"Conventional" and "Virtual" Civil Societies in Autocratic Regimes

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Much of our understanding of civil society derives from West European and North American experiences from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Out of this protracted historical development, civil society came to denote that sphere of active voluntary associations, distinct from state and economy, through which social cooperation and collective action takes place. In its idealized Tocquevillian form, civil society has usually been conceptualized as a dense network of face-to-face associations functioning on a more or less permanent basis. Civil society of this sort has been widely considered a critical condition for the functioning of a stable and effective democracy, as it nurtures the social capital necessary for citizens to solve collective action problems and provides a bulwark against the unbridled abuses of the state.[1] Particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, democracy promotion came to rely heavily on supporting the development of labor unions, professional associations, chambers of commerce, student groups, cultural associations, women's groups, and human rights organizations—in other words, formal civil society groups that relied primarily upon face-to-face contact in carrying out their work, often possessing their own physical spaces.[2]

Recent developments in much of the world, however, have raised questions about this traditional model. Many non-democracies where conventional civil society remains weak have witnessed the rapid growth of new social media (internet, blogs, Twitter, SMS, YouTube, etc.). These new forms of networking—not face-to-face associations, but digitally-mediated social networks—have in a number of instances become vehicles for organizing large-scale mobilizations that have challenged autocratic rule, providing the basis for a civic activism even in the continued presence of anemic "conventional" civil society association.

In this article, I address the consequences of the rapid growth of "virtual" civil society in non-democracies with perennially weak "conventional" civil societies. Does a robust "virtual" civil society substitute for a weak "conventional" civil society? Or does the interaction between a weak "conventional" civil society and a robust "virtual" civil society impart particular dynamics to state-society relations? Essentially, I argue that the rise of "virtual" civil society injects a high degree of volatility into autocratic politics

and presents autocratic regimes with new challenges for control over the streets. However, a robust "virtual" civil society combined with a weak "conventional" civil society has a series of consequences for the politics of opposition that are less positive: it reinforces already weak political organization, breeds a false sense of representativeness, dilutes collective identities within oppositions, and renders oppositional mobilization over extended periods of time more difficult.

In what follows, I document the extremely rapid growth of new communications media in the late 2000s in many non-democracies where "conventional" civil societies remain weak (particularly in upper- and upper-middle-income non-democracies). I show how, in a subset of cases, this has given rise to robust "virtual" civil society activity, connected through the internet rather than face-to-face ties, spurring unusual bursts of civic activism coordinated through social media rather than conventional political organization. I illustrate this through a case study of the rapid growth of "virtual" civil society in Russia, a country well known for its weak "conventional" civil society. I then lay out what Bennett and Segerberg have called the "logic of connective action" based on digital networking and describe how it differs in critical ways from the classical logic of the collective action, particularly in terms of incentives, forms of organization, and ways in which political actors relate to one another.[3] Finally, I illustrate how this logic has played itself out in some of the issues that have confronted political oppositions organized along "virtual" civil society lines in Russia, Egypt, Tunisia, Ukraine, and elsewhere.

The Growth of New Communications Technologies in Non-Democracies

In the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, a communications revolution occurred around the world, as internet and mobile phone technologies gained widespread use. This transformation in communications technologies spread unevenly, first manifesting itself in advanced industrial democracies in the late 1990s and 2000s. By the early 2000s a number of scholars pointed to the emergence of a "global digital divide" that separated high-income OECD countries from the rest of the world.[4] According to World Bank statistics for 170 countries,[5] in 2003, on average, 50 percent of the population in high-income OECD countries used the internet, and mobile phone subscriptions encompassed approximately 80 per 100 population, while for the rest of the world these figures were 8 percent and 19 per 100 population, respectively. In the second half of the 2000s, however, internet and mobile phone usage spread rapidly throughout much of the world. Thus, if the rate of internet usage for high-income OECD countries by 2012 had risen to 80 percent, the rate for the rest of world had also risen significantly—to 32 percent (i.e., approximately the level of internet usage in high-income OECD countries in 2001). The gap in use of mobile phone technologies narrowed even more rapidly, as mobile cellular subscriptions in high-income OECD countries rose from 81 per 100 population in 2003 to 121 in 2012, and in the rest of the world from 19 to 98.

Much of the early literature on the "global digital divide" pointed to political openness as a critical factor shaping the diffusion of new communications

technologies.[6] However, studies found that as economic development proceeded over the 2000s, the substantive effect of political openness on the adoption of internet technologies eroded significantly.[7] The spread of mobile phone technologies was considerably less sensitive to form of government than internet usage. For example, in 2003, those countries classified as "free" by Freedom House exhibited an average rate of 53 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 population, while those classified as "partially free" or "not free" exhibited an average rate of 14 subscriptions per 100 population. By 2012 countries classified as "free" had an average rate of 118 per 100 population, while those classified as "partially free" or "not free" had an average of 90 per 100.[8]

These data, however, mask much of what was taking place in the spread of new communications technologies in the late 2000s, as the most important factors driving their adoption were income and level of development. Examining the one hundred governments classified by Freedom House as "partially free" or "not free" in 2011 for which data on internet usage and mobile phone subscriptions are available, one finds sharply different patterns of internet and mobile phone adoption by levels of development (as identified by World Bank income classifications). As Figure 1a shows, by 2009 the average level of internet use in upper income non-democracies (mainly oil states) equaled or exceeded that in democracies and by 2012 had drawn close to internet usage in OECD upper-income democracies. Mobile phone subscriber rates (Figure 1b) in upper-income non-democracies had already exceeded subscriber rates in OECD upper income democracies by 2007 and by 2012 were 33 percent greater than in OECD democracies. But in the late 2000s significant changes in communications technologies also occurred in upper-middle income non-democracies (countries such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Tunisia, and Venezuela). On average, internet usage in upper-middle income non-democracies had reached 38 percent by 2012 (approximately the level exhibited by democracies in 2005), while mobile phone subscriptions had grown to 107 per 100 population (approximately the level found in high-income OECD democracies in 2007).

Even many lower-middle income non-democracies (countries such as Armenia, Egypt, Moldova, Morocco, Syria, and Ukraine) experienced significant growth in internet usage over the late 2000s. By 2012 mobile phone subscriptions in these countries had on average reached levels exhibited by high income OECD democracies in the early 2000s. By contrast, internet usage, on average, in lower income non-democracies (such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uganda) barely changed over the course of the 2000s, although mobile phone subscriptions rose to cover about half of these populations. In sum, in the late 2000s many non-democracies experienced a major transformation in internet usage and mobile phone coverage—a communications revolution that was heavily shaped by levels of income and development.

This shift in the communications milieu for some non-democracies was nothing less than astounding. Figure 2a presents information for internet usage per 100

Figure 1   Use of Communication Technologies for Non-Democracies by Level of Income

A   Internet Usage per 100 Population
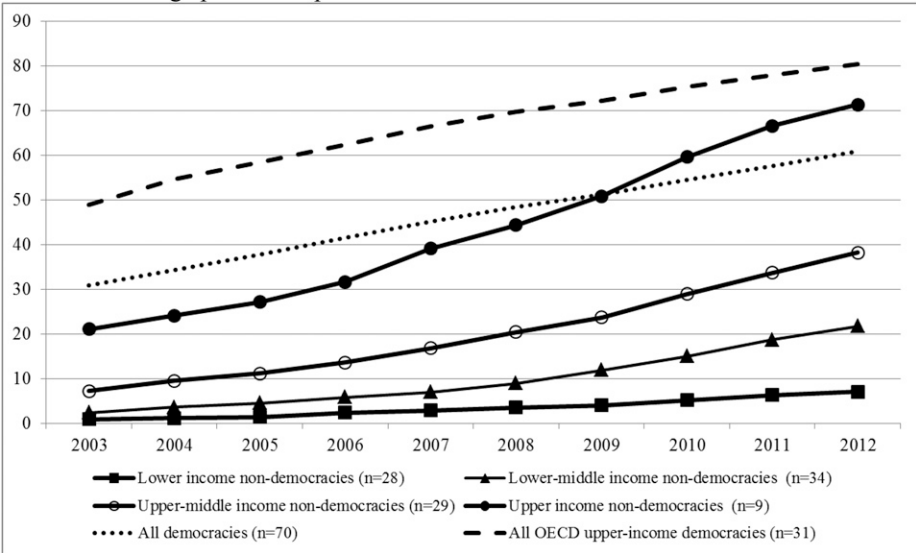
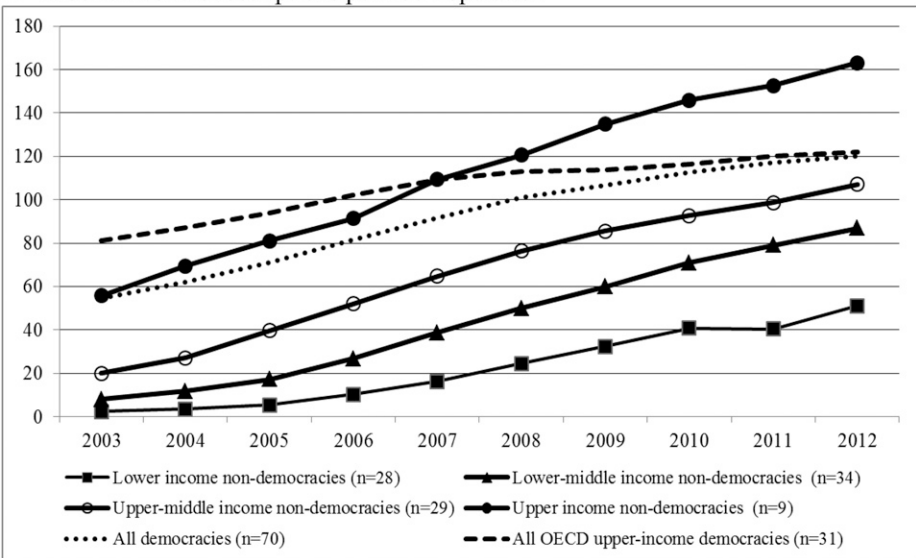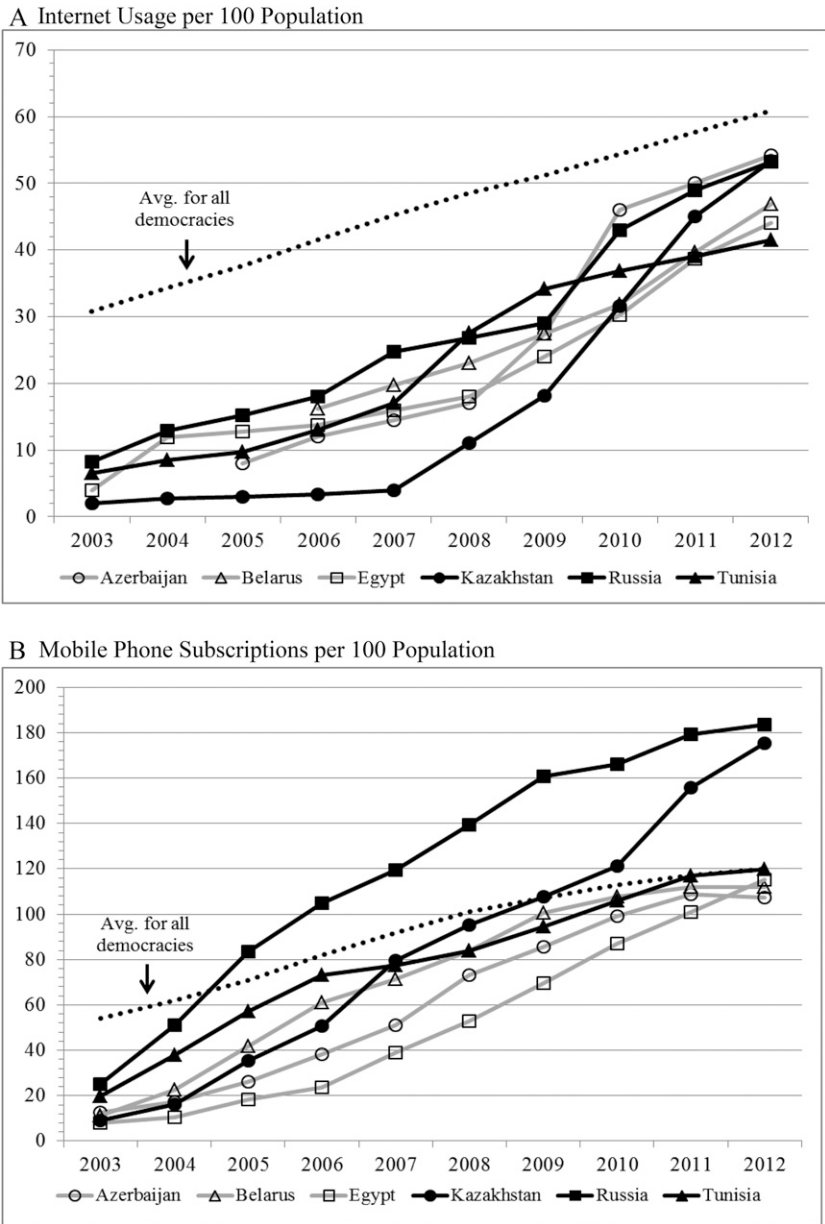B   Mobile Phone Subscriptions per 100 Population

Figure 2 Growth of New Communications Technologies for Six Non-Democracies

A Internet Usage per 100 Population

B Mobile Phone Subscriptions per 100 Population

population for six non-democracies (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Tunisia) over the late 2000s. During this time all six countries transformed from societies with relatively minimal internet usage (2 to 8 percent in 2003) to societies with quite extensive internet usage (41 to 54 percent by 2012), coming close to approximating the average level of internet use for democracies. Thus, many middle and upper income autocracies during this period transformed from societies that were relatively untouched by the internet to societies in which internet usage became widespread. Similarly, in terms of mobile phone subscriptions (Figure 2b) there was a stunning shift over the 2000s. In 2003, mobile phone subscriptions in all six countries lagged significantly behind the average for democracies, ranging from 8 to 25 per 100 population. But by 2012 all six equaled or exceeded the average level of mobile phone usage in democracies. The growth in mobile phone usage was particularly striking in Russia, which by 2012 had the fifth highest level of mobile phone subscriptions per 100 population (183.5) in the world, exceeding even the level of the highest OECD democracy, Finland (172.5).

All six of these countries are well known to have extremely weak "conventional" civil societies. According to the 2011 Arab Barometer survey, only 7 percent of Tunisian society reported participating in a civil society association of any sort. The corresponding figure for Egypt was 15 percent.[9] Similarly, in the 2005 wave of the World Values Survey, Egypt had one of the least active societies in terms of membership in civil society associations of any sort, with only 15 percent of Egyptians reporting that they were members of at least one civil society association, and only 6 percent indicating that they were active members of a civil society association.[10] In the Life in Transitional Societies II (LITS II) survey conducted among 39 thousand individuals in 34 countries by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 2010, only 3 percent of Azerbaijanis, 5 percent of Russians, and 6 percent of Kazakhstanis reported being an active member of at least one civil society association, as opposed to 40 percent of French, 32 percent of Germans, 40 percent of Great Britons, and 57 percent of Swedes. Passive membership in at least one civil society association was similarly low: 3 percent of Azerbaijanis, 11 percent of Russians, and 17 percent of Kazakhstanis, compared with 32 percent of French, 50 percent of Germans, 34 percent of Great Britons, and 78 percent of Swedes.[11] There are good reasons for the association between weak "conventional" civil societies and autocratic government. Autocrats usually fear the challenges that independent "conventional" civil society associations present to their hegemony and repress them. Moreover, previous rounds of autocratic rule usually leave a legacy of stunted civil society development in their wake.

It would be a mistake to think that there is an automatic or teleological relationship between the growth of new communications technologies and the emergence of large-scale contentious action. For every case in which widespread internet-based opposition has emerged, there are two cases in which it has not, either because wealthier autocracies (where new communications technologies have developed most rapidly) have been able to buy loyalty within their populations, regimes have been effective in suppressing opposition at early stages in their development, or regimes have

significantly regulated social media through monitoring and censorship. In 2010, Reporters Without Borders identified ten autocracies (Bahrain, Burma, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam) that were actively engaged in internet censorship through firewalls, filtering, and site-blocking, another five autocracies (Belarus, Egypt, Malaysia, Russia, and Thailand) that sought to control the internet through internet surveillance and harassment of opponents, and another four (Cuba, Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan) that sought to limit internet development by establishing high user costs, providing little infrastructure, or constricting access.[12] Like all contentious politics, there is a cat-and-mouse aspect to how new communications technologies affect the relationship between opposition and government, with each side constantly innovating in order to take advantage of the vulnerabilities of the other or to shore up their weaknesses.[13] Nevertheless, there have been a number of cases (Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Russia, Syria, and Tunisia) in which new communications technologies have come to play important roles in coordinating anti-autocratic oppositions, even in the presence of extremely weak "conventional" civil societies.[14]

A Russian Illustration

The 2011–2012 electoral protests in Russia are a case in point. By nearly all conventional measures of civil society development, the overriding feature of Russian civil society is its utter feebleness—not only in comparison with Western Europe, but even in comparison with other post-communist societies in Europe. According to the 2010 LITS II survey, Russia had the lowest level of citizens reporting active membership in a voluntary organization, the second lowest level reporting passive membership in a voluntary organization (after Bulgaria), the lowest level reporting participation in demonstrations or strikes, and the lowest level reporting that they had ever signed a petition among all European post-communist states. As we know from the work of Howard and others,[15] civil society in post-communist societies is significantly less developed than in advanced industrial democracies. Moreover, among the post-communist countries, Russians have an extremely low level of trust toward conventional civil society associations. According to the LITS II survey, only about 12 percent of Russians express trust toward NGOs in general—a level that is dismally low not only compared to Western Europe, but also to every other post-communist European state.

Yet, by the early 2010s there was one area of social interaction in which Russia was not a laggard: new social media. Russia is one of the most "socially networked" societies in Europe, at least if measured by the total number of internet users and the amount of time they spend on social networking sites. In December 2011, 12.3 percent of all internet users (61.5 million people) in Europe were located inside the Russian Federation, the largest internet community in Europe outside of Germany.[16] By the beginning of 2012, half of Russia's population used the internet, with 38 percent of the

Russian population using it at least once a day.[17] By 2013 the proportion of Russians using the internet had risen to 57 percent, and forecasts anticipated that 83 percent of the Russian population will be internet users by 2018.[18] Moreover, about 75 percent of Russia's current internet users use the internet to engage in online social networking, and studies show that Russians are some of the heaviest online social networkers in the world in terms of time spent on social network sites per user. As Figure 3 shows, with an average of 10.3 hours a month per visitor, Russians spent more than twice as much time on social networking sites as Americans did in April 2011, ranking Russia the second highest among countries (after Israel) in online social network engagement.[19]

The online social networking market in Russia has some distinctive features. Facebook controls a small proportion of the market (19 percent), ranking fifth among social networking sites. Instead, due to its loose policies in connection to intellectual property rights, the most visited online networking site in Russia is a local Russian firm, *Vkontakte*, with approximately 22 million unique visitors every day (65 percent of whom live in the Russian Federation). Not far behind is another Russian site, *Odnoklassniki*, with 16.7 million unique visitors. Russia witnessed an astounding growth in its online community from 2009 to 2011. During that time the number of unique visitors to *Vkontakte* increased by 75 percent, and the number of unique visitors to *Odnoklassniki* by 150 percent, while the number of hours spent on social networking sites per month by the average Russian user grew by 56 percent. Moreover, by 2011 Russia ranked fourth in the world in terms of mobile phone subscriptions, so that these

Figure 3   Average Monthly Hours per Visitor at Social Networking Sites, 2011
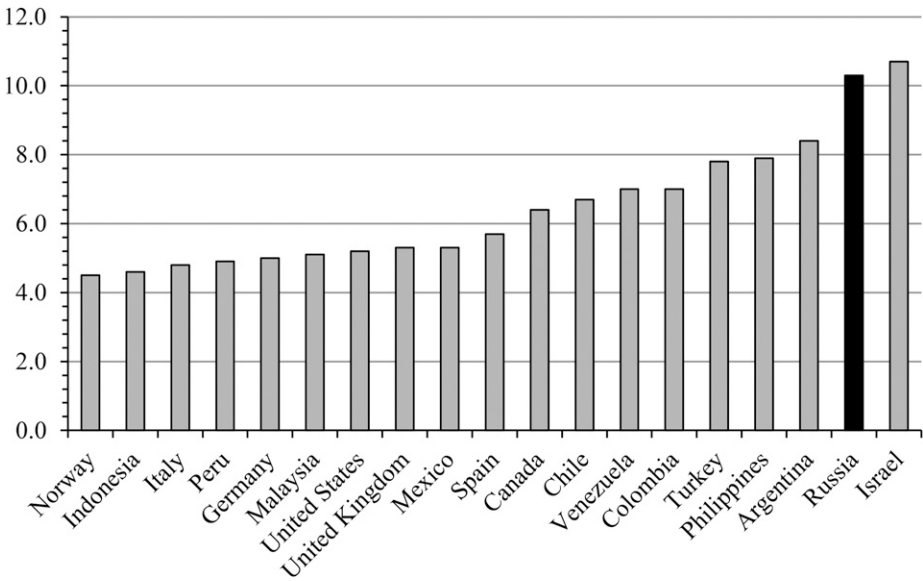
burgeoning social networks were omnipresent for most Russian internet users. If, as Marwell and Oliver argue, the larger and more variegated a population and the more that it is networked, the more likely it is to achieve a critical mass for the provision of public goods,[20] then Russia's online community, with its vast size and highly networked character, had a high potential for producing collective action. If Russia's conventional civil society in the Tocquevillian sense remained stunted and stagnant, Russia's "virtual" civil society—its bloggers, online networking sites, and online associations—blossomed in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

Russia's "virtual" civil society was in fact the driving force behind an unusual explosion of civic activism in Russia from 2011 to 2012. The demonstrations over electoral fraud that took place on Bolotnaya Square on December 10, 2011 (60 thousand participants), at Prospekt Sakharova on December 24, 2011 (100 thousand participants), and at Bolotnaya Square again on February 4, 2012 (80 thousand participants) constituted the largest manifestations of civic activism in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Protests occurred in hundreds of cities across Russia, though only in Moscow were large demonstrations mounted. The participants consisted primarily of two elements: 1) traditional opposition parties from across the political spectrum (i.e., "conventional" civil society); and 2) members of the new middle class, many of whom had never previously participated in any civil society association or protest activity, but who were largely mobilized into activism through the internet (i.e., "virtual" civil society).

As is true in many autocratic regimes, Russian television—the main source of news for most of the country—is highly censored, driving those in search of accurate information to the blogosphere. By the end of 2011 a quarter of the Russian population was using the internet as its main source of news.[21] Blogs and social networking sites played conspicuous roles in exposing electoral fraud in the December 2011 elections and in mobilizing protests over the falsified elections. Footage shot by cell-phone cameras and posted on the internet created a vastly different information environment than during past instances of electoral violations, as the Russian internet was inundated with dozens of videos purporting to capture incidents of electoral fraud. As Aleksandr Morozov, one of the many Russian political bloggers who publicized these accusations, noted, "If we didn't have social networks, we wouldn't have heard about the sheer quantity of violations. Thanks to social networks, election observers for the first time were able to speak widely about the violations and disgraces that they saw at polling stations."[22] The star of the demonstrations, Aleksei Navalny, gained notoriety through his blogging activity, framing United Russia as "the party of swindlers and thieves" to the 60 thousand Russians reading his blog on a daily basis (his Twitter feed drew an additional 135 thousand followers). Much of the participation in the December 10th demonstration was mobilized through social networking sites, with as many as 30 thousand people pledging ahead of time that they would attend. According to surveys of the protestors, 56 percent of those attending the December 24th demonstration heard about it from internet publications or blogs (true for 61 percent of those participating in the February 4th demonstration); by contrast, 33 percent found out about it from friends or neighbors and 18 percent from television.[23] Among participants in the

demonstrations under thirty years of age (over half of those who participated), 75 percent used the social networking site *Vkontakte* as their key source of information about the protests. At the same time, participation in "conventional" civil society association among those mobilized was extremely low.[24] Thus, relatively large crowds of 100 thousand were mobilized despite weak (and in some cases, completely absent) political organization. Indeed, some of the protests (such as the "Big White Circle" action in February 2012 in which the circular road around Moscow's center was occupied by a chain of protesters) were organized completely spontaneously, without any overt organization, through the internet.

In short, in 2011 to 2012, a "virtual" civil society, built around members of the newly emergent middle class connected to one another through the internet, emerged in Moscow (and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Russia). It provided the networks and cohesion for an unusual burst of social activism that "conventional" Russian civil society had proven incapable of producing. But what exactly is "virtual" civil society? How is it constituted? How does it produce action? And how might this differ from the way in which "conventional" civil society functions? These are the questions to which we now turn.

Civil Society and the Logics of Collective and Connective Political Action

In a recent book, Bennett and Segerberg noted that the logic of collective action characteristic of "the modern social order of hierarchical institutions and membership groups" revolves around "the organizational dilemma of getting individuals to join actions where personal participation costs may outweigh marginal gains, particularly when people can ride on the efforts of others for free." [25] There are many ways in which those seeking to organize collective action have sought to overcome tendencies toward free-riding. The solution originally proposed by Olson was selective incentives,[26] but, as many have pointed out, collective action problems are just as easily resolved by reducing the costs associated with action or by fostering strong identities and solidary ties that cause individuals to feel moral obligations that induce them to overlook material disincentives for participation.[27] Central in almost all of the traditional solutions to the collective action problem has been the role played by organization. Indeed, it was this insight that led social movement theorists to focus on social movement organizations and other structures of mobilization as critical to the mobilizational process.[28]

As Bennett and Segerberg argue, the rise of new social media does not eliminate collective actions problems in the senses noted above, but it does allow collective action to take place without strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a collective identity, primarily through the self-coordination that can occur through large-scale, open-ended, and interpenetrated information networks. They refer to this as the "logic of connective action."[29] Large-scale interpenetrated information networks allow large numbers of people who share common grievances or beliefs to find each other and coordinate action

without a heavy organizational presence and without sharing common identities. Personal expression and self-motivation play larger roles within connective action than external incentives. As Bennett and Segerberg explain:

> In this connective logic, taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships. Sometimes the people in these exchanges may be on the other side of the world, but they do not require a club, a party, or a shared ideological frame to make the connection.[30]

"Conventional" modes of civil society organization often coexist and hybridize with these new forms. This was evident, for example, in the 2012 Russian protests with the presence of "conventional" civil society actors, alongside new middle class protestors mobilized primarily through digital networks. However, the vast majority of new middle class participants mobilized through social media heavily distrusted these "conventional" civil society actors, who enjoyed little legitimacy within the crowds. In the Egyptian Revolution, much of the early mobilizations characteristic of the revolution occurred as a result of nascent "conventional" civil society movements utilizing new technologies of connective action that linked them to large numbers of potential new participants.[31] But even when "conventional" civil society actors continue to play a key organizational role, the heavy presence of social media exerts effects on the character of movement organization. As Chadwick notes, in the presence of new social media, participant ties to organizations become less important than the ability of organizations to use electronic networks to tap into groundswells of citizen opinion. The effects of new social technologies on many American social movements has been dramatic: the costs of communication with potential participants have been radically reduced, organizational staffs have been slashed, organizational hierarchies have been flattened, and the personal commitment of those involved in movements often becomes diluted, as modes of participation become less demanding and involve weaker ties.[32]

It is one thing when these new forms of connection and mobilization materialize within advanced industrial democracies, where there are long traditions of civil society association, democratic political processes are relatively institutionalized, and civil liberties are backed by the rule of law. But when new social technologies make rapid inroads into societies ruled by autocratic regimes where "conventional" civil society is weak, repression is high, and representational institutions are nascent or non-existent, there is a strong tendency for "virtual" civil society to substitute for "conventional" civil society as the fundamental mode for challenging autocratic rule. In fall 2004, when the Orange Revolution occurred, new communications technologies had only begun to make inroads into Ukraine, with only 10 percent of Ukrainian society consisting of internet users, and 29 percent consisting of cellphone users. Most of the mobilization that successfully challenged the Kuchma regime was organized by "conventional" civil society organizations in the course of an electoral campaign, even though "conventional" civil society association in Ukrainian society was weak (at the time, 17

percent of Ukrainians reported belonging to at least one civil society association). Only 19 percent of Orange Revolution participants utilized the internet, while 21 percent of Orange Revolution participants belonged to some form of civil society association. Nevertheless, as Figure 4 shows, if we look at the effect of internet usage on the choice to participate in the Orange Revolution among those who supported Orange Revolution at the ballot box, we find that an Orange Revolution supporter who did not use the internet had a .28 probability of participating in the protests of the revolution, while an Orange Revolution supporter who used the internet had a .55 probability of participating (that is, double the probability). By contrast, an Orange Revolution supporter who was not a member of a civil society association had a .29 probability of participating in the revolution, while an Orange Revolution supporter who was a member of at least one civil society association had only a .42 probability.[33] Thus, in the Orange Revolution the internet proved to be a more efficient means of mobilizing potential supporters than membership in conventional civil society associations.

Figure 4   Effect of Internet Usage/Civil Society Membership on the Probability of Participating in the Orange Revolution Over Merely Supporting It (holding other variables constant at their means)[a]
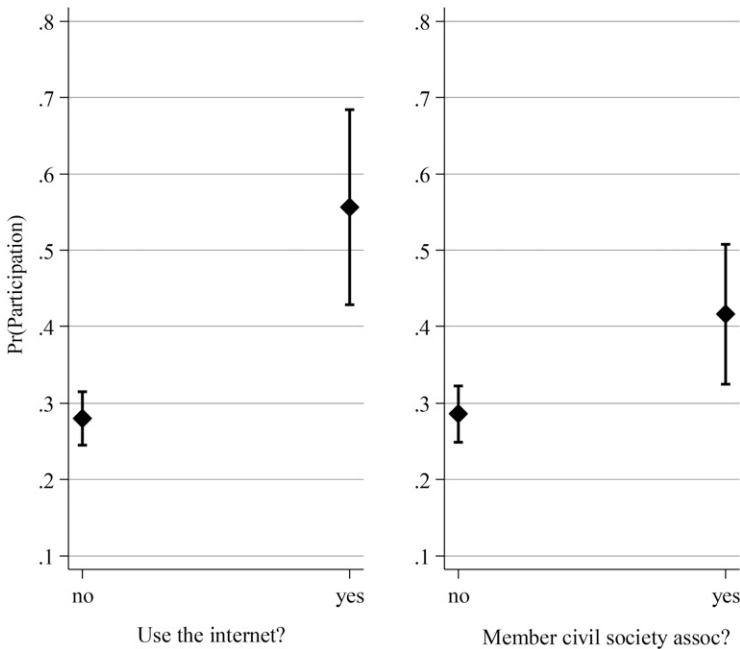
[a]Effects controlled for the influence of age, gender, education, self-identified class, level of consumer goods ownership, native language used at home, religion, identification as a Ukrainian citizen, and sector of employment.

Nine years later, by fall 2013, new communications technologies had come to play a much larger role in the Euromaidan Uprising. By then, 34 percent of Ukrainian society consisted of internet users, while cellphone usage had grown universal, with 132 cellphones per 100 population (higher than Sweden's rate of 123 cellphones per 100 population). In the Euromaidan protests, very few participants were mobilized by civil society associations, while Facebook, Twitter, SMS messaging, internet-based television, and other social technologies played a critical role in coordinating the protests, with 49 percent reporting that they had learned about the protests through Facebook alone.[34] Radical groups like *Pravyi Sektor* (Right Sector) came together relatively quickly, largely through the internet, without much associational life outside of social media or prior to the onset of the revolutionary crisis. As a result of their weak ties with those on the square, conventional politicians, who were largely distrusted by the crowds, had great difficulty controlling the actions of protestors, with events driven by the radicalism of the crowds rather than by the leaders of official opposition parties on a number of occasions.

Digital coordination played a similarly important role for a significant portion of those participating in the Tunisian Revolution in the presence of weak "conventional" civil society. According to the 2011 Arab Barometer survey, 56 percent of those who reported participating in the protests of the revolution used the internet at least once a week (as opposed to 23 percent of Tunisians who did not participate in revolutionary protests). By contrast, only 21 percent of participants in the Tunisian Revolution were members of at least one civil society association. Moreover, 36 percent of those who participated in the protests of the revolution indicated that they relied primarily on Facebook and the internet to follow events during the revolution (as opposed to domestic television, Al-Jazeera, or French TV). In Egypt, 45 percent of those who participated in the revolution's protests used the internet at least once a week, as opposed to 13 percent of the rest of society. However, "conventional" civil society associations played a larger role in the Egyptian Revolution than in Tunisia, with those reporting membership in at least one civil society association comprising 46 percent of revolution participants. Much of this civil society participation consisted of a combination of participants in liberal civil society associations and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In contrast to Tunisia, where the Ben Ali regime curbed a previously vibrant civil society through harassment, repression, and co-option, the Mubarak regime had loosened restrictions on civil society activity in the years leading up to the revolution, allowing a more vibrant independent press and permitting Islamist political candidates to run in the 2005 Parliamentary election. Only 14 percent of those who participated in the Egyptian Revolution reported that they had primarily used internet-based sources to follow the events of the revolution, with most reporting that their key source of information was Al-Jazeera.[35] Still, digital organization played a critical role in the early organization of protests—particularly, in the initial Day of Rage (January 25, 2011), when a surprisingly large number of middle-class professionals turned out in central Cairo.

The 2011–2012 Russian electoral protests represented a purer version of digitally-based mobilization, though, as noted earlier, some hybridization with "conventional" civil society association was also present. Much of the early organization of protest

emerged out of an electoral observer movement that was largely organized electronically, with networked citizens via crowd-sourcing collecting, posting, and sharing a mass of reports concerning electoral falsification. Social media were used to coordinate numerous types of actions, from organizing flash mobs to obtaining pledges from individuals to participate in mass actions prior to the onset of the protests (and thereby forming a critical mass prior to the event itself). Mobile-based streaming allowed crowds to watch online and to react with immediacy to clashes between protestors and the police, and online voting was used to determine who would be speakers at rallies. Even an act like the estimation of the number of participants became a distributed task that was coordinated through electronic networks. The contrast with pro-government rallies, organized through traditional top-down means and relying heavily on organization, was stark.[36] "Conventional" civil society association played little role in much of the opposition's activities. As we will see below, this organizational vacuum presented some of the most significant problems facing the movement and ultimately contributed to its decline.

The Political Consequences of "Virtual" Civil Society

As the Tunisian, Egyptian, Ukrainian, and Russian examples indicate, "virtual" civil society can provide a structural basis for challenging autocratic regimes even in the presence of a weak "conventional" civil society. In this respect, it injects a greater volatility into autocratic politics. But the logic of connective action has distinctive elements that impart a particular character into civil society activity and raise important questions about the ability of "virtual" civil society to function as an effective basis for democratic development.

Some have questioned whether the weak ties characteristic of "virtual" civil society can generate the kind of sustained high-risk activism necessary for effectively constraining an autocratic state. According to this line of thinking, high risk action requires the presence of strong network ties (friendships, personal acquaintances, and face-to-face relationships) capable of pulling in individuals who otherwise might lack the resolve to participate in dangerous circumstances.[37] The very fluidity of social media, with its easy entry and exit, makes stable association problematic and causes "virtual" civil society activism to be more episodic. The evidence for such arguments is weak. There could have been no riskier a case of activism than the Tunisian Revolution, where much of the driving force behind the spread of revolutionary activity was deadly repression by the government. Yet, as the 2011 Arab Barometer shows, those who participated more regularly in the events of the revolution were 68 percent more likely to have used the internet as their main informational source on the revolution than those who participated only occasionally (significant at the .10 level).[38] In Egypt, the relationship between mobilization through the internet and regular participation in the events of the revolution was even stronger, with those using the internet as their main source of information being 285 percent more likely to participate regularly than those who did not (significant at the .05 level).[39] Similarly, during the Russian electoral

protests, a significant group of individuals repeatedly engaged in protest actions, with 79 percent of those participating in the February 4, 2012 protest in Bolotnaya Square engaging in at least one of the three earlier major protests over electoral fraud in December 2011. A survey of participants in the February 4th demonstration by the Levada Center indicates that there was a very strong, statistically significant relationship (chi-square=40.603, significant at the .001 level, with 3 degrees of freedom) between whether a person primarily used the internet as a source of information about the protests and the number of earlier electoral protests in which they participated.[40] In short, as evidence from these three revolutionary episodes shows, if anything, internet-based participants in revolutionary action are more regular participants in high-risk activism than those not mobilized through the internet.

The reason for this appears to be the strong ties that are often embedded within the weak ties of the internet. Thus, internet-based mobilization does not mean that individuals participate in isolation from family or friends. In Tunisia, for example, 95 percent of revolution participants who primarily used the internet to follow the events of the Tunisian Revolution also indicated that their friends and acquaintances participated in the revolution—true for only 79 percent of those revolutionary participants who did not use the internet to follow the revolution's events (chi-square=10.271, significant at the .001 level). Similarly, in Egypt, 97 percent of revolution participants who indicated that they primarily used the internet to follow the events of the revolution also indicated that their friends and acquaintances participated in the revolution—as opposed to only 79 percent of participants who did not use the internet to follow the revolution's events (Pearson's chi-square=5.439, significant at the .05 level). Thus, contrary to the common image, "virtual" civil society does not consist of isolated and atomized individuals sitting alone at home on their computers. Rather, as a result of the friends and relatives connected by the internet or the conversations that the internet sets in motion, the weak ties of the internet readily transform into a vast multitude of nodes of strong ties weakly connected to one another through digital media.[41] Moreover, experimental work has shown that peer pressure to participate in protest activities functions just as easily when digital media are used as the medium for mobilization as when other means are used.[42]

The more significant questions surrounding "virtual" civil society revolve around the effects that connective political action exerts on political organization. As one Russian political observer noted:

> The internet as an alternative source of information and as an instrument of political mobilization plays an ambiguous role in the political process. On the one hand, it sharply lowers the costs to the opposition for disrupting the [regime's] informational blockade and for mobilizing its followers. However, the ease and speed by which these barriers are overcome leads to a situation in which the opposition (or more precisely, the leaders of protest) appear before a hundred thousand person crowd of followers completely unprepared institutionally.[43]

Indeed, a September 2012 poll asked Russian protest participants what they thought were the movement's weak points. Topping the list (named by 49 percent) was "the

absence of a clear program of action," with 25 percent also naming "the disunity of the movement and conflicts among leaders" and another 23 percent naming "the absence of authoritative and influential figures."[44] "Virtual" civil society establishes no coherent oppositional leadership and no common identity, but merely a loose network of coordinated information nodes. In Russia, its most authoritative leaders were not politicians but a loose collection of bloggers and media personalities. Many of these individuals believed, as one of them put it, that they "led nothing" but merely orchestrated an open-ended process through which anyone could participate and articulate their views.[45] Moreover, there was a fundamental skepticism among participants toward anyone making claims to leadership over the movement.

All this rendered it extremely difficult to develop any kind of protest strategy, to articulate a clear set of aims around the movement, or even to identify those who might have had the authority to do so. Strategic vision for the movement was completely lacking, actions were organized irregularly and without clear tactical aims, and the movement even went into abeyance over the summer so that activists could go on vacation. As Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov observed, one of the main reasons for a decline of protest activism in Russia in spring 2012 was that the leaders of the movement, to the extent that there were leaders, "were not able to articulate a clear program of actions and to provide a perspective for development of the protest frame of mind. They were not able to transform the protests either into party forms . . . or into a more or less formalized movement."[46] After eight months of functioning in this manner, an attempt was eventually made to create a legitimate leadership for the movement by holding online elections to a Coordinating Council. About 80 thousand votes were cast and 45 activists were selected, but by that time the movement had gone into serious decline, and the new leadership (itself unwieldy and divided, with a 45 member council incapable of providing strategic coordination) no longer seemed relevant. Moreover, the council was largely unrepresentative of Russia as a whole, with only a handful of delegates coming from outside Moscow and St. Petersburg. Within a year, the council had ceased to exist, and its activities have been widely judged a failure.[47]

An attempt was made almost ten months later to translate Aleksei Navalny's following on the internet into an electoral machine for the September 2013 Moscow mayoral election. Navalny was able to mobilize about 630 thousand of Moscow's 7.2 million potential voters (9 percent), garnering 27 percent of the vote in Moscow in a race in which the turnout was only a third of all eligible voters. While credited with having run a relatively sophisticated campaign that relied on both face-to-face canvassing and internet mobilization, Navalny nevertheless failed to break through the Putin regime's monopoly on power in Moscow and was unable to press charges in the courts over examples of election fraud. The Putin regime subjected Navalny to multiple trials and investigations on trumped-up charges of corruption in order to discredit him and ultimately placed him under house arrest, banning him from engaging in internet activities. Opposition mobilization on the internet persisted until the Putin regime introduced more restrictive censorship in 2013 on "extremist" sites that sought to organize illegal meetings or that advocated "any activities aimed at violating the established order."[48]

In Egypt and Tunisia as well, those who coordinated action primarily through social media lacked the political organization necessary for mounting an effective electoral campaign in the immediate wake of these revolutions. In both cases "virtual" civil society failed to produce unified or coherent electoral campaigns and instead ceded the electoral field to more established Islamist parties organized along "conventional" civil society principles. Thus, "virtual" civil society may provide an effective basis for challenging autocratic regimes, but not necessarily for building effective political alternatives, leaving the streets as its main playing field.

"Virtual" civil society also tends to breed a false sense of representativeness within opposition, an illusion that the opinions articulated through electronic networks mirror those of society as a whole. The 2011–12 Moscow protestors claimed to represent the authentic voice of Russian society. But there was a significant disjunction between the positions they espoused and those of society at large. The participants consisted primarily of self-identified liberals and democrats (70 percent at the December 24th protests), even though only a small minority of Russians self-identify as such. Indeed, 38 percent of participants in the December 24th protest indicated that they had voted in parliamentary elections for the liberal party *Yabloko*, even though Yabloko had received only 3.4 percent of the national vote in the election, and somewhere between 8 to 12 percent in the city of Moscow.[49] Although the protestors' clearest demand was for Putin's resignation, all public opinion polls taken at the time of the March 2012 presidential election gave Putin a solid majority of public support. Certainly, as the demonstrations indicated, Putin had lost the support of a significant portion of the Russian intelligentsia, particularly in Moscow, but surveys also found that only 22 percent of the Russian public at large was positive about the opposition's demand for "Russia without Putin," while 54 percent opposed it.[50] In particular, the gulf between opinion within the intelligentsia in Moscow (which imagined itself through social media as representing Russian society) and the Russian provinces remained considerable. In short, there is a tendency for "virtual" civil society to imagine digital networks as society itself and to over-estimate the strength of opposition.

Finally, one of the key roles of "conventional" civil society association has been outside periods of open contention—that is, building a sense of solidarity and common identity in preparation for challenging regimes and orienting individuals in politics. The kinds of identities nurtured within "virtual" civil society are ad hoc, broadly inclusive, and oppositional. As Bennett and Segerberg argue, digital networks are formed within a highly individualized and fragmented space based less on collective identity than on personal expression. As they put it, "the identity reference is more derived through inclusive and diverse large-scale personal expression rather than through common group or ideological identification."[51] The central feature of such identities is their symbolic inclusiveness, in that "personal action frames are inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed" and focus attention not on "who are we" but "who are you"[52]—that is, they orient diverse individuals toward the lowest common denominator of what they oppose. In this respect, "virtual" civil society can be quite effective in building ad hoc negative coalitions for challenging

autocratic regimes. However, "virtual" civil society does not seem capable of sustaining a sense of solidarity beyond specific windows of contention and providing the kind of collective cohesion necessary for long-term oppositional mobilization or governance. It is one thing when digital forms of coordination occur within contexts in which "conventional" civil society remains robust and collective identities are well established; in such situations "virtual" civil society may reinforce aspects of "conventional" civil society development. But if "virtual" civil society is the primary game in town (as is true within many of the autocratic contexts examined here), it is unlikely to breed the kind of shared collective identity necessary for stable and legitimate rule over the long term and instead reinforces the fragmentation and weakness of "conventional" civil society.

Conclusion

In societies where "conventional" civil society remains weak, we have seen that social media can provide an alternative basis for civil society development. However, "virtual" civil society assumes a structure and configuration that injects particular features into politics. It lacks coherent leadership and organization, connecting myriad nodes of friends and acquaintances through the weak ties of blogs and social networking sites. It breeds a false sense of representativeness within the opposition, leading it to over-estimate the degree of social support it enjoys. It eases barriers to mobilization and injects greater volatility into state-society relations, but provides few coherent alternatives—either negotiated or electoral—to the status quo. Finally, it is unlikely to provide the basis for a consolidation of society around shared collective identities for anything but a brief, intensive moment of opposition.

In all these respects, one might question whether a robust "virtual" civil society provides the same advantages for stable and effective democratic development that a robust "conventional" civil society is widely believed to supply. The question is not whether "virtual" civil society can offer a basis for citizens to act collectively in order to challenge autocratic regimes. In this respect, it can perform well so long as strategic coordination is not needed to achieve such a task. But even where "virtual" civil society succeeds in overturning autocratic regimes, it remains fractured, lacks the capacity to forge stable governing identities, and has great difficulty making the transition to electoral contention within post-autocratic politics. All this is the consequence of the substitution of a logic of connective action for a logic of collective action, with the marked weakening of organization that accompanies it.

NOTES

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Community (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Robert D. Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995); Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital, Civil Society and Development," *Third World Quarterly*, 22 (2001), 7–20. For skeptical views, see Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics*, 49 (April 1997), 401–29; Kenneth Newton, "Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy," *International Political Science Review*, 22 (April 2001), 201–14.

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7. Kristopher K. Robison and Edward M. Crenshaw, "Reevaluating the Global Digital Divide: Socio-Demographic and Conflict Barriers to the Internet Revolution," *Sociological Inquiry*, 80 (February 2010), 4–62.

8. See International Telecommunications Union at http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx [accessed on 2/16/2014].

9. Mark R. Beissinger, Amaney A. Jamal, and Kevin Mazur, "Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions: Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions," *Comparative Politics*, 48 (October 2015), 1–21.

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11. The data are available at http://www.ebrd.com/pages/research/economics/data/lits.shtml [accessed on 2/16/2014].

12. Reporters Without Borders, *Enemies of the Internet, Countries Under Surveillance* (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2010). Jordan, Libya, and Venezuela have at times appeared on the list, and Belarus and Russia have since adopted internet censorship mechanisms.

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14. See Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

15. Marc Marjé Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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23. For the surveys, see http://www.levada.ru/26-12-2011/opros-na-prospekte-sakharova-24-dekabrya and http://www.levada.ru/print/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya [accessed on 6/25/2012]. Overall, 70 percent of participants in the protests in 2011–2012 reported that they relied primarily on the internet as their main source of information about the protests; by contrast, 81 percent of the Russian population as a whole relied upon television as its main source of information about the protests. See Denis Volkov, "Protestnoe dvizhenia v Rossii v kontse 2011–2012 gg.: Istoki, dinamika, rezultaty," *Levada-Tsentr*, Sep. 2012, 21.

24. Regina Smyth, Anton Sobolev, and Irina Soboleva, "A Well-Organized Play: Symbolic Politics and the Effect of the Pro-Putin Rallies," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60 (2013), 24–39.

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27. See Mark Irving Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Marwell and Oliver, 7.

28. John McCarthy and Meyer Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, 82 (May 1977), 1212–41.

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31. Merlyna Lim, "Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004–2011," *Journal of Communication*, 62 (April 2012), 231–48.

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33. These results control for the influence of age, gender, education, self-identified class, level of consumer goods ownership, native language, language used at home, religion, identification as a Ukrainian citizen, and sector of employment and hold all other variables at their means. On the data, see Mark R. Beissinger, "The Semblance of Democratic Revolution: Coalitions in the Orange Revolution," *American Political Science Review*, 107 (August 2013), 574–92.

34. Olga Onuch and Tamara Martsenyuk, Ukrainian Protest Project, as reported in the Monkey Cage, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/01/02/social-networks-and-social-media-in-ukrainian-euromaidan-protests-2/ [accessed on 3/11/2014]. Only 8 percent of Euromaidan participants belonged to any kind of civil society association. See Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), "Maidan-2013: Kto stoit, pochemu i za chto?" at http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=216&page=2 [accessed on 3/11/2014].

35. All figures here were calculated using the Arab Barometer Second Wave data, available at http://www.arabbarometer.org/content/arab-barometer-ii. Principal investigators of the Arab Barometer surveys are Amaney Jamal, Bassma Kodmani, Khalil Shikaki, and Mark Tessler.

36. Gregory Asmolov, "Russian Elections 2011–2012: The Dynamics of Political Innovation and the Balance of Power," Paper presented at the conference "Explaining Contentious Politics in Russia: Innovations in Theory and Data Collection," Higher School of Economics, Moscow, June 13–14, 2013.

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38. Calculated from the Arab Barometer Second Wave data, available at http://www.arabbarometer.org/content/arab-barometer-ii. Principal investigators of the Arab Barometer surveys are Amaney Jamal, Bassma Kodmani, Khalil Shikaki, and Mark Tessler.

39. In Tunisia respondents were asked whether they participated in any protests during each of three different time periods within the revolution: 1) December 17, 2010 to January 1, 2011; 2) January 2, 2011 to January 9, 2011; and 3) January 10, 2011 to January 14, 2011. Regular participants were defined as those who participated during more than one of these periods. By contrast, in Egypt, where the revolution was more compact temporally, respondents were asked about their participation in each of six major demonstrations of the revolution. Regular participants were defined as those who participated in more than one of these events.

40. The results come from analysis of the original survey data provided by the Levada Institute. On the survey, see http://www.levada.ru/print/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya [accessed on 6/25/2012].

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45. Volkov, "Protestnoe dvizhenia v Rossii," 11.

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51. Bennett and Segerberg, 40.

52. Bennett and Segerberg, 57–59.