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CARNAVALISATION OF THE PROTEST: RUSSIAN MIDDLE CLASS AND LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

In this paper author explores resemblances between protests of winter 2011–2012 in Russia and student movements. Given the fact that Russian protest is considered to be values-oriented event rather than political movement, discursive practices of its participants should be explored. The conclusion is that protesters used practices of 'carnevalesque' not to undermine political essence of the movement, but as a tool of middle class self-identification.

Keywords: social movements, anti-language, discourse-analysis, sociolinguistics.

Ключевые слова: протестное движение, анти-язык, дискурс-анализ, социолингвистика.

2011–2012 protests in Russia became the most salient political event since the Collapse of Soviet Union. During five months from December to May, almost 500,000 citizens participated in rallies all over the country against, assumingly, fraudulent Parliament elections. Moreover, for the first time in Russian history, the average protester was not a young nationalist or communist pensioner, but a middle class educated citizen. Thus, core group of these protests consisted of middle class representatives, who started to use uncommon for Russian protests practices (sarcastic posters and antislogans¹, which, however, are more indicative for students movements) as well as new tools of mobilization (social media). Satirical expression of 'political views' and demands and 'carnevalesque' discourse in general (concept by Russian philosopher Michail Bachtin, that refers to a practices that subvert and liberate the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos, often used by scholars referring to the student movements) allowed authorities to ignore rallies for significant amount of time and then to mock protesters and treat the movement like some unserious joke (e.g. see Putin's live conversation with Russians, February, 2012). Moreover, discourse of 'carnevalesque' allows us, as I mentioned above, to consider Russian protest in the context of student movements, as far as among their main indicators are values-oriented discourse and group self-manifestation through the original practices of performance including non-violent and humorous slogans (e.g. French spring 1968) [1].

Although at the very beginning wave of protests in Russia looked quite promising, protests failed to achieve their primary demands: cancellation of fraudulent elections' results, resignation of the Chief Elections Official and investigation on his activity during elections, release of political prisoners, passage of the democratic law towards registration of opposition parties and elections, and arranging the new democratic Parliament elections. Thus, elected officials to some degree pacified protesters with the bill regarding government elections and announcement of the number of other political reforms coming soon. Nevertheless, neither the main

¹ Concept by French philosopher Olivier Reboul, who studies slogans of student spring 1968. Antislogan is based on humor and paradox and calls not for direct violent action or aggression (usual slogan), but stimulates 'laboratory of ideas' and deliberation.

demands were satisfied, nor any trade-offs were offered. The protests started to decay already in January and in last two months, participants were mostly opposition partisans, and almost all protests' novices – 'average' citizens - left Moscow streets, while their ties between each other as well as ties to higher mobilized oppositionists were weak and their demands of universal justice seem to be unfeasible. Thus, it is possible to conclude that citizens missed the opportunity to affect political decision-making processes and that the most prominent collective action event in modern Russian history failed regardless of its seemingly high potential in the beginning.

As far as 2011–2012 protest was the first social movement of such scale in Russian history, it became quite a popular research topic among both anthropologists and political science researchers all over the world. When the former are more concerned with agency problems, actors and practices of performance [e.g. 1; 4; 10], the latter mostly try to put the Russian case either in the set of "Arab spring" movements focusing on the mobilization role of social media and digital devices [e.g. 9] or in the set of "Color Revolutions" looking in general for presence or absence of particular structural features which are meant to be responsible for "revolution" failure [e.g. 2; 5] Although, question of protest failure was addressed in both camps, no one seems to find plausible answer why it happened. However, I believe that look from the interpretivists prospective would benefit this body of research. For Russian middle class' participation in rallies often treated as a value-oriented movement, rather than pure political action, we can speak here about revealing new possibilities for dispersed identity-groups engagement and ideas sharing.

As I mentioned above, there is some evidence that allows comparing Russian protest with cases of student movements. I will use this opportunity, as far superficial analysis allows me to recognize some similar patterns in practices of Russian protesters' and student protesters. It seems that online networks may produce social movements resembling ones produced by student activist networks, however, ties and motivations seem to be weaker in the former. Thus, the question is did Russian protest fail because of agents' problems (in particular, because of weak and non-durable ties that produced by social media networks) accounting for structural external factors as well.

I don't state here that all student movements share the same characteristics that provide ultimate positive outcome, but I will try to reveal similarities between most salient students protests of 20th century to some modern form of participation, where university is not the only environment, which allows creative open- and like-minded individuals to gather together. However, one should bear in mind that regardless of similarity of practices and common discourse, online networks do not provide ties that are strong enough to maintain durable and stable participation under the resembling structural and external factors pressure.

Insight of anthropologists' works on Russia 2011–2012 protest which compare Russian middle class protesters' practices to students' ones (carnavalesque – turning protest upside-down, making fun of it and of ruling authorities; satirical slogans, antislogans – often ones with puns, not calling for violence but rather for reasonable and peaceful outcome, the ones about political values and freedoms in general rather concrete policies and decision-makers, etc.).

However, in order to speak about discursive movement's dynamics, one should understand its origins. In the autumn of 2011 in the Russian segment of the Internet appeared a new community, whose interaction kernel is an opposition to the current government and to the next elections to the Parliament. This community, at the time, is a virtual one, so its participators communicate with the help of the "language of the Internet". Their communication is characterized by hypertext, a special vocabulary and memes. For me this community is interesting because its members on 10th and 24th of December will exceed the bound of the virtual space to the real, physical space – at rallies and pickets against falsifications of the elections that will take place around the world. It was the first time in Russian history when such form of dialogue with the government as rallies' slogans and posters was conducted with a help of "language of the Internet". In this paper I will consider the features of this community and its sociolect, as well as possible reasons for its formation as it is and communication problems of the community's members with the government official as well.

By V.N. Popravko's definition, online community is a group of individuals, which interacts in the framework of computer-mediated space of some Web-resources for significant period of time and its foundation is common purpose accumulation or transformation of symbolic product (information, media) [7]. Taking account of the specifics of the used channels of communication and interaction between the participants, we can say that this community is virtual by its nature. But we cannot say that it is the online community in its pure form [11]: its main platforms are social networks (primarily Facebook), twitter and, to some extent, blogs, but there is no common platform, which would unite all members of the community. One can say that the boundaries of the community are symbolic rather than temporary or physical - the participants are united not by any resource, but by some symbolic code, which acts as a "filter" to enter the community. The basic units of information spreading within the community is socially important information (for example, calls to go to the polls on December 4) and internet memes that express the political views of community members.

I specify conditional stages of community development, which are characterized by the change of the content of messages distributed among and discussed by the participants. At each stage within the community certain memes and vocabulary are created, which are fixed and spreading in the first place among the members of the community, then in the online media and in the Internet in general, and, finally, some of them turn into oral and written language of people who didn't relate to its online community. I find it reasonable to restrict the time period for further consideration. Therefore, its boundary is the rally on Sakharov Avenue on December 24 - the last mass event in 2011, which was attended by representatives of the community.

The first stage. Until the day of elections to the State Duma (December 4th, 2011).

- Main topics of discussion: the call to go to the polls and vote for any party other than the party "United Russia".
- Major memes: maintenance and circulation of the meme "Party of crooks and thieves", new memes at this stage hardly appear.

The second stage. On election day and before the rally on Bolotnaya Square (December 4th, 2011 – December 10, 2011).

- Main topics of discussion: distribution of the videos of election frauds, discussion about unauthorized rally on Chistye Prudy and arrest of its members, circulation of calls to go to rallies and pickets, scheduled for December 10, 2011, the creation of Facebook groups and meetings devoted to them.

- Major memes: appeared memes dedicated to the Head of the Election Commission V.E. Churov (e.g., "Churov – you're a magician!"), to election results (for example, 146%, "normal distribution", etc.), to the participant of "Nashi" Sveta from Ivanovo (e.g., "We began to dress more better"), etc. These memes would appear in logos and on posters when community's members went to the streets on December 10th.

The third stage. Rally on Bolotnaya Square - Press conference of Vladimir Putin – a rally on Sakharov Avenue (December 10th, 2011 – December 24th, 2011).

- Main topics of discussion: a discussion of the past events, the authorities' response to it and its absence, press conference of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, preparation for the new rally.

- Major memes: most new memes are associated with the performance of Prime Minister live (e.g. "Banderlog", "boa Pu", "condom", "Hillary, where is our money?"). These memes would appear in logos and on posters when community's members went to the streets on December 24th.

Specification of the main stages demonstrates us that within the community a certain dialect, group jargon was formed. One can see that new words, symbols and memes got into common use. For community members, this new words and symbols became an universal code of communication, a filter that helps to distinguish "us" from "them" [3]. Online liberal media picked up this vocabulary, either because their journalists are themselves members of this speech community, or they use this clear and relevant code to attract an audience to their publications. Community members express their position, when they go to rallies with banners and posters written with a help of "language of the Internet." Rallies participants use either the memes themselves and their variations (e.g., poster "We are ready to dress more better"), or just slogans without any relation at all to the political situation (e.g., poster "Return numbers!", which hit almost all photo stories devoted to the rally on Sakharov Avenue, but wasn't addressed to the government, but only to the members of the private online community leprosorium.ru). Photo galleries with these posters appeared in the very day of the rally on websites of most media, both Russian and foreign. Taken out of the protest movement discourse and context of its creation, these slogans do not make sense for usual person [6]. Rally's posters and slogans in essence is a form of dialogue between government and citizens. But its 'unserious' form and language gave the acting government opportunity in first place to ignore a mass rally on Bolotnaya Square (there were no official statements of the President and the Prime Minister on this issue). And then acting government used the "incomprehensible" slogans and symbols as an example which proves inadequacy of rallies in general (like the Prime Minister Vladimir Putin did it during his live conversation with citizens). I can say that the language of rallies on 10th and 24th of December – the language of the memes and the language of the

RU area of Internet – is a code that is incomprehensible as well for both the ruling elite and foreign community as for the vast majority of the Russian Federation population. I suggest a following hypothesis as to why citizens chose deliberately incomprehensible code for the expression of their political position. According to researches, in rallies participated mostly educated people with well-paid job and evaluating their wealth as the middle class and above, mostly aged between 23 and 55 years, active Internet users with active citizenship. Some sociologists and scientists have called the phenomenon a "revolution of the sated" and the first-ever mass action of the middle class in Russia [8], also they talk about the first serious attempts of middle class to find its identity. Thus, I can say that the recipient of the message, which the community released on rallies, was not the current government, and the aim was not to relate their position to the current government. The selected code primarily is tool of self-identification of the community in particular and of the middle class in general, as well as tool of distinguishing itself from 90s intelligentsia, which was the core of the protest movement 20 years ago, and until recently stayed the main force of present protest movements.

Sources:

1. Posts on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, etc., video streams on youtube.com in the period from September 1 to December 31, 2011.
2. Materials of online media (lenta.ru, kommersant.ru, gazeta.ru, etc.).
3. Transcript of the program "A Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continued"
4. Sociological studies by Levada Center, analytical group SmartMarketing etc.

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