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«HIEROGLYPHS OF PROTEST»: INTERNET MEMES AND PROTEST MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA

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Political Internet meme is an underresearched contemporary phenomenon situated at the interface of digital media and political communication. Regarded as a unit of online transmission of cultural information, such a meme can be considered, on the on hand, as a manifestation of post-folklore, and on the other hand, as a mechanism of political participation and construction of social media users' collective identity. The article presents the results of investigation into Internet memes generated by protest discourse in Runet (Russian Internet). Examination of a vast amount of Internet content allows drawing conclusions as to the thematic emphases of protest actions represented in Runet's memosphere and to the specifics of the image of Russian protest as reflected in memes.

Keywords: political communication, political participation, new media, meme, internet meme, protest, Russia

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Introduction

Memes in general, understood as a specific "quantum" of spreadable information, and Internet memes in particular, have been among the most discussed and at the same time the most controversial communicative phenomena lately. Mentioning that the American dictionary Merriam-Webster (2015) recently added the entry "meme" as "an idea, behaviour, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture", researchers of political memetics R.Gambarato and F.Komesu point out that this fact "not only shows the strength and social relevance of memes but also highlights the problematic nature of a confusing definition" [Gambarato, Komesu, 2018, p. 87]. According to the classical definition of R. Dawkins, who first introduced the term, a meme is a unit of transmission of cultural heritage [Dawkins, 1976]. However, our contemporary understanding of this phenomenon has evolved significantly, and new approaches to defining memes not only vary dramatically, but also contradict one another. The 1990s were characterized by a surge of interest in memetics [Blackmore, 1999; Brodie, 1996; Hofstadter, 1986 et al.], followed by disappointment resulting from the blurriness of the subject matter. In the 21st century, the academia came to reconsider memes, this time as a phenomenon of the digital era.

Shifting the focus of its interest over the recent years toward such narrower meme versions as media meme and Internet meme, contemporary scholarship interprets these phenomena as a manifestation of online creativity, "(post)modern folklore" [Shifman, 2014]; as a kind of metaphorical utterance [Piata, 2016]; artifacts of participatory digital culture [Wiggins, Bowers, 2014] and even as one of "new literacies" practices, without which contemporary social skills of reading and writing in a digital environment would be impossible [Lankshear, Knobel, 2006]. Such diversity of definitions, among other things, results from the high variability of memetic content, whose extant scholarly classifications are based on different parameters and typological foundations [see: Shomova, 2018, pp. 58-84]. Using only the semiotic and genre criteria memes can be divided into numerous subtypes: verbal (hashtags, speech clichés, abbreviations etc.), audial (melodies, sound imitations), visual (GIF files, photoshopped images, collages), mixed (demotivators, coubs, videos etc.) and other.

At the same time, while their definitions of this phenomenon differ in details, most researchers agree over the key characteristics of a meme. First of all, these information units are a sort of viral communication and are capable of replication (however, they are not the same as a virus: "Whereas the viral comprises a single cultural unit (such as a video, photo, or joke) that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme is always a collection of texts" [Shifman, 2014, p. 57]. Secondly, memes mostly belong to the culture of laughter, containing a joke or ironical comment [Davison, 2009, p. 122]. Thirdly, they are open to transformation and play (language games, visual puns etc.), they are interactive, intertextual and welcome creativity [Tay, 2014]. Finally, memes represent an

effective mechanism of participatory culture [see: Jenkins, 2009], political among others. It is a "new form of participatory culture that can offer certain demographics an opportunity for political expression, engagement and participation which otherwise might not have been accessible" [Ross, Rivers, 2017, p.1].

Interestingly, even more often than in scholarly work, attempts to define an Internet meme and its role in everyday communicative practices can be found on different online resources, coming from users or practitioners of Internet industry. In particular, this phenomenon has been described as a "cultural hieroglyph" of sorts, which has no independent meaning, but expresses a notion existing in a certain context or at the intersection of contexts and one that would otherwise require a too long and detailed explanation [Zaykov, 2016]. The same author points out a function of memes which is important for protest communication: "The replicator uses a meme to verify belonging and facilitate communication, where it serves as a template" [Ibid.].

A characteristic feature of memes is that they contain information "compressed to a molecule". This information is readily identifiable, it allows distinguishing between "us" and "them", has an attractive "package" and is easy to reproduce and spread. All the above ensures the popularity of memes in political discourse. Among other things, "Internet memes enable and encourage non-traditional actors to 'speak back' to political authorities in surprising, and surprisingly eloquent, ways" [Howley, 2016, p. 171]. However, memes' attractiveness as a mechanism of interaction in the political sphere is not limited to their uses within participatory culture. Recently there has appeared research into representation of the image of power structures, parties and politicians in national memospheres of social media, such as Spanish [Martínez-Rolán, Piñeiro-Otero, 2016], Brazilian [Gambarato, Komesu, Tenani, 2018], American [Anderson, Sheele, 2014] and others, as well as into the role of memes in the electoral processes [Burroughs, 2013; Heiskanen, 2017; Tay, 2014 et al.] etc. "More simply stated, politics needed memes to keep up with the pace of digital culture—the pace of digital political campaigning" [Burroughs, 2013, p. 260].

A special topic of interest for theoreticians and practitioners of political communication and Internet industry is the incorporation of Internet memes into communicative processes of protest movements. Revealing a tight interconnection between a vivid visual image and a protest action (which essentially is a demonstrative phenomenon, a visible expression of dissent [Mattoni, Teune, 2014]), researchers have noted the key role played by images in activists' communication during protest actions [e.g.: Mortensen, 2011]. Memes have been identified as an effective visual argument, a means of spreading one's viewpoint rapidly [Hahner, 2013; Gambarato, Komesu, 2018]. According to one definition, "a meme is the content of culturally rooted information, which takes recognizable shape of an idiom, a symbol, an image, a tune or an artifact, imparted with a special, added meaning, relevant only for in-group members and intelligible only to them… Due to its brevity and precision in

conveying a particular emotion, value or stereotype, a meme spreads fast among the members of a group… Collective emotional experience and reactions to current events are crystallized in specific phrases, drawings, popular photos and videos, which gain significance for a certain community. These virtual artifacts produce similar emotions in members of a community and are understood only in this milieu" [Zinovieva, 2013]. Which protest events in particular elicit social media users' response that gets crystallized in memes, and what are the semiotic forms for expressing this response? Such political and communicative issues lie at the heart of our research.

Meme and Protest: literature review and research methodology

The role of new media in protest communication has been researched widely [Castells, 2012; Bodrunova, Litvinenko, 2013; Breuer, Landman, Farquhar, 2015; Wolfsfeld, Segev, Sheafer, 2013 et al.]. The use of social media in Russia over the last several years "has increased, reaching 55 %. About one third of Russians use social networks every day or almost daily. In the youngest group of respondents 93% use social networks at least 'a few times a week'" [Volkov, Goncharov, 2017]. This makes clear to what extent new media can influence the shaping of news agenda and Russian people's awareness of political events. According to another research, as early as 2016 in 23 regions of Russian over 50% of the audience read news on the Internet daily or nearly every day [Indeks razvitia mediasfery 2016] and since then this number has only increased.

Increasing attention within the paradigm of research into new media's protest potential has been paid to Internet memes. Memes have been examined as a means of public commentary on the news agenda, a tool of personal and group self-identification, a channel for transmitting views and political values, a mechanism of shaping a collective identity [Bayerl, Stoynov, 2016; Milner, 2013 et al.]. Scholars note the transformation of these viral messages into a new language of political communication and a new form of presence of political subjects in media environment [Martínez-Rolán, Piñeiro-Otero 2016]. Researchers regard memes as «an organic means through which citizens can respond in almost real time to contemporary political events with no fear of delay or censorship by mainstream media" [Ross, Rivers, 2017, p.3]. Considering memes as a populist way to engage with public discourse, R. Milner identifies their advantages in protest media practices as follows: "memes can be quickly produced and shared, and therefore can agilely respond to diverse public events" [Milner, 2013, p. 2359]. Equally important is the fact that a meme "facilitates the potentially viral communication of one's own political beliefs, attitudes and orientations, generally always among groups sharing the same, similar or opposing ideological beliefs" [Ross, Rivers, 2017, p.1].

Interesting as these works are, they obviously do not take into account the diversity of memes in Runet and the specifics of memetic message application in the Russian protest movement, which besides is prone to dramatic fluctuations in its manifestations. Russian sociologists have recently

registered both a decline following the 2011-2012 peak of protest actions ["Pochti 90 protsentov rossiyan…", 2018] and a surge in protest actions to a nearly unprecedented level ["Protestnye nastroenia", 2018]. However, if the Russian protest movement of the early 2010s has become the topic of many publications (see, for instance, bibliographic review of Russian Protest Research, 2016), protest actions of 2017-2019, which have furnished a huge bulk of new material, have not yet been systematically addressed by scholars. There are still fewer works directly connected to the use of Internet memes in Russian protest discourse. Among those, S. Greene's research on the role of social media in organization of protest actions of 2011-2012 [Greene, 2012] seems most interesting. Greene's conclusions are important, but his choice of memetic messages is limited in terms of genre, including mostly verbal memes and hashtags ("in the beginning was the meme, and the meme was the word"). Among other publications the article "Memes and social engineering attacks in virtual space" [Azarov, Brodovskaya et al., 2013] should be mentioned. However, the emphasis there is placed on the problems of information security rather than the specifics of the protest Internet meme, which interest us here. Other noteworthy works are dedicated to political memes [Stolyarov, 2014; Shomova 2015] and to various aspects of politainment, political satire and humor [e.g., Chmel, Savin, Delli Carpini, 2018], though the latter only tangentially address the problematics of Internet meme. Considering all of the above, the topic of the present research, directly touching upon the role of Internet meme in Russian protest media discourse, appears highly relevant. It seems worthwhile to consider it at the interface of Political Studies and Media Studies, joining an understanding of media technologies in social and political planning with the insights of political science.

Revealing direct interconnections between the intensity of protest memes' spreading online and the activity of the real protest offline is not among the tasks of the present article. To address this issue, other methodological approaches and resources of a larger scale would be required. Our research questions are the following: what is the key semantics of the memetic units relevant to our topic (which micro-events of protest actions in particular most often give birth to memes in the social media under consideration); which meme images are the most popular among Internet users (attract most attention, draw responses, get actively reposted etc.), and which are the leading genre forms and varieties of the protest meme in Runet. The core problem of this research is the fork between the attitude to the Internet meme as a mere manifestation of the digital era's culture of laughter, a specific leisure activity and entertainment for the Internet audiences (an opinion established both in the academic and in the industrial circles) and contemporary meme's real function as a mechanism of political participation for the masses, a means for shaping a new online identity and even a specific PR technology (see: Shomova, 2019).

The research's empirical basis proved to be rather bulky. It includes posts in social networks' and messengers' popular communities (such as *Lentach*, *Nastoyaschiy Lentach*, *Abstraktnye memy*

dlya elity vsekh sortov, *MDK* and other VKontakte communities; Telegram channels */po*, *Politota* and other), as well as the content of personal pages on social media (Facebook, Twitter and other). The total number of Internet memes under analysis amounts to over one thousand. Apart from the memetic content as such, we have used secondary data of sociological surveys, mass media publications and the results of expert interviews (in written form) the author conducted with representatives of Internet industry: editors of *Lentach*, *Nastoyaschiy Lentach*, "meme encyclopedia" *Memepedia* and other resources. Among the themes discussed with the experts were the nature of political Internet meme, the role of Internet meme in the organization of protest movement, the (im)possibility of constructing a successful meme artificially, and other.

Among the methods applied in the present research, we should first of all mention participant observation of the process of protest memes generation and spreading on social networks (which memetic constructions in particular collect a considerable number of "likes" and reposts, how fast does it happen, what are the semantics and semiotics of highly viral memes, etc.); methods of discourse analysis, semantic analysis, semiotic analysis and the above-mentioned expert interviews. The issue of objectivity/subjectivity of the author's selection of memes for examination was a pressing one throughout. Due to the existence of contemporary algorithms for "likes" and reposts inflation, we have chosen "manual" methods of content examination, paying attention not only to the quantitative, but also to the qualitative indicators of memetic constructions' popularity: other communities' repeated quoting of memes that appeared in a particular public profile, the appearance of certain memes in the selections made by various media resources (*Meduza*, *Memepedia*, *TJournal* etc. [3]). We believe that the results of this analysis yields an adequate representation of the specifics of the "protest" memetic content in Runet and answers the research questions we have formulated above.

During our research we have noted certain differences in the ways memetic contents is constructed depending on the theme and purpose of protest actions. Below we present some conclusions regarding the memes of political, social and "digital" protest in Russia of 2017-2019. The distinction between different protest types is obviously provisional, as protest movement is inherently manifold, however, such categorization allows identifying the specifics of the images of Russian protest represented in memes.

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[3] See: Aktsii protesta protiv korruptsii. Tolko memy [Protests against corruption. Only memes]. Medusa. 26.03.2017 // https://meduza.io/shapito/2017/03/26/aktsii-protesta-protiv-korruptsii-tolko-memy; Likhachev N. Iskusstvo mediavoiny. Pochemu Pavel Durov — genialnyi piarschik [The art of media war. Why Pavel Durov is a brilliant PR man]. TJournal. 14.05.2018 // https://tjournal.ru/tech/70080-iskusstvo-mediavoyny-pochemu-pavel-durov-genialnyy-piarshchik (all resources accessed on: 10.04.2019) etc.

Political protest: the documentary dominant

The highest surge of political protest activity in Russia since 2011-2012 was registered in spring 2017 in connection with demonstrations against corruption, which were inspired by investigative movie *"He Is Not Dimon to You"* made by A. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). This film proved the most "memegenic", to use journalist O. Kashin's phrase[4], among FBK's videos: it provided Russian protest not only with a verbal slogan, but also with one of the most recognizable and deeply rooted in the oppositional discourse memetic symbols — a rubber duck. Later, the movie continued to inspire creation of political memes: its echo can be traced in the name of protest action "He is not Tsar to us", which took place on May 5, 2018, timed to V. Putin's inauguration, in memetic images of "Voters' strike" (January 2018) etc. Distinctive features of spring-summer 2017 protest actions included high activity of the regions (not only Moscow and St-Petersburg, but also Tomsk, Novosibirsk, Saratov and other cities joined in the protest actions) and the huge numbers of young people involved. Up to that moment Russian youth was traditionally considered relatively depoliticized, though their protest potential had occasionally attracted the attention of Russian theorists [e.g.: Yerpyleva, 2013]. Apparently it was the active involvement of school and university students in protest actions that prompted social networks' high interest in representing the political agenda by means of memes. "VKontakte publics which previously hardly ever touched on political issues, these days resemble the 1920s ROSTA Posters", mass media reported. "ROSTA Posters are indeed a fitting analogy. Today's youth express their attitude to events not so much in texts and comments as visually — through photoshopped images, "pikchas", memes. Just like simple topical posters of the 1920s, it is a way to keep abreast of the news. But essentially it is a means of information exchange, a form of cognition and making sense of reality"[5].

However, on days of protest actions, Internet users not only come up with "memez" concerning one burning political issue or another, but also actively share witty "prefabricated forms" created by professionals, according to representatives of Internet industry, such as organizers of online "meme" communities. As early as March 2017, soon after the first massive anti-corruption protest, Nariman Abu Namazov, an administrator of *Dvach*, in an interview for *Lenta.ru* explained young audience's interest in his resource's content as follows: "Young people hate reading long texts, and that's not because they're stupid. It's just that they have to deal with too much information every day… Big texts and long videos should have a burning, up-to-date topic. But we still need memes or animation to attract attention to them, and only then you can feed them a story or some analytics"[6].

[4] Kashin O. Kinoteatr povtornogo filma. MVD reklamiruet "On vam ne Dimon" [A movie theater again. MVD advertises "He is not Dimon to you"]. Republic. 27.02.2019 // https://republic.ru/posts/93160 (accessed on 27.02.2019)

[5] "Drugoi mir. Probuzhdenie": top-20 protestnykh memov ["Another world. Awakening": top 20 protest memes]. Rosbalt. 29.03.2017 // http://www.rosbalt.ru/like/2017/03/29/1602898.html (accessed on 2.04.2017)

[6] "Mitingi obsuzhdayut pokruche, chem Dianu Shuryginu". Administrator "Dvacha" o nravakh i protestnykh nastroeniyakh sovremennykh podrostkov ["The meetings are discussed abruptly, than Diana Shurygina". Administrator "Dvacha" about the

To the interviewer's remark: "There are rumors that the opposition received help from a certain creative agency. About ten days before the unauthorized protest rally they supposedly began to throw in Medvedev memes on popular networks, building hype…" *Dvach* representative replied: "Filming videos about corruption is a new trend… <Our> trend is the same: we post relevant memes the audience will like… In fact, I won't be surprised if all this hype has been generated artificially. It's politics, after all"[7].

R. Panchvidze, administrator of another major online community, *MDK*, is equally candid explaining the politics of social networks: "We carefully analyze which content interests users. Teens weren't particularly concerned about "Manezhka", "Bolotka" or Sakharov Avenue. Even Crimea passed rather tangentially, though many were obviously troubled by the war with Ukraine. Yet again it couldn't be named a phenomenon, unlike what is happening now with FBK… As a public profile we are primarily concerned with our users' interests… If teens decide that they dislike Navalny, we shall respond to this demand. Users decide everything. That's why we forcefully promoted Putin, while annexing Crimea"[8]. Later, in 2018, in answer to the questions of our own expert interview, R. Panchvidze characterized the significance of memetic content in contemporary political discourse as follows: "Nowadays memes are a universal unit of communication, not only among the youth, but also for audiences up to 45 years old. That's why, by constructing the right meme or using a template, you can draw attention to a political personality as well as to a political event"[9]. This means that the use of memes becomes a technology of political Public Relations, going far beyond everyday entertaining Internet communication.

A study of Russian protest Internet discourse on the days of mass actions and in their aftermath allows outlining three major semantic fields, where memes united by a common "protest" frame are generated and disseminated. First of all, it is the topic of arrests and detentions (numerous across the country), which encapsulates the problematics of rough violence toward protesters. In this respect, the analysis of Russian protest memes corroborates the observations of western scholars, who tend to believe that violent episodes dominate the visual representation of protest by social networks [e.g.: Neumayer, Rossi, 2018]. However, if media coverage of protest actions in other countries associates violence with disturbances and damage caused by the protesters, Russian memosphere emphasizes police violence directed at rally participants. Creating narratives about the confrontation between the authorities and the people, memes provoke the feelings of indignation and anger and thus fulfil one of their most integral functions: they "appear to function like the IEDs of

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manners and protest moods of teenagers»]. Lenta.ru. 29.03.2017 // https://lenta.ru/articles/2017/03/29/abuaboutyoungsters/ (accessed on 2.04.2017)

[7] Ibidem.

[8] See: My vam ne deti. Shkolniki i studenty o svoem pervom proteste [We are not children for you: Schoolchildren and students about their first protest] // http://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/life/225246-teenage-resistance (accessed on 7.07.2017)

[9] From expert interview conducted by the author.

information warfare. They are natural tools of an insurgency; great for blowing things up" [Siegel, 2017]. It is not a coincidence that popular meme "an ape with a club" becomes a universal and "off-topical" message in Runet on protest days. It denotes disaffection and riot, featuring an intentionally misspelled slogan "Riod" (*Bund*) or "Riod fack" (*Bund blet*). Moving from virtual environment into meatspace, this meme appears on numerous posters for the rallies. A photo with one of such posters published on *Lentach* on the day of "He is not Tsar to us" action (May 5, 2018) gathered 192 000 views, about 8 000 "likes" and was reposted over one hundred times within an hour.

A semiotic peculiarity of the memeplex related to the Russian political protest of 2017-2018 is frequent appearance of previously quite rare documentary photos among visual memes. For instance, a picture of a young woman carried away by policemen had an immense viral potential. Even without being modified into a collage or photoshopped, this photo proved so emotionally charged that it became a meme in itself. However, more often this documentary image was put together with a picture of a guy burying his face in his hands and wondering: "Why isn't she calling?". A "mirror" meme was based on a photo of a male protester brutally manhandled by a policeman (one of the most viral images documenting arrests), coupled with a picture of a girl pining at home with the same question: "Why isn't he calling?" (*Orlenok*, 27.03.2017; in one day the meme gathered about 6 000 "likes" and over a hundred reposts).

On March 26-27, 2017, pinned posts and users' comments in many VKontakte communities featured photographs of rough arrests "crossed out" with the slogan "The number of those arrested at the anti-corruption rally in Russia has already exceeded the number of those arrested for corruption"; pictures of a police van with a caption "Russia's most popular taxi this weekend", etc. Photographs of elderly protesters with sarcastic captions turned into memes gathering thousands of "likes" and hundreds of reposts on the days of protest actions. For instance, the image of a pensioner who "recklessly manages to survive on bare pension" (*Borsch*, 27.03.2017), of a grandmother from Samara, who had come with her poster to a rally in support of Navalny on October 7, 2017 (various communities), and other. A specific topic is the arrests of minors: on May 5, 2018, the day of "He is not Tsar to us" action, *MDK* pinned the post with a famous picture of a school student being arrested, accompanied by a slogan: "Children are the flowers of life. And they grow better when they're planted" (44 000 "likes", 1180 reposts, over 500 users' comments within hours after initial posting); that is the language game: the Russian verb «posadit'» (to plant) has the meaning of "plant flowers" and "imprison".

School and university students' participation in political protest is the second semantic field where we observed intensive construction of Internet memes in 2017-2018. The surge in youth activity contributed to the broadening of genre gamut of memetic messages representing oppositional political ideas, to protest sentiments' "migration" into youth publics which rely on memes as a means

of expression and which previously showed no distinct interest in politics (such as *Pikabu* or *MDK*) and on the whole to protest communication's "translation" into the language of memes. Along with various social and economic factors causing young people to join the protests, analysts have pointed to media mechanisms forming the "basis of the situation where for thousands of young people the oppositional agenda has ceased to be something boring and marginal… Political content, which always used to be a tiny part of the Russian Internet (however strange that might sound for the people on Facebook), for a few days became central for millions of people who prior to the events had hardly known what a "avtozak" (police van) was"[10].

The genre of documentary photography as a basis for creation of memes plays a significant role in this semantic field, too. Emotionally charged pictures of young people climbing the street lamps on Pushkin Square in March 2017 proved a viral message with a considerable lifespan: during the "voters' strike" on 28 January, 2018, they were assembled in posts on *Lentach*, accompanied with a slogan "2017-2018. We can repeat it!". However, the scope of semiotic variations and vectors of meaning here is much larger; rather than expressing anger, the makers of these memetic messages laugh, carnivalizing and desacralizing political discourse. Social networks emphasize the perception of protest as a peculiar form of youth entertainment and leisure. On November 13, 2017, Telegram-channel */po* posted several such memes at once. One of them featured a caption: "Come to the rally for fair elections! Get to know new people, socialize, take a walk in the fresh air. A rally is fun, interesting and lively!" Another one showed a laughing young man inside a police van, cheerfully yelling into a receiver: "Hello! Guess where I am right now?!" On June 12, 2017, a collaged comic strip addressing the same topic appeared on public *Borsch*, rapidly collecting about 10 000 "likes". It featured the characters from a famous Soviet cartoon based on Astrid Lindgren's books: Malysh complains that he is bored, to which Karlsson suggests: "Let's take a stroll!" "Sure! Where shall we go?" "To Tverskaya!". The final frame presents a photo of policemen beside a police van, with the cartoon characters looking out of its window.

Mass culture characters (from films, cartoons, video games, books etc.) often become subject of a metaphorical, associative utterance in Runet's protest memosphere. For instance, a picture posted by A. Navalny on his Facebook page on December 23, 2017 with a comment "Funny" (and later appearing in many other publics and comments) gathered about 7000 "likes" and around 500 reposts. It featured an easily recognizable shot from the same Karlsson cartoon: Mother and Father in Malysh's room, but there is a portrait of Navalny on the wall, the pillowcase is adorned with the slogan "Navalny 20!8", and Father says, preoccupied: "I guess we should have bought him that dog after all…" In Twitter, Telegram and other social media we have seen protest memes using the

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[10] Orekhanov S. Politizatsiya mema. Kak izmenilas rol sotssetei v rossiyskoy politike [The politicization of the meme. How has the role of social networks in Russian politics changed]. Moskovskiy Tsentr Karnegi [Moscow Carnegie Center]. 11.04.2017 // https://carnegie.ru/commentary/68620 (accessed on 15.04.2017)

images of Dumbledore and Harry Potter arrested during a rally, or Pennywise the Dancing Clown scaring a girl who has come to the rally with a red balloon ("What are you afraid of? Police unIT"). Speaking about politics and politicians in a "slang" which the younger generation find relatable, with references to everyday experiences and well-known pop culture artifacts, memes not only shape contemporary communicative practices of the 21st-century political language, but also create new opportunities for a political statement.

Another thematic subtopic connected to the involvement of minors in protest actions is the opposition's willingness to bring to the rally everyone short of babies (from various viral messages' slogan "When you can't find anyone over 18 at a rally" to a comment on *Nastoyaschiy Lentach* on May 5, 2018, showing diapers with Navalny's protest logo and a caption: "Now diapers, too. Official store"). The image of Navalny as such appears in many protest memes and is, in our opinion, a political "brand-meme", laying the foundation of the third semantic field in the political Internet discourse which is of interest to us here. Practitioners working with Russian meme industry have long identified the high viral potential of his actions. According to A. Krivets, one of *Memepedia* creators, "Alexey Navalny is a walking meme in himself: now we see him eating Doshirak noodles, now hugging YouTube's Gold Play Button, now leaving a remand centre… All these moments are purposefully constructed memes. Navalny and his team are meme-literate and specially publish potentially memetic photographs and videos. And it works, because this politician's audience consists of typical meme consumers: young urban dwellers who spend much time on the Internet"[11].

Although the oppositional leader is the main character of political protest storytelling (i.e. transmission of information in the form of narratives with elaborate dramatic development, unusual heroes and a set of symbolic elements), social network users are rather critical toward him. The whole body of viral content concerning Navalny includes both protective memes presenting the oppositionist's image apologetically (demotivating poster "Navalny is our president"), and aggressive memes "attacking" their character. As a result, on the Internet we can see memes with a dreamy Navalny (slogan "When you imagine protest actions taking place every day", Telegram, 14.11.2017), a tragic Navalny (a photo documenting his arrest on the street, which was turned into a meme by adding a drawn plan of a flat the policeman supposedly got as a reward for this feat, *Nastoyaschiy Lentach*, 28.01.2018), an "omnivorous" Navalny, ready to call even inanimate objects to rally (meme with a caption "Can stones go to rally?", various social networks, November 2018) etc. One of the key subtopics of this field deals with the oppositionist's numerous arrests, sometimes even before the start of the protest action. Meme speak about it in a wide range of genres and semiotic strands, from verbal messages ("The year 2025. Policemen travel to the past in order to arrest Navalny right after

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[11] From an expert interview conducted by the author.

his birth", public *Kak ya vstretil stolbnyak*, 12.06.2017) and image macros using his photo ("You won't be arrested at the rally if you have been arrested before the rally", *Abstraktnye memy dlya elity vsekh sortov*, 26.03.2017) to documentary pictures of his arrest (for instance, with a slogan "A happy life means knowing that wherever you go, you are already waited for", Telegram, */po*, 6.11.2017). There are hardly many brand-memes similar to A. Navalny in Russian political discourse; he is the central figure of Runet's protest memosphere, and political technologists would do well to consider the influence of his memetic image on social network audiences.

Social protest: toys under the rain

Many authors who study memes regard them as a form of not only political, but also broader social criticism, a kind of communicative activism practice [e.g.: Lankshear, Knobel, 2006]. In 2017 – early 2019 we observed a wide range of protest movements in Russia ("rubbish riots", protests against pension reform, "The March of Mothers' Anger" etc.) representing a particular campaign which "makes social claims and produces common values and emotions" addressing "the general public for understanding and support" [Gorodskie dvizheniya…, 2013, p. 19]. An important characteristic typical of many such movements is their attempt to distance themselves from political slogans. Thus, at protest rallies against Yadrovo landfill (Volokolamsk, March-April 2018) there was a "formal rule… not a word about politics"[12], and political activists who had arrived with party banners were made to leave and were told that those assembled "make no political claims"[13]. A similar situation arose on August 15, 2018 at the "Mothers' March", which addressed the trial of *Novoe velichie* members: the march's organizers had asked politicians to refrain from taking part in the event[14].

Considering collective actions in the era of social networks as a means of constructing a collective identity, researchers pay attention to the communicative message underlying this construction and to the production of symbolic meanings of the movement in the virtual space [e.g. Milan, 2015]. In this regard, memosphere proves to be one of the most fruitful terrains for interactive communication as well as for constructing the symbols of a collective identity. According to *Nastoyaschiy Lentach* editor M. Shevtsov, memes are "a means of building solidarity instantly ('ha-ha, I can't stand Prince Lemon either', 'right, I also think the mayor of Gotham is a bad man') — there's no need to read the text thoroughly and give different viewpoints equal consideration. There's

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[12] Fomina E., Odissonova V. "Davit na nas bespolezno…" ["It is useless to press us…"] Novaya gazeta. 16.04.2018 // https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/04/14/76179-eto-stoit-ne-nasha-politsiya-nasha-dyshit-s-nami-odnim-dermom (accessed on 16.04.2018)

[13] Na miting v Volokolamske prishli politicheskie aktivisty. Ikh prognali [Political activists came to the meeting in Volokolamsk. They were driven away]. Meduza. 25.03.2018 // https://meduza.io/video/2018/03/25/na-miting-v-volokolamske-prishli-politicheskie-aktivisty-ih-prognali (accessed on 16.04.2018)

[14] See: Padayuschiy rubl i politicheskie repressii [The falling ruble and political repression]. Svoboda. 15.08.2018 // https://www.svoboda.org/a/29435673.html (accessed 16.08.2018)

only one viewpoint present and you can either agree or disagree with it in the comments"[15]. As far as 2017-2019 social protest in Russia is concerned, messages are becoming more abstract: documentary photos as a basis for creating memes do not disappear completely, but they increasingly give way to demotivators, GIF files and comic strips representing the symbolic or metaphorical image of the protest.

In March 2018, the image of a "girl in pink" became the symbol of the first spontaneous protest actions, which started after dozens of children were poisoned in Volokolamsk, Moscow Oblast (apparently because of toxic emissions from Yadrovo landfill). Little Tanya in a pink jacket, who approached the governor and made a threatening gesture, became a heroine of numerous memes (not only the main GIF, i.e. an animated image of the title frame, but also stickers, image macros etc.). On the one hand, due to the dynamic gesture, she turned into an embodiment of the people's vexation and discontent. On the other hand, her image stood for all children who have already suffered or might still suffer because of environmental issues. Therefore, the "girl in pink" united all the protesters and became a visual message, which required no further explanations for social network users. On *Nastoyaschiy Lentach*, where this GIF was posted on March 22, 2018, it collected not only numerous "likes" and reposts, but also over 2100 comments.

Sweeping the whole Moscow Oblast (Kolomna, Tarusa, Klin, Naro-Fominsk etc.) and later spreading to other regions of Russia, in April 2019 "rubbish riot" found a new pivot and geographical center in Arkhangelsk Oblast, which protested against building a landfill in Shiyes. The slogan "Pomorye is not a dump" became not only a verbal meme, but also the name of a special environmental public in VKontakte. The derogatory expression *shelupon'* (rabble), which the governor of Arkhangelsk Oblast had applied to the protesters, also turned into a local meme. Posters "You shall answer for *shelupon'*" united the participants of protest action and pitted them against the authorities, shaping a common identity and consolidating the people neglected by bureaucrats. Thus, an environmental movement is taking on the features of a political one, and mass media get grounds for claiming that "rubbish dumps have woken civic protest in Russia"[16].

However, on the whole the process of constructing memes about "rubbish riots" proved much less active than about political protests. The environmental agenda did not hook young audiences of social networks the way the topics of political corruption or elections did. That said, this concerns social protest in general: many meme publics hardly noticed "Mothers' march" which took place on August 15, 2018, in support of underage female defendants in *Novoe velichie* case. On the other hand, this does not mean that this event was not represented in memes at all. Instead of demotivators or GIFs the role of memes was fulfilled by the hashtag #prisonisnotforchildren or a toy unicorn,

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[15] From the expert interview conducted by the author.
[16] Svalki razbudili grazhdanskiy protest v Rossii. Khronika [Landfills woke up a civil protest in Russia. Chronicle]. Novaya gazeta // https://www.novayagazeta.ru/themes/291 (accessed on 20.05.2018)

which one of the accused, Anya Pavlikova, is seen clutching in a famous photo. The participants of "Mothers' march" did not use any posters or slogans, but carried plush animals such as teddy bears, ponies, monkeys in their demonstration under the rain, due to which the media called this action "a march of wet toys"[17]. Soft toys as a symbol of childhood which does not belong in prison, or children's suffering because of their parents' unjust persecution, appeared at another protest action, "The march of mothers' anger", which took place on February 10, 2019, in support of Anastasiya Shevchenko, an Open Russia activist, who, placed under house arrest, could not be with her daughter, who was dying in hospital. Such "toy riots" as a spectacular, performative and mediatized form of civic resistance are extremely important for a media representation of the event; flash mobs with toys are based on "certain collective notions, expressed in specific images and narratives" [Nim, 2016, p. 60] and they can count as a means of symbolic production. The fairytale plush unicorn from Anya Pavlikova's photo became a material embodiment of meme precisely due to its capability to express a relatable emotion, to consolidate different people through common values.

Although we observed numerous actions of social dissent over the period under examination, the protests against the pension reform in summer-autumn of 2018 appear the most "memegenic" of all. A sharp rise in Russian citizens' protest activity registered by sociologists at the time [Protestnye nastroenia, 2018] was expressed not only in rallies and demonstrations, but also in different forms of creating memes — above all, verbal ones, dynamically migrating from posters on the street into the Internet and back again. First of all, these slogans represent the topic of late retirement and the possibility never reaching the retirement age. The aphorisms such as: "Birth. Suffering. Death. Pension", "Special offer from Russian pension fund: a free coffin to every retiree" and other rapidly became viral and were passed by word of mouth — a traditional route of pre-Internet era anecdotes — as well as from public to public on the Internet. At the same time, Russian pension reform protest generated many visual images in different forms and genres. When it took on a visible political tinge (such as, for example, at the all-Russia protest action summoned by A. Navalny on the single voting day, September 9, 2018), numerous viral documentary shots of rough arrests start to appear online, which gave BBC Russian Service an opportunity to title its publication on the topic "Beating in St. Petersburg"[18]. However, the main body of visual and mixed memes on these protest topics consists of demotivators, collages and image macros. A special series of "pikchas" actively spreading on various social networks and messengers included memes "on behalf of" the Russian Pension Fund, referring to the fate of famous writers. One demotivator, for instance, represented the scene of Pushkin's duel

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[17] "Kak i vse, etot plushevyi medved vozmuschen". Kak prokhodil "Marsh materei" v Moskve ["Like everyone else, this Teddy bear is outraged." How was the "March of mothers" in Moscow]. Snob. 16.08.2018 // https://snob.ru/entry/164585 (accessed on 17.08.2018)

[18] V Pitere — bit, ili Starik i deti. Foto pensionnykh protestov v Rossii [In St. Petersburg – to beat, or an old Man and children. Photo of pension protests in Russia]. BBC Russian Service. 9.09.2018 // https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-45451376 (accessed on 9.09.2018)

with the caption: "Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin died at 37. And what have you done for your country? Don't be selfish. Pension Fund of the Russian Federation". Representation of older Russians with a laptop or a newspaper featuring the slogan "In search of job vacancies…" became a frequent theme for image macros. Although the topic of pension provision seems far removed from the main consumers of memetic content — school and university students, — the intensity with which this theme was represented in Runet memes shows that it eventually managed to get to young users. According to A. Kolpakov, editor-in-chief of *Lentach*, "Memes sometimes make the youth think about the topic of a meme, and that is better than nothing. If you see memes about increasing retirement age, sooner or later you'll start thinking why people produce so many memes → why it is being increased"[19].

Digital protest: symbols and heroes

The topic of civic resistance which can be provisionally named "digital protest", on the contrary, is highly relevant for Runet's younger users. This includes various actions in response to blocking of Telegram messenger in Russia, protests against limiting the freedom of Runet, numerous local demonstrations against detention for memes and reposts etc. A key communicative feature of this protest consists not so much in the abundance and variety of memes on this topic (obviously, the audience whose interests are particularly impinged by the attempts to limit the freedom of Internet express their position in a familiar language) as in the symbolic nature of their most popular examples. Here we are dealing with logos and "trademarks" rather than with demotivators and GIFs. Thus, a "hooded dog" — a modified symbol of VKontakte drawn by P. Durov after Telegram was blocked, became a long-lived meme. This drawing, which the creator of both resources provided with a caption "Digital resistance", turned into the movement's label of sorts, appearing on numerous "pikchas" on different publics and messengers as well as on personal pages of social networks' users. It is this symbol of digital resistance, with corresponding caption, that young protesters, the characters of P. Reshetnikov's painting "For peace!" draw on the wall instead of the original "Paix" (peace; Telegram, */po*, 19.04.2018, over 1000 views in an hour). It appears on posters at the protest against isolation of Runet on March 10, 2019, on T-shirts and hoodies. The topic of youth resistance to the authorities' forays on the terrain of online freedoms is aptly represented using the images of socialist realism. Along with the above-mentioned Reshetnikov picture and other photoshopped artifacts of Soviet fine art, the meme based on A. Markov's painting "Pavlik Morozov", for instance, collected thousands of "likes" and reposts in various accounts. The hero sternly asks the enemies clearly caught off-guard: "Using Telegram, scumbags?"

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[19] From the expert interview conducted by the author.

The logo of the blocked messenger became another symbol of digital protest. It migrated from virtual space into meatspace in the shape of DIY paper airplanes, which the users flew out of their windows during the action in defense of Telegram on April 22, 2018. In this performative form of protest, we observe the "transmedia mobilization" discussed by the researchers of contemporary protest movements. This complex process encompasses simultaneous use of "extensive offline, analog, poster and printbased, and 'low-tech' forms of media production, in parallel with cutting-edge technology development and use (autonomous wireless networks, hackathons, creation of new tools and platforms)" [Costanza-Chock, 2012, p.378]. Internet memes as such are nowadays qualified by specialists in Media Literacy as a form of new, "transmedia" literacy [Scolary (ed.), 2018], without which effective communication in the age of digital practices would be impossible. In this context, the creation of meta-memes based at once on several popular protest images, which would only make sense for an audience already familiar with the language of memosphere, presents a curious precedent. When the Riod ape we have met before appeared with a paper plane in the hand instead of a club, this post on *Lentach* collected 374 000 views, 117 000 "likes" and 270 reposts (22.04.2018). During another action of "digital resistance" — the demonstration for the freedom of the Internet on March 10, 2019, the topic of Telegram and a combination of several symbolic images occured again. Comments on *Lentach* reveal the popularity of a picture where "hooded dogs" triumphantly march across Red square, carrying the defeated standards with Roskomnadzor logo, while in the sky above them the aviation — a formation of paper planes solemnly flies. However, the intensity of this topic's discussion on various online publics varied significantly. While on *Lentach* a selection of photos from the demonstration gathered over 4000 "likes" and 150 reposts in an hour, *MDK* on the same day mostly posted jokes about Shrove Sunday.

In the whole body of Runet memes dedicated to digital protest we encounter numerous messages inspired by art and popular culture characters. Sharikov from Bulgakov's "Heart of a Dog" travels from one account to another: he is seen sprawling as in the scene from 1988 film adaptation of the novel, saying: "I have found a place, Philipp Philippovich. I will work at Roskomnadzor, dealing with the Internet!" Comic strips featuring Malysh and Karlsson, which we have discussed in connection with other protest actions, this time represent a dialog between the characters who are upset by Telegram blocking. Karlsson, gamboling around the room, urges his friend to fly a paper plane out of the window at 7 pm, and Malysh, baffled, asks: "What for?" "We'll cause the blocking to be retracted!" "But the only thing you're doing is putting a dog on your avatar and throwing paper out of the window…" "Cut it out, I'm digital resistance!" (*Abstraktnye memy dlya elity vsekh sortov*, 22.04.2018, 41 000 views, about 4 000 "likes", 160 reposts). The topic of yet another "Russian rebellion, senseless and pitiless" conveyed in this meme (particularly in recurrent comparison with "live" anti-government demonstrations of many thousands in Armenia on the same days) is one of

the dominant meanings in comments and memes posted by social network users in April 2018. Participation in digital resistance does not stand in the way of Runet users' irony with regard to the protest's forms and effectiveness.

A particularly active surge in meme creation by young Russians on the topic of digital resistance was seen in summer 2018, when numerous criminal cases were opened in Russia on charges of reposts in VKontakte (the following news heading from *Meduza* sounds very typical: "Illegal meme trade on a massive scale" [20]). One of the main semantic emphases placed by Internet users in their memetic messages was on the new and absurd approach to defining "digital security". Thus, in thousands of reposts, the following post travelled from account to account in Twitter and Facebook: "Is your SIM unauthorized?" "Sure." "Phone new?" "Sure." "VPN?" "On." "Tor browser?" "But mom…" "Don't mom me. You wanted to access VK." "I'll open Tor right now." "That's what you should do, rather than momming". And in Telegram (*/po*, 2.08.2018) a meme made after the famous Soviet poster "Ne boltay!" ("Don't talk too much") gathered 6200 views. The slogan was changed to "Ne repost'!" (it means "Do not make reposts") and the image went with a caption "Russian social networks in brief".

Another key emphasis in the topic under research was the geographic specifics of digital resistance: one of main centers of Runet's memosphere at that time was located in the city of Barnaul, several residents of which were tried for reposting memes qualified as "extremist". The following post on *MDK* on August 15, 2018, gathered 595 000 views, over 12 420 "likes", 310 reposts, over 300 comments: "A citizen of Barnaul was sentenced to 5 years for publishing a Rorschach inkblot online. In this picture the court identified a demonstration of Nazi symbols, insult to the feelings of believers, justification of terrorism and a pornographic image featuring one of the investigators' mother".

Devices of political storytelling are clearly identifiable in the body of memes dedicated to digital protest. Each of the specific stories told in Runet memes has its own dramatic development: an introduction, in some way dictated by the actions of Russian authorities, a culmination taking the shape of demonstrations, pickets, actions of civic resistance (including the performance with paper airplanes), and a denouement — the consequences of protesters' actions. There is an antagonist — in this case, Roskomnadzor, whose logo became a meme in itself. Allusions to war in memes like the above-mentioned "Red Square parade" serve the narrative of battles and victories quite well. Finally and most importantly, there is a symbolic hero, the embodiment of resistance, who not only becomes the subject of many memes (we see, for instance, numerous photoshopped images of the viral photo

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[20] "Sbyt memov v osobo krupnom razmere": polzovateli sotssetei razmyshlyaut o Rossii, v kotoroi sazhayut za reposty ["The distribution of memes in especially large size": users of social networks think about Russia, where people are imprisoned for reposts]. Meduza. 8.08.2018 // https://meduza.io/shapito/2018/08/08/sbyt-memov-v-osobo-krupnom-razmere-polzovateli-sotssetey-razmyshlyayut-o-rossii-v-kotoroy-sazhayut-za-reposty (accessed on 10.08.2018)

showing Pavel Durov in the desert — where he was revealed to be "hiding his encryption keys", Telegram, */po*, 24.04.2018), but sometimes even gets sacralized. Thus, at several protest actions for the freedom of the Internet in St. Petersburg in 2018 and 2019 the protesters were carrying a stylized icon of Pavel Durov with a Telegram logo in his hands[21]. The competition between the narratives told by memes and the narratives of official information and propaganda, as well as the implementation of political storytelling technology in the memosphere may become a new vector in researching the topic of memes and Russian protest.

Discussion and conclusion

Although the meme concept has both adherents and opponents in scholarly theory (see, for example, the discussion of S. Blackmore and J. Polichak [Blackmore, Polichak, 2002, p. 652, 664]), in everyday communicative practices and in Internet industry meme have turned into a key instrument of interpersonal and group interaction. L.Shifman has a right to say that a meme, "the term once kicked out the door by many academics is coming back through the Windows (and other operating systems) of Internet users" [Shifman, 2014, p. 2]. The results of the present research show the intensity of protest communication's translation into the language on memes (any topics, genres or images), as well as, judging from practitioners' comments, media industry's tendency to use Internet meme as a special technology of communication with users.

An important function of Internet memes in Russian protest discourse, which has been identified in the course of this research, consists in speaking about something that is hushed up by official sources (thus, federal TV-channels hardly mentioned the actions of disobedience in Shiyes and hesitated to discuss the protests against building a church in Ekaterinburg), as well as in giving voice to those having no other opportunity for a public utterance. It can be argued that memes today present a particular news environment independent from the official agenda. This does not mean, however, that memes shape an adequate and exact information picture or reflect the plurality of viewpoints for the user. Scholars warn: «In a boomerang effect, the wealth of public discourse on sites like Twitter, reddit, Tumblr, and YouTube might lead users to seek and engage only opinion-confirming content. Individuals can create their own metaphoric giant room where they shout an opinion and hear the same opinion bounce right back» [Milner, 2013, p. 2362]. Besides, the viewpoint that memes are a means of transmitting verified news can be rather dangerous. It is not always possible to expect exactitude in memes' presentation of facts, what is more, memes as a specific content type do not even make a claim to veracity. «Rather than factually reproducing news items, Internet memes penetrate official discourses by carnivalizing them» [Heiskanen, 2017, p. 21].

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[21] See, for example: Krivets A. Ikona Pavla Durova na mitinge za Telegram v Sankt-Peterburge [Icon of Pavel Durov at a rally for Telegram in St. Petersburg]. Memepedia. 02.05.2018 // https://memepedia.ru/ikona-pavla-durova-na-mitinge-za-telegram-v-sankt-peterburge/ (accessed on 4.05.2018)

At the same time, despite numerous researchers' conclusions that memes are becoming one of the key forms of citizens' political participation of the digital era, in Runet we do not find equally active creation of memes by users with regard to all socially and politically significant protest topics. Rather often than not the interest of an event or recognizability of a politician play a bigger part in intensive construction of memes than the issue's urgency. In other words, though protest movements develop increasingly media-driven character and become the subject of representation in social networks' and messengers' entertainment publics, the intensity of creating memes cannot be said to correspond proportionally to the newsworthy event's significance. This problem, together with many other, only locally touched upon in this article, invites further research.

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