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**Title:** Government's Echo. Twitter Discussions Around News Topics in Russian Networked Authoritarianism

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Abstract

This research uses the Social Network Analysis (SNA) method to determine the main actors in Twitter discussions around news topics. First, using the theory of networked authoritarianism (McKinnon, 2011), it conceptualizes the ways that authoritarian states may influence domestic media and the broader Internet, taking Russia as our case study. It describes Russia's media system and the incentives behind it. Next, it discusses the role of Twitter in authoritarian societies and defines Twitter's role in today's Russia. Methodology and results are followed by an exploration of the involvement of state-loyal actors in online discussions of the news, including those centered on social media in support of Russia's domestic and international priorities, aiming to set the agenda on sensitive news topics and, thus, support existing authoritarian elites while diminishing voices of opposition.

Keywords: Authoritarianism; Russia; Twitter; Media; Social Network Analysis

## **Introduction**

Authoritarianism seems to be on the rise across the world. For the last twenty years Russia has been described as one of the key examples of contemporary authoritarianism (Hale, 2010; Petrov, Lipman & Hale, 2013; Robinson & Milne: 2017). These modern regimes also seem to be adapting well to the new digital reality: they use and develop controlled decision-making input of citizens, especially through the Internet (He & Warren, 2011; Toepfl, 2018; Truex, 2014).

Research on social networks and media freedom in these kind of authoritarian regimes, as well as the political consequences of the Internet for non-democratic politics, has been developing in recent years (Gunitsky, 2015; Morozov, 2011; Toepfl, 2018; Truex, 2014). Much of the focus of such research has been on the ‘liberating’ function of social networks and ‘free’ online media, and on the use of the Internet by political opposition: from organizing the 2011-12 demonstrations in Russia (Nikiporetz-Tokagava, 2013; Oates, 2013) to Arab countries’ ‘Twitter revolutions’ (Lota et al, 2011; Pamelee & Bichard, 2011). The study of more straightforward censorship and interference in foreign elections by regimes (Sanovitch, 2017; Stukal et al, 2017), as well as discussion of how authoritarian elites use the Internet for their own purposes are also prominent areas of interest (MacKinnon, 2011; Toepfl, 2012; Toepfl, 2016; Reez & Sullivan, 2013). However, less attention has been paid to media systems that exist in such environments and the ways they interact with social networking platforms under authoritarian regimes. Besides Hallin and Manchini’s (eds) analysis of Central and Eastern Europe media systems (2012), there have been only isolated attempts to analyze the latter (Herrero et al, 2017), and a few descriptions of the Asian authoritarian media systems, such as in China (Repnikova, 2017) or Cambodia (Chunly, 2020), and the ways the state is, directly and indirectly, involved in news media and social networks concerned with domestic issues and politics (MacKinnon, 2011; Gross, 2019). A gap in the research on how the authoritarian state uses social media networks to maximize its communication strategy has also been identified (Gunitsky, 2015; Morozov, 2011). This paper intends

to fill this gap by looking into the contemporary media system of one prominent regime, namely Russia, and by studying one of the key social networking platforms, Twitter, which is an important component of both the modern global media landscape and the engagement of authoritarian regimes with social media in a domestic and international context.

The main research questions of this study center on the following concerns: are state-loyal actors present in Twitter discussions around media news stories, and if so, what role do they play? If they are important actors, then how might the social media discussions contribute to the function of an authoritarian state's media system? To answer these questions, this study uses the Social Network Analysis (SNA) method, which allowed us to determine the main actors in Twitter discussions around news topics. The article is structured as follows: first, using the theory of networked authoritarianism (McKinnon, 2011), we conceptualize the ways that authoritarian states may influence domestic media and the broader Internet, taking Russia as our case study. We describe Russia's media system and the incentives behind it. Next, we discuss the role of Twitter in authoritarian societies in a literature review and define Twitter's role in today's Russia. Methodology and results are followed by an exploration of the involvement of state-loyal actors in online discussions of the news, including those centered on social media in support of Russia's domestic and international priorities, aiming to set the agenda on sensitive news topics and, thus, support existing authoritarian elites while diminishing voices of opposition.

### **Networked authoritarianism in Russia and beyond**

The initial optimism of researchers towards social networking platforms and their democratizing and empowering role (Bailly, 2012; Diamond, 2010; McFoul, 2005) has long subsided, with the realization that autocracies are also succeeding in using these networks to sustain the regime (Burgess & Robinson, 2016; McKinnon, 2011; Morozov, 2011). Some researchers have identified the term 'networked

authoritarianism': it refers to authoritarian regimes exploiting the Internet (social networking platforms included) and digital technologies (McKinnon, 2011). Researchers have acknowledged how authoritarian regimes have used the Internet to create quasi-democratic institutions, such as online voting in Russia, (see Toepfl, 2016) or Chinese authorities gaining feedback on policies via online discussions (Stockman et al, 2019). The regimes, thus, find ways to support themselves using social networking platforms and new technologies. Apart from quasi participation institutions, there are prohibition and manipulation mechanisms in place. Among others, these include content censorship, legal restrictions, the ban of certain sites, and the use of Internet trolls (Hyun et al, 2014; McKinnon, 2011). While networked authoritarianism does not exercise complete control over the Internet, allowing instead a degree of freedom of communication, the government puts in place a system of systematic censorship, control, and public opinion manipulation (MacKinnon, 2011). Under this approach, the main way to sustain legitimacy and stability of the regime, rather than completely suppressing online criticism, is to allow a degree of freedom of communication on certain issues.

The case of China demonstrates how authoritarian regimes can adapt to the Internet and strengthen the regime's legitimacy through networked technologies (MacKinnon, 2011). Use of social media in networked authoritarianism, can actually produce support for the regime and its articulated ideologies (Deibert et al, 2010; Hyun et al, 2014). Authoritarian countries also use the Internet to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime and uphold societal stability (Li and Lee, 2015). China, researchers claim, has already gone through three stages of tactics for policing the Internet: filtering and surveillance, legal restrictions, and proactive means (more systematic surveillance and information campaigns) (Deibert et al, 2010). It should be noted that research concerning the ways that networked authoritarianism functions has been more extensive in relation to China than other countries, although the Internet and media sphere of Azerbaijan (Pearse & Kendzior, 2012), Thailand (Phoborisut, 2019), Turkey (Koçer & Bozdağ, 2020) and Cambodia (Chunly, 2019) have been described in these terms.

While Russia is recognized as an authoritarian country (Hutcheson and McAllister, 2018; Ross, 2018; Vorobiev and Sidorkin, 2019), Russia's autocratic status and well-established engagement with digital technologies provides an excellent case study with which to further develop our knowledge of the relationship between non-democratic regimes, social networking platforms and online media.

The regime in Russia is vigorously using the communication mechanisms of citizens' participation opened up by the digital sphere (He and Warren, 2011; Toepl, 2016; Truex, 2014). A few examples of such involvement include the digital platforms used in voting for municipal initiatives in Moscow or the active promotion of the 'change.org' platform for citizens' petitions (usually in the form of an outcry for 'help' submitted to the president). The Russian IT sector is quite developed and includes hundreds of tech companies, some of which have been appropriated for government purposes. Still, the question remains of how these quasi-democratic procedures and highly tech-developed mechanisms are functioning in the context of online media and social networks within the country? Some researchers, like Liliya Shevtsova, for example, are claiming that Russia is a more "harsh" form of authoritarianism, closer to that of China and Iran (Shevtsova, 2015). We tend to disagree, given how elections at the local level sometimes work in favor of opposition candidates, and how the Internet remains much freer than in China, despite various incentives to harden the rules. Even the previously banned messenger service, Telegram, was recently approved once more (Roskmdnador: 2020), and notwithstanding the fact that its ban had been wholly unsuccessful in practice. The three types of digital participation of citizens by authoritarian elites (Toepl, 2016) could also include the 'pro-active' use of Twitter and other social networks, as they are also digital technologies allowing participation and communication.

The next section discusses how the current media system developed within Russian networked authoritarianism, defines what role it plays (and why) in the communicative strategy of the authoritarian government, and characterizes its relationships with social networking platforms.

## **The Russian media landscape and the role of the state**

Russia's political regime inevitably has had an impact upon the development of the country's media system. Most scholars agree that, during the Soviet period, there was one 'agent of control', a Party-State, and the media had to respond to its demands (Koltsova, 2001; Roth and Zaharova, 2015; Sparks and Reading, 1994).

The break-up of the Soviet Union and 'bloodless liberal-democratic revolution' (Sakwa, 2017) of the 1990s have brought many other agents into play. During the process of privatization, some media outlets were bought by Western media conglomerates, which were operated according to their own set of rules and practices. The ownership of many media outlets also ended up in the hands of their existing editorial staff, as Boris Yeltsin's government handed over these media brands (but not the assets) to their editors and journalists between 1991 – 1995. Without the tradition of private media ownership and many owners lacking the necessary entrepreneurial skills, the new management of these outlets started to search for alternative means of obtaining capital (Roudakova, 2017). In the years since, most of the existing and emerging large media outlets have acquired external ownership (Koltsova, 2001). Furthermore, Yeltsin's liberal government distributed significant financial support to struggling print media outlets. This made the press financially dependent on local and federal governments. (Kiriya, 2019)

At present, after a series of legislative changes which limited Western ownership of Russian media to 20% of shares, as well as a take-over of many politically-orientated media outlets by the State and oligarchic groups close to the government (Degtereva and Kiriya, 2010; Kachkaeva et al., 2006), the situation is increasingly complex. First, there are currently both state-owned media outlets and those that are close to the state. The old elite of the 1990s (Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gussinsky, and Vladimir Potanin, to name a few) were completely replaced by two oligarchs (Yuri Kovalchuk, the

head of the bank Rossiya, and Alisher Usmanov, the steel magnate) who have since taken control of the most important television channels as well (Kiriya, 2017, 2019).

Channel One, the main Television channel in the country, is 39% publicly owned and has another 25% in the hands of the National Media Group, which is closely affiliated to the government (Yuri Kovalchuk). Rossiya 1 TV channel, or the “second button” on the remote control, is 100% state-owned through the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) (Matveev & Gataulin: 2017). The so-called “third button” or NTV, is officially a commercial (not public) channel, but it is owned by Gazprom-Media, a division of Gazprom company, where the state owns 50,23 %.<sup>1</sup> (Gazprom, 2019).

Among the 10 most cited federal TV channels, only one of them is not connected to the state through its ownership: TV channel Dozhd, which is only present in online broadcasting. Even Euronews is 16% owned by VGTRK. Other channels belong to the Ministry of Defense (Zvezda); National Media Group (RenTV); Moscow Department of Property (TV Center); Rosimushchestvo (Russia Today) (Voronov: 2020). According to the latest report by the Levada Center, over 72% of the population in Russia finds out about the latest news from television. Age-wise, 93% of the elder generation (over 65), and only 42% of the youngest audience (under 25) do so (Goncharov & Volkov, 2019). For the youngest, the main sources of information and news are social media networks. The level of trust in television as a news source has fallen in 10 years from 83% to 55% (Ibid, 2019).

The main newspapers on the federal level are also, in many cases, connected to the state through their ownership.<sup>2</sup> For example, all three of the most cited newspapers’ owners have close government ties: Izvestiya (National Media Group); Kommersant (belongs to an oligarch, Alisher Usmanov, who was in a list of businessmen close to Vladimir Putin in 2018); and Rossiyskaya gazeta (100% government owned) are the three most-read news sources (Goncharov & Volkov, 2019).

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Newspaper readership, however, has been falling and is now under 2%, but the online presence of these and other sources is gaining readership (35% of population receive news from online news outlets and social networks) (Goncharov & Volkov, 2019).

As has been happening all over the world, the media ecosystem has changed significantly during the last decade, and there are still a limited number of independent newspapers, radio stations, and online news outlets in Russia. The latest report of the Levada Center (Goncharov and Volkov, 2019) on news consumption in Russia places the audience of so-called “independent” news outlets at 35%. Some of these media outlets are supported by Russian businessmen exiled abroad, such as former Yukos oil company owner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky; while others can be traced to Western sponsors (Radio Liberty, which is sponsored by the US government, or BBC Russia, to name a few). There are also a small number of media outlets, mostly at the federal level, supported by advertisement or subscription-based models. Yet, in many cases they cease to attract advertising revenues if found to be engaging in criticism of certain topics, as an example of the New Times magazine has shown. According to its editor, the magazine had to move online and switch to a crowdsourced (and fundraising) model after losing its advertisers due to the critical nature of the publications’ content (Azar, 2018). For instance, The New Times published stories about the eldest daughter of President Putin, disclosing her identity and properties in 2016 (Kanev: 2016). Kiriya offers an explanation for how a few large opposition news outlets, such as The New Times, Echo of Moscow radio, Dozhd internet TV channel and print media Novaya Gazeta, as well as some digital news media (e.g. Meduza), still continue to exist in the Russian media landscape: according to the researcher, these outlets are niche and cater to a very narrow audience. Moreover, a large part of these media outlets is institutionalized within the system of state-related ownership (Kyriya, 2019).

The journalistic and media managers’ practices which are going on in this kind of media ownership have been studied before (Gessen, 2005; Kiriya: 2017; 2019; Koltsova: 2001; Schimpfoss and Yablokov: 2014;). It is important to highlight that the media in today’s Russia, unlike in-the Soviet

Union, are not forced into supporting the government. Some researchers suggest that this happens due to an existing practice called commodification of loyalty (Kiriya, 2019), and they relate to the financial incentives available to the media. Direct financing through a budget line; financing based on a contract model; and financing through a grant system are the most used forms of influence (Kiriya, 2019). Indeed, there are special articles in most of the regional governments' budgets that are specifically directed at 'supporting the media' or 'improving the image of regional government' (most often, the governors themselves). Although there are still various ways that the regional governments finance local media in exchange for the absence of criticism, since the deliberate suppression of regional elections in the late 2010s, and the move to direct appointment of governors by the Kremlin, this system has been in decline (Dovbysh, 2019). The same contract relations exist among the federal media, although by now they are mostly substituted by the relations between Kremlin-related media owners and branches of the Kremlin itself (Dovbysh & Gudova, 2016; Kiriya, 2019).

Finally, in terms of journalistic practices, media researchers believe that journalists and TV presenters in Russia might be guided – as might be the case elsewhere – by conformism. (Koltsova, 2001; Shimpfoss & Yablokov, 2014). Russian sociologist, Olessia Koltsova, who studied newsroom practices in news outlets of St. Petersburg, outlines the following schemes of influence in Russian media. First, it is the influence of the owners who provide general guidelines for news policies; secondly, various state agents (both executive and legislative) can impose selective sanctions for disloyalty. There is, however, no unified 'state' actor, as there was in the Soviet times (Koltsova, 2006). Self-censorship is prevalent in TV newsrooms and among journalists in Russia today (Kiriya, 2019; Koltsova, 2006; Roudakova, 2017; Shimpfoss & Yablokov, 2014.). For instance, one may find two coexisting lists of 'prohibited' words or topics in editorial policies of a given media outlet. Apart from the obligatory banned topics and words list that implies sanctions by Roskomnadzor (a state body which specifically follows the media and gives fines or shuts down websites when a law is broken),

there is the outlet's 'own' stop list of topics or people (Dovbysh & Gudova, 2016). It is necessary to add that the Roskomnadzor's list itself is getting longer each year. Today, apart from the famous 'anti LGBT propaganda' law that essentially bans any LGBT-related vocabulary and topics, it includes the prohibition of references to certain organizations, and the use of swear words (even in art forms such as video clips) and many more limitations besides (Roskomnadzor: 2020 (1)). Editorial lists are usually not so obvious but when a new journalist enters the news organization they quickly learn that there are certain topics that cannot be written about, or if they are, one has to be very careful in the choice of words and supporting facts. Needless to say, aside from protecting Kremlin interests, there are stop-lists on commercial partners or companies of the media outlets' owners (Koltsova, 2006). Since Russian capitalism is a so-called 'patrimonial capitalism' (Robinson, 2013; Vasileva-Dienes, 2019), i.e. capitalism with vast state involvement in all major sectors (especially, though not exclusively, natural resources), the regime and large business owners' interests are intertwined to the point of being indistinguishable. As Sara Oates points out, the selective application of laws also plays its role in controlling the media (Oates, 2013). Though only a few cases have been reported, there is always the possibility of becoming one of the 'punished', although mostly it concerns social media users rather than journalists or media outlets as such (a yearly report of Roskomnadzor concluded that the media received 3113 appeals to delete information, and the majority of them – 2930, or 94.1% – had been for the use of swear words) (Roskomnadzor: 2019, p.21).

These complicated relations and self-censoring journalistic practices play their role in online social media networks as well. Since every media outlet has an account on Twitter, and journalists of every spectrum are active participants online (Johansson & Nygren, 2014), it is important to investigate their possible influence. We intend to see whether the mechanisms of power behind them, might be related to the current media system of the networked authoritarian country.

## **The role of Twitter in authoritarian societies and Russia: literature review**

“The myth of Twitter Revolutions is dying”, proclaimed the New Statesman in the end of 2019, as it acknowledged that the uprisings against the incumbent regimes in Iran (2009), Egypt, and Tunisia (2011) were once closely, but mistakenly, associated with communication via social media networks (Seymour, 2019). Just a decade ago, many assumed that the more digital a state becomes, the more options were open for opposition activism (Zuckerman, 2018). Twitter has been viewed by many in the social sciences as a tool for organization and democratization (Nikiporetz-Takigava, 2013; Pamelee and Bichard, 2011), especially when cyber utopianism was a dominant and “euphoric” idea among early Internet researchers in the 1990s (Meredith, 2013). Free, uncensored political communication is what a lot of scholars saw as the role of social media in autocracies (Diamond, 2010; Lotan et al. 2011; Penney and Dadas 2014;).

On the other hand, as early as 2013, Henry Hale warned against a simplistic view of social media’s role in changing hybrid regimes, like the one in Moldova in 2009, where a much bigger role was played by the crisis of succession and accompanying economic downturn (Hale, 2013). In the last decade, more scholars began to draw attention to the methods that these kinds of regimes deployed in an effort to use social media for their own purposes (MacKinnon, 2011; Morozov, 2011).

Twitter has been playing an ambiguous role in Russia. On the one hand, it has been described as a ‘vibrant’ and ‘unregulated’ sphere, and up until 2013 social media networks and the Russian segment of the Internet enjoyed relative freedom. Research by Alexanyan et al (2012) has found that the Internet and online debates in Russia have offered a diverse public sphere. Renz and Sullivan (2013) note that the openness of the internet in Russia at one period of time made it the news source of choice, especially for politically engaged audiences. According to the aforementioned Levada report of 2019, that tendency is still present.

It has been rightly noted that the previous degree of Internet freedom enjoyed in Russia was never predicted to stay that way. However, since 2013, evidence of a large-scale Internet censorship machine in Russia, comparable to the one in China, has not been found (Koltsova and Bodrunova, 2019). Despite this absence, legislation on sovereign Internet has already been passed, and at least two large networking platforms (LinkedIn and the messenger Telegram) have been blocked, albeit in the case of Telegram – unsuccessfully. The latter, by the time of this article’s publication, has already been unblocked (Roskomnadzor: 2020). On the other hand, Twitter in Russia has been used extensively by the government, even before the personal account of Donald Trump became frontpage news. As Toepfl (2012), Renz and Sullivan (2013) highlight, Twitter has been actively used by governors of Russian regions and other government bodies. In spite of the fact that such active Twitter (and other blogging platform) usage started during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, and at least one of the most popular governors on Twitter, ex-governor of Kirov oblast, Nikita Belykh, is in jail (case unrelated to Twitter (Interfax: 2020), the governors, en masse, still continue to tweet in today’s Russia. Overall, the popularity of Twitter in Russia is much less than that of domestic social media networks, such as Vkontakte (Brand Analytics Report, 2019). With slightly above 0.65 mln users, the microblogging service took only fourth place in Russia, far behind VKontakte (30 mln) and Instagram (27 mln), and almost three times less than Facebook (1.7 mln). However, Twitter remains an important medium for news dissemination; journalists, people who are engaged in politics and interested in government affairs, as well as opposition politicians, are still well represented on the platform. For example, among the mostly cited top twenty-five Twitter accounts in 2019, there are at least five representatives of the opposition elite (not including anonymous accounts under a pretense name) (Brand Analytics, 2019).

As it has been noted by Morozov (2011), state agents in Russia prefer to actively set the agenda rather than respond to it. Thus, the other side of Internet freedom in the Russian media system and social media networks is not blunt censorship but rather a blend of techniques, such as manipulation, co-optation and control (Gunitsky, 2015). Etling et al (2010) have already described the influence of

the state on online content via paid bloggers and internet service providers. In our analysis we will show instances of state agents' involvement around news topics, when the online discussion is managed and guided. Thus, from the point of view of the state, the need for a stricter Chinese-type model of Internet censorship becomes obsolete, and a much cheaper option of subtle censorship, guidance and control remains.

## **Research design and methods**

Our work is based on a Social Network Analysis (Otte and Rousseau, 2002) of the Russian-language sector of Twitter. Twitter's followers network is a directed graph where nonreciprocal relations are permitted (Morales et al, 2014). We have collected data from Twitter for a period of fourteen days (22 January - 5 February 2019), as related to topics defined as the most important news agenda in the traditional media in Russia for the first three days of collection. In total, 20648 tweets posted by 14392 unique users were gathered.

It is important to note that due to a long tradition of celebrating numerous holidays according to the Gregorian and Julian calendars (the latter of which the Russian Orthodox church follows), the time from mid-December till mid-January in Russia includes a series of holidays that blend into each other (Tass, 2018). A week before 31 December, most companies and government agencies are focused on organizing 'corporate' New Year parties, and practically no news is generated apart from holiday-related stories (Glevkaya, 2013). Following the New Year celebrations (from 31 December to 1 January), there are ten days of official bank holiday for everyone but essential workers. Vacations are widely taken by private-sector and government employees, and even those working in the regional media, so reporting on major political and economic developments is usually limited during that period. In fact, regional media outlets often 'shut down' for vacations and do not have any journalists working for two weeks straight. However, when the holidays finally end, a lot of topics that have been

neglected due to such a long winter break quickly emerge. As a result, we chose to begin our data collection on 22 January 2019, once both the media and government had returned to their normal operational schedule.

With the help of the biggest Russian search engine Yandex, and its aggregation section Yandex.News, we have collected the top media stories on 22 January in the Russian media field. Based on the selection of the three key stories from that date, 20648 tweets posted by 14392 unique users of Twitter were collected in data sets. Yandex is a search engine with the biggest share of readership in Russia, which at the time of the research was not required to filter its results. It is worth acknowledging that 25% of the search engine belongs to the state-owned Sberbank (Zavadski and Toepfl, 2018). In spite of this, it remains the only search engine that is able to search through most of the Russian media. We also collected 54 news stories published by the media and as indexed in Yandex.News. Later on, we narrowed the initial sample to those news stories that followed a set of sampling (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, pp. 112–116). We only included events of political relevance to Russia and used maximum variation sampling to provide a diversity of news stories from different political and social spheres. The stories had to be those which would be discussed on Twitter, thus, had to be of broad interest and with the potential to attract a diversity of viewpoints. Three news stories were thus analyzed:

- The negotiations of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the future of the Kurili Islands (Dataset A)
- State company Gazprom forgives Chechnen Republic its gas debt (Dataset B)
- Continuation of a story related to Nastya Rybka, a girl who was allegedly hired by an oligarch, Oleg Deripaska, and the vice-premier minister of Russia for sex work (Dataset C)

These news stories became the basis for Twitter data collection, forming the primary datasets for this research. An exhaustive list of keywords and key phrases was further developed, which

captured Twitter discussions related to the sample news stories. The most relevant keywords or phrases, which brought the most search frequency, were used for collecting the Twitter datasets within a 14-day window. They included all public Twitter messages with the keywords and hashtags from a sample of news stories, posted between 22 January 2019 and 5 February 2019. In total, 20648 tweets posted by 14392 unique users of Twitter were collected in these datasets. An online application, Netlytic, was used for the data collection and social network visualization (Gruzd, 2016). Once the data sets were collected, a name network was built with this Twitter data.

The Name Network analysis involves studying the messages' content and connecting nodes (in our case – Twitter users) between each other in cases where they reply, repost or mention the tweet of another user (Gruzd, 2009). A Twitter actor, or name, network shows us who is interacting with whom in relation to a hashtag or search term (Graham & Ackland, 2017). As Gruzd and Haythornthwaite (2013) suggest in their analysis, the resulting social network datasets were further exported to ORA, a network visualization application. ORA software is often used in the studies of Twitter, when the research looks at the mentions (or Name Network, in case of this paper) (Carley, 2014). Through collecting these messages and looking at their connection with each other, we were able to identify who the main actors were in the Twitter discussions of these news stories. After identifying the main actors, we could both attribute their connectedness (or not) to the state, or identify suspicious activities (in cases when the user was suspended by Twitter). By reading through tweets of the most important nodes in the network (Twitter users who played the main role in discussing and disseminating the news), we could also identify some of the discourses that were used in the discussions. Descriptive as it may seem, it should be noted that this technique allows us to identify the key actors of an amalgam of tweets and, therefore, make some interpretative insights according to SNA methodology, as will be discussed below. We were able to identify which were the key actors, if there is some interest related to their political affiliation and how frequent were their incidence on the\*\*network\*\*, as well identifying



some bots used in the network. We also provide texts of some tweets or retweets as they appeared in the analyzed sample, in order to better illustrate the findings of the research.

## **Discussion**

### **Table 1. Groups' Descriptive Statistics (Insert here)**

Among the three news stories, the database A (Negotiations of President Putin and Prime-Minister Abe of Japan) stands out as the one with the largest network diameter of 8, in comparison with 5 for the B and 3 for the C databases respectively. The larger the number for the network diameter the larger the size of the network, or how many connections it takes getting from one side to another (Gruzd et al: 2016). In the case of Kurili islands, it takes 8 connections, and this network is the largest of the three. We can therefore suggest that this topic was of more interest to Twitter users than the two other stories. The higher value of reciprocity for the Kurili islands story also shows that more participants had a 'two-way' conversation, and engaged in more dialogues between users, than in the other two cases. Density calculates how closely the participants are connected, and the closer the measure is to zero, the less participants know each other. What we can tell from the three networks under review is that only in the case of the Nastya Rybka story were the participants intricately connected to each other, while the discussion was going on in a 'bubble' of sorts. The other two stories were relatively open for participants, who did not know each other and, thus, presented a wider spectrum of opinions. However, the measurement of modularity determines whether the clusters found represent distinct communities in the network (a group of densely connected nodes that communicate more with each other than the nodes outside a cluster) (Gruzd et al, 2016). Higher values of modularity closer to 1, as in all the three stories, point to clear divisions between clusters, i.e., they do not overlap significantly, and we can clearly see the main clusters discussing the stories.

## **Twitter discussions of the negotiations between President Putin and Prime-Minister Abe on the future of the Kurili Islands**

We will now turn our attention to the first network around the news story about the Kurili islands.

Based on a visual examination, the largest connected component of the network is composed of the five largest interconnected clusters, which are presented in Graph 1:

### **Graph 1: Largest clusters of Dataset A (visual evaluation): Insert here**

Source: compiled by the authors based on own research

According to the visual examination, the five most important clusters for this network are the following: The first is Youtube mentions – video sharing (which we exclude from our analysis since it is a different platform). The second cluster is spread around the accounts of journalist Armen Gasparyan (the anchor of various state radio stations) and the State Duma MP and head of the “Russian World” foundation, Vyacheslav Nikonov (both are considered state-loyal). The third cluster, as we are going to see elsewhere, was centered around the opposition activist and “Left Front” coordinator, Sergei Udaltsov. However, in contrast to previous clusters where the discussion was based on actual statements or retweets of the main figures, in this case there was a ‘mention’ of Udaltsov in a negative context, which had been retweeted many times over. The fourth cluster was centred around the Twitter account of Dmitry Smirnov, special correspondent of Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper in the Kremlin (state-loyal). And finally, the fifth cluster did not have a central figure and was more dispersed. Since there were no central actors in the discussion, we focused our analysis on the three previous clusters.

Later on, through the ORA software, we also measured the in-degree centrality of all the nodes in a network. Thus, apart from the visual examination of the network, we were also able to find those Twitter users to whom the participants were more likely referring to. (Carley: 2014).

**Table 2. The top 10 nodes with highest in-degree centrality dataset A: Insert here**

As we can see from the Table 2, apart from Youtube links, the most important Twitter users in this discussion include: three state-loyal media (@onlinekpru; @rianru and @tass\_agency); three state-loyal journalists (@a\_gasparyan (Vesti FM anchor), @dimsmirnov75 (Komsomolskaya Pravda journalist), and @alexey\_pushkov, senator, TV presenter), one opposition figure (@s\_udaltsov) and two personal accounts without particular affiliation. For Twitter discussions, in-degree centrality means not only how many times one was mentioned but also how many times one was retweeted. Therefore, these ten were the most discussed and retweeted nodes in the network.

Afterwards, we analysed the text of the most important nodes, or Twitter users, and their mentions. With the assistance of the DiscoverText computational content analysis tool (Goritz, Kolleck and Jörgens: 2019) the tweets were grouped around top nodes. A tweet mentioning the newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda” was retweeted by 95 members of the network. It was retweeted by various accounts, including those with dubious Twitter IDs such as @RVasZ6wiSxFYS4I (which might suggest that the accounts are bots (Sanovitch: 2017)). The text of the retweet from the advisor to the Russian defense minister, Andrei Ilnitsky (<https://twitter.com/amicableru>) reads:

“Via @onlinekpru: 10 reasons why Kurili are important for Russia (...) It was not us who conquered them, it should not be us who give them away<sup>3</sup>”.

As we can see here, the tropes of national pride, nationalism, territorial integrity, and war are used in the tweet. They often mimic the governments’ discourse surrounding the Second World War and other populist nationalistic statements (Robinson & Milne: 2017; Oates: 2018). Because the Kurili Island conflict has been widely discussed in traditional media for the last decade, it is common

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knowledge that the Kurili Islands were retaken from Japan by the Soviet army in 1945. The Second World War, on the other hand, is an event which constitutes much of the state's narrative on the topic in Russia, and in this context the tweet literally means that 'the Russian soldiers of WWII' (whose actions are never questioned) have taken Kurili from Japan, and who are we to question these 'heroes' actions and give them away again.

Dmitry Smirnov, the special correspondent of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in the Kremlin, received mentions from 70 people (in total giving him 77 mentions) in response to his post about the negotiations. They were not identical in their wording and varied in the degree of support for, or opposition to, the process, thus, providing an impression that a real discussion was going on behind this tweet, and there were no bots involved. The anchor of *VestiFM*, Armen Gaspayan, received 288 mentions, given to him by only 63 Twitter users. 45 of those mentions were identical retweets of the accusation from the 'opposition':

“So how easy it is to read this. The next step will be Putin did not give away Kurili. What for do we need these useless islands? Just recently, Gozman [a politician, moderately in opposition - D.D.] managed to combine these two phrases in one airtime.”

In addition to the issues of territory and nationalism, there is a line which blames the opposition for being incoherent, and this is another discourse which is visible in many retweets, including those from anonymous accounts.

The Twitter account of one of the major state-loyal agencies, @rianru, received both retweets of their news pieces concerning Putin and Abe's meeting and the words of an expert who stated that “Japan has lost its chances to receive the South Kurils”. The account also received replies from users, which were not identical, regarding the anxiety of users that the islands were going to be given to Japan, once again echoing the territorial integrity theme.

### **Twitter discussions on the news story about the Republic of Chechnya and its gas debt**

Based on the visual examination below, the largest connected component of the network is composed of five unconnected clusters, which are presented in Graph 2:

**Graph 2: Largest clusters of the dataset B (visual evaluation): Insert here**

Source: compiled by the authors based on own research

As in the previous case, Youtube links have played a large role in the network but were discarded from the sample. The second largest cluster were users answering or retweeting @onlinekpru, an account of the state-loyal newspaper, Komsomolskaya Pravda. The third largest was clustered around one private user (@svirsky1), and the fourth and fifth clusters were dispersed without obvious opinion leaders visible in the network. Further on, we again measured the in-degree centrality of the nodes in the whole network. The top 10 nodes with the highest in-degree centrality were:

**Table 3. The top 10 nodes with highest in-degree centrality dataset B: Insert here**

As is visible from this list, apart from Youtube links (not included in the sample), there are two state-loyal media (@onlinekpru; @rianru); one opposition media (@meduzaproject); five individual users (@svirsky1, @prof\_preobr, @hypecoum, @allaallp and @8019denis), and one opposition figure (@navalny) represented. Unlike in the dataset A, there were less retweets of the media sources.

Through computational text analysis we were able to group the tweets around the most influential nodes in this network. Thus, @onlinekpru received 39 retweets of their news story on the refusal to forgive the gas debt to Chechnya. It has to be noted that the republic of Chechnya generates a long-term controversial theme field in Russia; while the state is trying to de-escalate any tensions that might once again lead to a war-like conflict, human rights activists often describe the difficult and dangerous situation in the republic for many vulnerable groups (Benedek, 2019). There is also a certain degree of discontent visible in Russia due to the ‘preferential’ treatment of the republic, thus, stories of

‘forgiving’ the debt vs the ‘refusal’ to forgive have received a lot of attention. In the studied tweets, we see the culmination of the story, since state media have been actively articulating the absence of any preferential treatment, which fits into the usual government discourse. At the same time, unlike in dataset A, the theme generated much fewer retweets of the associated media sources. However, in one case, there were 225 tweets of an identical character, suggesting they might have been bots. They retweeted a user (@svirsky1), who said:

“Should Navalny win in the Russian Federation, he will have to support Kadyrov and the Crimea, and all the conquests. Otherwise, Chechnya will demand independence, and Crimea will demand going back to Ukraine, and there will be war again and killings. All in all, until all of Russia splits up, nothing good will come out of it”.

Although in this dataset there is some balance in the typology of users (two state aligned media; two opposition figures), again, we see active retweets of the accusation or warnings against the opposition figures, or the possible new elite (Alexey Navalny is one of the main opposition activists in Russia now). There were no public media figures involved in the discussion, apart from the opposition politician Alexey Navalny, who was being criticized.

### **Twitter discussions on the news story about Nastya Rybka, a girl allegedly hired for sex work by an oligarch and vice premier**

#### **Graph 3: largest clusters of the dataset C (visual evaluation): Insert here**

Source: compiled by the authors based on own research

As in the previous networks, cluster one is Youtube. This is the smallest network of the three presented, and there were many dispersed small conversations going on concurrently, rather than large ones with any degree of overlap. The five biggest clusters are clearly not connected at all, and largely consist of replies/retweets and mentions of one user. Visually, we have identified clusters around the opposition

media outlet, The Bell; opposition politician Alexey Navalny; and two clusters around users with no visible affiliation. Further on, we have measured the in-degree centrality of the nodes or defined those to whom the participants were more likely referring.

Table 4. The top 10 nodes with highest in-degree centrality dataset C: Insert here

Source: compiled by the authors based on own research

Apart from Youtube links, there are two media outlets not affiliated with the state (@ru\_thebell; @meduzaproject); two opposition journalists (@rasstriga – Sergey Dorenko; @kshn – Oleg Kahin), one opposition politician (@navalny), one account suspended by Twitter (@justice777lady) and three individual users accounts (@zo1\_ter; @yh8hqrnvmt8qv9k; @dvm\_moscow). This story has clearly not attracted state-loyal media figures or accounts on Twitter. In this story, again, mentions of opposition politician Navalny have gained a central place in the network.

Using DiscoverText, we looked at the tweets that mentioned Navalny in this network. Overall, 42 out of 54 mentions contained identical text:

“Just recently, Navalny has bragged that Rybka was freed because of his videos. And now Nastya Rybka publishes a video appeal thanking the lawyer, thanking journalists, Lukashenko, but totally forgot to say something about @navalny. She probably forgot...”

Once again, as in previous networks, we see here mention of the opposition politician, however, the tweets are deliberately mocking him rather than retweeting or answering a previous tweet. And among those retweeting this tweet we observe accounts with suspicious Twitter usernames such as @yh8hqrnvmt8qv9k (those accounts were later suspended by Twitter in some cases). Overall, this story attracted much less attention, and none from state-loyal media or affiliated persons on Twitter, so the biggest actors were focused on mocking Alexey Navalny rather than discussing the story itself.

## **Conclusion and limitations**

Our results suggest that the activity of state-aligned actors increase in some discussions, thus representing a subtle form of state intervention and guidance of the media agenda on Twitter. We can infer that some topics might be more sensitive to the state and worthy of more direct intervention.

The research has also shown that the most influential figures that discuss current news via Russian Twitter include various actors, but the most important ones are state-loyal media, media affiliated persons and opposition politicians (or opposition elite figures). The latter, however, are mostly not active participants themselves and sometimes find themselves criticized, mocked or scrutinized on the platform. The official information agency MIA Russia Today (@rianru), the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda (@onlinekpru), which are among the most-read state-loyal periodicals, as well as the state TASS information agency (@tass\_agency), were being actively retweeted by users, sometimes by those with suspicious, unidentifiable anonymous profiles, which were often subsequently blocked by Twitter, suggesting their status as non-human actors, or bots. The news anchors and Kremlin-based correspondents were retweeted as well. On the other hand, mentions of the opposition politicians (such as Alexey Navalny, a prominent opposition politician, and Sergei Udaltsov, a left-wing opposition activist) were mostly mentioned in a negative way.

The most discussed story, with the greatest number of state-loyal media and identical tweets, was the story on negotiations concerning the Kurili Islands. It was also the only news item involving President Putin as a direct participant. The story around Chechnya and its gas supply debt was the second most discussed story, which also attracted the participation of some state-loyal media outlets. It appears that this story was used to propagate a different news agenda (e.g. should Navalny become a president, there might be grave consequences) given only this tweet was retweeted massively and, thus, became central to the online conversation. The same case happened with the third news story: while state-loyal media did not participate in the discussion, mentions mocking opposition politician Navalny were abundant and constructed some of the central points of the conversation. These findings allow us



to point to a particular form of guided discussion, which appears on Twitter around topics sensitive to the state, while remaining more subtle than the approach seen in conventional state-affiliated media, and is supported by the active intrusion of state-loyal actors.

There are certainly limitations to the research. First, we are only talking about Twitter, which has significantly less users in Russia than some other networks, and its users are primarily big city residents (BrandAnalytics, 2019). Secondly, there is the question of digital divide, since Twitter is barely used in the provinces of Russia (ibid). In this sense we are looking at networks constituted from media literate and politically active participants, which is a specific but important stratum in any country, including those with authoritarian regimes. As we can see from the analysis of the Twitter discussions described above, autocratic elites, via state-supported actors and media, are actively participating in discussions around news and current affairs. Even where these groups are not as present, we can still observe negative portrayals of a potential new elite – the opposition. This corresponds with the view of Toepfl (2016) and Gandhi et al (2020), who stated that authoritarian elites in a hybrid authoritarianism are able to use various, digital and non-digital ‘participatory institutions’ for managing their relations with pro-regime elites, opposition elites, ordinary citizens supporting the opposition and the general public. In the case of communications among the media literate and in the context of the highly politicized platform of Twitter, authoritarian elites can be often seen as: 1) promoting the state discourse and; 2) discrediting the opposition ‘elite’ among the country’s most politically active stratum.

### **Further research**

Based on our research, there is evidence of mass participation by Twitter users in Russian-centric political discussions; this is especially true when opposition members are mentioned in a negative context. Even though it may be too early to judge on the character of this mass participation, this is an

interesting result that could lead us to another study focused on discovering the possible pattern of diminishing influence of the new elites – the opposition – via social networks in authoritarian states.

Some of the findings of this research might also contribute to our understanding of how state-loyal actors may act in Twitter discussions of the news agenda in countries with networked authoritarianism regimes. Further research going into country-specific social media sites, such as VKontakte in Russia (or WeChat in China), could provide deeper understanding of state actors' involvement in discussions around the news agenda within social networks in authoritarian countries.

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