse on the peninsula, suggested alternative interpretations to the events and initiated a ‘strike at the level of discourse’ (Peters,

2013: para 3). The format of Internet memes was instrumental in creating a ‘fast-food media’ (see Metahaven, 2013; Zuckerman, 2013), an understandable objection to the state rhetoric, and simple enough to reach broad audiences yet sufficiently sophisticated to stimulate critical thinking.

Memes permit dissent users to retain their independence from any political party or established organisation, but at the same time get access to the public space where many other users can see their input. Meme sharers benefit from the visibility that networks provide (Meikle, 2014), but hide behind the limited connectivity and individualism that they facilitate (Wellman, 2001; Wellman et al., 2003). Many opposition meme makers and sharers in Russia protect their identities by the pseudonyms they use on Twitter. The interviewees agreed that sharing memes under playful virtual identities helps to shelter anti-government activists and protect them from potential persecution from the government. Besides, meme sharing functions in this environment as the “light-hearted” deliberation of politics: memes discuss themes and stereotypes without going into specific details, making them seem harmless to the communication watchdog (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014). My findings on the potential of memes in overcoming censorship exhibit that this format enabled the Russian liberal users to address the audience of social networks from their personal accounts and get involved in connective ‘action’ without harm to personal safety and privacy. Memes facilitating the expression of various styles of humour therefore covered a wide range of audience.

Many politicised Twitter users in Russia have utilised their accounts to spread news and ideas, attract public attention to specific events and point to the distortion of truth in media coverage. My research has proven that many opposition microbloggers have been deploying memes as tactical media (Garcia & Lovink, 1997; Lievrouw, 2011), on a daily basis, as immediate responses to the activity of the Russian government and media. These exposures of state manipulation have constituted an alternative flow of information and analysis. These outcomes of my research enable me to answer the research sub-questions 1 and 2: *Does satirical communication online facilitate alternative political talk?; Can satirical framing and memes overcome censorship and serve as coded in-jokes to raise the awareness on political issues?* As my study on Crimea exposed, communication via the means of Internet memes has indeed facilitated the generation and maintenance of the alternative political talk

online. However, tactical utilisation of social networks for liberal campaigning faces significant limitations in reaching large audiences. In its current state, the circulation of satire in social networks resembles the tradition of Soviet “samizdat” as the clandestine production and distribution of alternative media resources (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014). One may argue that in the USSR dissent citizens were hiding their alternative media production, while in the present day people publish memes and political commentary in the open realm of social networks. Yet, despite being de facto “public”, these spaces are not as known and available to all. Only the most prominent liberal accounts, such as @navalny or @KermlinRussia, have more than a million followers, and the majority of satirical microbloggers can rarely boast more than 100,000 followers on Twitter. This makes for a tiny percent of the country’s population with its 140 million citizens. My interviewees agreed that Russian liberal discourse in social networks bears traits of the “information ghettos” (Kiriya, 2012), as very few Russian citizens utilise networks for harvesting political information and seeking alternative views (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014).

Despite these challenges, Internet memes are still meaningful and precious for the development of liberal discourse, and the Kremlin’s treatment of memes additionally verified their potential for promoting alternative perspectives. The elites did not know how to respond to the flow of satirical texts and memes of the opposition crowds that emerged in the early-2010s (A. Nossik, personal communication, 26 June 2014). They issued unofficial instructions on the coverage of the Olympic Games in Sochi that had preceded the Crimean crisis and imposed a ban on sarcasm. The instructions permitted open criticism of corruption and abuse of the Olympic funds yet prohibited any sardonic commentary and offensive Internet memes (A. Nossik, personal communication, 26 June 2014). The ambiguous Aesopian language of the memes appeared challenging to comprehend, and hence to control. Digital expert Sultan Suleimanov (personal communication, 1 May 2015) explained the crusade on memes and satire by the spontaneous and liberating nature of this style of communication for the Russian opposition public; the government could not grasp the inner spirit and style of humour of the Internet memes.

For the majority of interviewees, memes are important vehicles of self-expression. They mingle politics and art (Lievrout, 2011; Benkler, 2006; Melucci, 1996), allow users to challenge their creativity and at the same time contribute to the

political discourse. When users generate Internet memes, they are rewarded by self-expression and recognition. These benefits motivate them to participate in individualised political activity, which corresponds to the logic of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), ‘networked individualism’ (Wellman, 2001) and Resource Mobilisation theory (Olson, 1965). According to the resource mobilisation theory (Olson, 1965), sharing of common grievances and pursuit of mutual goals may not be enough to stimulate individuals to take an active part in a protest, but additional incentives that trigger one’s interest on the personal level can help immensely. As the interview analysis revealed, the prominent meme producers perceive the creation of these humorous texts as an entertaining and thrilling practice: *“I am enchanted by the possibility to condense a smart/deep/witty idea in 140 symbols. This challenge gives me shudders, jokes apart”* (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014). Many meme makers declared that they feel responsibility as citizens to participate and have their say in the political discussion. This responsibility, merged with the self-indulging creative process, motivates them to engage with meme making and production of satirical tweets on a continuous basis.

Besides, the openness of memes to holding various styles of expression makes them suitable in propagating even the sophisticated styles of humour and sarcasm. Memes are never limited to intricate humour: as interview analysis revealed (see p. 301 of the Results chapter), even the most intellectual meme makers produced various types of jokes, from stupid and vulgar, to the more complex ones, and therefore were able to connect with different members of the audience. In several cases, Russian meme makers involved even the tactics of the Theatre of Absurd for a postmodernist commentary on the political reality. In the Crimean discussions on infiltrated state media, for instance, they opposed lies and bold threats of the Russian television with absurd memes that did not appeal to the rational judgement of the audience, but manifested the revolt against hegemony in an ambiguous and artistic form (see pp. 124-127, 299-301 of the Results chapter). Moreover, meme makers also emphasised the broadly absurd nature of Russian political reality when they created absurd and surreal memes: *“We were contrasting the absurd that surrounds us in the news”* (I. Belkin, personal communication, 26 June 2014); *“It is easier for me to perceive all this absurd in the form of a joke, turn the absurd into a bigger absurd and somehow reconcile with it”* (P. Borisov, personal communication, 10 May 2014).

The production and spread of memes in this case exhibited another function of meme sharing as the coping strategy for liberal users who felt incapable to settle with the disturbing political reality. This case revealed yet another motivation behind meme making and distribution: the necessity to protect one's peace of mind and actively confront the aggressive hegemonic discourse. Academic research has not yet covered this trait of memes as soothing practices of digital users in the oppressed media environments. It could be beneficial for further studies on Internet memes to inquire into what other motivations except for self-expression, serving the citizenship duty and comforting oneself drive people in creating memes in various circumstances.

7.3 Memes as contestation sites for popular narratives and collective and national identities

Content and textual analysis of the main themes of Crimean memes have exposed the significance of these texts in both grasping and negotiating popular rhetorical themes in the public space. Many memes of the pro-government users fortified and promoted the ideas suggested by the state propaganda, such as the interpretation of patriotism as absolute loyalty to the government (Ryzhkov, 2015), or framing nationalism as patriotism (Laruelle, 2014); or identification of political power with 'macho culture', the rule of force over the rule of diplomacy (see Results chapter: 173-206). Liberal meme makers utilised memes to contemplate these discourses and suggest alternative evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of 'macho culture' or explain 'patriotism' as wishing the best for your country, including better management of resources and holding the current government to account. In the Crimean case, users with opposing political views did not exchange memes on the same topic in a form of 'dialogue', yet submitted their contributions to the discourse, which altogether constituted varying perspectives in the public space of Twitter.

Some rhetorical claims of the state propaganda encouraged the liberal meme makers to engage in the prolonged and persistent analysis of the suggested concepts and offer their own interpretations. For instance, the Crimea Welcome Home narrative of the state media implied that the peninsula was returning to its legitimate home

country, which welcomes the long lost land with wealth and promise of prosperity. Dissent meme makers responded with the memes that pointed to the poor condition of the Russian economy, high level of poverty and wide gap between the elites and the poor. The meme makers and sharers aimed to disrupt the pompous state narrative on ‘welcoming Crimea home’ by juxtaposing the government’s claims with photographs of impoverished Russian citizens and areas. Sometimes the dissent users even called their memes ‘postcard to the patriots’ (p. 137 of the Results chapter), thus criticising uncritical consumption of propaganda and unbalanced notion of state-loyal “patriotism”. Liberal users frequently employed the Demotivator meme format in the Crimea Welcome Home narrative, as this frame always juxtaposes visuals with the contrasting tagline. Within Crimea Welcome Home deliberation, resistant memes functioned as the rhetorical tools that offered new angles of interpretation and deconstructed rhetorical idioms, grounding pompous claims with facts and critical evaluation.

Moreover, the debates on the Crimean takeover brought forward the popular Russian narrative on the unique path of the country in the global economy, politics and culture. This narrative has long formed a crucial part of Russia’s national identity (Vishlenkova, 2011; Confino, 2013; Helleman, 2004, among others), but was not as visible in the 2000s as it became in the 2010s. The return of this rhetoric was discussed in the memes. Since the start of the Crimean campaign, Russian elites have notably reinforced the public persuasion on Russia’s exclusive global mission as the bearer of the moral and religious values and emphasised its responsibility to intervene in the politics of other countries (Kuzio, 2015; Teper, 2016). Pro-government users endorsed the ideas from state propaganda and created the memes that justified the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula by references to this unique stance of Russia. They added more themes to the narrative: promoted the myth that life in the USSR was prosperous and happy and suggested the restoration of the Soviet Union and also employed a centuries-old metaphor of Russia as a lonely bear who has the right to protect his land by all means from any incoming threat. These powerful metaphors derive from the centuries of historical, social, political and cultural tradition (Confino, 2013), and therefore bring strong sentiments to the current media discourse.

However, liberal meme makers confronted many of these popular myths and allegories by either substantiating them with facts and logical interpretation, or

ridiculing by obscenities and laughter. For example, they compared the idea of returning to the Soviet borders to the well-known metaphor of stepping on the same rakes. They produced the meme depicting a man walking on the road full of rakes to the USSR presented as giant buttocks (see Results chapter: 146-147). In a more sophisticated take, meme makers showed Putin looking in the mirror and finding there Joseph Stalin instead (see Results chapter: 147-148). This interpretation suggests comparison of the current Russian president with the controversial Soviet dictator and invites the audience to associate their leadership styles. Nonetheless, the memes that mentioned Stalin in my sample (13 units) disclosed the intriguing character of the public perception of the Soviet ruler. Pro-government users tended to use comparison with Stalin as a positive reference, praising Stalin's assertiveness and father-like status for the Soviet people, while liberal users criticised his authoritative governance, brutal suppression of freedoms and cult of personality. Furthermore, a number of memes that mentioned Stalin were not clear in their interpretation of Stalin's role in history: they were open to the opinions of the audience. This mixed evaluation of Stalin in the realm of memes corresponds to the public opinion, as only 25% of the Russian population in 2013 associated Joseph Stalin with fear or disgust, while over half of respondents assessed his rule in positive terms (see pp. 147-148 of the Results chapter).

While the 'USSR as buttocks' and 'Stalin' memes operate on different levels of sophistication, they both encourage evaluation of popular myths and rhetorical themes from a fresh perspective. Memes are not alternative by default, yet their user-friendly, entertaining nature makes it easier for opposition users to pass their message to the audience in this format. *"(If sharp humour helps someone to see differently from how the television instructs, it would be a significant achievement"* (@Judge_Syrova_Ya, personal communication, 1 September 2014). *"The simpler the idea and the brighter form it takes, the quicker it affects your mind. It is the main principle of neuro-linguistic programming"* (@FakeMORF on the power of condensed political communication via tweets and Internet memes, personal communication, 10 September 2014). *"(M)emes are incredibly contagious and importunate just as they are. When a new meme emerges, everyone covets to utilise it in his or her creative input, be it a jokey tweet or an advertising campaign"* (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015).

By unpacking popular metaphors and narratives, liberal meme makers engaged in the analysis of these symbols and their meaning for the Russian elites. For instance, 2014 saw the return of the allegory for Russia as a lone wild bear, a folklore animal who defends his land and offspring from any threat, is driven by instincts and ‘nature’ rather than human social obligations of compromise and reasonable judgement. The Russian president endorsed the metaphor of the bear in his public speeches, and pro-government meme makers utilised the image of the animal numerous times to celebrate Russia’s assumed unique rights and responsibilities. By promoting the bear narrative, the elites offered a rhetorical justification to the confrontational style of Russian international diplomacy and provided a ‘mindbomb’, an attractive symbol of power that the population can worship and endorse. This case of governmental exploitation of memes for mindbombing further proves that memes are not limited to either government loyalists or dissenters, but can be employed by anyone who seeks to make a point and suggest meaning through memorable metaphors.

The popularity of the bear allegory in pro-government memes in my sample (24 out of more than 600 pro- and anti-government memes collected) indicates that the Russian population accepted and advanced this national identity of a strong country under threat. Moreover, the narratives of the unique path, bear and Soviet myth correlate with another important theme of the Russian hegemonic politics of the 2010s - the rule of power and macho culture.

A high number of memes in my Crimean collection celebrated hard power and ‘macho culture’ in Russian politics. Content analysis of the collected texts has revealed a strong pattern of depicting the Russian leader and his allies as members of a gang or a group of lads (see Results chapter: 179-186). Machismo and mafia discourse often intertwine in the memes on Putin and promote the authoritarian politics, which prioritises forceful domination over rules and negotiation. The pervasiveness of memes that linked traditional masculinity with successful politics unbarred the public endorsement of hegemonic gender relations. Crimean memes of the 2010s illustrated the emerging trends of public opinion and expectations: the population’s longing for a strong leader that derives from the 1990s-2000s (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014; Bjelica, 2014); the developing consent to the new cult of personality, the tradition that descends from the Stalin era (Rees, 2004; Cassidy & Johnson, 2010), and both fear

and respect towards the ‘criminalised masculinity’ that stems from the turbulent 1990s (Goscilo, 2012).

Proliferation of memes that commend conventional gender roles celebrates neo-patriarchal social relations. The recent state persecution of the LGBT community and labelling them as “impure” citizens (Riabova & Riabov, 2013) correlated with the boost of conservative family rhetoric (Eichler, 2006; Stein, 2005). The rise of conventional gender roles and macho narrative was reflected in the Crimean memes, which both exhibited the popularity of these themes and exposed the public contestation over them. The Kremlin has mobilised the framework of strong and militarised masculinity for the enhancement of patriotism and nationalism in the Crimean crisis (Foxall, 2013; Riabova & Riabov, 2013). It also evoked the themes from the Cold War rhetoric, such as accusations of the Western countries in moral decay and decline of family values. The memes that endorse the authoritarian Putin as the bearer of force and moral superiority scapegoat the ‘decaying West’, LGBT community and opposition forces as the main enemies of the conservative Russian state. Besides, the memes that celebrate ‘macho’ culture reflect upon and probably form the collective thinking over the role of men and women in contemporary Russia. Sexist memes (5) in the Crimean sample portrayed women as objects, but not subjects of decision-making and politics, thus suggesting that meme sharers attribute little influence to women in the contemporary masculine Russia.

Pro-government memes with sexist connotations (see Results chapter: 191-206) exposed the prevailing societal stereotypes as much as they commented on political power struggles; the two are intrinsically united. They endorse the neo-patriarchal political order and conventional gender hierarchy. Nevertheless, memes from the liberal users also exposed a tendency to conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Besides, the majority of proliferate meme makers in my interview analysis were males, with only one female presented. Ekaterina Romanovskaya, the public relations specialist who lives in Moscow, took part in my research as the co-author of the most popular opposition parody Twitter @KermlinRussia. She was leading the account with the business relations specialist Anatoly Bobrovsky until 2015, when she announced that she was no longer contributing to @KermlinRussia. My sample of prominent meme makers and sharers in the interview analysis is statistically unrepresentative, yet I sought to include the most popular and influential

liberal meme sharers in accordance with my best knowledge and expertise. The lack of women points to the underrepresentation of women in Russian politics in general, in either the establishment or opposition. This finding further strengthens the underlying inclination towards conservative gender, social and political relations in contemporary Russia.

By answering the sub-question 4 “*What themes and ideas do social networks users promote by the means of memes?*”, my research has exposed the prevailing motifs and themes of political struggles at the level of discourse. Active politicised meme sharers in the Russian Twitter expressed their views on hegemonic rule, nationalism and patriotism and gender roles through allegories and popular myths. The choice of narratives (Russian imperial ambition, preference towards hard power over soft power, negligence of women, pro-government patriotism etc.) exemplifies the burning topics for the national and collective identities. These narratives are meaningful and important for the politically active social media users. In response to the research sub-question 5 “*Do supporters and opponents of the government employ political memes differently? What narratives do memes contribute to the pro-government and resistant communication flows on Russian Twitter?*”, my research has established that pro-government users tend to exploit memes to expand and follow up on the themes promoted by the hegemonic discourse, while resistant users have to confront both state indoctrination and the pro-elites propagation in social networks.

One of the pro-government meme makers from my study suggested exploiting Twitter to slightly deviate from classic indoctrination schemes and public rhetoric and defined his account as something “*less classical in the sense of contemporary political propaganda in the Internet*” (@vezhливо, personal communication, 5 June 2014): “*I would refer to our format as the “polite propaganda”. In brief, it is a positive representation based on the pride for Russian people, the Russian army and sincere feelings of the Crimean citizens who have returned home*” (@vezhливо, personal communication, 5 June 2014). This particular Twitter feed is quite popular and known for filtered images and inspiring slogans on the Russian army. The authors excel in unaggressive persuasion that involves promoting Russian military glory by the means of advertising techniques, positive framing and assembling memes that look like airy posters and light-hearted jokes. This rather unconventional pro-government meme channel differs from other pro-elites Twitter flows on Crimea. Other loyal users, such

as @Stalin_RF from my sample, advanced hatred towards the enemies of the state in their Twitter feed; they used memes to stimulate antagonism between the pro- and anti-Kremlin supporters. By doing so, they expanded the messages of the state propaganda, but raised the level of aggression and confrontation in the narrative. Pro-government users, therefore, have been enriching the discourse on Crimea on Twitter with varying forms of endorsement of the Kremlin, from rude and vulgar blasphemy against the resistance to the highbrow redecoration of the pro-Crimean propaganda. The pro-government utilisation of memes shows how users can adapt the traditional media indoctrination to the digital platforms. They do not differ dramatically from the anti-government users in the ways they exploit memes: all meme sharers appropriate varying techniques and very diverse styles of humour; interpret messages from the hegemonic discourse to their own liking and understanding; emotionally campaign for their beliefs and harshly rebuke the adversaries.

The significant difference between pro-government and anti-government meme sharing in my study was their reliance on the dominant media agenda and the subsequent power to produce memes “actively” or “reactively”. Liberal users mostly responded to the agenda suggested by the hegemonic discourse, while pro-Kremlin users could piggyback on the already popular notions and freely offer personalised alterations in the digital realm. Russian public space of 2014-15 had been filled with pro-government symbols and ideas; therefore, pro-government Twitter did not need to explain themes and allegories from the dominant discourse; but original concepts from the liberal publics needed to be introduced and explained first (for instance, how can you call a mobilisation on a corrupt official if you do not explain his case first? How do you ask for promoting a petition on freedom of assembly if you need to enlighten people on the current threats to it?). Resistant users were compelled to create the oppositional agenda from scratch, as they suffered from the absence of popular liberal independent media and alternative voices in the public space.

Currently, resistant meme makers exploit their social media presence to inform, educate and mobilise like-minded individuals. They rarely suggest new themes to discuss with the followers, but mostly tweet in response to the instances of media propaganda, and particular quotes or actions of the elites. For example, users distribute the memes that deconstruct manipulation of mass media and invite critical assessment of broadcast and print news. By doing so, meme sharers may attract more visibility to

their discussions. Although previous research demonstrates that the majority of people are likely to come to the Internet with predisposed views, these indoctrinated users can still notice alternative opinions from the corner of their eye. Memes, as a user-friendly and easy-consumable vehicle of information and political education, may have more chances to appeal to these publics than, for instance, a long column or a lengthy blogpost. However, this probability and the potential of memes to change viewpoints and raise the debate requires more research.

7.4 Carnavalesque polyphony in the circulation of memes

Mememes are more likely to connect ideas than people. According to the majority of meme makers in my research, they do not see how memes can coordinate people for mobilisation or maintain a meaningful discussion. Like-minded individuals may identify each other's ideological position by the memes they share. Yet the exchange or sharing of memes does not link people, as memes are anonymous and the connection with the previous sharer gets lost as soon as the user distributes a meme without credit.

In this instance, memes correspond with Bakhtin's (1984) concept of 'polyphony' of voices that marks any carnival. Political resistance by the means of Internet memes may seem an array of disconnected voices; however, all of them together promote the diversity of ideas and opinions. When prominent meme makers share memes on social networks, they invite and empower other, less active users, to come and join the entertaining but critical deliberation of politics; they make the liberal discourse visible (see Meikle, 2014) and sharable (see Esteves & Meikle, 2015). Many meme makers from the Crimean study declared that watching other people satirically express themselves in the digital realm and openly criticise hegemonic politics was liberating and encouraging: they acknowledged that they were not alone in their discontent with the elites (S. Suleimanov, personal communication, 1 May 2015). Russian political resistance via artful memes of the Crimean case further proves that 'carnavalesque' dissent does not need to pursue specified political goals, such as organisation of a rally, promotion of a petition or any offline campaigning. It facilitates

the articulation of prominent ideas, makes ordinary voices heard, and permits laughter at the elites.

Power holders seem to tolerate these last sanctuaries of alternative political communication in order to gather information on the opposition publics and allow them to let off steam (Shirky, 2011). Unable and probably unwilling to completely silence the protest discourse, Russian elites resemble the medieval authorities that granted to the public those rigidly bounded places for informal mockery, open criticism and billingsgate. Russian e-carnival is limited by the margins of virtual space yet it nonetheless facilitates the coming together of diverse individuals in a shared environment, supporting Boje's (2001) concept of e-carnival as the digital reincarnation of the carnivalesque deliberation of alternative ideas. On the positive side for resistance, this managed opposition also keeps the protest 'flame' burning on low heat, as the interviewees remarked (@Twitted_knitter, personal communication, 26 August 2014; @FakeMORF, personal communication, 10 September 2014), until the emergence of political opportunities.

The self-awareness of being 'lonely warriors' rather than a consistent community of protesters is another particular trait common for many alternative meme makers of the Russian Twitter. Fearing harassment from the state, the majority of liberal microbloggers in the research refused to identify themselves as political activists. They preferred to classify as "independent journalists", "watchdogs" and "civil activists"; they further refrained from the association with any established ideological position or party, vaguely defining their views as "liberal" or "opposing any abuse of power". These findings open room for more research on the identity of politicised Internet users in contemporary Russia. Lack of the established trustworthy opposition parties and leaders and state oppression of political non-conformism force users to be engaged in what seems like individual battles against injustice. Popular resistant meme sharers do not form a coherent community, though acknowledge and mostly know each other. They participate in meme making and sharing as a relatively mild and benign form of activism, but refuse to expand their activity to any larger and evidently "political" activity.

7.5 Limitations of this research

I have incorporated non-Western scholars in my studies (e.g. Bakhtin's (1984) conceptualisation of carnival, studies on the Russian national identity and popular myths (Vishlenkova, 2011 and others)) yet the majority of academic sources on politics, media and activism in my literature review originate in the Western theoretical background, which may limit their applicability to the interpretation of Russian events. Further research on the Russian politicised microblogging could benefit from the application of a broader range of non-Western theories.

This is a mixed method study that explored one particular case limited in time and space. It yields valuable findings on the phenomenon of the exchange of memes in a heated period of time, the peak of the Crimean crisis in February-March 2014. The fact that memes were stockpiled in real time makes this research exclusive. The access to the interviewees was also complicated, thus the collection of these interviews is another significant achievement that should not be undervalued. In the present political environment of contemporary Russia, people are weary about disclosing their political views and personal details with strangers, be they academics or journalists, as users are wary of the state surveillance and persecution. Therefore, the interviews conducted for this study have become a precious document of alternative political activism in Russia in 2014. From my perspective, the same research conducted in 2015 would not succeed in accessing as many people – liberal users now tend to refrain from any contact, not to mention in-depth interviews with scholars based in the West.

Content and textual analysis are limited due to the inevitable personal bias in coding and interpretation. Although every effort was made in assuring triangulation and juxtaposition of findings from quantitative and qualitative methods, the potential subjectivity of interpretation should still be taken into account. Besides, network analysis was conducted as a pilot small-scale study that could be useful to indicate areas for the future research. As a suggestion, other scholars working on the Russian memes could further analyse the networks of distribution of memes; for instance, juxtapose dynamic relationships (acts of sharing, retweeting or commenting) with the static ones (whether accounts are steadily linked by “following” each other). This could help to illuminate whether memes are more expedient in travelling through

established networks or proliferate via various channels. The patterns of meme distribution between the accounts of opposing political views is another particularly interesting topic worth exploring.

7.6 Concluding remarks and suggestions for further research

This research has analysed the role of Internet memes in the contemporary Russian alternative discourse and unveiled their potential for the deliberation of politics. It has successfully identified memes as the common language and folklore of the Internet crowds that enables people to express themselves on all possible topics. The politically active Russian users often utilise memes as discursive weapons and mindbombs that they share in social networks to drag attention to news and opinions; they benefit from the reputation of memes as Internet darlings and familiar slang of digitally savvy users. This approach to exploiting memes as political mindbombs contributes new dimension to the research on social media activism. It reveals that the circulation of the Internet memes can promote alternative political discussions, shed new light on hegemonic ideas and representations, and therefore increase the visibility and connectivity of the political dissent among digital crowds.

This study builds upon the previous findings from the research on global movements, such as Occupy and the Arab Spring, the anti-censorship digital activism in China and various examples of social and political mobilisations with a visible digital dimension. Yet it adds a new understanding to the role of digital-only activism in the oppressed media ecology. Russian resistant publics are heavily constrained in the offline expression of their discontent, as the state has significantly curbed the freedom of speech and assembly by the mid-2010s. Therefore, the virtual manifestations of the oppositional publics and their criticism of the government on the Internet fill the voids that were left in the public space. Interactive digital communication via the means of memes transforms the vernacular into political, yet keeps the boundaries in between the two blurred to avoid the state surveillance. This phenomenon of the ambiguous yet visible online deliberation of politics suggests a novel strategy for the political activism in the authoritarian political environments.

The liberal publics of the Russian Twitter fill many recognisable meme formats with political points and therefore deliver information and suggest nonconventional interpretation of events in an accessible and entertaining format. This characteristic of the Internet memes makes them instrumental for digital activism, and my research has explained how exactly memes resist or distort the hegemony of media propaganda. Internet memes have been influential in raising political awareness of the Russian citizens in 2011-2012. Later on, due to the exacerbating political conditions, memes have turned into the analogue of short-lived tactical media that often assist in raising awareness of the issues that are hidden or misrepresented in traditional media. My research substantiates the rising role of memes as the popular political tactical media of the 2010s.

Russian liberal meme makers and sharers express their scepticism over the potential of liberal mobilisation in Russia and refrain from identifying with any ideological standpoint or political party. Yet they consistently engage in meme making and sharing in order to maintain the circulation of alternative ideas. They protect the sanity of their minds against indoctrination. These users indulge in creative self-expression via memes and acknowledge the pleasures of artistic challenge and rewards among their motivations. However, they also identify themselves as responsible citizens who raise their voice against corruption, lies of the elites and their abuse of power. By doing so, resistant microbloggers enter the realm of political activism without acknowledging it (or, alternatively, consciously refusing to acknowledge it due to the fear of state prosecution). Active meme sharers utilise these texts to preserve the liberal discussion until any political opportunity for mobilisation arises. From this perspective, my research adds more substance to the research on the importance of self-expression in the present day activism. It highlights that, when digital activism offers rewards for creativity, the users feel more encouraged to contribute to the deliberation of politics in the ICTs.

Memes are not reserved to the alternative communication, and this research timely pointed to the establishment of the new direction in the studies on memes, which focuses on the memes generated on behalf of and for the elites. This side of meme sharing had not received much attention previously. Nonetheless, the swiftness of the Russian government in appropriating memes in the mid-2010s exhibited new practice in preserving the media hegemony and expanding control over digital

communication. Pro-Kremlin users have deployed memes to the cyberspace to reinforce propaganda and intervene in resistant communication. The utilisation of memes in the Crimean crisis has exposed the role of memes as contestation sites of national and collective identities. Pro- and anti-government users utilised memes to negotiate gender roles, responsibility of the elites and the balance of hard and soft power in politics.

The study on Crimean memes divulged the main points of disputes between opposition and loyal crowds. It put forward the hidden agenda of misrepresentation of women in politics and decision-making; public approval of a neo-patriarchal regime and traditional family roles; inclination towards the restoration of the Soviet myth and the new cult of personality, among others. The potential of memes in the negotiation of identities is a relatively new strand of meme research and adds insights on the role of identity negotiation in the alternative political discourse online. This thesis therefore contributes to the studies on the role of the ICTs in shaping and interpreting national and collective identities; and the ways these discourses can be utilised in political communication and activism.

The ease of producing and sharing of memes makes them accessible for a broad range of users. On the one hand, the entertaining nature and references to popular culture enhance the potential of Internet memes to attract diverse masses with unequal levels of education, political awareness and digital literacy. On the other hand, resistant microbloggers of Russian Twitter still consider memes as the conduits of communication of a relatively small group of people. Digitally savvy liberal users refer to them as “in-jokes”, which help them to identify like-minded individuals in digital networks. Furthermore, the often-absurd character of humour in a meme may embarrass and confuse digital users: unsure how to make sense of a meme, they can share it unchanged, without any comment or elaboration. This characteristic of a meme opens a question of whether memes are open and accessible to all or require any preliminary knowledge or skills to decipher them. This study suggests that the style of humour and amount of complex references in a meme influence their comprehension among digital users: it is not the format of a meme, but the content and sophistication of allusions that one puts in it that affect the perception.

Due to the limited expressiveness and ambiguous nature, memes are unable to maintain a meaningful debate. They permit users with varying political views to make a politicised commentary or promote their ideological standpoints. Yet, memes are condensed jokes and therefore cannot explain complex topics. Russian pro-government users exploit memes to amplify the points and symbols suggested by the state propaganda; resistant users combat these symbols by deconstructing them and juxtaposing them with facts and logic. Moreover, opposition microbloggers often pick ideas and allegories from hegemonic discourse to reinterpret them. By doing so, they invite the audience to consider alternative perspectives and see the broader context of events. Liberal users are limited in expressing themselves via memes: there are almost no liberal media left that can help the resistant Russian citizens to promote nonconventional views. In these circumstances, dissent meme sharers often employ memes as beacons that lead to opposition blogs and deeper discussions in different networking platforms.

The anonymous nature of memes protects liberal meme sharers from state surveillance and prosecution. However, it also limits the connective potential of memes: people are unlikely to form a community on the basis of meme sharing. They can nonetheless link ideas and context through the vehicle of memes. Digital crowds on different sides of the political spectrum perceive Internet memes as the useful and attractive conduit to express themselves and their political views. They can still retain independence from any community, party or commitment to political activism.

As the indication for further research, I would suggest paying more attention to the ways users adapt the offline media discourse to the Internet space; how they reinterpret symbols, ideas and narratives from dominant media through the memes in the virtual space. Moreover, the analysis of the preferences towards local or global formats of memes could also be expedient: further studies could enlighten whether Russian meme sharers favour Western expressive styles, such as Demotivator, over more local ones, such as Anecdote or Painting. Additionally, the analysis of the transformation of a meme on its route in between accounts and platforms should shed more light on the patterns of adjustment and redistribution. In order to conduct these studies, a researcher would have to follow the development of memes in real time and collect as many alterations of the same meme as possible, then study the accounts that shared them, their interrelation and networks of sharing. Furthermore, other studies on

Internet memes could reveal whether users exploit memes as triggers of the debates or final points in the argument. Memes are a novel phenomenon of the political communication and activism of the digital age. They have a vast potential to induce political change and balance the hegemonic media agenda. Therefore, further studies are strongly invited to shed more light on the potential of this communication conduit for the deliberation of politics in democratic and authoritarian political regimes, Western and non-Western media environments.

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Results Chapter – Interviews with meme sharers

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Appendix

1. Glossary.
2. Content analysis in numbers and details. Main themes, expressive methods and the most active meme sharers in the collected sample.
3. Classification of expressive methods. Discussion of the global and local formats of memes that were identified in the collected sample.
4. Analysis of the popularity of various expressive methods.
5. Detailed profile information of the prominent Twitter political meme sharers.
6. Detailed explanation of meme travel analysis (three case studies).

1. Glossary

Operational definitions reflect the purpose of this research and correspond to the mutually accepted terms in the contemporary academic Internet studies.

The Internet memes refer to the viral amusing texts that users share (or adjust and share) in social networks. They may include a text or an image with text; they contain a humorous comment and often mock or prank individuals, and provide references to the context or popular culture. *The Internet memes* and *memes* are in the majority of cases interchangeable terms throughout this dissertation, except for the literature review chapter.

Meme makers are the Internet users who create memes and spread them in the virtual sphere. Due to the anonymous nature of memes, it is normally implausible to identify who is the author and who is simply the sharer. This dissertation acknowledges the complicated issue of authorship in meme making, and therefore establishes *meme sharer* as a more satisfactory and universal definition. Yet, in the interview analysis, I refer to the speakers as “meme makers” and “meme sharers” as compatible variations, as these respondents were chosen specifically for their known involvement in the production of memes. However, in the majority of other mentions, “meme sharers” functions as the general term for people who share memes, regardless of whether they produce or merely circulate them.

Twitter, *Twittersphere* and *microblogging* are transposable notions that refer to Twitter as the popular microblogging social network. It is public and allows members to join freely and express themselves via 140-sign posts named *tweets*. Users can follow and retweet (post other people’s posts on personal pages) each other, praise each other’s tweets by adding tweets to “favourites”. The profile page of each account offers open statistics on the number of followed accounts and amount of followers, it features the user’s profile picture, personal statement, biography or links to other Web resources (when included) and sometimes the wallpaper on top of the page.

2. Content analysis in numbers and details

Tools used: NodeXL Network Analysis of the top meme sharers

Dynamic Filters: Relationship date (UTC) 17/03/2014 00:00 – 21/07/2015 00:00.

Prominent themes of the Crimean memes

Ambivalent – 84; anti-Obama – 34; anti-propaganda – 87; anti-corruption – 17; anti-war – 11; anti-EU – 34; anti-Ukraine – 45; anti-US – 124; anti-Putin – 109; anti-Russia – 120; bear – 24; empire - 16; family – 19; information war – 42; Medvedev – 12; Nazism – 26; pro-Putin – 84; pro-Russia – 257; patriotism – 23; resistance – 77; Stalin – 5.

Memes divided according to the expressive methods

The amount of memes belonging to each category in the collected data: Demotivator - 125, Image Macro - 113, Photoshopped Image - 39, Comic - 44, Expressive Photo - 70, Pun - 13, Image and Quote - 9, Map - 16, Professional Cartoon - 90, Juxtaposition - 65, Poster - 52, Painting - 4 and Anecdote - 21.

List of the top meme sharers in the collected data

First number indicates the number of memes by the user; “anti” or “pro” reflects the ideological stance towards the activity of the Russian government; then follows the Twitter username.

31 anti Dbnmjr

29 pro Pravdiva_pravda

17 pro Anti_maydan

13 anti RuNetMemes

11 pro a_shilets

10 anti Fake_MIDRF

9 anti TukvaSociopat

8 anti EuromaidanPR
7 anti Sprotiv
6 anti Tolokno
6 pro Russian_market
5 anti NashaCanada
5 anti Srakamotyka
4 anti Tvrain
4 pro RozhkoRussia
4 pro Rpgrpgs
4 pro USEmbHell
4 pro VeteranOMON
4 pro Vezhlivo
3 anti Assreactor
3 anti DarthPutinKGB
3 anti IlyaYashin
3 anti KermlinRussia
3 anti MATPOCKuH
3 anti Pavel_XII
3 pro HrunMorgov
3 pro IvanTurenkov
3 pro Korobkov
3 pro Myrevolutionrus
3 pro SmartNewsRu
3 pro SurkovRussia
3 pro vienya
2 anti alexzzzzz
2 anti CatDemokrat
2 anti CatMoriz
2 anti DrK_25
2 anti elenamikhailova
2 anti evdok9
2 anti FakeMORF
2 anti Ianbremmer
2 anti maidan_go

2 anti Obama_Tiran
2 anti olakhota
2 anti oleg_Kozyrev
2 anti pavelsheremet
2 anti Ru_slon
2 anti Sandy_mustache
2 anti Sovetnic74
2 anti TV81090721
2 anti vaddieg
2 anti voproskin
2 pro autovolk
2 pro bumshuk
2 pro chestno2014
2 pro hankalenok
2 pro Ionovltl
2 pro Lady_Katz
2 pro Pavlov_msk
2 pro politrash
2 pro Rogozin
2 pro rzhev
2 pro tvjihad
2 pro VitasMark

Separate lists of pro-government and anti-government meme sharers:

Pro-government: Pravdiva_pravda; anti_maydan; a_shilets; Russian_market; RozhkoRussia; rpgprgs; USEmbHell; VeteranOMON; vezhливо; HrunMorgov; IvanTurenkov; korobkov; myrevolutionrus; SmartNewsRu; SurkovRussia; vienya; autovolk; bumshuk; chestno2014; hankalenok; Ionovltl; Lady_Katz; Pavlov_msk; politrash; Rogozin; rzhev; tvjihad; VitasMark.

Anti-government: Dbnmjr; RuNetMemes; Fake_MIDRF; TukvaSociopat; EuromaidanPR; Sprotiv; Tolokno; NashaCanada; Srakamotyka; Tvrain; Assreactor; DARTHPutinKGB; IlyaYashin; KermlinRussia; MATPOCKuH; Pavel_XII; Alexzzzz; CatDemokrat; CatMoriz; DrK_25; ElenaMikhailova; Evdok9;

FakeMORF; Ianbremmer; Maidan_go; Obama_Tiran; Olakhota; Oleg_Kozyrev; Pavelsheremet; Ru_slon; Sandy_mustache; Sovetnic74; TV81090721; Vaddieg; Voproskin.

3. Classification of expressive methods

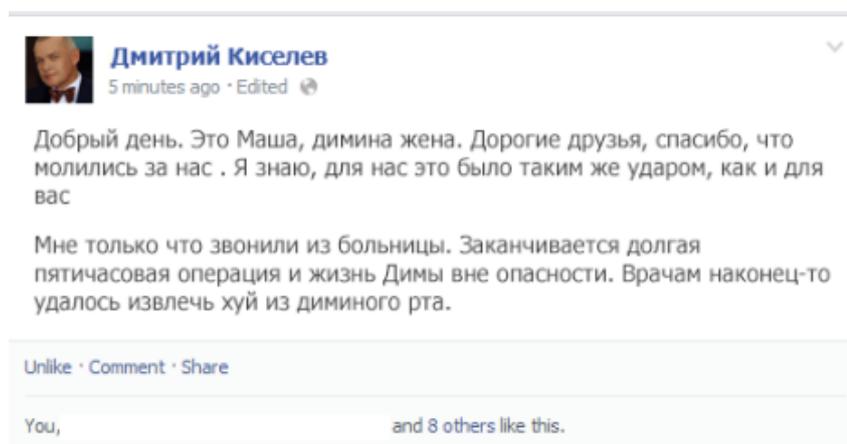
The literature review (pp. 54-60) explains in detail the genesis and metamorphosis of the visual language of the Internet memes, yet their formats require additional explanation. Content analysis performed on 624 mems from the Crimean collection enabled detection of the prevailing outlines, and suggested the classification of these forms. Russian users tend to shape memes in the array of recognisable visual templates borrowed from the global discourse, but at the same time, they utilise a number of local outlines. Regional peculiarities of context, language and culture have impact on the shape of memetic expression, and this research has discovered and analysed the meme formats that specifically appeal to the Russian meme sharers. This section defines the prevailing global and local layouts of the memes in the collected data from the Russian politicised Twitter.

The majority of the collected memes follow international formats, such as Demotivator, Image Macro, Photoshopped Image, Comic etc. The rest of the recurring outlines have not received much analysis in the available scholarship on the Internet memes, so I define them either as specifically Russian or merely unconventional meme templates. As I cannot guarantee that, for instance, “anecdote” format of a meme does not proliferate in any other regional Twittersphere, I can assess it as an “auxiliary” or “other” type of format. These unconventional templates are presented under the names “Anecdote”, “Expressive Photo”, “Image and Quote”, “Map”, “Juxtaposition”, “Painting” “Poster”, “Professional Cartoon” and “Pun”.

Anecdote. The genre close to a pun, anecdote is often a short story with a punchline; a laconic humorous essay or a commentary. It normally includes a statement and a following twisted statement that overthrows the logic of the first one or develops the idea in a surprising manner. Anecdote is the iconic genre of Russian sardonic humour, it thrived through the Soviet era when censorship limited expression of the alternative views, and people harnessed concealed forms of criticism. “(T)he imaginary story with a barb that is never written down, that circulates, at least at the larger cities, with the speed of wildfire until it is replaced by a new one, inspired by some new development”

(Chamberlin, 1957: 27). For instance, this exemplary anecdote from the USSR comments on the circumscribed media environment. There were two main newspapers “Pravda” (translates as “Truth”) and “Izvestiya” (translates as “News”), but the people joked: “There is no news in “Truth” and no truth in “News” (Chamberlin, 1957: 27). Memes shaped as anecdotes mostly emanate in the text-only format, but can rarely incorporate an image. One of the recent examples from the collected data (Figure 7) is a rude satirical take on the popular state television host Dmitry Kiselyov who is known for spreading the most scandalous bits of propaganda, which he frames as analytical observations (Suleimanov, 2014). The anonymous author of the anecdote presented it as a prank tweet published from Kiselyov’s account: “Good day. This is Masha, Dima’s wife. Dear friends, thank you for praying for us. I know you were hit by this news as hard as we were. I have just received a call from the hospital. The lengthy five-hour long operation is close to an end and Dima’s life is now safe. The doctors finally managed to withdraw a cock from his mouth”.

Figure 128. Example of the Anecdote meme



Expressive Photo is a photo that does not require words for explanation, because the visuals alone make an apprehensible statement. An expressive photo becomes a meme when linked to the specific context; it may be accompanied by a tweet or an explanatory commentary, but generally goes viral on its own. The image of the twin bathroom facilities at the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games (Figure 8) is an illustration of this format. Shortly before the start of the Games, the BBC journalist Steve Rosenberg discovered this toilet at the Olympic Biathlon Centre and posted a photo on Twitter, sparking waves of lampooning and reproach (Rosenberg, 2014). Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny picked on this case to propagate his investigation on corruption

of the Olympic construction funds, while other users ridiculed the builders' approach to convenience, design and privacy (Ibid.). The official representatives of the Russian Olympic committee responded that the journalist took the picture in the middle of construction works and the cabin was not finished yet.

Figure 128. Example of the Expressive Photo meme

Кто-то еще помнит, как в феврале это
казалось главной проблемой
международного имиджа России?
Reply Retweet Favourite More

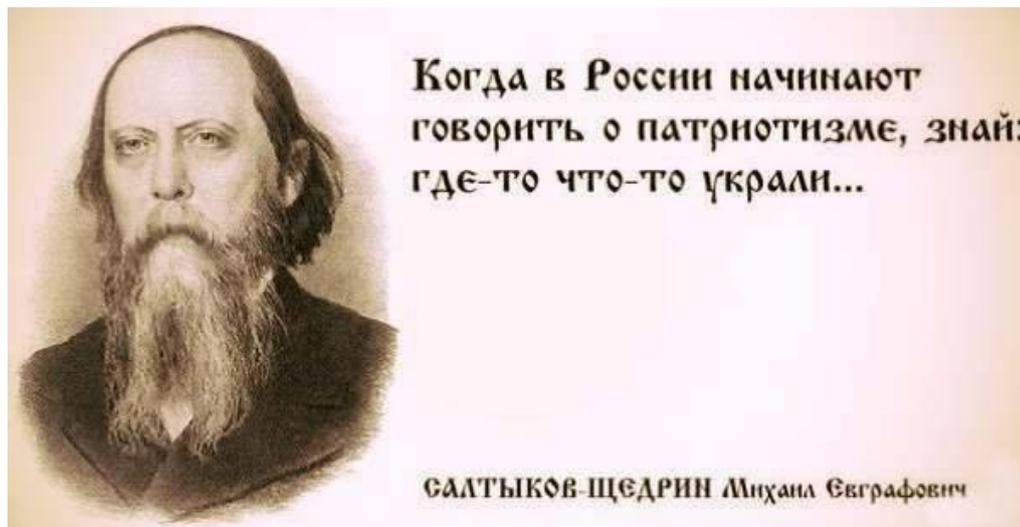


The memes on twin Olympic toilets survived throughout the Olympics and reached the Crimean narrative. The tweet here says, “Does anybody remember that in February this was the main problem of Russia’s international reputation?” implying that the involvement in the armed conflict in Ukraine counterbalanced Russia’s attempt at making a good impression at the Olympics. This expressive photo has become explicit without a comment; it serves as a symbol of clumsy Russian logic and poor public relations skills of its officials.

Image and Quote. A subversion of Image Macro, this type of meme comprises an image of a famous person and the quote allegedly coming from his or her wisdom. It may be a citation by the historical figure or any contemporary speaker; the authenticity and authorship of the text are questionable and often cast suspicion. The following meme (Figure 9) says: “When they start talking about patriotism in Russia, you can be

sure that someone has stolen something”, Mikhail Yevgrafovich Saltykov-Schedrin. Saltykov-Schedrin is the classic 19th century novelist known for his condemnation of Russian vices. Pro-government users often accuse liberals of the lack of patriotism and label them as traitors for questioning the legacy of the state’s actions. This quote (allegedly) coming from a Russian classic slams the exploitation of patriotic rhetoric against the critics of the government.

Figure 129. Example of the Image and Quote meme



Meme makers turn to the Image and Quote genre to add weight to the expression of their own opinions. Moreover, the authority of the iconic personalities assists in putting current events in the historical perspective; either emphasising the link between current affairs and the events of the past, or reminding the audience of a certain tradition of Russian politics and mentality.

Juxtaposition. Meme makers place two images (with text or without) next to each other to reveal the gap between two representations. Netizens often use this genre to oppose Russia and the West, or expose the contrast between the media representation of reality and reality as they know it. For instance, this meme (Figure 10) praises Vladimir Putin’s macho posture over a cosy depiction of Barack Obama. The meme maker juxtaposes not only presidents, but a leopard and a puppy in their hands as the contrasting symbols of either wild untamed power or soft and domesticated animal. On the metaphoric level, this juxtaposition comments on the discussion on hard and soft power, force and weakness in the Russia-US politics.

Figure 130. Example of the Juxtaposition meme



Map. Memes of this genre bloomed during the Crimean crisis, as the conflict was closely related to territorial wrangles and geography. The texts in this category normally comprise a distorted map, or a map with an added tagline. The humorous effect comes from the falsification of real geographic names or alteration of borders. For example, this meme (figure 11) was tweeted with a commentary “The new name of Crimea and its cities”.

Figure 131. Example of the Map meme



It consists of a map with the grotesquely garbled town designations. Roughly translated from Russian, they say “The FuckingPutYourCameraAway Republic” and “ShowMeYourDocumentsBitch” (references to the brutality of local police); “HeyCarriageWakeUp” (perhaps a reference to the rude demeanour of the sleeping-car attendants, a traditional complaint in Russia and Ukraine); “CloggingUpTheCountry” (reference to the locals’ negative attitude towards migrants); “BloodySanatorium” (reference to the old medical facilities that are unlikely to provide any health benefits); “IfYouDontLikeItGetTheFuckOutOfHere” (reference to the government’s intolerance to any criticism); “ThePortOfWarDogs” (perhaps a reference to the old military men supporting wars); “GoToKiev” (reference to the rude oppression of political opponents who are invited to flee to the capital); “TheBeachesWithFences” (reference to the oddly organised uncomfortable beaches); “ThisIsOurFuckingCity” (reference to the working class domination over the city and its rude vocabulary); and “OverpricedShishKebabs” (reference to the overpriced tourism attractions in the area).

By formatting this meme as a map, the meme maker presented Crimea in critical light and exposed its burning issues. The meme can appeal either to a general audience or to the local Crimeans. In the first case, it eradicates the Russian romantic mythology of Crimea being a “Russian Riviera” (Poloskin, 2014) and enlightens Russians and Ukrainians on the gruesome inner problems of Crimean life. In the other case, it invites the locals to reflect on the criticism, agree or disagree with the given tags and express their opinion.

Painting. A small selection of memes relies on classical painting as the source of visual inspiration. Users either present recognisable works of art in a new context or supplement them with a tagline or a Demotivator frame. For example, this meme (Figure 12) encompasses a print with the literary character Gulliver from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726, amended 1735) and says: “Jonathan Swift’s prophecy has turned out to be true: the glorious Putin is leading away the fleet of the Ukrainian dwarfs!” The format of a painting helps meme makers to draw an allegory from the art heritage and utilise it in the interpretation of current affairs.

Figure 132. Example of the Painting meme



Poster. Memes with this formatting borrow characters and composition of a typical poster or advertisement from popular culture. They draw parallels between real personas and fictional characters in order to highlight certain aspects of the personalities that they criticise. For instance, this meme (Figure 13) resembles a poster from the promo campaign of *The Dictator* (2012) movie and presents Vladimir Putin as the main character. He holds a funeral bouquet, while the tagline says, “We have become almost extinct...” and the signature “Dictator”.

Figure 133. Example of the Poster meme



Professional Cartoon. Another piece of the Soviet cultural heritage. Political cartoons were widely used as one of the few permitted outlets of social criticism in the USSR (see more in the Literature Review chapter, pp. 48-49). State-approved cartoon magazines published them to expose bureaucracy, cultural foibles and Western enemies yet never touched the ruling party and political issues. Contemporary Russian newspapers and digital media still hire cartoonists to comment on the burning issues; their works often go viral on the Internet and get altered by average users, thus turning into memes. A professional cartoon is a masterful drawing that adds a comment to the events or personalities, with or without written text. A cartoon becomes a meme when a social network user supplements it with a tweet or alters either the text or image. During the Crimean crisis, many social networks users shared professional cartoons

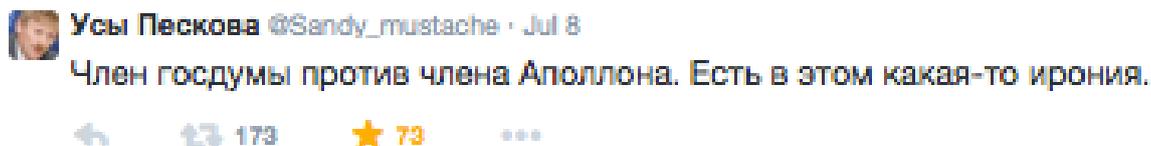
coming from both Russian and Western cartoonists, in Russian or in English. For example, this cartoon (Figure 14) portrays Putin as the barbarian and functions as a remark on the Russia's breach of diplomacy rules in the obtainment of Crimea.

Figure 134. Example of the Professional Cartoon meme. The reporter: "Mr Putin, what have you to tell to the world's public?" Putin: "Uga-uga, aga-aga!"



Pun is a textual joke based on the double meaning of words. In the memes that operate on puns, it is normally the written text alone that makes a joke, and they rarely employ images. Wordplay is very popular in Russia both in professional media and in social networks. A recent example (Figure 15) refers to the absurdity of the Russian parliament's initiatives. In 2014, the parliament's member started an infamous crusade against depicting genitalia at banknotes; the debate arose around the 100-rouble note that featured the statue of naked Apollo riding a four-horse chariot atop the Bolshoi Theatre (Dolgov, 2014). The mocking meme on this issue says, "The member of the Duma against the member of Apollo. There is a certain irony in it".

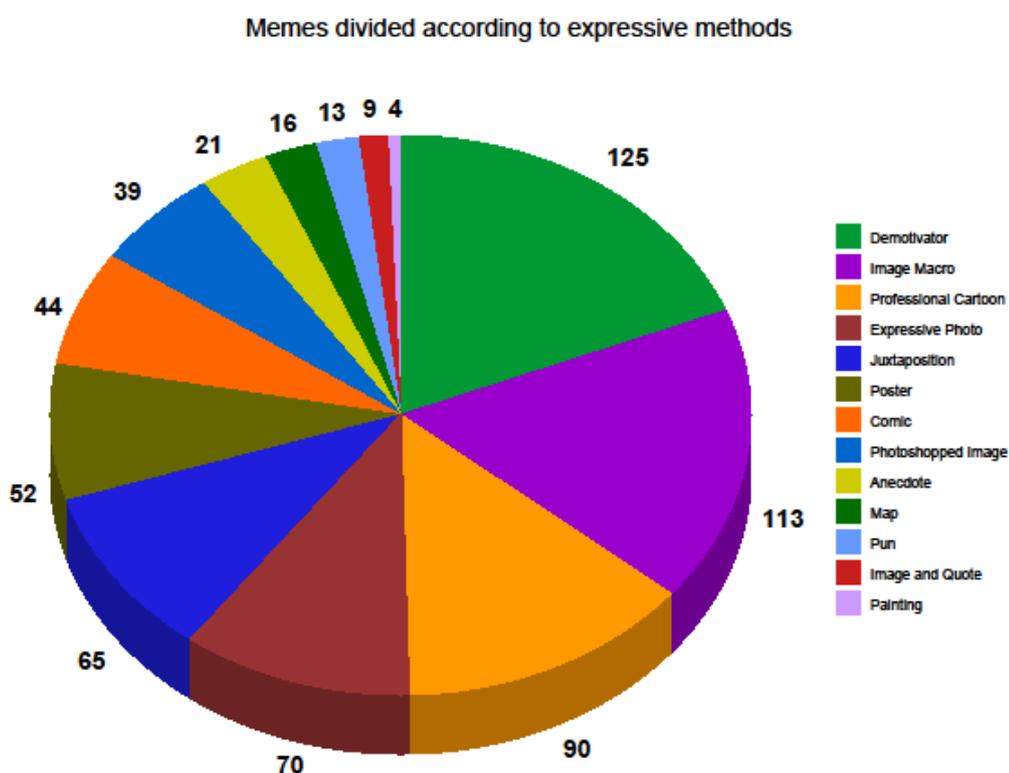
Figure 135. Example of the Pun meme



4. Analysis of the popularity of various expressive methods

Quantitative analysis of the collected data reveals that the majority of the Crimean memes fit into two widely present global formats: Demotivator and Image Macro (see Literature Review, Memetics chapter, for the detailed discussion on prevalent memes' formats, and the chart below for numbers).

Figure 135. Memes divided according to the expressive methods



Such artefacts of the Soviet cultural legacy as Professional Cartoon and Anecdote are also popular meme styles in contemporary Russia. Cartoons and anecdotes are multi-layered, normally responding to the most recent events rather than

broad timeless concepts (but may include these as well); these memes require knowledge of the immediate agenda to decipher them.

Such formats as Expressive Photo, Comic or Pun are slightly less popular in the Russian flow of political memes. These rely more on facetious, lightweight gags that often communicate their makers' observations and momentary remarks (instead of the analysis or convoluted judgements).

Photoshopped Image, Poster and Painting are the most time-consuming types of memetic expression, as they require the remix of images; unlike Demotivator or Image Macro, one has to doctor the photo and not just insert a text or image in the available black frame. These types of memetic expression vary from superficial to compound and convey ideas ranging from shallow observation to elaborate criticism.

In summary, the juxtaposition and comparison of numbers of memes in the collected categories divulged two approaches to the politicised meme-making in Russia: I propose defining them as analytical (e.g. Professional Cartoon, Anecdote) and observational (e.g. Expressive Photo, Comic, and Pun). This is not a rigid separation as the genres are extremely versatile and fluctuating. Yet this assumption may be useful for future research: scrutiny of the correlation between the level of analytical intricacy and the expressive method used may shed light on the discursive potential of memes, their ability to stimulate or stifle discussion.

5. Detailed profile information of the prominent Twitter political meme sharers

Pro-government user profiles

Figure 136. @Pravdiva_pravda's Twitter profile page

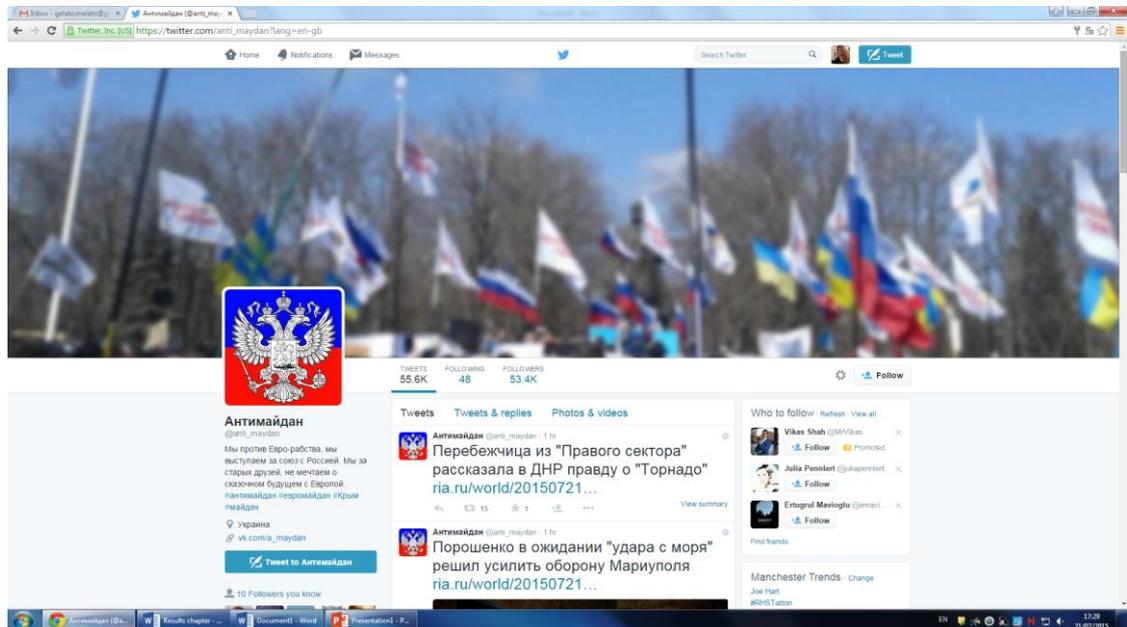


@Pravdiva_pravda follows 20 accounts (mostly news outlets) and has 31,400 followers. The account name translates from Russian as the “Truthful truth”. @Pravdiva_pravda employs a plethora of Russian national symbols in the account framing: the profile picture is a bear with the Russian flag and the Georgian ribbon (the symbol of the remembrance of the Great Patriotic War/Second World War and, recently, nationalist moods in the society). The background picture on top of the account’s page depicts a gun in front of the St Basil’s Cathedral situated on the Red Square next to the Kremlin walls. The account’s description is concise: it says in Russian capitals “Say the truth”; the user joined Twitter in May 2012.

The account publishes a high volume of politicised texts per day, they criticise Russian liberal politicians and activists, Ukrainian and Western political leaders; sharing plenty of pro-Russia memes daily. There are high assumptions that this webpage may belong to the Troll Factory due to the striking amount and frequency of posts and memes he or she shares on a daily basis. Moreover, the attempt to organise an interview with this user failed: he or she initially agreed to take part in my research,

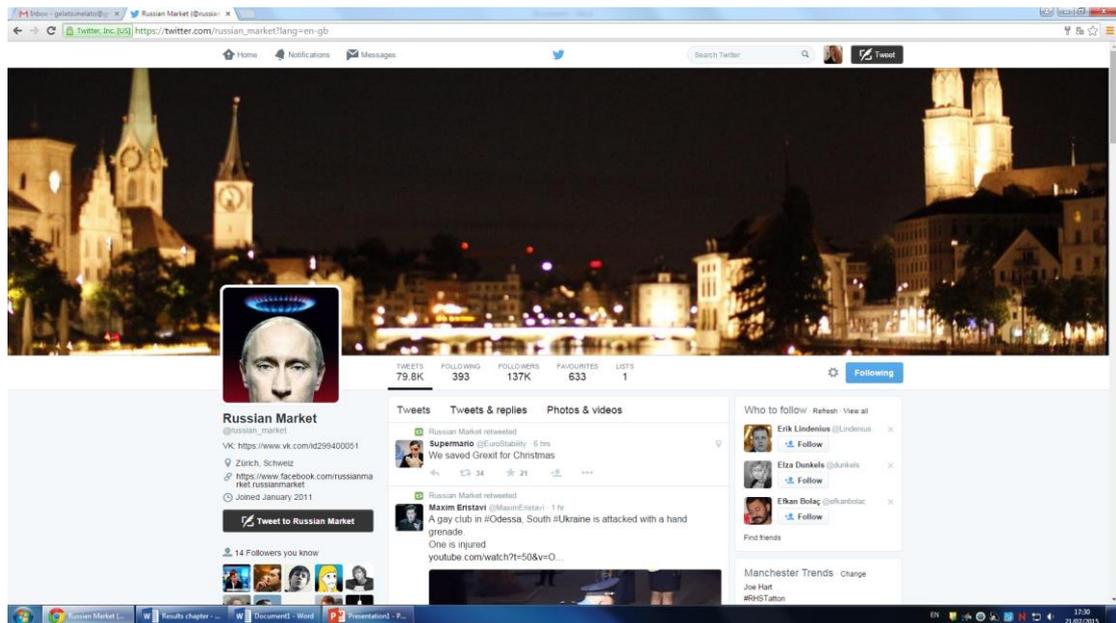
but then sent me a dozen questions inquiring about *my* background, funding for my studies, my ideological views and sources of income.

Figure 137. @anti_maydan's Twitter profile page



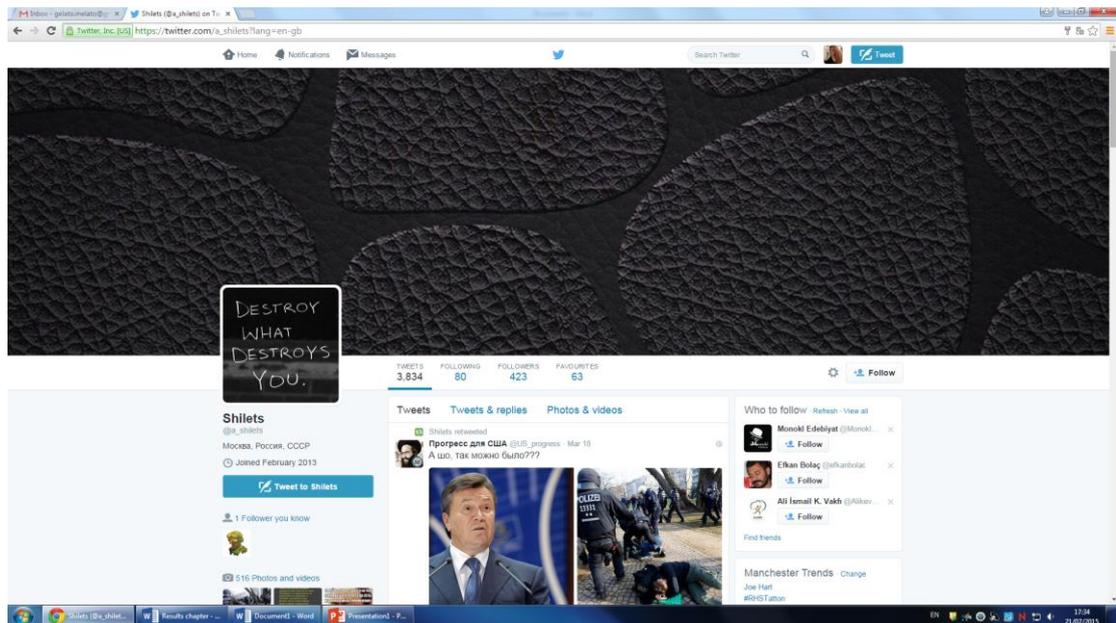
@anti_maydan has a very similar framing. It holds the double-sided eagle, Russian national coat of arms, as the profile picture. The background photo shows blurred Russian, Ukrainian flags and unidentifiable posters. The account follows 48 users and has 53,400 followers. The profile information says: “We preach up against the Euro-slavery and in favour of the union with Russia. We stand for keeping the old friends and do not dream of the future with Europe. #antimaydan #euromaydan #Crimea #maydan”. The user claims to be located in Ukraine. The tweets blame the Ukrainian pro-European government and promote the Russian involvement in Ukrainian politics.

Figure 138. @Russian_market's Twitter profile page



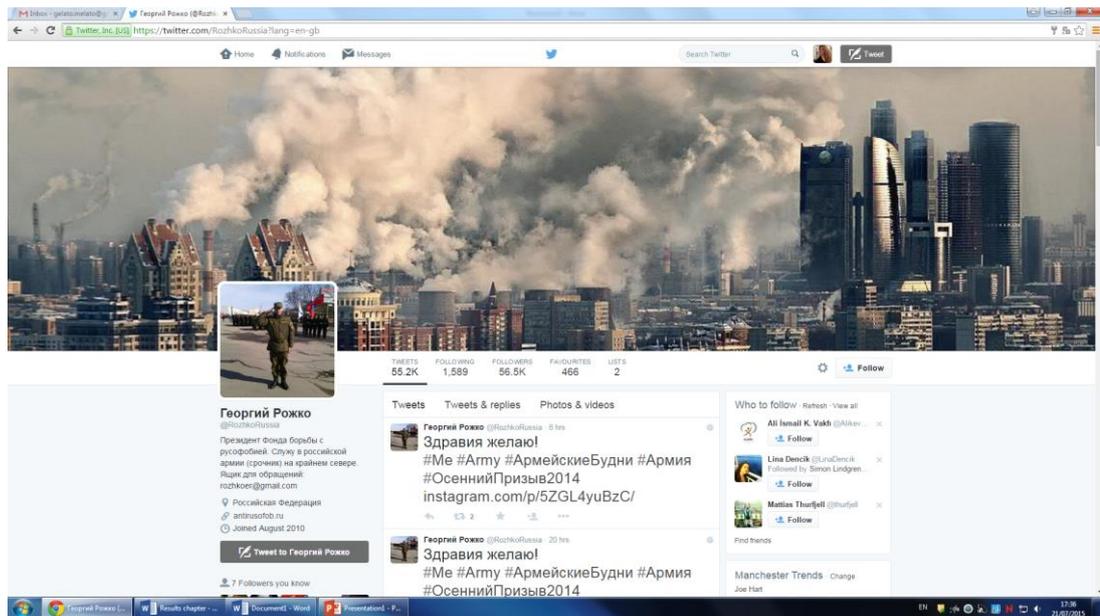
@Russian_market is another account that looks like a work of brand managers and media professionals; its arrangement resembles the framing of other leading pro-government meme sharers. The account's profile picture is a close up portrait of Vladimir Putin with the halo resembling a gas ring over his head. The user follows 392 accounts and is followed by 137,000. The background picture apparently depicts Zurich, as the profile information suggests "VK: <https://www.vk.com/id299400051>. Zürich, Schweiz. <https://www.facebook.com/russianmarket.russianmarket> Joined January 2011". @Russian_market shares mostly original tweets, with very few retweets; he or she does not focus solely on the Russian politics, but monitors global politics and economy as well; for example, recently there have been many tweets devoted to the Greek economic crisis, Iranian oil etc. The majority of tweets are in English, but several retweets of Russian tweets and original Russian tweets prove the user's fluency in Russian.

Figure 139. @a_shilets' Twitter profile page



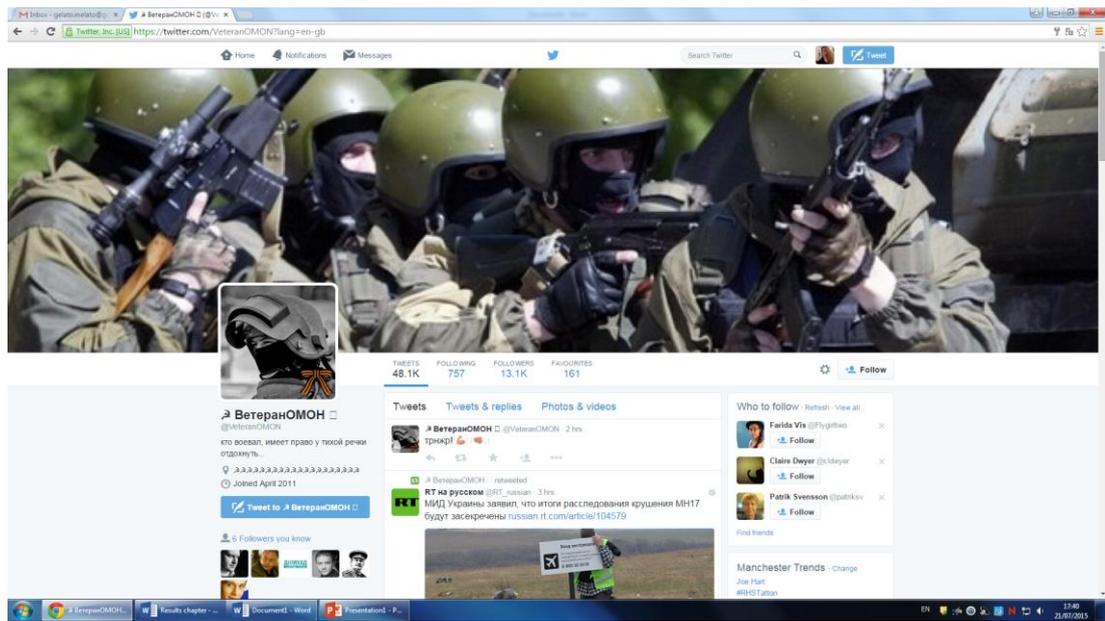
@a_shilets differs from the alleged “professional” accounts by the vague profile information, a moderate number of followers and no clear indication of ideological affiliations. The profile picture says in English “Destroy what destroys you”, the background picture reminds of black leather; the account follows 80 users and is followed by 423 (including one well-known patriotic account @vezhlivo). In opposition to @pravdiva_pravda and @anti_maydan, @a_shilets does not post as many original tweets as retweets; he or she mostly shares the tweets of the pro-government media and users, and even includes texts from anti-government accounts sometimes; only every 6th-7th tweet is original.

Figure 140. @RozhkoRussia's Twitter profile page



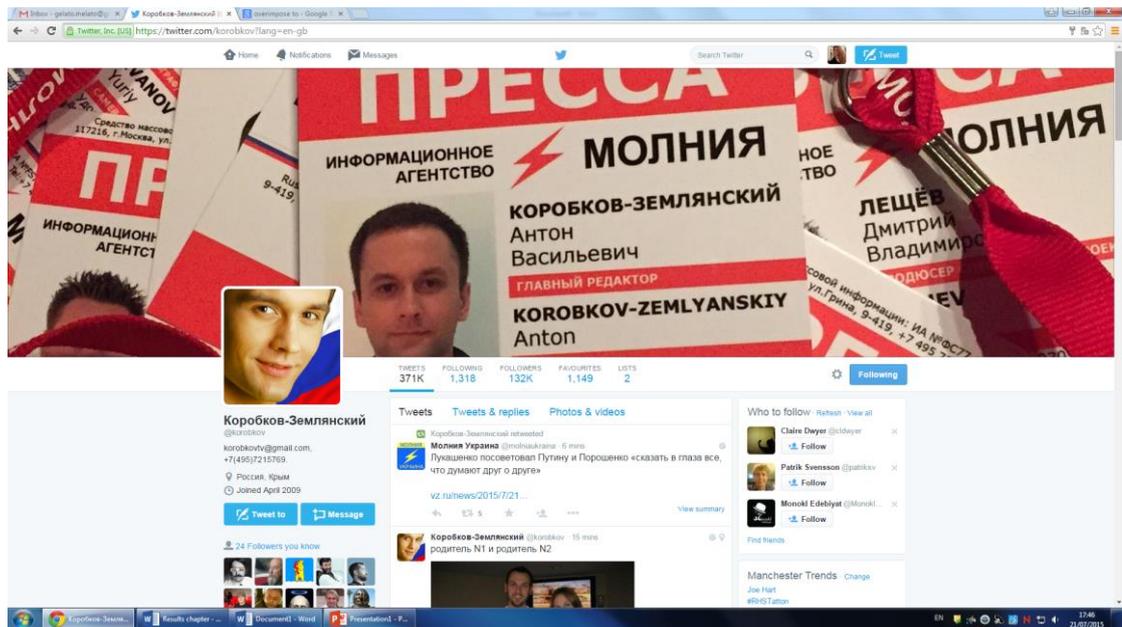
@RozhkoRussia is another account that looks like a personal webpage rather than the established professional media (yet it can also belong to the Troll Factory, but represent a more creative type of framing). The account acts on behalf of the soldier of the Russian army Georgiy Rozhko. The profile information indicates his ideological views: “President of the Foundation against Russophobia. I am serving in the Russian army (conscript) in the Far North. Mailbox for the enquiries: rozhkoer@gmail.com. Russian Federation. antirusophob.ru. Joined August 2010”. The profile picture portrays a full-length portrait of an agreeable soldier in uniform; the background picture is a panorama of a big city. The account follows 1,589 users and is followed by 56,500. He mostly publishes original tweets (containing many full-length self-portraits in the uniform) with the hashtag #ArmyRoutine; congratulates his followers on national and religious holidays; shares casual details of the everyday life in the army in the Far North; promotes patriotism and defends the actions of the Russian government in different conflicts of the past and present. This account may be analogous to *The Truman Show*: it invites the audience to follow the life of a “common soldier” of the Russian army, encloses details of his routine and publishes his amiable portraits.

Figure 141. @VeteranOMON's Twitter profile page



@VeteranOMON's name also links its account to the Russian military glory. "VeteranOMON" translates as "the ex-serviceman of the Special Forces police unit". The profile picture shows a monochrome picture of a young man covered by a helmet; the coloured Georgian ribbon covers part of the image. The background photo depicts the Special Forces soldiers in action. The account follows 757 users and is followed by 13,100. His or her profile information says "Whoever fought has the right to take rest by the quiet river..." Instead of a geolocation, the account has the multiplied Soviet coat of arms; joined Twitter in April 2011. @VeteranOMON retweets many texts from other prominent pro-government users; his own tweets are often rude and sexist and attack the political opposition leaders and liberal media. There are no noticeable references to the experience of having worked in the Special Forces in the tweets.

Figure 142. @korobkov's Twitter profile page



@korobkov is a particular case in the pro-government Twitter activity. A real person with the confirmed biography, Anton Korobkov-Zemlyanskiy he has emerged as a popular Twitter user after having established a career in blogging and undertaking several jobs on television, radio and in PR (a producer, editor, and scriptwriter, among others). He currently holds the membership of The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, a consultative committee consisting of the respected distinguished public figures who oversee the activity of the parliament, government and other government bodies of Russia and its subjects. He is following 1,315 accounts (a mixture of pro and anti-government users with plenty of pop culture celebrities and PR representatives) and is followed by 132,000 users. @korobkov tweets profusely, supporting all the actions of the Russian government and constantly scorning the opposition, liberal media and publics, and Western politicians; he employs various expressive methods, from texts to images and videos, retweets and memes to support the Russian authorities and attack its enemies.

Figure 143. @tvjihad's Twitter profile page



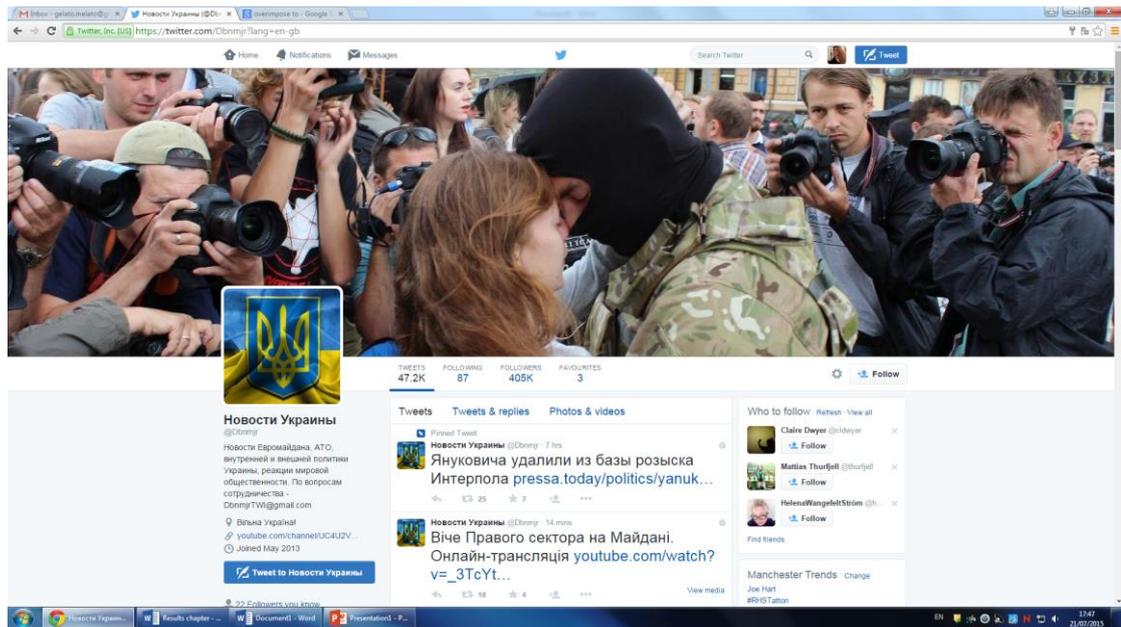
Several pro-government accounts demonstrate exceptionally creative branding, such as @tvjihad. @tvjihad may be interpreted as the parody to the liberal TV Rain (@tvrain on Twitter). The profile picture employs the similar design in the logo and mockingly presents an imaginary television channel called TV Jihad. The profile information says “A joint project of the Caucasus-Center and TV Rain. We fight Kafirs, Murtads, Mushriks, Shabikhs, Harbiyahs, Munafiks and Rafidites. The account is a parody”. The location is set as “VILAYAT MOSCOW”; there is also a link to the VKontakte page of the same name. @tvjihad follows 447 and is followed by 21,000 users.

The account regularly comments on the activity of the liberal community, politicians, journalists and media outlets; it frames criticism in the complex Islam terminology. For instance, they commented on the news that Russian opposition politician Maria Gaidar will join the Georgian ex-president Mikhail Saakashvili in the government of the Ukrainian city of Odessa. @tvjihad posted: “HAREM. Maryam-al-Gaidar will become the favourite wife in the harem of the governor of the Ukrainian provence of Odeshan Ishac Ash-Shvili” (17 July 2015). On a different occasion, @tvjihad made a joke about the terrorist group ISIS: “In the Islamic State a mujahidin has occasionally cut off his own head while attempting to make a selfie with a knife” (4 July 2015). @tvjihad’s tweets are generally very hard to comprehend without the knowledge of the Islam concepts; the user applies them in the sardonic sense, making the deciphering challenging. According to the information shared by @Stalin_RF,

@tvjihad is a professional account whose owner works for a high salary. He did not specify who pays to @tvjihad's owner yet the anti-liberal ideology of the account suggests it may operate on the government's funding.

Anti-government user profiles

Figure 144. @Dbnmjr's Twitter profile page



@Dbnmjr is the prominent pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian Twitter account that has shared a plethora of critical memes that went viral in the Russian cyberspace. When typed in the Russian keyboard layout, “Dbnmjr” reads as “Sergey”, a typical name for the Slavic countries. The account is fiercely pro-Ukrainian and holds the Ukrainian flag in the profile picture. The background image depicts a soldier resting against a young woman, and many photographers around are shooting the touching scene. The profile description says in Russian “News of Ukraine. News of Euromaidan, ATO, domestic and international politics of Ukraine, reaction of the global community. For collaboration inquiries use DbnmjrTWI@gmail.com. *The Free Ukraine!* (the only sentence in Ukrainian here). <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4U2VfDek2vLwqNfwKogSiw> Joined May 2013”.

Figure 145. @KermlinRussia's Twitter profile page



@KermlinRussia is the most popular political satirical account of the Russian Twitter. It playfully misspells “Kremlin Russia” for “Kermlin Russia” and makes conscious mistakes in the words “President of Russia” to pursue a comic effect. The account is called “Perzident Roissi” and the profile picture, the double-sided eagle, national coat of arms, is adjoined with the description “The official twitter-account of the Perzident of Roissi”. The next line says “Roissya, vperdel!”, which is also a misspelled slogan: instead of “Rossiya, vperyd!” (Go, Russia!) it reads somewhat like “Russia is in the ass”. The background image is the night shot of the Kremlin walls. The user follows 2,562 and is followed by over 1,300,000 users. First, the account holders were anonymous, but then revealed their identities. Arseniy Bibrovskiy and Yekaterina Romanovskaya, young professionals living in Moscow, work in public relations, both in government-related and corporate spheres. They had been leading the account together up until 2015 (Arseniy responsible for the analytical accuracy of their criticisms, and Yekaterina mastering the style), when Yekaterina announced that she would no longer be part of @KermlinRussia. The account ferociously attacks Vladimir Putin and his close circle of corrupted officials and oligarchs; provides long analytical investigations in addition to the Twitter account at his standalone website kermlinrussia.com.

Figure 146. @Fake_MIDRF's Twitter profile page



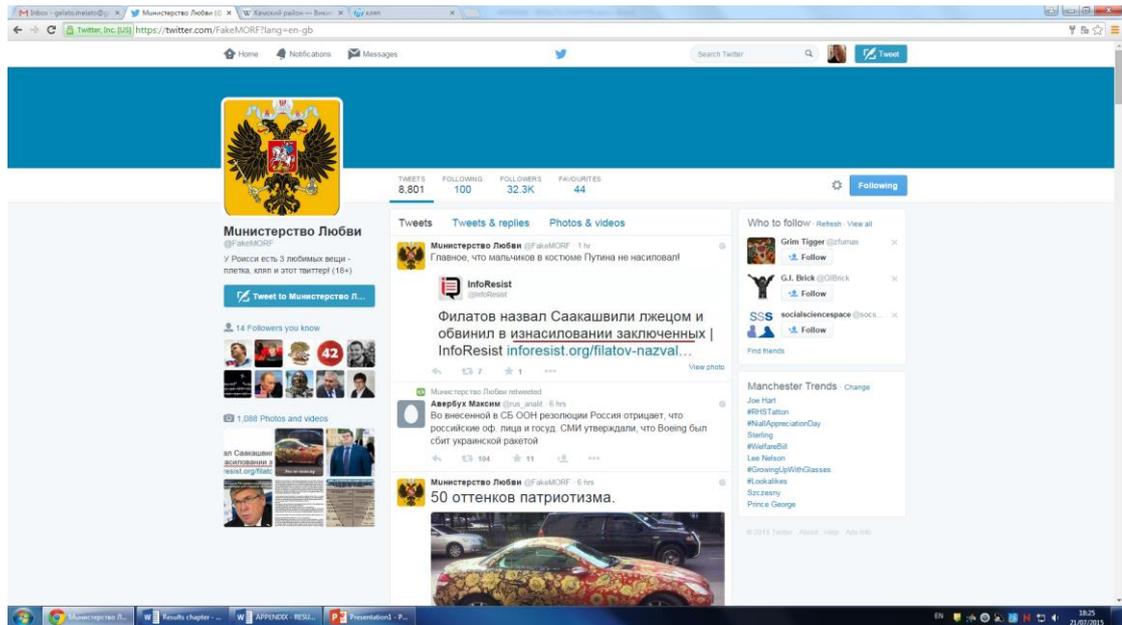
@Fake_MIDRF is the protuberant political satirical account that critically welcomes all the news on the Russian government’s activity and supplements them with an intricate reflection. It follows 237 and is followed by 102,000 users. The profile page encompasses the photograph of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov as the user picture. The account’s name “Fake_MIDRF” literally means “Fake Ministry of the Foreign Affairs”. The profile description says “I’m showing you Kuzka’s mother”, which derives from a famous episode when the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev took off his shoe and beat on the table before the United Nations, threatening that “he would show them Kuzka’s mother”. According to the common belief, Kuzka comes from the folklore, he was a peasant boy with a belligerent mother. Hence, a promise to introduce someone to this unpleasant lady might indicate a severe threat (Babakian, 1999).

@Fake_MIDRF’s account arrangement ridicules this linguistic artefact of the Soviet heritage in global diplomacy. The background picture also portrays Khrushchev against the label “The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”. The geolocation says “Kemska volost” and also makes a meme. The phrase comes from the popular Soviet movie “Ivan Vassilievich: Back to the Future” (1973). The main character, an awkward Soviet engineer, gets mistakenly sent to the 16th century by the time machine; there people perceive him as the tsar Ivan Groznyi. He gets to like the taste of power and rules the country with idiotic excitement. When the Swedes

asks whether they can have back “Kemska volost”, he eagerly grants them the land with a happy laugh.

Judging by the tweets and retweets of this user, @Fake_MIDRF monitors the main pro-government and liberal news media and analytically reflects on the developments; he or she often retweets other top liberal users; however, mostly publishes original tweets.

Figure 147. @FakeMORF’s Twitter profile page



@FakeMORF operates on the similar principles as @Fake_MIDRF. The account claims to represent “The Ministry of Love” and keeps the double-sided eagle, Russian coat of arms, as the profile picture. The description says: “Russia has three favourite things: a whip, a gag and this Twitter! (18+)”. It has a plain blue background. The account follows 100 and is followed by 32,300 users. @FakeMORF often retweets @Fake_MIDRF, @KermlinRussia and @Sandy_mustache and gets retweets back. The account constantly lashes out on the issues of corruption, poor economy and questionable management of Russia; comments on the news in a sardonic form.

Figure 148. @Sandy_mustache's Twitter profile page



@Sandy_mustache claims to act on behalf of the moustache of the Russian President's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. The profile page contains a cartoon-like portrait of Peskov and says "Peskov's moustache. We move regularly"; there is also a link to the humorous website sandy_mustache.ru. The background picture is the night shot of the Kremlin wall. The account follows 207 and is followed by almost 100,000 users. It mostly publishes original tweets, comical comments on the political agenda; rarely retweets other humorous and political accounts.

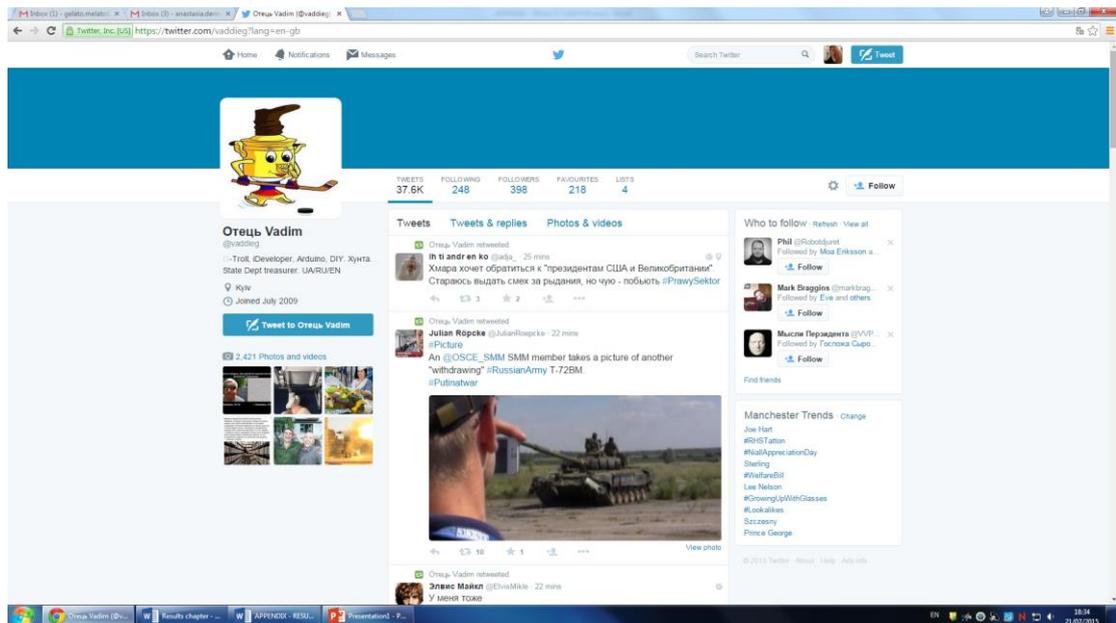
Figure 149. @Judge_Syrova_Ya's Twitter profile page



Another noticeable parody Twitter account mocks the federal judge who sentenced the punk band Pussy Riot to two years in prison for singing and dancing in the main Moscow cathedral (RBK, 2012). The account @Judge_Syrova_Ya (follows 237 and is followed by 6,355 users) mockingly represents the judge Marina Syrova. Initially the account holder feigned to tweet on behalf of Syrova, pointing to the details of her biography and ongoing activity (see @Judge_Syrova_Ya, 2014), but then almost obliterated any references to the judge and turned the microblog into a general liberal account reflecting on the Russian politics. It has the metaphoric depiction of the barbed wire and one escaping unit of it on the profile picture. The wallpaper shows the back of a man in an orange uniform saying “Judge” on his back. The profile description is “Pre-conceived judgement. Now also available in 3D”; location: “The shrivelled country”; joined in August 2012.

@Judge_Syrova_Ya mostly publishes original tweets and sometimes memes; retweets other eminent liberal parody accounts and opposition journalists.

Figure 150. @vaddieg's Twitter profile page



@vaddieg has the most ambiguous branding among top opposition meme sharers. Although in our selection he appeared as one of the hubs of meme dissemination, the account only follows 248 and is followed by 398 users. The profile page says “Father Vadim. □-Troll, iDeveloper, Arduino, DIY. Хунта. State Dept treasurer. UA/RU/EN” and sets geolocation as Kiev; joined Twitter in July 2009. No other prominent users follow him; he often retweets the opposition account @StalinGulag and questions the politics of the Russian authorities.

Several liberal Twitter accounts also utilise sophisticated framing, becoming a compelling retort to the likes of @tvjihad. For example, the parody account @gniloywest, although not featured in the meme collection (it has gained recognition after the scraping was over), provides a mordant commentary to the anti-West propaganda. The name translates as “decaying West” and refers to the well-known Russian idiom deriving from the USSR’s propaganda media. The account pretends to post photos from the Western countries and supplement them with condemning taglines in the style of the Soviet newspapers. Nevertheless, it is clear that the images were shot somewhere in Russia, hence the criticism becomes a triple metaphor. @gniloywest blames biased state media and users for scapegoating the West for the internal problems; depicts gruesome episodes of the Russian reality to emphasise the contrast between the life in the “prosperous” Russia and “decadent” Europe and the

US and accentuates how easy one can manipulate the representation of reality by remixing texts and geotags.

Figure 151. @gniloywest's tweet says: "An exclusive footage! Our journalists managed to capture the decaying of the West in its very process. Birmingham, England".

 **Загнивающий Запад** @gniloywest · Jul 13

Редкие кадры. Нашим журналистам удалось заснять непосредственный процесс гниения Запада. Бирмингем, Англия.

[View translation](#)



RETWEETS 67 FAVOURITES 49

2:20 am · 13 Jul 2015 · Details

Alternatively, in this example, the tweet mocks the horrific condition of Russian roads, but pretends to deliver the news on the Southern Italian mafia.

Figure 152. @gnilywest's tweet says: "The contours of the dead bodies of those passed in the drug cartels' exchange of gunfire. Naples, Italy"

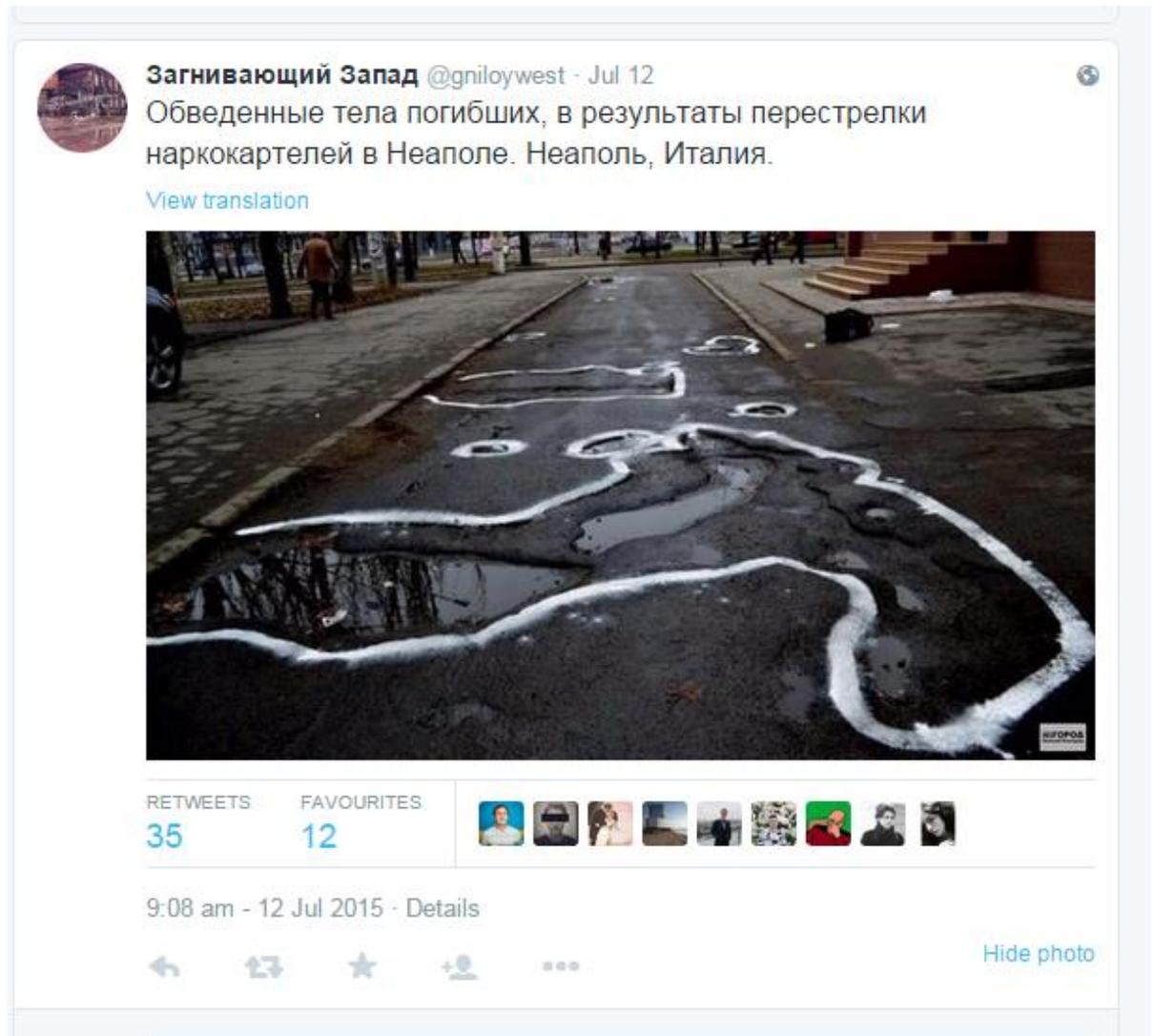
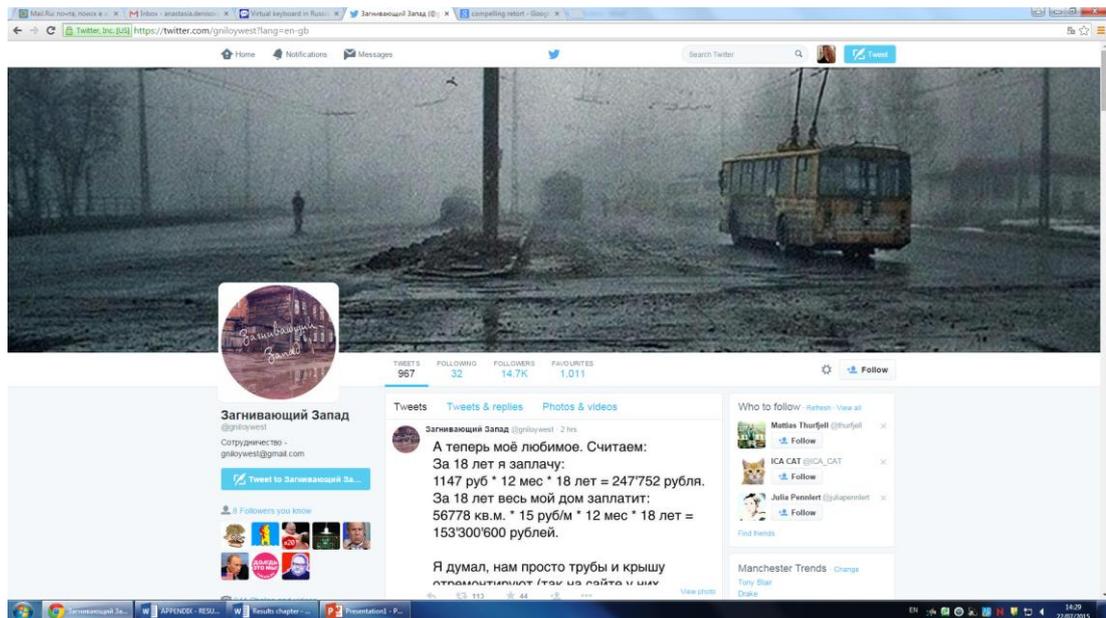


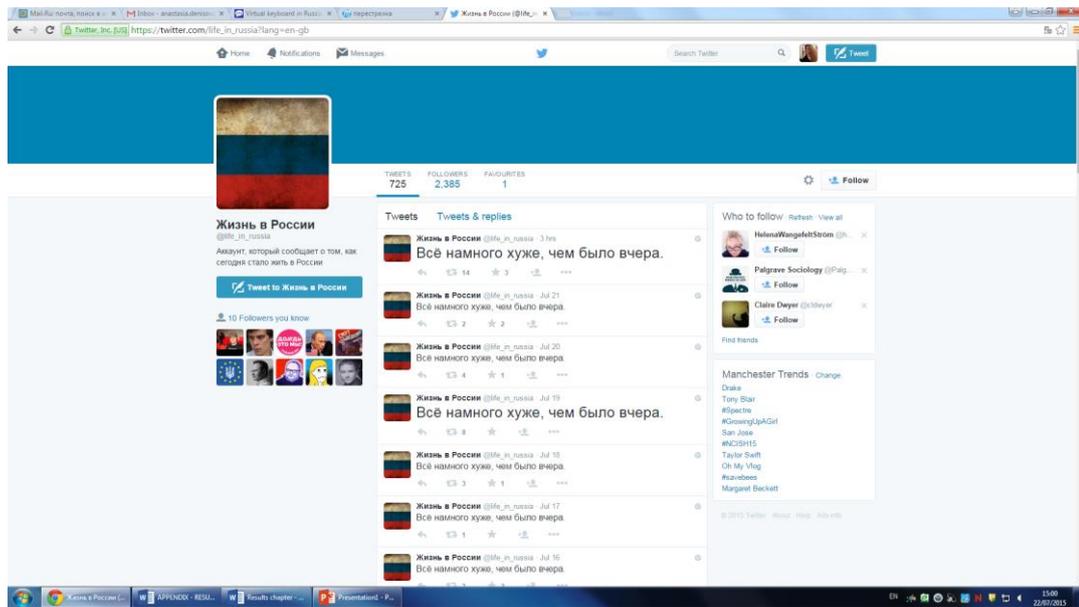
Figure 153. @gniloywest's Twitter profile page



@gniloywest generates symbolic texts that have a potential to develop into memes. Yet until other users modify them, these remixed humorous artefacts remain viral jokes, but not memes.

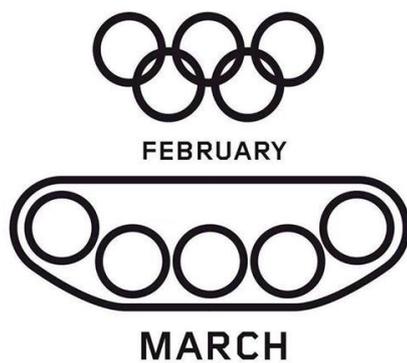
Another account of high viral potential is @life_in_russia (followed by 2,385). The user's description says "The account that reports how is it going in Russia today". Following the principles of the Theatre of Absurd, it publishes the same line every day: "Everything is much worse than it was yesterday". Many prolific liberal users follow and occasionally retweet this account. However, it has not yet grown memetic as other people do not alter the pessimistic tweet shared along with the shabby picture of a Russian flag.

Figure 154. @life_in_russia's Twitter profile page



6. Detailed explanation of meme travel analysis

CASE STUDY 1. THE FEBRUARY-MARCH MEME



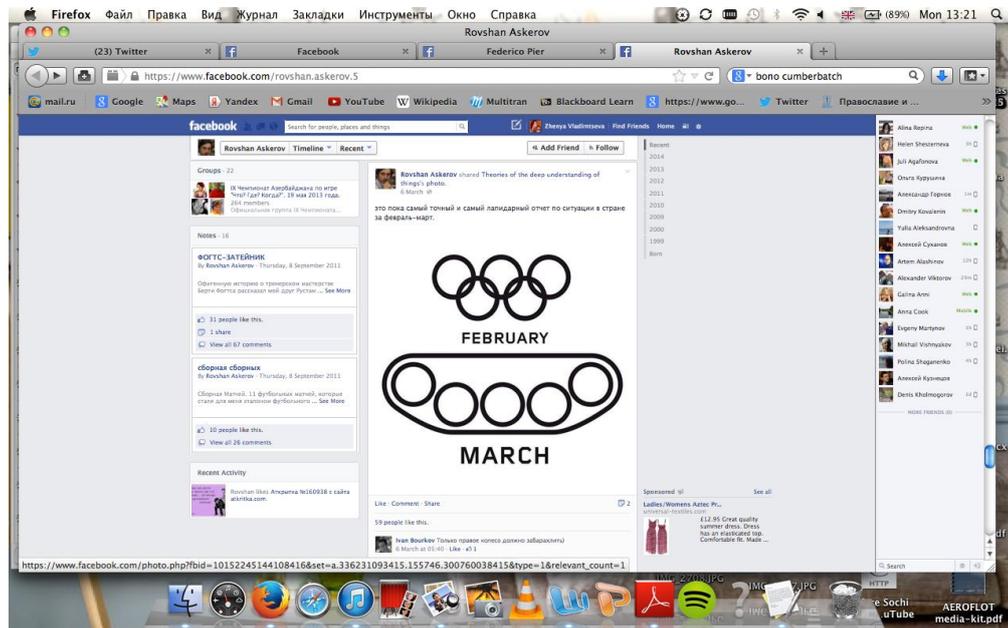
- 1) The meme was initially spotted at the Facebook page of Rovshan Askerov, public figure and journalist, followed by 4,375 people. He supplemented the meme with a comment: “This is so far the most accurate and terse report on the situation in the country over February-March” (transl. from Russian,

originally: "это пока самый точный и самый лапидарный отчет по ситуации в стране за февраль-март"), 59 likes, 2 shares. The meme starts a thread of comments (transl. from Russian):

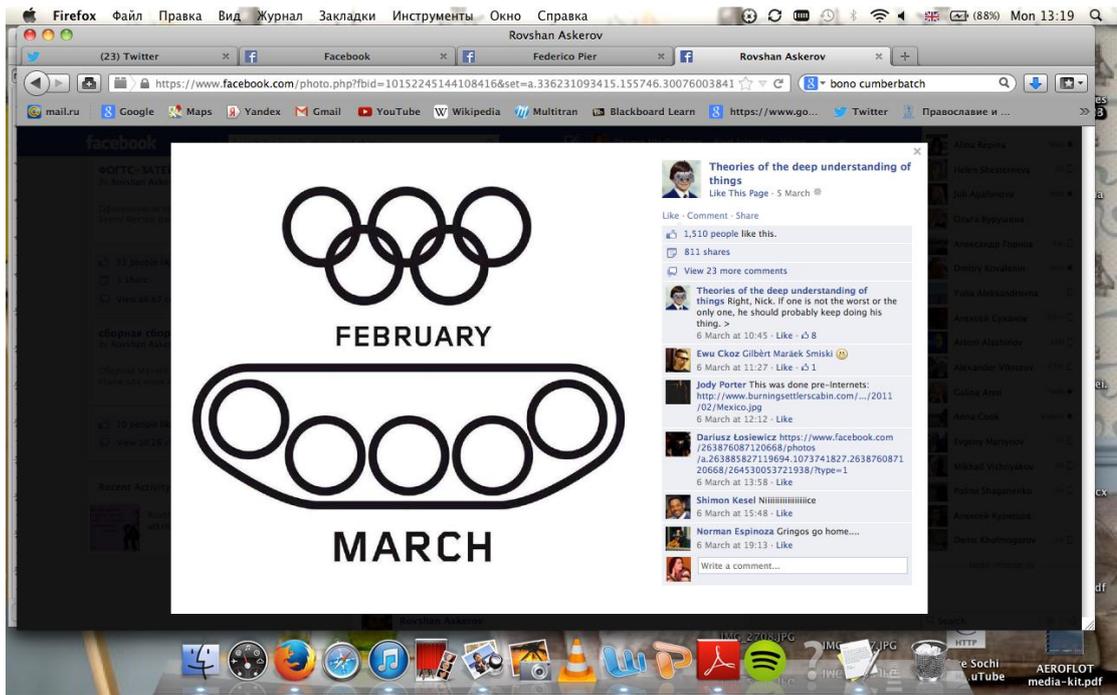
Ivan Bourkov: the right wheel has to collapse ("только правое колесо должно забарахлить")

Rovshan Askerov: already... ("уже...")

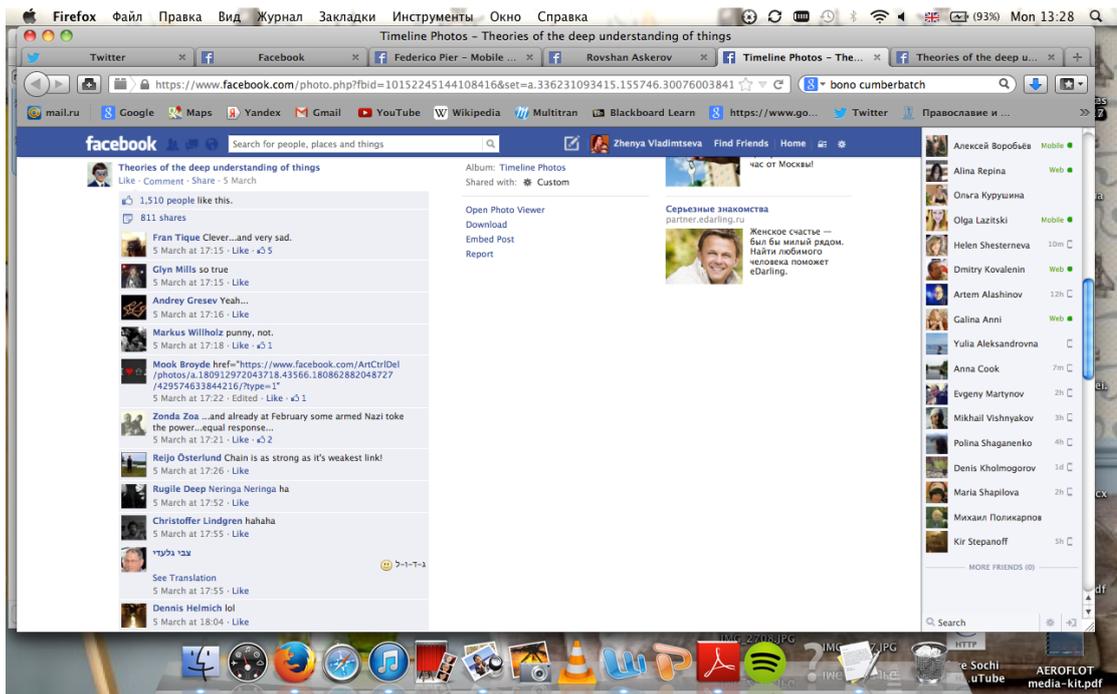
Sveta Zimmerman: Wow... ("Ух...")



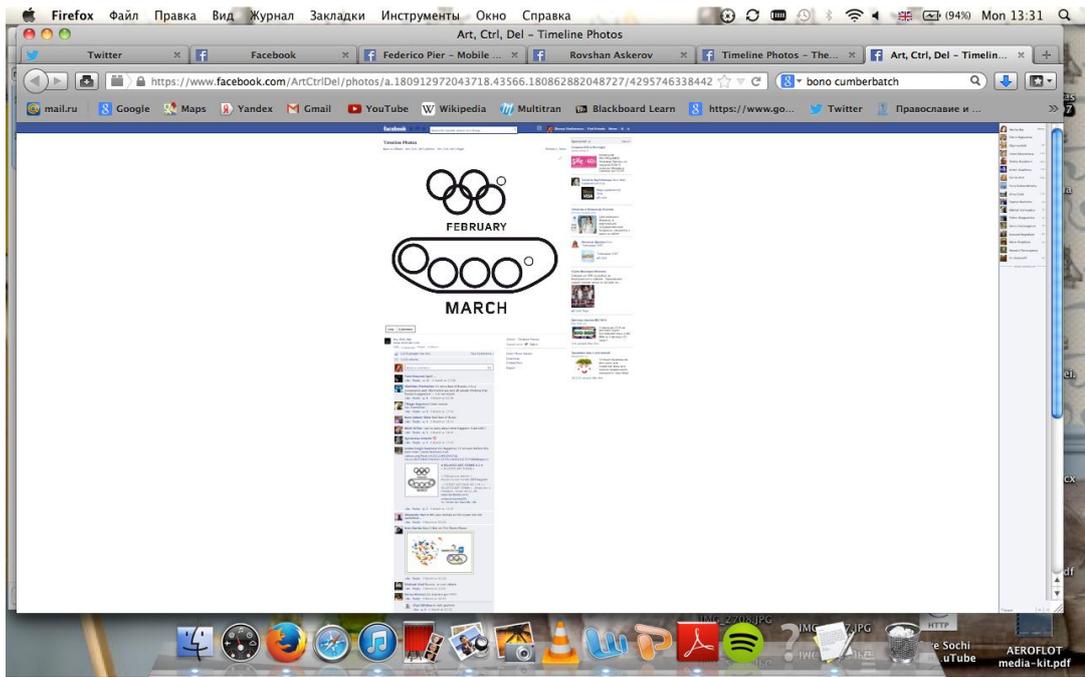
3) Clicking on the picture leads to the original publication by Theories of the deep understanding of things, an audio & video visual web magazine, 130, 981 likes, and 20,200 users are talking about it.



1,510 likes, 811 shares



3.1) One of the commentators shares another meme:



This newly added meme has 1,670 likes and 1,135 shares. Art, Ctrl, Del, art page/community with 275,940 likes produced by it.

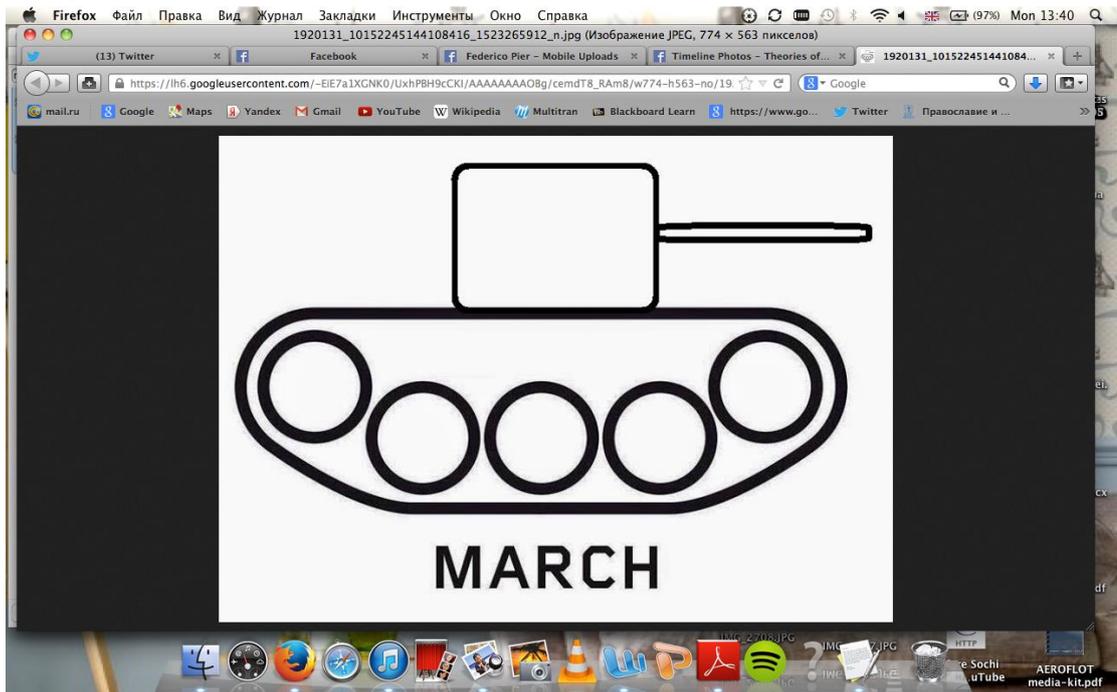
3.1a) and 3.1b) Commentators share two additional memes: Jordan Leigh Guerrero points out that there was a previous meme on the same topic and gives a link. Bran Darida shares a new meme without adding any copyright.



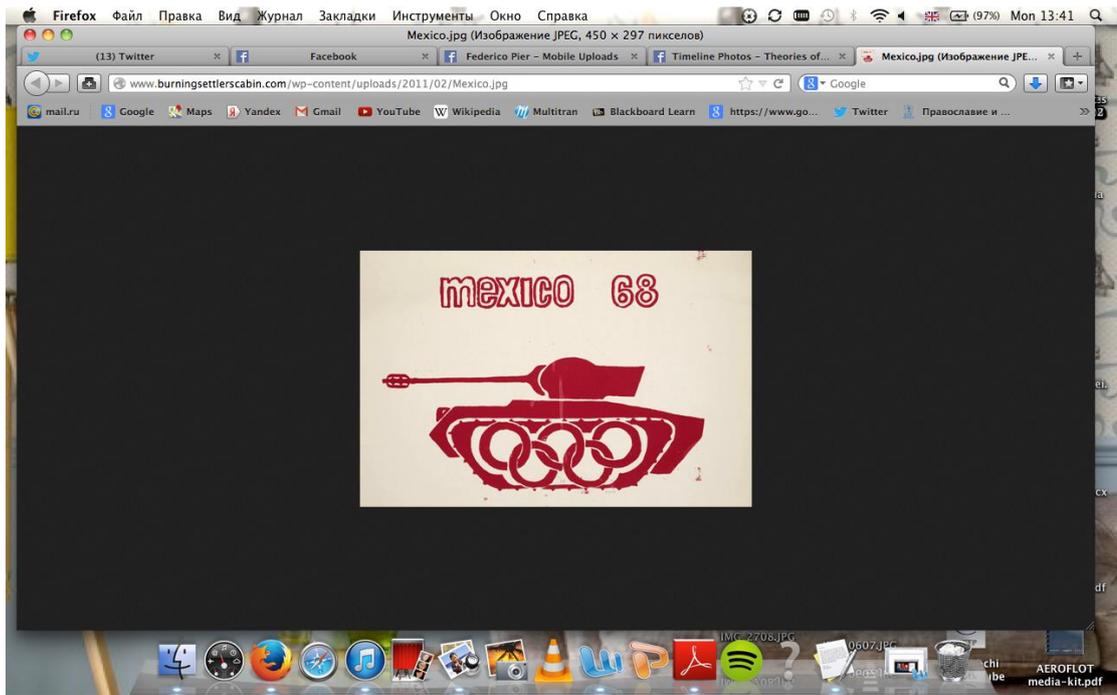
3.1c) One of the commentators shares another meme with Twitter URL:



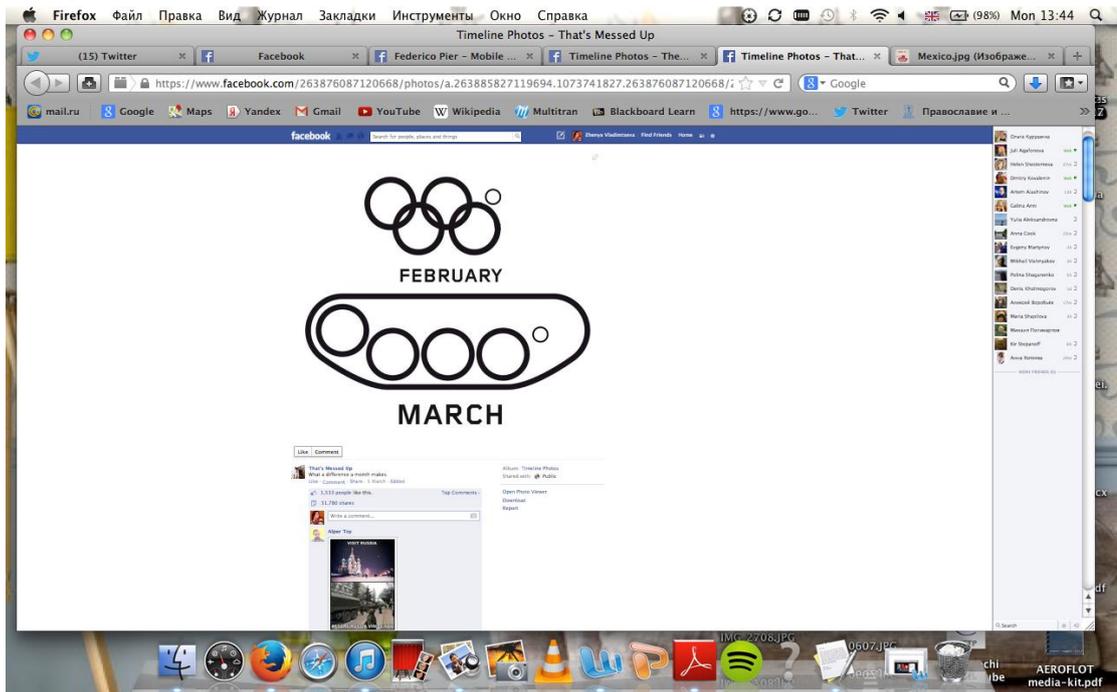
3.2) Marcelo Prezende shares the image of a tank with Olympic rings from googleusercontent.com:



3.3) The next commentator Jody Porter points out that this image was seen long before Sochi: "This was done pre-Internets: <http://www.burningsettlerscabin.com/.../2011/02/Mexico.jpg>"

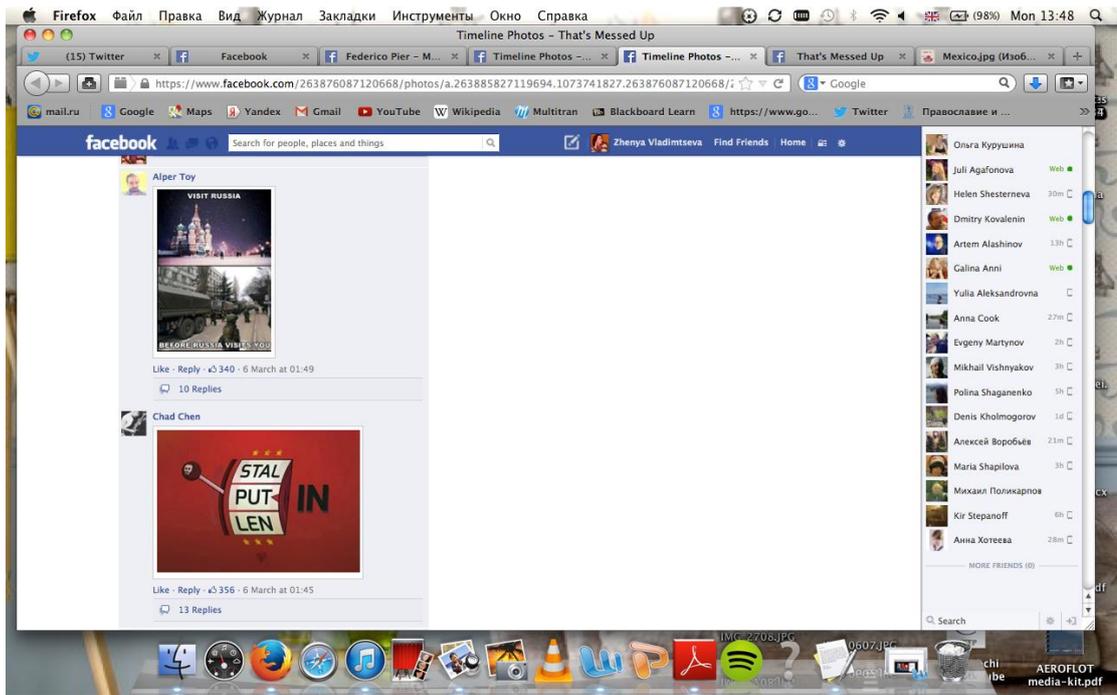


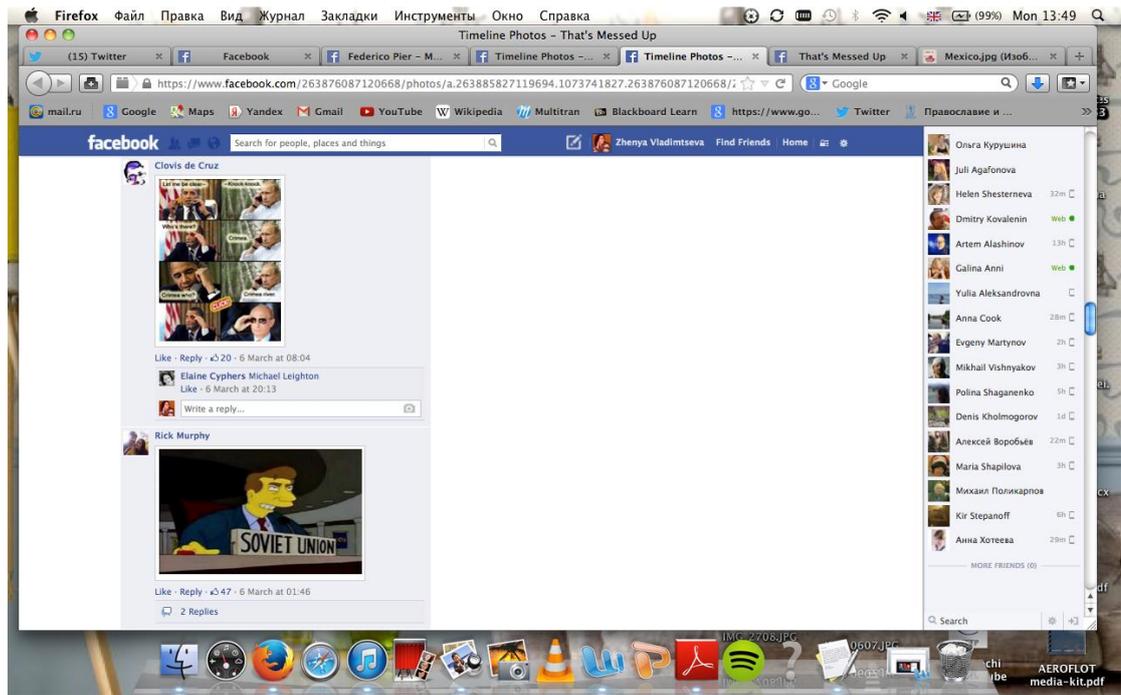
3.4) Another commentator from Poland shares one more meme with a note "What a difference a month makes":



That's Messed Up added the meme on Facebook, harvesting 1,533 likes and 31,780 shares (That's Messed Up is a humour community with 13,233 likes and 168,661 people talking about it).

This thread attracts a lot of meme posting.





CASE STUDY 2. DOORS (DEATH WALKING DOOR TO DOOR) MEME

The Doors meme is the allegory of the US invasion of other countries: signs at the doors read “Iraq”, “Syria”, “Lybia” and others; one can spot flames and blood coming from these rooms. The symbolic Uncle Sam is shocked to meet the Bear, the metaphoric representation of Russia, greeting him from the Ukrainian door.

1) Facebook - Federico Pier

86 likes, 177 shares



[Steven Stewart](#) shared [Federico Pier's photo](#).

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10203385914914017&set=a.1453288257631.60855.1396020584&type=1&theater>

[Franz Zach](#) shared [Federico Pier's photo](#).

... die kurze - aber treffende - Zusammenfassung

2) Twitter

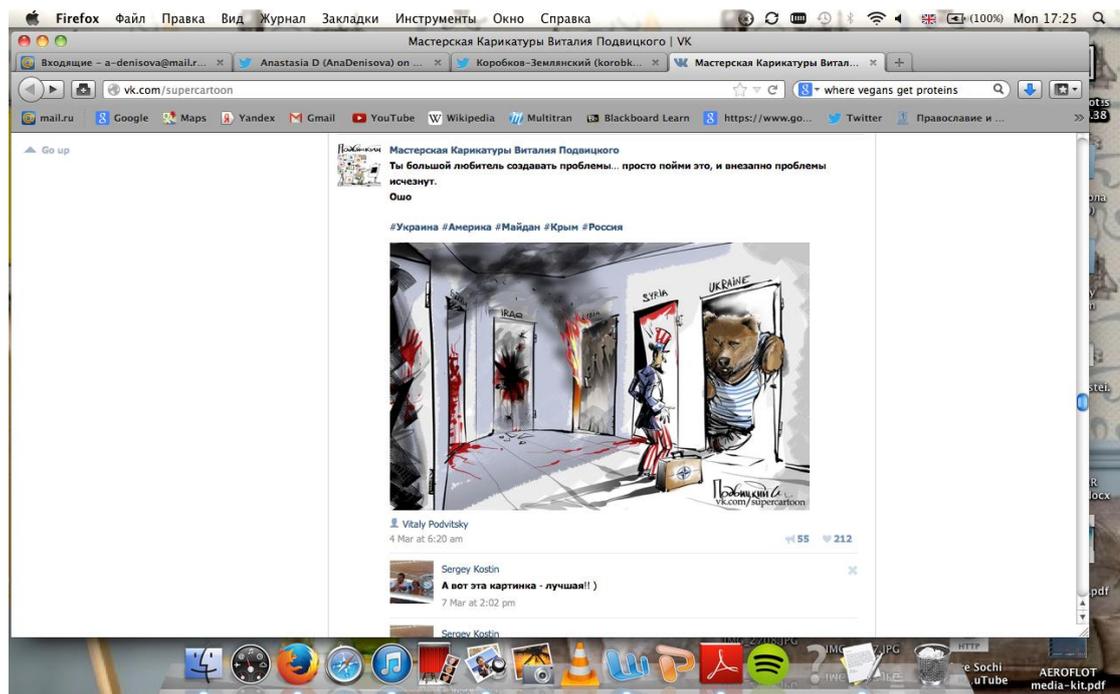
@Profes777 shared the meme on Twitter, 11 retweets, 4 favourites.



3) vk.com

The image has the signature of the cartoonist Vitaly Podvitsky. His vk.com/supercartoon profile shows the image with the comment, a quotation from Osho, the Buddhist wisdom: “You are a big fan of making trouble... just realise this, and suddenly all the problems would go away. Osho” (transl. from Russian, originally "Ты большой любитель создавать проблемы... просто пойми это, и внезапно проблемы исчезнут. Ошо"), 55 shares and 212 likes.

Weblink to Podvitsky’s page: “Cartoon Studio of Vitaly Podvitsky”
Мастерская Карикатуры Виталия Подвицкого



His webpage informs that Vitaly used to be a professional cartoonist of magazines "Bayki" (“Tales”) and "Anekdoty" (“Anecdotes”).



Мастерская Карикатуры Виталия Подвицкого
Решение о разводе часто принимается втроем.
Лешек Кумор



Vitaly Podvitsky
2 Mar at 7:19 pm

30 119

Hide comments



Dima Chernolesky
Где кнопка "очень нравится"???

7



Igor Sochnev
до слез

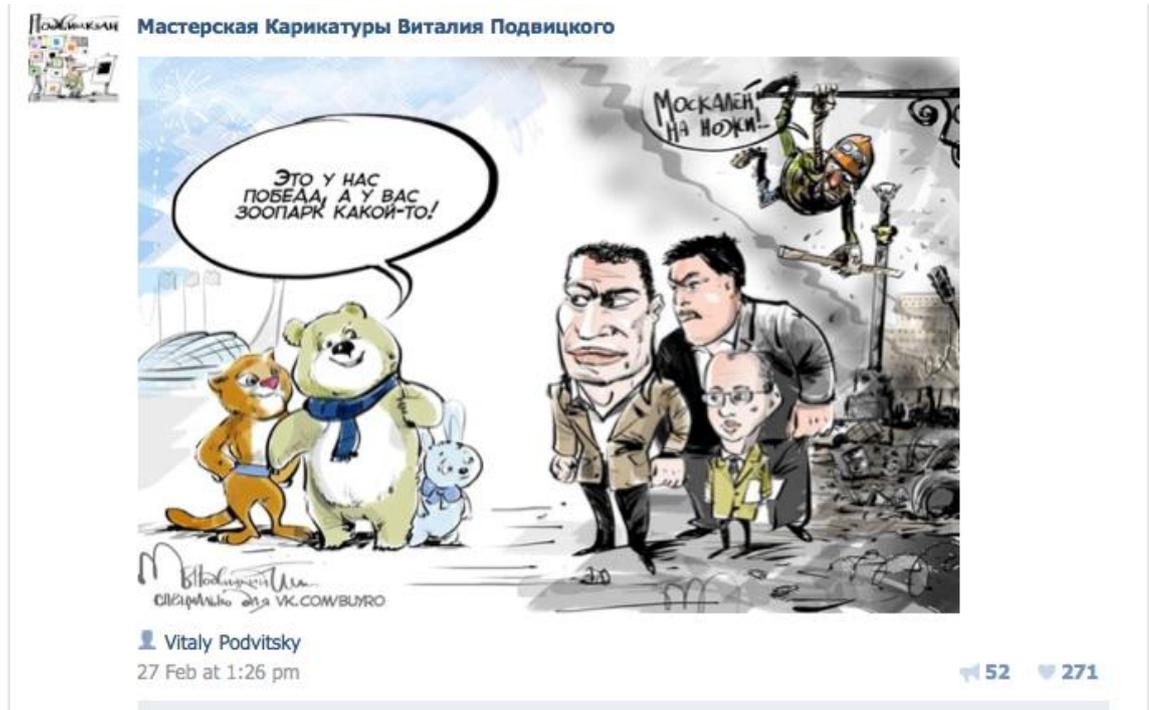


Anton Ivanov
Браво Виталий, всегда нравились ваши работы =), помню вас еще по журналам

The cartoon bears the title “It often takes three to make a decision about divorce. Leszek Kumor”. The image depicts many people in the socks painted in the national colours of the US, UK, Poland and others; all covered by the blanket painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. The character in the middle says: “Darling, you can think about me whatever you please, but I am going to my ex”.

The commentators say: Dima Chernolesky: Where is the button “like very much”???.; Igor Sochnev: you make me cry; Anton Ivanov: Bravo, Vitaly, I have always enjoyed your works =), remember you since the time you published in the magazines.

Vitaly Podvitsky's Studio's page holds many other sarcastic cartoons supporting the Kremlin and condemning Western politicians and the new Ukrainian government that came to reign after the Maidan revolution. For example:



The cartoon depicts three official mascots of the Sochi Olympics 2014 who say: “It is us who has the victory and you who holds a zoo!” They are opposed to the characters resembling the Ukrainian politicians Vitali Klitschko and Arseny Yatsenyuk on the background of a devastated street. The character in the top right corner says: “Fight the moskals!” (meaning – Russians).

2) Many Twitter users shared the Doors meme. Some of them distributed the original version:

@Profes777 tweeted “Who are you looking for? #Crimea #Russia #Putin #Ukraine #Maidan #Antimaidan #Donetsk #Kharkov #Odessa”



Curiously, other Tweet users contributed another version of the meme, probably coming from an international cartoonist. @philoxenia29 tweeted “Instead of a thousand words. #Ukraine”. This alteration of the meme includes a symbolic figure of Death instead of Uncle Sam, yet the character wears the American national colours. The Ukrainian door is not open yet.



The same meme was found in the Twitter account of @RuNetMemes, led by journalists Kevin Rothrock and Tatyana Lokot. The account monitors and publishes trending memes in the Twittersphere. @RuNetMemes tweets in English: “Some Russian bloggers believe that Moscow is defending Ukraine from American aggression”. The Doors meme receives 147 retweets and 52 favourites.



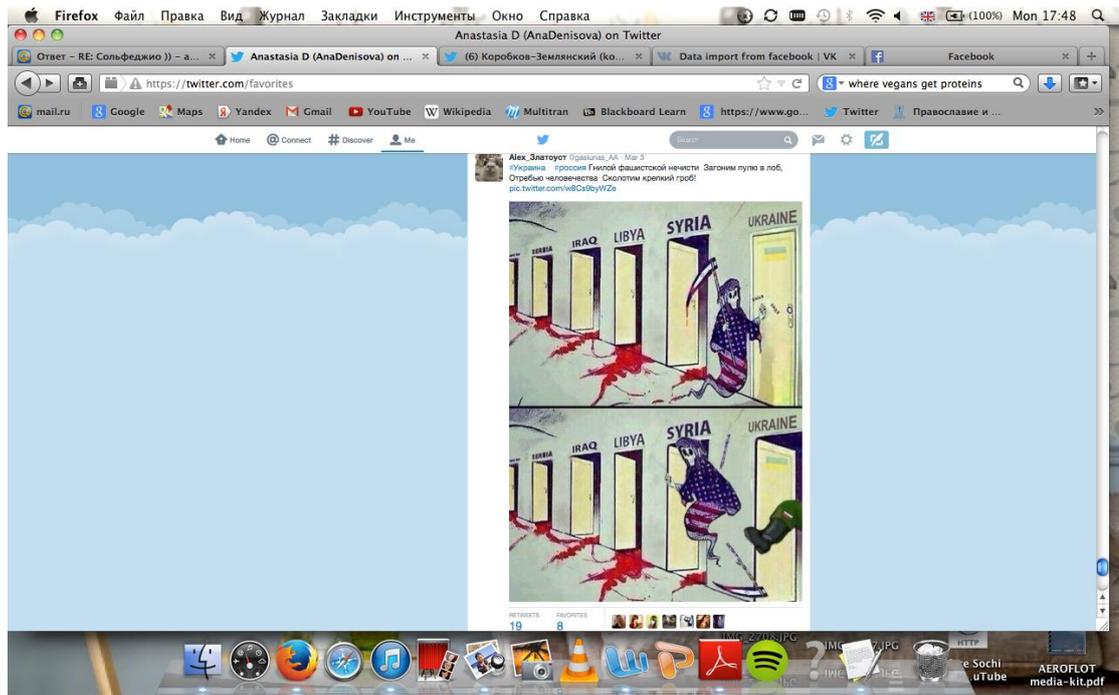
Further reiterations of the meme incorporate the likes of Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin: the latter kicks the American president on the bottom, resting against the door labelled as “Ukraine”. @AOkunew tweets: “Sorry, the wrong door!”, 22 retweets and 6 favourites.



Other Twitter users adjust the figure of the bear, but keep the American Death character. @MarkRowe tweets in English: “#Russia #Ukraine Capitalist expansion”.



Furthermore, users remodel the cartoon into a two-piece comic. @gasiunas_AA tweets a verse from the Second World War patriotic poem (transl. from Russian): “#Ukraine #Russia Let us send the bullet to the forehead of the rotten fascist bogey, let us knock together a sturdy coffin for the rubbish of the human race!”, 18 retweets and 14 favourites.



Finally, someone twists the power relations in the meme and proposes Russia as the aggressor: Death is now wearing Russian national colours and the doors hold labels of Russia’s former war zones. @Chashka_dm tweets: “Russia #Russiainukraine”, 2 retweets and 1 favourite.



@JoshuaNoonan picks this version and sends to @RuNetMemes. The meme aggregator subsequently spreads the new version of the meme among its 2,112 followers with the tweet: “A response by Russia’s critics to previous meme. Attn

@MiriamElder". The anti-Russian mutation does not get as much recognition as the pro-Kremlin version, only 6 retweets and 3 favourites. Remarkably, @RuNetMemes calls for the attention of Miriam Elder, World Editor of BuzzFeedNews, thus probably expanding the meme's potential audience to the global level.



@RuNetMemes is affiliated to the independent Web portal Global Voices, a non-profit resource started by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School; it features articles written by bloggers, translators and citizen journalists who monitor the blogosphere. According to the Global Voices investigation of the Doors meme (Rothrock, 2014), it had been circulating long before the Crimean crisis and Vitaly Podvitsky's creative input.

"As it turns out, the political cartoon may postdate the Soviet Union by two decades, apparently originating in the modern-day Middle East. David Guy, a pro-Israel blogger at "Five Minutes for Israel," claims that the cartoon appeared as a criticism of the Wahhabi movement's role in the Arab Spring. In fact, several Twitter users noted the Israeli flag painted on Death's scythe in the image tweeted at Korobkov. (While it's entirely possible that the author of this cartoon's Ukraine-focused iteration harbours anti-Israel sentiments, the Star of David does seem out of place with general Russian criticisms of US policy in Europe, which do not typically vilify the state of Israel, suggesting that it could be a remnant from an older template meant for the Arab world.)

“While the image may lack the historical Russian roots that so endear Crimean soil to Moscow, the exploitability of the cartoon has already inspired several responses. Critics of Russian military intervention might enjoy this example, which recasts Death as Russia, and the opened doors as Russia's former war zones: (left to right) the Caucasus, Chechnya, Dagestan, Abkhazia, North Ossetia [sic], and Ukraine” (Rothrock, 2014, no page).



A pro-Israel blogger and photographer David Guy provides a link to his 2013 blog entry in the comments to the article. The publication reveals his study of the Doors cartoon’s mutation in relation to Israel’s war conflicts. The following meme accuses Israel and America in plotting the Arab Spring in Arab countries: the Star of David sits next to the American flag in Death’s hands.



In another alteration, the blame fell on the Wahhabi movement, the ultra-conservative version of the Islam that dominates Saudi Arabia, and had no mention of Israel and the US (Guy, 2013).

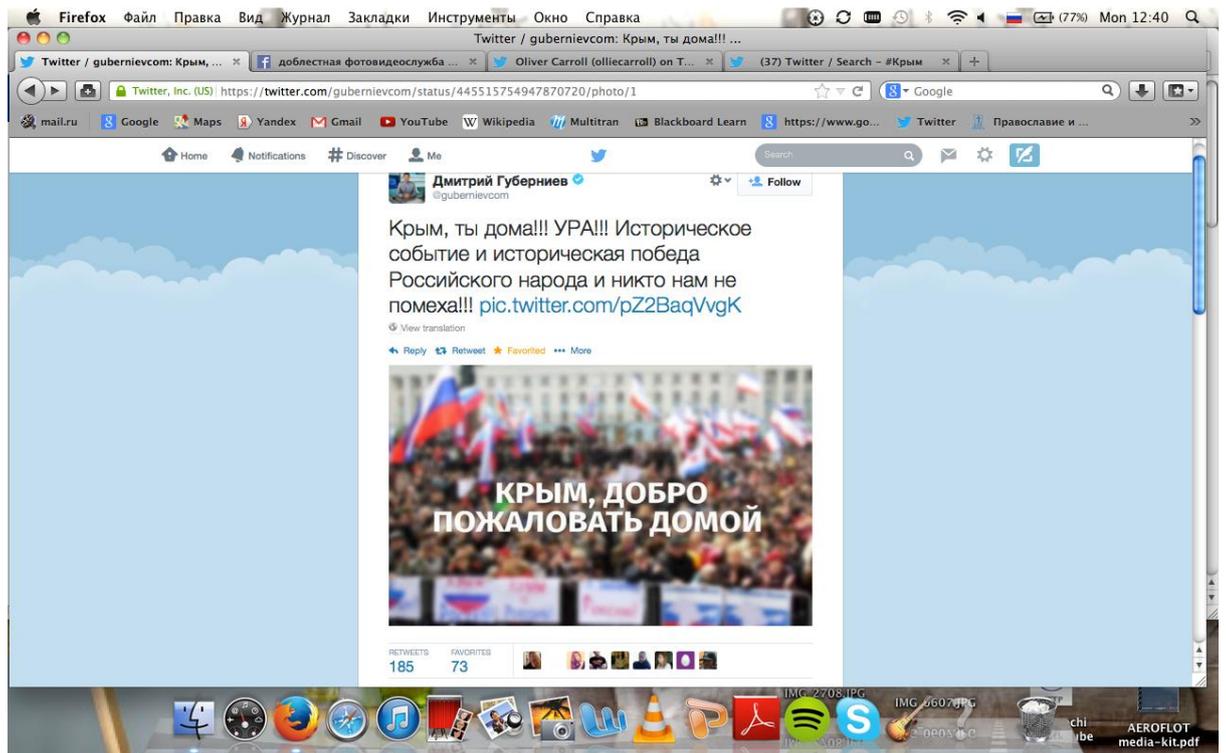


He concludes by offering a clear template for all those willing to create their own memes by adding captions and painting Death in desirable colours.



CASE STUDY 3. CRIMEA WELCOME HOME MEME

Russian celebrity sports commentator Dmitry Guberniyev enthusiastically welcomed the seizure of Crimea on his Twitter @gubernievcom. He was one of the first Twitter accounts to promote the Crimea Welcome Home narrative. Followed by 160,000 users, Guberniyev received a lot of feedback for other accounts; many people deployed other Crimea-related memes in their replies.

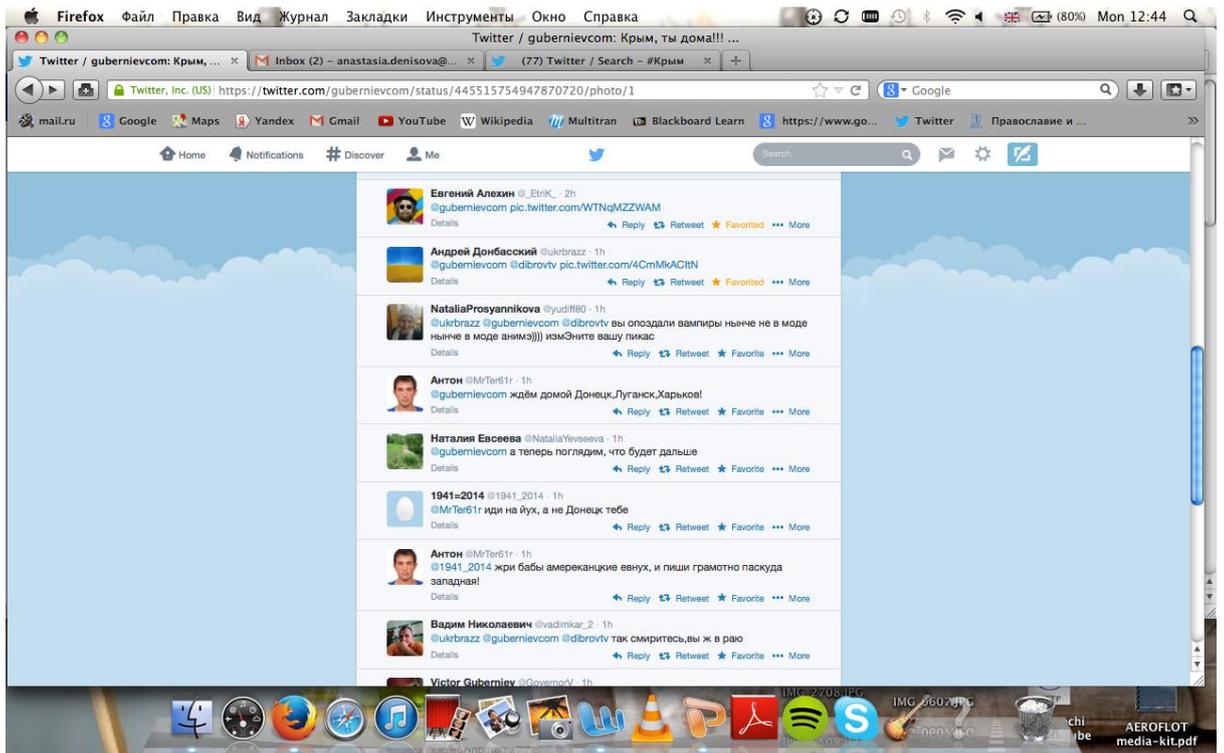


@gubernievcom tweets: “Crimea, you are home!!! HURRAY!!! It is the historical event and the historical victory for the Russian people and no one can interfere!!!”

185 retweets, 73 favourites (by 12.43GMT 17 March 2014)

276 retweets, 105 favourites (by 15.38GMT 17 March 2014)

The tweet enjoyed the ballooning popularity, with the number of retweets and favourites quickly growing within hours.



 **Евгений Алехин**
@_EtriK_ Follow

@gubernievcom
pic.twitter.com/WTNqMZZWAM

← Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorited ... More

КРЫМ2014
RUS 

RETWEET 1 FAVORITES 2 

4:06 AM - 17 Mar 2014 Flag media

Reply to @_EtriK_ @gubernievcom

@_EtriK_ offers an image that resembles Russian vehicle plate numbers saying “CRIMEA 2014 RUS”. Then suddenly the user @ukbrazz adds a critical text, the horrifying picture of the zombies opening their embrace towards the viewer; the slogan in red over their heads reads “Welcome home!”



RETWEET
1

FAVORITES
2



4:11 AM - 17 Mar 2014

Flag media

Reply to @ukrbrazz @gubernievcom @dibrovTV



Natalia Prosyannikova @yudiff80 · 2h

@ukrbrazz @gubernievcom @dibrovTV вы опоздали вампиры нынче не в моде нынче в моде анимэ)))))) измЭните вашу пикас

Details

Reply Retweet Favorite More



Вадим Николаевич @vadimkar_2 · 1h

@ukrbrazz @gubernievcom @dibrovTV так смиритесь, вы ж в раю

Details

Reply Retweet Favorite More

The network search for the distribution of this meme revealed two other Twitter users who shared the zombie image: @NashaCanada, the anti-Putin account located in Toronto (tweets in Russian, 2,882 followers) and @agap7180 (the Ukrainian users, tweets in Ukrainian and English, almost 8,000 followers). Other users replied to the image commenting on the artistic style and political connotation: “you are late, vampires are not in fashion anymore, now anime is in fashion)))))) change your picture” (@yudiff80) and “be reconciled, you are in paradise” (@vadimkar_2).

Then a popular @BremboTwit account that has 22,700 followers (but no recognised journalists or media celebrities among them) introduces the hashtag #[ДоброПожаловатьДомой](#) (#WelcomeHome). He adds another cartoon that portrays Russia’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vitaly Churkin (grey headed man on the left) and a girl with the Russian flag and tag “Going home!”.



@BremboTwit’s tweet says: “This is how it is!)”. The bubble over Vitaly Churkin’s head (on the left) reads “Best wishes staying!”. Churkin and the girl stand on the shore labelled as “Crimea”, while the gang of aggressive people with Nazi symbols, pro-Ukrainian posters and bursts of flame remain on the other side labelled as “New Ukraine”.

While scraping more memes that floated in the threads of Guberniev’s followers and contributors and appeared under the tag #[ДоброПожаловатьДомой](#), I located another text on the Crimean topic. A Demotivator with the comic inside, it arrived under the tweet “Listen to your Mom!”



@sergzvon959's Geopolitics for the Youngest meme. The Mother (painted in Russian national colours) calls Crimea by the "pet name" "Кры-у-у-мка!", and the Boy answers "What, Mom?", while two other Boys (painted in the Ukrainian national colours and red and black Anarchist colours) seem to be plotting something in the background. The next image shows the Mother yelling "Home, now!". The last image portrays the Mother calling "Ala-a-a-ska!". The Demotivator frame reads "Geopolitics for the youngest".

The moderate number of retweets on that meme allowed locating all the retweeting users. Twitter statistics does not reveal the whole list of retweeters if it extends a few dozens, so this example was a feasible case for the detailed examination of the network. I attempted to draw a portrait of an average meme sharer by drawing the comparison of the number of followers of each user, their geolocation and available profile information. Yet the task proved challenging as the accounts varied greatly and very few communalities were spotted. In this case, for instance, 24 people retweeted the meme. Among them seven users have 100-300 followers, eight users fall between 500-13,000 followers, and seven – below 100.

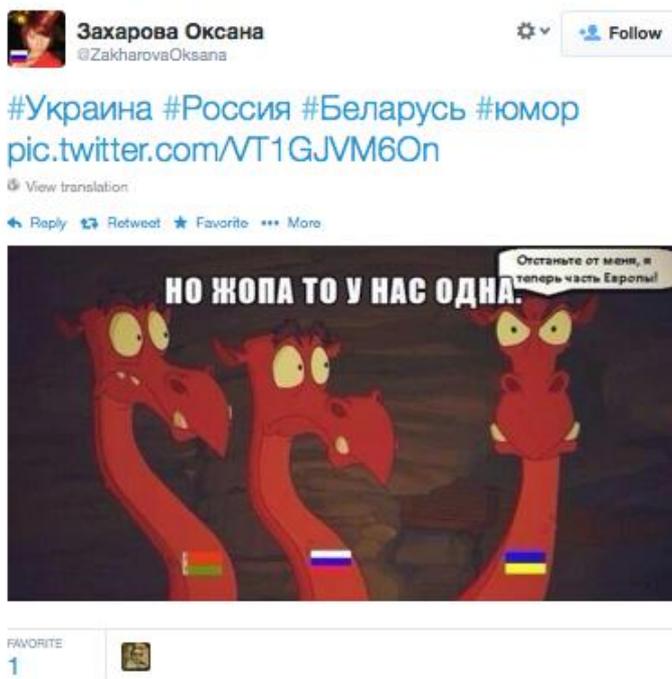
Top retweeters are ER_Insider (12,459) – the abbreviation suggests the user’s affiliation with the Russian ruling party Единая Россия (United Russia), @vMixailv (5,077), @ZakharovaOksana (1,365) – youth politics, @iHelicopteritow (811) – Twitter user and engineer, @MovludTuran (1,197) – user from Ufa, Russia and @serzvon959 (1,428) – ‘simple lad, Kazan’. These users do not connect to each other and follow a diverse arrangement of accounts.

Furthermore, I expanded my analysis by checking whether the abovementioned users shared any other political memes on their personal pages.

@ZakharovaOksana published other political memes: one condemned the former defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov who was accused of corruption but then was granted amnesty, the other light-heartedly commented on the unity of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.



@ZakharovaOksana’s anti-corruption meme. The tweets says: “After Serdyukov was granted amnesty the whole war on corruption looks very funny”, and the Demotivator frame below Serdyukov’s photo adds a pun “I am on the Saboteur Protection Programme”.



@ZakharovaOksana's Dragon meme. The popular folk character, dragon with three heads, represents (according to the flags attached to the necks) Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The Ukrainian head bellows "Leave me alone, I am now the part of Europe!". But the over-imposed catchphrase demurs: "But we still share the same ass".

@ZakharovaOksana attracted only one or no retweets at all for either meme, making me conclude that her account is the dead end for further network analysis.

Another retweeter @ER_Insider proved more helpful in tracing a network of connected accounts. He or she has a substantial amount of followers (12,800) and tweeted other political memes in March 2014.



@ER_Insider's Obama-Alaska-Putin meme. Barack Obama says: "And we...And I... We are not recognising the results of the referendum..." Putin answers: "Oh come on.. For real? Are you talking about Crimea? Or already about Alaska?"

19 retweets, 4 favourites. The majority of the retweeters are minor Tweeter users (round 100 followers), yet a few are more popular. They are: **@G_oo_D_MaN** (Tula, 570 followers) and **@zyuliyc** (Vladivostok, 312 followers). The inquiry into the latter account (analysis of the profile, background image and recent tweets) suggests that it belongs to a romantic woman; a young mother; she also shares photos of children and "cute" quotations about life. Nonetheless, she also shared another political meme among her casual apolitical tweets. Intriguingly, this is a popular meme that leads to the account of Sergey Aksenov, the newly appointed Chairman of Crimean parliament in Crimea Republic.



Сергей Аксенов
@sergyaksenov



Follow

Яростно, не стесняясь в выражениях и сравнениях патриоты Украины пишут про санкции и перекрытие границ. Мы не боимся. pic.twitter.com/J1DqTWhlgA

[View translation](#)

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)



RETWEETS
145

FAVORITES
26



4:00 AM - 17 Mar 2014

Flag media

@sergyaksenov's Railway meme. The tweet says: "The patriots of Ukraine furiously write about sanctions and the closure of the borders without giving consideration to the choice of words and comparisons. We are not afraid". The meme says in English, on behalf of Barack Obama: "Putin! Stop! Come back here or I'll be forced to draft a strongly worded condemnation!"

Aksenov's Railway meme is successful on Twitter (145 retweets, 26 favourites). This text thus surprisingly connects a young mother from Vladivostok with the pro-Russian political leader in Crimea. This finding is especially fascinating as @zyuliyc and @sergyaksenov do not follow each other and their networks of contacts differ greatly. @zyuliyc follows celebrities, fashion and lifestyle accounts and very few political and news feeds; while the 'sergyaksnov' network is more news and politics-oriented. Nonetheless, the very few mutually shared accounts promoted their interconnectedness via the meme sharing.

Due to the complexity of Twitter structures, it was unfeasible to locate the mutually followed account that may have facilitated meme sharing. Manual analysis of @sergyaksenov's Railway meme shares has exposed many prominent political Twitter users in his network of followers.

The Railway meme was retweeted by many minor (below 100 followers) users and a few major ones. The major retweeters are:

- **@yabloko75 (St Petersburg, politician? 902)**, retweets the pro-Kremlin accounts @RT_Russian, @rykov, @pravdiva_pravda, @grizzlynohead pic.twitter.com/hiPfwMEjVO; shares the memes on Obama by the pro-Kremlin journalists Anton Vernitsky (Pervyi kanal) and Roman Kondrashov (Rossiya TV news) pic.twitter.com/3s7kSPF4gZ; @rykov's meme mocking Yulia Timoshenko (Crimea-Timoshenko-Gollum pic.twitter.com/2qvexoiGIV) and @myrevolutionrus' meme against Obama (Obama-bombings-democracy pic.twitter.com/REX4cDmGyt);
- **@kolydka (St Petersburg, 1,257)**, retweets the pro-Kremlin accounts @pravdiva_pravda, @rykov, @Lev_Sharansky and posts plenty of own tweets. Shares the original meme – 'These Guys are Not Perfect but They Made Me Proud of My Country' pic.twitter.com/MzVGHgpuuB. He or she also published a version of the Bear meme pic.twitter.com/Y0vpWpZk8s;
- **@Anton2020A (the account's title is 'Ecology & nature! Humour & jokes!', 867)**, retweets the pro_kremlin accounts @vezhlivo, @rykov, @RT_Russian, @pravdiva_pravda @mironov_ru, @myrevolutionrus (AntiMaidan). Retweets @vezhlivo's logo - pic.twitter.com/mxPZr834d9;
- **@ivolodchenko (an attractive young woman with a patriotic poem in the profile, 2,934)**, retweets the pro-Kremlin accounts @vezhlivo, @korobkov and shares pro-Russian memes pic.twitter.com/mxPZr834d9;
- **@robabayan (editor-in-chief & presenter at Moscow radio FinAm FM, 1,077)**, also retweets [@sergyaksenov](https://twitter.com/sergyaksenov) and @vezhlivo a lot.

The evaluation of this network of meme sharers reveals that the majority of them support the Russian government and often publish memes in their Twitter feeds. Although it was not possible to locate who distributed the meme to @zyuliy, we can

spot an echo-chamber of popular and influential pro-government accounts; they have wide webs of followers, hence guaranteeing a mass dissemination of memes. Besides, several major accounts, such as @rykov, @korobkov, @pravdiva_pravda and @myrevolutionrus appear in many pro-Russian meme networks suggesting that there is a strong tendency towards hierarchy in the system of pro-government accounts.

Back to the Putin-Obama-Alaska meme (see Figure 27). Besides @zyulyic, another notable retweeter here is @G_oo_D_MaN (Tula, 570 followers). Noteworthy, @G_oo_D_MaN does not only follow the popular pro-government blogger @rykov, but is also followed by him. @G_oo_D_MaN's profile does not disclose his ideological preference, but the meme he or she shares do:

- retweets the sexist @BremboTweet's meme on Vitaly Churkin and American ambassador Samantha Power in the UN pic.twitter.com/sz3kPUjGgv; Apparently it originates from the account of the popular pro-Kremlin blogger Maxim Kononeko (see Figure 28), 75 retweets, 13 favourites;
- follows and retweets @kolaydka pic.twitter.com/JLgTQNEI3R;
- retweets @s_udaltsov's (one of the opposition leaders in Moscow) image The USSR-is-back (see Figure 29), 286 retweets, 89 favourites.



Максим Кононенко
@kononenkome



Follow

ТАК ВОН ОНО ЧО ! pic.twitter.com/VTfAYDwIEx

View translation

Reply Retweet Favorite More



RETWEETS
75

FAVORITES
13



@kononenkome's Churkin-power-UN meme. The tweet says: "So this is the point!" while the meme portrays the US ambassador to the UN Samantha Power next to the Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin. The first image comes from the news sources, two others are doctored to give the impression that Power is getting under the table to perform oral sex with Churkin.



@s_udaltsov's The USSR-is-Back image. The tweet above the USSR's coat of arms says: "The next step is the revival of the Soviet Union that was destroyed 23 years ago despite the will of the Soviet citizens".

The curious fact that the pro-government user @G_oo_D_MaN retweeted the opposition leader @s_udaltsov among many pro-Kremlin memes called for further analysis. Picking on the USSR-is-Back image, I examined the top retweeters among 286 users who shared the meme to their followers.

- The image with a tweet was posted by the opposition politician of the Left Front Sergey Udaltsov @s_udaltsov, 286 retweets, 89 favourites.
- @s_udaltsov follows 100 and is followed by 88,500 users.
- The tweet triggers a hot debate and a long thread of replies. **A popular TV actor and stand-up comic Denis Kosyakov @Dermission** (22,100 followers) replies to @s_udaltsov and @navalny arguing that "the USSR is the

worst and most shameful thing that ever happened to our motherland. God forbid! Although he does not exist”.

- **A popular anti-Kremlin ecological activist Evgeniya Chirikova @4irikova** (70,100 followers) joins in saying that “Udaltsov [@s_udaltsov](#) under home arrest is the step towards the USSR as much as the referendum in Crimea is a step towards the revival of the glorious GULAGs (*concentration camps of the Soviet era – A.D.*)”. This comment attracts intensive trolling and rude attacks from other users.
- The major retweeters of The USSR-is-Back viral text are **@mrzine_notes** (English-speaking socialist magazine Monthly Review, 104 followers) and **@rednewsru** (Sergey Krongauz, Prague?, 3,352 followers).
- The heated thread under the text engages the established opposition leaders, civil activists, television personalities and average users, proving that the publication of viral texts and memes can incite a discussion. The conversation enlightened the participants’ ideas on the political standpoints of the Soviet Union and comparison with the present Russia, thus encouraging reflections on the parallels between two countries.