

Reports and Commentaries

**VIRTUAL RUSSIA:
DIGITAL SPACE AND POST-SOVIET POLITICAL CULTURE**
by Tatiana Teterevleva

The international conference *Virtual Russia: Digital Space and Post-Soviet Political Culture* was held in St-Petersburg on 20-21 October 2011. The conference was organized by the *Future of Russian* project (Bergen University, Norway, http://www.uib.no/rg/future_r/) in cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (<http://nupi.no>) and the *Web Wars* project (headed by Ellen Rutten and Vera Zvereva, Bergen University, and Maartje Gerretsen, an independent filmmaker from Amsterdam, <http://www.web-wars.org/>).

The main goal of the conference was to encourage interdisciplinary dialogue between the members of the *Future of Russian* team (the core group and international network), members of the *Web Wars* project and scholars working in political science, anthropology, sociology and history. Such a scholarly dialogue was necessary because of the large-scale transformations that have occurred as a result of the impact of new technologies and new media on politics. The ‘mediatisation’ of politics has become an important factor in the re-shaping and functioning of the post-Soviet political space. New media change the ways in which political information is produced, and transform the relationship between the political elites, public intellectuals, media and electorate. In this context the issues related to politics and politicians in virtual environments are perhaps the most exciting ones, for their study can assist our understanding of how digital technologies are revolutionizing political and social practices and radically altering basic political categories. Moreover, digital media and internet are now changing the language of politics, the representation of political phenomena and the construction of political discourse.

Ingunn Lunde (University of Bergen) opened the conference with a statement explicating the aims of the conference; they included a wide range of issues related to the place of internet and digital media in Russian political discourse and the language of social memory, main digital platforms for the political debate in the post-Soviet space, as well as the mutual influence of the Russian-speaking blogosphere and Russian politics. Lunde followed this with a presentation about the recent Twitter flashmob *SPASIBOPUTINUZAETO/THANKS PUTINFORTHIS* as a literary and a political phenomenon.

Michael Gorham (University of Florida) began the first session with a presentation on the official models of identity and community in the age of new media when internet is being included into mundane practice of Russian bureaucracy. Gorham argued that the presence of the Russian political elite in the blogosphere is part of the broader campaign for ‘modernization’, and ‘direct internet democracy’ has resulted in a relatively unmediated exchange of ideas between the political leadership and citizens. The promise of a less formal and complicated communication with Russian civil institutions that is characteristic of the Russian bureaucratic culture became the subject of a lively discussion among the conference participants.

Two researchers from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs continued this theme. **Sean P. Roberts** offered a comparative analysis of the political effectiveness of the Russian party leaders’ online activities (with a special focus on Ziuganov, Zhirinovskii, Mironov, and Gryzlov). **Natalia Moen** discussed the ruling tandems’ strategies and attitudes towards new media, using as an example the case study of Medvedev’s and Putin’s instrumentalization of digital media in leveling the current demographic crisis.

The topical issue of the politician’s self-presentation in the virtual space was thoroughly elaborated in **Tine Roesen’s** (Aarhus University) presentation ‘limonov2012.ru’. Roesen analysed the content of Edward Limonov’s website, paying attention to the convergent use of text and hypertext as well as to visual and verbal representations of this illustrious politician. She also looked for traces of the former writer and propagator of aesthetic-political *Gesamtkunst* [total artwork].

The next session explored the role of new media in changing the basic principles of post-Soviet political strategies. **Oleg Reut** (University of Petrozavodsk) presented the paper ‘New Media: Wiki-Democracy or Veracity’, in which he revealed key factors effecting qualitative changes in the ways politics is represented on Runet, with focus shifting from ‘fact-based politics’ via ‘opinion-based politics’ to ‘belief-based politics’. **Tatiana Teterevleva** (University of Arkhangelsk) presented the paper ‘Historical Policy in the Virtual Space: Representations and Interpretations of the Past’; she discussed the political use of history in digital media and the political and legal tools being currently developed to regulate historical representations on the internet. This issue has gained relevance since the lack of a critical public debate on politics in Russia has tended to shift political life into the symbolic space of ‘memory’.

Natalia Sokolova (University of Samara) discussed the political dimension of digital entertainment media in Russia. The case studies of the *Second Life* virtual world and the trans-medial project *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* suggest that the common view of the virtual space as a ‘democratisation locus’ of the political life is far too optimistic. Socio-political activism and creativity are poorly represented in these projects, which convey values of official culture with its nostalgia for the Soviet times.

Elena Morenkova-Perrier (Panthéon-Assas Paris II University) presented a paper on the memory of the Soviet past in the Russian blogosphere. Focusing on the main actors and trends of the historical debate in *Livejournal*, she concluded that the historical debate on *Runet* [Russian segment of the internet] can be viewed as an attempt to rethink Soviet history from below. The leading positions in constructing the image of the Soviet past are taken increasingly by a young generation of ‘patriotic’ historians and publicists; young internet users

show a growing interest in Soviet history, accompanied by scepticism towards its official interpretations.

The morning session of the conference's second day opened with a presentation by **Martin Paulsen** (University of Bergen) titled 'The National Politics of Domain Names: Russia and Ukraine dealing with ICANN'. Paulsen focused on the reaction of these countries to the decision made by the *Internet Cooperation for Assigned Names and Numbers* (ICANN) to allow for internationalised domain names (IDN) and dealt with the question of why Russia set up a Cyrillic domain so much faster than Ukraine. His presentation was specifically concerned with both language policy and administration of the internet.

Gasan Gusejnov (Centre of Research in the Humanities, RANKhiGS) presented the online educational project on Russian and American political language as a case to comprehend the reasons why online political self-education projects are still undeveloped in Russia. He came to the conclusion that the rejection of the very idea of politics appears to be the generic feature of the Runet, which has declared a symbolic war on academic political science.

In her presentation 'Virtual Remembering' **Johanna Dahlin** (Linköping University) discussed the interaction between commemorative practices in the corporal world and their extension into virtual sites of memory. Dahlin dwelt on the issue of virtual artefacts, symbolic action and interaction in relation to the Second World (or Great Patriotic) War, the memory of which occupies prominent position in public discourse of contemporary Russia.

The last session of the conference consisted of the three presentations forming a panel 'Virtual Russia and Virtual Ukraine: Memory Wars and Digital Diasporas'. Memory wars in the post-Soviet space are the subject of the collaborative research project in the framework of the *Humanities in the European Research Area* (HERA). The project *Memory at War: Cultural Dynamics in Poland, Russia and Ukraine* (www.memoryatwar.org) led by the University of Cambridge has united scholars from five European universities to study Eastern European memory wars from different prospects. For this conference the scholars from one of the participating universities (University of Bergen), Ellen Rutten and Vera Zvereva, teamed up with media expert Helene Dounaevsky (University of Corsica). Unfortunately, Helene Dounaevsky did not manage to come to St-Petersburg, so she made her presentation 'Forged proofs, real hatred: The place & role of fakes in 'memory wars'' on-line, using Skype technology. The presentation describing two main categories of faked documents intensively used within internet discussions, suggested that the 'non-document' in an academic context becomes a 'document' (in other words, a legitimate source) in the non-academic context of Runet memory wars.

Ellen Rutten's presentation 'Digital Diaspora: Social Media and Russian-Ukrainian Memory Wars' explored the geopolitical dynamics in which the Russian-Ukrainian online memory discourse unfurls, departing from the persistent scholarly trend to define the contemporary public sphere as 'diasporic' or 'transnational'. This presentation was a very interesting attempt to draw attention to transcultural variations in memory studies by expanding the concept of 'digital diaspora' to encompass all web users in Russia and Ukraine.

The presentation by **Vera Zvereva** (University of Bergen/RGGU, Moscow) provided a lucid and in-depth analysis of the language of shared memory in digital *Runet* communities (*Facebook*, *Vkontakte* and *Livejournal*). The language of memory seen in the broad sense: 'the language'—'speech/textual behaviour', 'memory narratives', 'commemorative dis-

course’—appears to be a peculiar combination of official and informal styles, being at the same time highly ritualised.

The presentations were followed by discussions which showed the fruitfulness of the interdisciplinary dialogue between linguists, historians, political scientists and revealed interesting opportunities for their future cooperation.

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