digital icons
Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media

Russian 2011-12
Elections and Digital Media

NETWORKED PUTINISM: THE FADING DAYS OF THE (BROADCAST) ERA[1]

by Vlad Strukov

In this short essay I aim to discuss the emergence of a new form of social and cultural order in the Russian Federation that I call 'networked Putinism'. In the narrow sense, networked Putinism refers to the ways in which Putin's regime has utilised new media, especially the internet, to manage new participatory democratic processes in the country. In the broader sense, the term defines an historical era that is characterised not so much by Putin's leadership but rather by the ability of the regime to evolve by responding to the challenges of global economy and Russia's local political and social instabilities. My concern then is outside the dichotomies of technological determinism that have dominated the discussion of 'Russia's path to democracy' from 2005 through 2010; instead I am interested in the new discourses of power that have been employed since 2010. Although my focus is on the political and media events of the autumn 2011-spring 2012—as the theme of the present cluster suggests—I write this essay in the hope that in the future a new paradigm of political and cultural shifts can be developed to include a wider historical and medial context.

My discussion is based on the analysis of media events shown on national and transnational television channels (Channel One, Rossiia, BBC and Russia Today, Dozhd, respectively) and discussed in newspapers (Kommersant, gazeta.ru, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian), online resources (Navalny blog, *YouTube*) and on various websites. My media monitoring started in November 2011 and continued until the end of March 2012 and is complemented by numerous conversations with fellow Russians during my visit to Voronezh and Moscow in March 2012—I am grateful to all of them for their thoughts and particularly for enduring and commenting on my own 'monologue'.

I present my argument as code, insofar as they signal the difficulty to disentangle the events of protests from the media frenzy they instigated as well as the post-mortem nature of the discussion. Each coda employs a specific visual. The visuals are used to evoke certain events in the electoral process of the past six months as well as to accentuate the ocular, even

[1] I presented some of these ideas at an event in Cambridge that was organised by Dr Susan Larsen (see Strukov 2012).

cinematic effects of the current political spectacle in Russia. Where possible, I identify the creators of the phrases and visuals; in a few instances where phrases and images have become internet memes, their authorship is rendered irrelevant.

1 Not a laughing matter

My first image is a reminder of how the battle for Russian presidency commenced. The caricature shows President Medvedev announcing Vladimir Putin's candidacy for presidency, and it appeared and circulated in *LiveJournal* blogs as a typical internet viral. Is Medvedev performing a circus magic trick? Or is he unveiling a monument? Am I right in thinking that his and the presidential candidate's stances are reminiscent of the Vera Mukhina's 1937 sculpture *The Worker and the Peasant*? And does the veiled candidate remind you of the famous ghost—'samoe strashnoe prividenie'—from the Soviet animated film about Karlson (*Malysh i Karlson*, 1968, dir. by Boris Stepantsev)? Whatever the case, the caricature captures the prevailing emotion of the past year: Russian political life is a fantastic source of (visual) anecdotes. Laughing at Putin and other politicians is believed to be healthy and many maintain that the carnival should go on. And it did go on until it was no more: almost overnight following the announcement of the results of the Duma elections, the political process ceased to be a laughing matter. I find that this new wave of seriousness and sincerity that has replaced inertia and steb[2] in relation to politics and the future of the nation is perhaps the greatest social achievement of the past decade.

Image 1. Screengrab of a *YouTube* video showing a caricature of Medvedev and Putin.

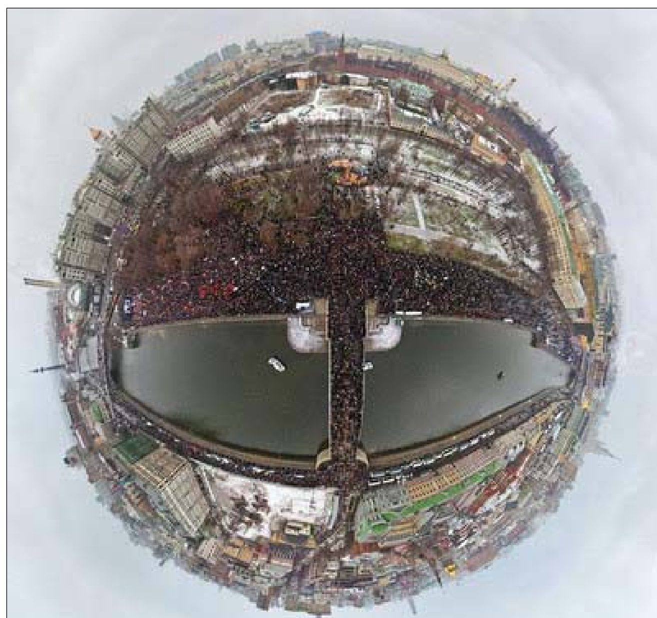
Source: www.youtube.ru (accessed 1 March 2012).

[2] Steb is a rhetorical category. Alexei Yurchak defines steb as 'a peculiar form of irony... that required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mix of the two' (2006: 50). For the use of steb in relation to Russian media please see Beumers et al 2009.

2 To observe or not to observe

I borrow my next visual from the Tsensor.net website.[3] It shows the December 2011 protests on the Bolotnaia square in Moscow. The brilliant spherical effect was perhaps altered with the help of Photoshop, and it designates a few characteristics of the contemporary political process in the Russian Federation. Firstly, it refers—predictably—to the distortion of the real political process in its mediated phase. Secondly, it demonstrates the scale of the protest as well as the role of the 'perspective'—whether photographic or political—in the framing of the events. The square—visually compared to the globe—simultaneously appears gigantic and miniature, depending on the viewpoint of the spectator. The buzz generated by the people on the square seems to have penetrated the whole world, and indeed political protests in Russia have been in the focus of global media for months on end. I believe an even greater discussion will follow in academic circles in the years to come.[4] Thirdly, the anthropomorphic effect of the image—the two symmetrical sections of the Moscow canal appear as human eyes (or as sunglasses covering the eyes) with the bridge standing for the nose—signifies the reflective, dualistic quality of the events whereby the observers are being observed by the very thing they aim to observe.

Image 2. Protests on the Bolotnaia square in Moscow, December 2011.



Source: http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/190993/moskva_prevratilas_v_planetu_miting_ fotoreportaj (accessed 2 March 2012).

This postmodernist effect of self-reflexivity denotes the very nature of the political process in Russia of the past few months: political ambition has constantly been questioned, social goals undermined and any aspiration muted by the suspicious spectator. At the same time, one of

[3] http://censor.net.ua is an activist platform that monitors abuses of internet freedom in post-Soviet states.
[4] For example, at the *Media, Power and Revolution: Making the 21st Century* conference (organised by James Current et al; London 2-4 April 2012).

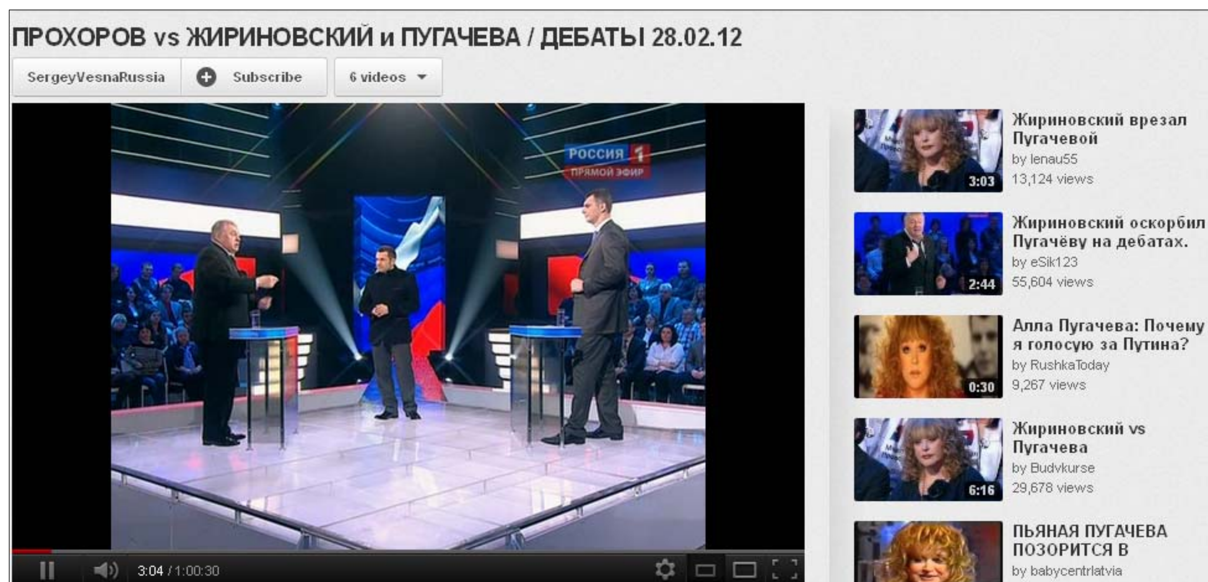
the achievements of the protest movement has been the consolidation of the previously fragmented public, which was particularly evident in the use of volunteer observers at polling stations. However, their hopes and hard work were challenged by the networked panopticon set up for the presidential elections: the CCTV cameras that were installed at every polling station provided the political observers with an opportunity to monitor the electoral process but also provided the regime with the opportunity to survey the process. The city-scaped cyborg presented in Image 2 is a wonderful commentary on Putin's politics of controlled vision facilitated by networked media whereby the gaze has multiple directions, and in effect it seems to be looking nowhere.

3 Political *Big Brother*

The spectatorial practice of the 2011-12 elections was significantly different from that of 1996 or even the perestroika period. It occurred mainly in cyberspace, thus delinked from the continuous programme flow of televisual media. This is not to say that most of the Russian electorate would go online to check the political news but rather that Russian media had entered the post-broadcast phase with multiplatform multimedia products circulating widely and impacting day-to-day political discourse. For the first time the Russian public was exposed to a mediated networked political spectacle which provided the electorate with (an illusion of) participation. It was derived from the well-rehearsed skill of watching reality shows and combined mediation of the political process with remediation of media formats on new platforms. Image 3 is a screengrab of the *YouTube* premier of the televised debate between two presidential candidates, Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Mikhail Prokhorov. The setting is reminiscent of Russian talk shows, which makes the political debate less intimidating. At the same time it contains an ironic allusion to the *Muzykal'nyi ring* programme;[5] the connection is established with the help of the studio setting as well as because of the presence of pop music star Alla Pugacheva, Prokhorov's supporter. The debate captured the imagination of the public because of Zhirinovskii's attack on Pugacheva and her retaliation, i.e. it demonstrated the shift of Russian politics literally into the arena of entertainment. Other videos and comments appearing to the right were posted by internet users and they are symptomatic of the general trend of interest in the Zhirinovskii-Pugacheva clash. I would like to emphasise that my point here is not that infotainment has replaced genuine political discussion but to suggest that the political is now played out on the realm of the popular. This is indeed an effective mechanism of engaging the disenchanted publics and of generating what we might call a public opinion in a society that is disastrously fragmented and incapable of reaching social consensus.

[5] [musical ring] was a musical show that was aired on Soviet and Russian television in the 1980s and 1990s; it was created by Vladimir and Tamara Maksimovs and featured contestants on a ring; these would normally be Soviet rock and pop bands; this way the Maksimovs introduced the public to the underground culture of rock music in the late perestroika period.

Image 3. Televised debates between presidential candidates Zhirinovskii and Prokhorov.

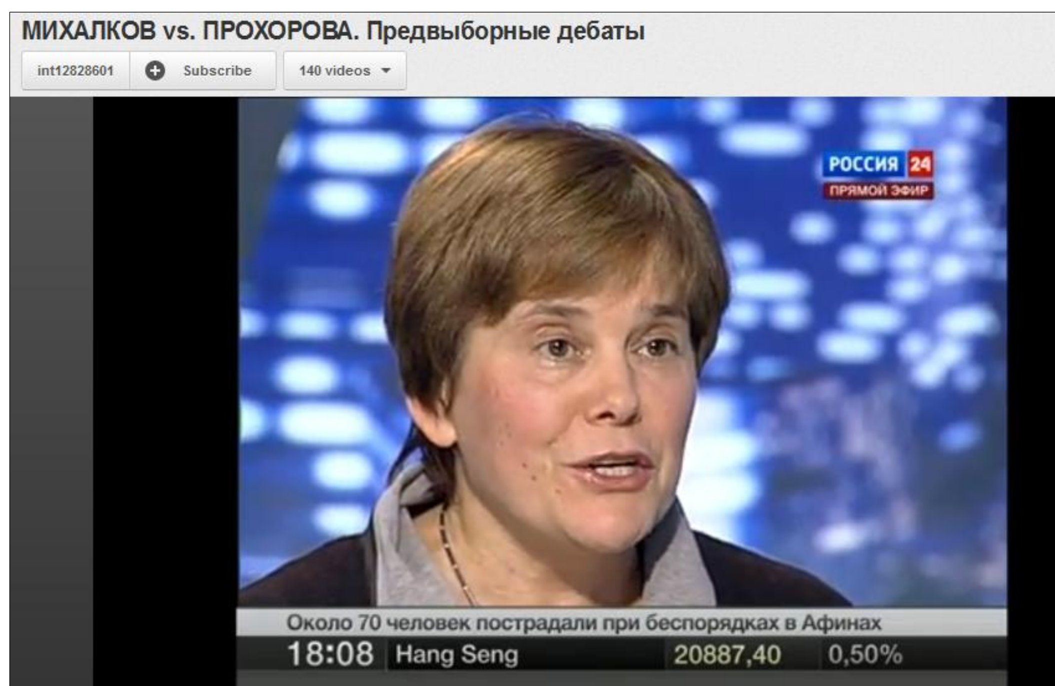


Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1jOidrxqHo (accessed 1 March 2012).

4 Editing political talk

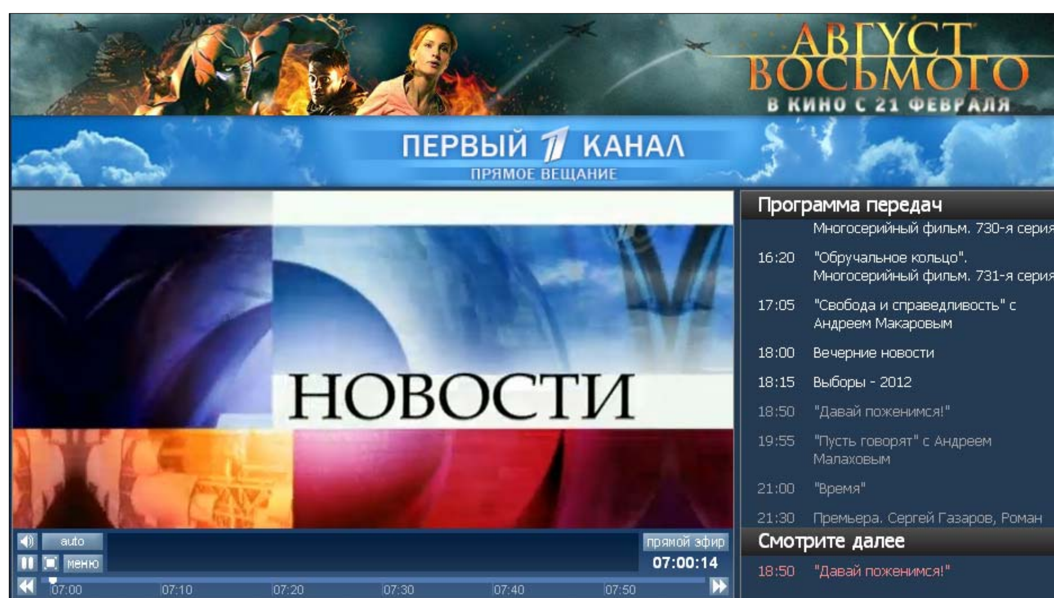
The distancing effect of Russian politics is also evident in the use of the so-called proxy-debates, i.e. a practice of nominating public figures to represent presidential candidates at televised debates. It was started by Vladimir Putin whose political technologists advised him to abstain from participating in the debates on the grounds of that his popularity would have a positive affect on the polling rates of other candidates. Putin's conspicuous, almost Olympian, absence from the debates signifies—among other things—his newly obtained status of a media deity who exercises great impact but is rarely visible unless his performance is carefully choreographed and monitored. In this case, Putin's representative is the filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov, known for his nationalist, monarchist agenda and loyal support of the government. His opponent is Irina Prokhorova, sister of the tycoon and manager of his cultural foundations, who is known for her liberal political orientations. In spite of an extremely sophisticated use of the news tagline at the bottom of the screen—every time the camera would focus on Irina the tag line would carry some negative news, and conversely positive news would be presented when it was Mikhalkov's turn to speak—the debate propelled Irina Prokhorova into Russian political stardom making her perhaps even more popular than her brother.

Images 4&5. Screengrabs of *YouTube* videos of televised political debates. Image 4 shows Irina Prokhorova; the tag line at the bottom of the screen reads: 'About 70 people were hurt in protests in Athens'. Image 5 shows Nikita Mikhalkov; the tag line at the bottom of the screen reads: 'Putin: in 4 years in the Russian Federation government expenditure on welfare has increased by 1.5 percent'.



Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tW3qLufFJls (accessed 28 February 2012)

Image 6. Screengrab of the news site of Channel One. The site contains an announcement of a programme covering Russian elections as well as advertises a new blockbuster *Avgust Vos'mogo* (*8 August,* directed by Dzhanik Faiziiev) that depicts the events of the South Ossetia conflict. Protests in Georgia and Ukraine were branded as an 'orange threat' during the Russian election campaign; in this case this threat is evoked in the use of colour as well as through the cinematic reminder of recent historical events.



Source: http://www.1tv.ru/news/(accessed 1 March 2012).

5 Shopping for the president

Russia's electoral process has shown a great propensity for commodification which is apparent in the use of the slogans of the protest movement in the promotion of a radio station (see image 7). In this case, the Russian word 'golos', meaning both 'voice' and 'vote', is used to refer to the practice of 'stealing' votes in the Duma elections, i.e. rigging the electoral process, and to suggest that the voice of this radio station will always remain forceful and genuine. The call of the Kommersant radio station for greater transparency in Russian political life is only laudable; furthermore it is important to emphasize that the station appropriated the call of the Russian opposition and turned it into a successful advertising campaign. The logo of Nescafe in the top right corner of the screen puts the finishing touch to this political/commercial campaign with the right side of the screen appearing as a single canvas for projecting (political) aspiration in contemporary Russia, whether one is tuning in for news or shopping for new flavours and aromas.

Shopping in the USSR was something of a gulag nightmare; nowadays spending a weekend in one of Moscow's shopping centres is itself worth a trip to the capital. Like in other post-industrial countries, it is the experience that matters more than the actual product; therefore the process of commodification of Russian politics has taken the route of the experience and the main outcome of the electoral process is the emergence of new political brands that I believe will continue to develop in the post-broadcast media ecosystem, with fans contribut-

ing to branding through their activity online. For me, in the past 6 months clicking for Russian politics online has been similar to being on price-comparison sites: small print is frequently used to disguise and upset the real scale of offered 'discounts'.

Image 7. Screengrab of an advertisement of the new Kommersant radio station on Dozhd television channel website.

Source: http://video.meta.ua/4359861.video (accessed 1 March 2012).

6 'Krug zamknulsia' [the circle is now complete]

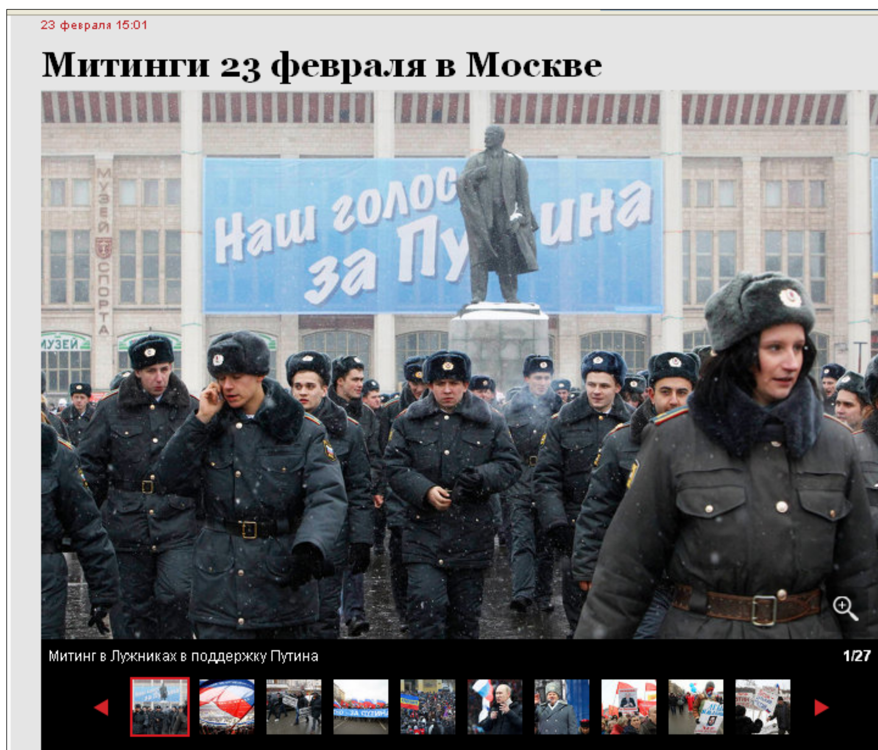
The aggressive proliferation of new media in Russia has resulted in the emergence of new types of audiences / publics—they are not only pleasure seekers who spend most of their time shopping for political experiences online but also haphazard publics [sluchainaia publika] and mobile parties that congregate in order to address a specific societal issue and then to dissolve. These flexible organisations and taste-based allegiances—to paraphrase Latour—are active only in situational contexts; however the online digital trail enables them to reassemble and to continue their activities both online and offline. As a result Russians now have a sense of being connected, at least technologically, with new lines of separation being drawn along access to the internet and its various digital realms. This was manifested in the political protest when protesters in Moscow built a circle around the Garden ring, the main concentric

thoroughfare in the capital. Curiously the event was rarely branded as a flashmob which is significant for my argument because it testifies to the success of taking political activity off-line as a form of consolidation.

Image 8. 'Krug zamknulsia': *Big White Circle* protest in Moscow.

Source: http://rosnarod.ru/foto-dnja/bolshoi-belyi-krug.html (1 March 2012).

Image 9. Demonstrations in support of Vladimir Putin.



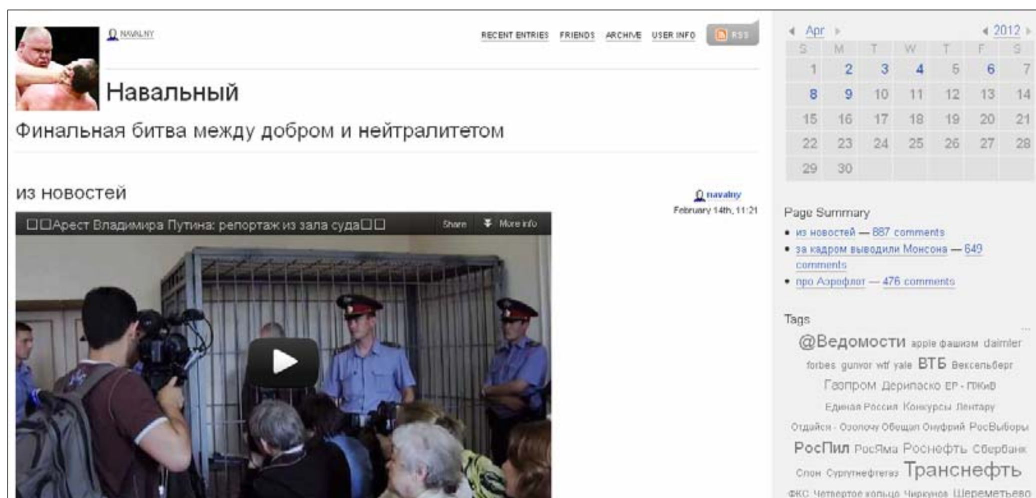
Source: www.kommersant.ru (accessed 1 March 2012).

At the same time, ‘krug zamknulsia’ is a peculiar phrase in Russian as, on the one hand, it signifies a completion of an action, and, on the other, it refers to the notion of ‘krugovaia poruka’ [mutual dependence], thus accentuating interdependence and even corruption. Image 8 shows the protestors facing the police—the latter seem to outnumber the former—and this opposition, taken literally here, is a peculiar sign of confrontation and also consolidation: the protestors stand on the inner side of the Garden ring with the sites of what symbolically represents Russia, e.g. the Kremlin, behind their backs. In other words they seem to be protecting their motherland from the outside aggression—a very clever move indeed!

7 New lyrics and old tunes

The electoral process has helped solidify the power of new figures of authority, for example, of Aleksei Naval’nyi (http://navalny.livejournal.com/) whose site http://rospil.info/ has come to symbolise Russia’s battle against corruption. I imagine new voices will emerge in the next few years and perhaps we will see the birth of new political elites, parties and associations. Needless to say, new media will be central to their success in the future. This change is symptomatic of Russia’s quest for democracy and of the global trend of conducting political activity in the digital realm. However, there is one significant social and cultural factor that should not escape our attention. The politically active users of new media in Russia belong more or less to the same generation, the one that came into being at the time of perestroika; now aged 35-45 they were in their teens when Mikhail Gorbachev announced the move towards glasnost and uskorenie [acceleration]. Therefore, like everything made in the 1980s, calls for transparency are particularly fashionable these days. The political fashion seems to have made a comeback, and it is possible that the new Russian elites will maintain the values they acquired in the debates of the late 1980s. I wonder—sceptically—whether they will eventually be replaced by the apathetic generation of the 1990s. Brushing up on Pelevin’s *Generation P* is perhaps something political technologists should do this summer.

Image 10. *LiveJournal* blog of Aleksei Naval’nyi.



Source: http://navalny.livejournal.com/2012/02/14/ (accessed 14 February 2012).

8 The postbroadcast era

In the heat of the political debate we failed to notice how Russian media had entered its post-broadcast phase. The space of this essay does not allow me to present a fuller argument; however I hope a very brief outline of the media development will suffice. It has been successfully argued that the 1990s were a period of battles between Russian television channels. The outcome was quite gruesome with some channels shutting down and others mutating to become their own opposites (Koltsova 2006). The 2000s will be remembered as a period of confrontation between television and the internet, with the latter carrying the liberating logic of user-generated democracy. However perhaps Evgeny Morozov (2011) stated the obvious when he proclaimed that technology in itself will not pave way for a democratic society, and that new pathways should be explored.

My concern is that this binary logic of technological development and associated communication, social and cultural advancement has long been exhausted. In Russia we see the emergence of new multimedia platforms that promote political brands and newer parties or groups. I am hesitant to provide an account of what exactly the future holds; however I am quite confident to suggest that the visual aspect of new media will prevail in its capacity to deliver political message and to impact the political process. In this regard, new media repeat / remediate previous media (Bolter&Grusin 2003)—and I would argue cultural paradigms: in the 1920s Sergei Eisenstein wrote about the cinema of attractions and its capacity to influence the masses. While the term 'masses' without doubt belongs to the twentieth century, I wonder if we will live to witness the emergence of the networks of attractions.

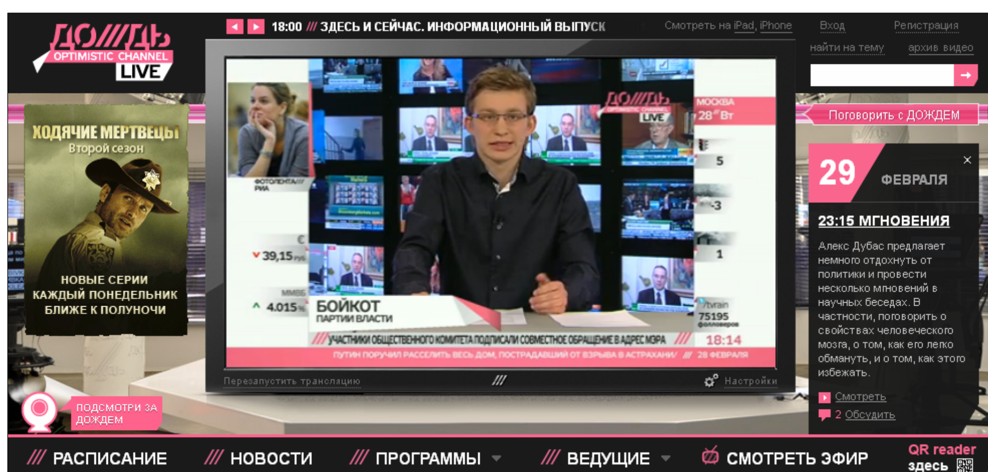
Image 12. Screengrab of a *YouTube* video showing Viacheslav Khait speaking in support of fair elections.

Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPW1LT8kroc (accessed 29 February 2012).

9 Visual perestroika

The Russian opposition movement has been frequently criticised for failing to produce a new convincing ideology; however in my view it has produced a new style of politics. Moreover, I would like to argue that the electoral process of 2011-12 has been characterised not by media wars—whether between television channels or media platforms—but by political styles. Political programming produced by main television channels, for example, Channel One, Rossiia, and others—no matter what form of delivery they chose to utilise—had the flavour of carefully staged, stern and a little Sovietesque take on political life. Marginal, particularly digital television channels, for example Dozhd, entertained their audiences with a new aesthetic of political communication: their programmes and advertising campaigns featured unedited footage, informal modes of address and presentation of political discussions, enhanced interactivity and user-generated content. On the one hand, these features appear to have stemmed from the experience of networked media, with *YouTube* pioneering a new form of televised sincerity and Twitter delivering the impression of immediacy in political debate. On the other hand, these modes of political appeal appear to have roots in a different historical period altogether: Gorbachev's perestroika and Russian media of the time, for example, Vzgliad[6], put great emphasis on honesty, informality and live interaction. In other words, I would like to argue for the return of the perestroika generation and perestroika style of politics that I hope—fingers crossed—might produce a similar paradigmatic shift in Russian political and cultural life that would replace networked Putinism.

Image 12. Screengrab of Dozhd television channel website.



Source: http://tvrain.ru/ (accessed 29 February 2012).

London, Cambridge & Voronezh, March-April 2012

[6] Vzgliad [glance] is a popular television programme (premiered in 1987) that has been aired on Soviet Central Television and Russian Channel One; Aleksandr Liubomov and Vladislav List'ev were its anchors; the programme became one of the symbols of perestroika.

Bibliography

Beumers, Birgit, Stephen Hutchings and Natasha Rulyova (2009). 'Introduction', in *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals* edited by Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings and Natasha Rulyova. London: Routledge, 1-26.

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard A. Grusin (2003). *Remediation: Understanding New Media.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Koltsova, Olessia (2006). *News Media and Power in Russia.* London: Routledge.

Morozov, Evgeny (2011). *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World.* New York: Allen Lane.

Strukov, Vlad (2012). 'Networked Putinism: New Media Discourses and Old Media Frameworks' [Conference Paper]. New Russian Politics and Protests: A Roundtable on the Eve of the Presidential Election conference, March 2, University of Cambridge (UK).

Yurchak, Alexei (2006). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

VLAD STRUKOV is an Associate Professor in Russian Cultural Studies and World Cinemas, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Leeds. He is one of the founders of the Leeds Russian Centre (Russia[n] in the Global Context) and Director of the Centre for World Cinemas. He is currently working on the project 'Visual Media in the Era of Multilingual Globalisation' with the BBC World Service and Leeds Institute of Communication Studies. His research on digital culture has appeared in a number of publications, including 'Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic' (with Professor Helena Goscilo, Routledge, 2010) and 'New Media in New Europe-Asia' (with Drs Natalia Rulyova and Jeremy Morris, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2012). His forth-coming publication is a book entitled *From Central to Digital: Television in Russia* (co-edited with Dr Vera Zvereva).