Internet and Politics in Russia

This special issue of Euxeinos is devoted to current internet politics in Russia. It appears at an important moment for Russia: after the parliamentary elections in December 2011 and on the eve of the presidential elections scheduled for 4 March 2012. In this context, the Russian internet (RuNet) has seen remarkable developments. On the one hand, Russia's key political actors have become very active on the web. Today they are using the internet for political communication more purposefully than ever before. Seeking to expand its influence through attempts at direct communication with the electorate, Russia's political establishment is finding new ways to take political advertising and political marketing online.

At the same time, RuNet has been literally buzzing with activity from below as well. A wave of criticism against the political status quo has swept over social media and the Russian blogosphere. Gaining momentum on the internet, Russia's protest movement uses various online tools for political mobilisation. Significant tensions have arisen between these two trends – of official and civic activity. These tensions have the potential to change Russia's political landscape which, in terms of communication, long remained dominated by the traditional media and especially by the state television channels which work, by rule, in support of the status quo.

We have invited Henrike Schmidt to analyse these exciting new developments. In her article in this issue, 'The Triple P of RuNet Politics: Protest, Political Technology, Public Sphere', Schmidt analyses the Russian internet as an arena, or rather, a battleground of conflicting interests and ideas. Her analysis focuses on several emblematic developments. Among them are the protests that erupted in the blogosphere and social media following allegations of widespread fraud in the December 2011 elections. The author looks at the digital attacks and counterattacks posted on Twitter by opponents and supporters of President Dmitry Medvedev. She examines the launch of Medvedev's and Putin's official campaign websites for the March 2012 elections and the character of their political communication which, to a large extent, only pretends to be an open dialogue with the public. Schmidt analyses in particular the role of leading opposition bloggers whose websites are visited by tens of thousands of people a day, as well as the possibilities of different online communication channels to coordinate the protests and to inform the public about them.

Schmidt's idea to project those recent developments against the background of some key moments in RuNet's political history is especially productive. This gives her analysis great depth as it enables her to grasp the historical logic behind the developments that have led to the flowering of internet politics in Russia. Another strong aspect of Schmidt's analysis is her interpretation of Russian online political practices through some of the central idioms of media and political theory: public sphere, political technology, consumerism, and so on.

In the final part of her analysis, Schmidt discusses some of the most prolific sceptical attitudes towards the democratising potential of the new media (expressed by authors such as Evgeny Morozov and Dmitry Golynko-Volfson). The latest developments in 2011 and 2012 show, according to Schmidt, that a profound change is taking place in Russia. On the one hand, the possibilities for government control and even censorship on the RuNet still exist. They depend mainly on whether the fa-

miliar style of autocratic politics of Vladimir Putin will remain dominant after the presidential elections in 2012 which Putin is expected to win. On the other hand, RuNet is more and more likely to turn into a place for public debates. Many groups have the potential and ambition to exert pressure towards the democratisation of political practices. In this context RuNet can no longer be viewed as a closed and self-sufficient communicative space, which only offers opportunities for digital escapism, or where the controlling state is favoured because of advanced options for surveying and accumulating data on the opposition and the citizens. Schmidt sees the prerequisites for change in the opportunities provided by factors such as transmediality and media convergence. Due to the increasing role of these factors, now the clear border between online and offline practices has largely been removed and networked activities spill out on the streets.

Henrike Schmidt is one of the leading experts on RuNet. Among her recent publications is the book Russian Literature on the Internet. Between Digital Folklore and Political Propaganda, published in German in 2011 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.[1] Schmidt is also co-editor of Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet, published in 2006 by Norderstedt: Books on Demand. Her numerous publications on RuNet explore the interesting zones of intersection of artistic practices, media and politics. Schmidt is also a Member of the Editorial Team of one of the most influential journals investigating the impact of new media on politics, society and culture in Russia, Eurasia and Central Europe,

the online journal Digital Icons.

This issue of Euxeinos captures and analyses the moment in which Russian politics and Russian civil society are becoming ever more digital. The analysis offered here elaborates on the subject of the role of the internet in Russia and encourages further discussion.

Orlin Spassov
Guest Editor

Orlin Spassov is Doctor of Sociology and Associate Professor at Sofia University, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication. Until 2011 he was the Head of the Department of Radio and Television. Dr Spassov teaches Media and Communication Studies, and Internet Culture. He is executive director of Media Democracy Foundation (fmd.bg). Spassov is the author of Transition and the Media: Politics of Representation (2000, in Bulgarian), Internet in Bulgaria (2012, in print, in Bulgarian) and editor of twelve books, including Media and Politics (2011), New Media, new Mobilizations (2011, in Bulgarian), New Youth and new Media (2009, in Bulgarian), Quality Press in South East Europe (2004) and New Media in South East Europe (2003). His current research concerns transformations of the public sphere caused by the traditional and new media, and subcultural activities on the internet.

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1   Henrike Schmidt (2011) Russische Literatur im Internet. Zwischen digitaler Folklore und Politischer Propaganda, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.