



## FROM MY PERSPECTIVE

Cyberprotest in contemporary Russia: The cases of *Ingushetiya.ru* and *Bakhmina.ru*

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 11 January 2010

Received in revised form 23 April 2010

Accepted 23 April 2010

## Keywords:

Cyberprotest  
 Democratization  
 Color revolution  
 Internet  
 Case studies  
 New media

## ABSTRACT

We explore the possibilities of the Internet as a tool for supplying information necessary for the organization and mobilization of successful opposition movements, especially under non-democratic regimes. Examples of the roles the Internet plays in the political processes in Russia are discussed in detail. In particular, the recent cyberprotest cases of the Ingushetiya.ru website and the movement to release political prisoner Svetlana Bakhmina are investigated. Besides showing the Internet's significant role in organizing modern protests, these cases also demonstrate that in environments where practically all traditional mass-media are under the authorities' control, the Internet becomes the major source of alternative information. Our paper offers a look at how deploying technologies can bring about social change, even in some of the most difficult political environments.

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## 1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that democracy is linked to prosperity (see, e.g., [1]). Unfortunately, there are many states in the world which are non-democratic. For example, more than a third of society lives in 47 countries that are considered undemocratic or under autocratic regimes (in 2008 there were 42 such countries) [2]. In particular, about two-thirds of the former USSR countries have non-democratic governance structures; according to both *The Economist's* Democracy Index (2008) and *The Freedom House's* "Freedom in the World" Index (2010), which measure degrees of democracy and political freedom, out of 15 former Soviet Union countries only four can be considered politically free and more or less democratic. While in free societies the opposing political forces have practically unlimited access to mass media, in the (semi-)authoritarian states like Russia<sup>1</sup> the authorities control almost all traditional means of mass communication [3,4].

Therefore when the last 2007–2008 parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia showed that the Russian authorities strictly control all the means of democratic transformation (i.e., elections) [5,6], the only way to a *peaceful*, bottom-up democratic change of the regime seems to be a color revolution like the ones that occurred in Georgia in 2003 [7] or in Ukraine in 2004 [8]. But

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<sup>1</sup> According to the most recent ratings measuring democracy worldwide, we can consider Russia as the (semi-)authoritarian regime. In particular, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2008 (retrieved from <http://a330.g.akamai.net/7/330/25828/20081021185552/graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf>), it has the hybrid regime between flawed democracy and authoritarian regime, but much closer to the latter (this Index measures such parameters as "Electoral process and pluralism", "Functioning of government", "Political participation", "Political culture", and "Civil liberties"). At the same time, according to the later Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2009 rating (retrieved from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/nit/2009/Tables-WEB.pdf>) measuring such parameters as "Electoral Process", "Civil Society", "Independent Media", "National Democratic Governance", "Local Democratic Governance", "Judicial Framework and Independence", and "Corruption", Russia is considered as consolidated authoritarian regime. Also the fresh Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2010 rating (retrieved from [http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/FIW\\_2010\\_Tables\\_and\\_Graphs.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw10/FIW_2010_Tables_and_Graphs.pdf)), measuring such parameters as "Political rights" and "Civil liberties", considers Russia as not free country.

in order for color revolutions to be successful, not only should a strong mood of dissent and a nucleus of opposition be present [9], but the unrestricted flow of related information should be ensured in order to conduct necessary enlightenment, organizational and mobilization activities, as well as coordination among the wider masses of the people.

Appreciating the potential of information flows to incite change and concerned by the color revolutions in surrounding states, Vladimir Putin imposed strict information control in traditional Russian mass media [3,4]. Thus, the Internet became the only platform that is not under the control of Russian authorities, which can promote the exchange of information that is uncensored (see, e.g., the recent, March 2010, report by the *Reporters without Borders* [10]). The purpose of our research is to establish whether the Internet in Russia can fulfill the function of ensuring the flow of information necessary for successful dissident activity. Accordingly, we seek to answer the following research question:

*Does the Internet provide an effective tool for politically-interested people in Russia to conduct dissident activities under the (semi-) authoritarian regime?*

In order to answer this question, we will organize our paper as follows. First, we will provide a review of the literature on the role of the Internet in political processes and on Internet use for cyberprotest in post-Soviet countries. Then, we will discuss our research methodology. This will be followed by a discussion of the two most recent cases of cyberprotest in Russia. Further, we will provide a comparative analysis and derive from the analysis implications about the role of the Internet in supporting dissident activity in the non-democratic states. We will show that even in the reality of today's Russia, Internet-facilitated opposition politics and independent initiatives can achieve considerable success when the opposing political forces use the Internet strategically. Finally, we will provide analysis of some strategies for political cyberprotest in general, and conclude with suggestions for developing a general theoretical framework of successful Internet-facilitated dissident activity in non-democratic and non-free countries.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The key concepts

According to Christian Fuchs [11, p. 278], cyberprotest is the structural coupling and mutual production of self-organization processes of the Internet and self-organization processes of the protest system of society: “the two systems interlock; their self-organization processes produce each other mutually and affect each other.” There are several features of the Internet which make it a very useful tool that promotes people's active involvement in political life. Among these attributes, Thornton [12] notes that the Internet is a fast and convenient way to get access to a whole spectrum of viewpoints, a cost-effective means for separate individuals or small groups of people with fewer resources to present their perspectives practically worldwide, a space where “small interest groups” can discover their close “relatives” and then coordinate activities, a source of enhanced capacity to form (online) communities, and a means of interactivity which enables real-time feedback and more two-way communication than previously has been possible.

### 2.2. Overview of previous research

Internet-based information and communication technologies (ICTs) bring additional possibilities for the protest activities of people under the non-democratic regimes. Therefore it is not a surprise that the dissidents were early adopters of these technologies: for example, manifestations of some of the cyberprotest's typical elements happened in the early 1990s (like use of email by dissidents to spread information to the world during the August 1991 coup in the USSR<sup>2</sup>). Subsequently, in the 1990s, the widely known cases of political cyberprotest happened in Mexico (the Zapatista movement starting in 1994 [13]), and in Indonesia (the anti-Suharto movement which eventually led to his resignation in 1998 [14]). In the recent decade, examples include Ukraine (the “Kuchmagate” events of 2000 and the successive winning phase of the Orange Revolution in 2004 [8]) and Kyrgyzstan (the Tulip Revolution of 2005 [15]). Since then the political cyberprotests have occurred in other countries (the most widely known recent instances include the 2009 “Twitter Revolutions” in Moldova and Iran).

There is also an active sharing of information found on the Internet: “both the users and non-users state that the more knowledgeable Internet users share the information with non-users” [16, p. 133], with political interest as a strong predictor of whether the Internet users are likely to share the information with non-users. Moreover, there is a *bi-directional* causality between political interest and Internet use: “even though the results show that the political interest is driven by Internet use, it may be also that the people who are more interested in political matters move to the Internet because they cannot find sufficient information in the traditional media and are attracted by the Internet resources and communities where the discussions are much more open” [16, p. 95]. Kulikova [16, p. 141] found that “the Internet media ... [do] have the potential to facilitate the public debate at least for the politically interested citizens.” This finding was confirmed in Russia.

The fast rise in popularity of the *Internet-based* mass media in Russia at the beginning of the 21st century was caused by the serious increase of the authorities' control over the *traditional* mass-media in that country [4]. In particular, in September 2000 Putin approved an official Russian “Doctrine of Information Security”<sup>3</sup> which asserts that the *state-controlled* mass-media “must dominate the

<sup>2</sup> You can find numerous accounts of that at <http://bpastudio.csudh.edu/fac/lpress/articles/relcom.htm> and <http://www.cs.oswego.edu/~dab/coup/>.

<sup>3</sup> Official text in Russian is available online at: [http://www.rg.ru/oficial/doc/min\\_and\\_vedom/mim\\_bezop/doctr.shtm](http://www.rg.ru/oficial/doc/min_and_vedom/mim_bezop/doctr.shtm).

information market, since only the state can provide the citizens of Russia with *objective* information about what goes on in Russia” [17]. Using this official doctrine as a pretext, the authorities aim to keep all the *main* Russian mass-media (including the new Internet-based ones) under their own influence, so that only they would be able to control the main information flows in the country (see, e.g., [18]). Accordingly, as with other mass media, the Internet-based information outlets, under the pressure of Russian authorities, were often passing into the ownership of people and structures apparently more loyal to the Kremlin [18].

As a result of the authorities’ control over the mass media during the last election campaigns (December 2007 for the parliamentary and March 2008 for the presidential), traditional Russian media coverage was unbalanced and biased, with media outlets giving the majority of airtime and newspaper space to President Putin and his nominee, future President Medvedev [19]. National television channels prevented equal access of the candidates to the media through censorship and the refusal to broadcast political advertising clips from the opponents of Putin’s regime, while all opponents’ attempts to file complaints with the Central Election Commission and Supreme Court failed. Believing that the elections were predetermined and the media were nothing but an instrument of the Kremlin, many journalists practiced self-censorship and kept away from electoral issues [20].

Under these conditions, the Internet truly became the last defensive line of free speech in Russia [21]. Since, according to the data of the International Telecommunication Union, approximately one-third of Russians are already online,<sup>4</sup> it is a very important frontier. As noted by Cooper [22], given its “level of economic development, [Russia is] to some extent underperforming in rate of diffusion of the Internet.” Nevertheless, in comparison to Ukraine, Russia has about 50% more Internet users per 10,000 people [22], – and it is known that in Ukraine, despite the relatively low penetration rate, the Internet played an exceptionally important role during the Orange Revolution, because it was practically the only free alternative source of information available then (e.g., see [4]). Here we may also disagree with Oates’ statement [23, p.1] that “[t]he Russian case illuminates how national media norms can neutralize much of the democratizing potential of the internet” – because fortunately, thus far Russian authorities have not legally and officially imposed any systematic limitations upon Internet-based free speech. Moreover, as noted by Cooper [22] that “notwithstanding occasional scares (most recently draft legislation, now dropped, that appeared to threaten blogging) the Russian authorities have chosen not to subject the Internet to formal control. ... [Russian President Medvedev] does not sound like someone who is about to introduce controls.”

It is no surprise, however, that many dissidents blame Russian authorities for using various forms of *covert* actions to block, harm or spoil their websites in different ways, from unofficial calls to their ISPs, to the trolling of oppositional forums, to sponsoring friendly hackers who often undertake distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks<sup>5</sup>. In addition, the authorities sponsor a network of pro-Kremlin propagandistic websites and pay some bloggers for their posts [21,24]. Dissident Russian Internet users were especially alarmed in December 2007 with the purchase of the very popular LiveJournal blogging service (originally American, but very popular in Russia) by a Russian tycoon, Alexander Mamut, who is a known Kremlin-connected loyalist [25]. The dissidents feared that this move could easily promote establishing control and censorship of general free speech in the Russian segment of the *blogosphere*.<sup>6</sup> Due to an effective networked organization [27], both the members and the readers of the blogs may be quickly summoned, through the Internet, for potential actions of protest.

Thus we see that the Internet has unique and exceptional potential to support revolutionary transformations in non-democratic countries. Using Internet-enabled ICTs the dissidents can have and provide access to alternative information, as well as communicate and coordinate their activities almost instantly. Even a few activists armed with such technologies can seriously influence development of the political situation. The literature suggests that the authorities in non-democratic countries are unable to completely control the Internet, the last frontier of democracy: “if there exists a weakest link in undemocratic tightening of controls over the public sphere and freedom of speech, it is the Internet. And when it breaks, the information flow is impossible to stop” [16, p. 46]. Therefore answering research questions about the role of the Internet in political activities, in particular in the countries of the former USSR (as we do in this paper using the example of Russia) could be very useful for determining the most effective ways to shift those countries towards consolidated democracy.

### 3. Methodology

Researching the role the Internet can play in enhancing possibilities for political dissidents in the non-free countries of the former USSR is a complex task. It requires taking into account the complexity of various related processes occurring simultaneously within the context of those countries and their unique situations, and understanding the intricate and omnipresent relations within and between those states’ various institutions, organizations and people, as well as the ways they use Internet-based information and communication technologies. At the same time, according to Yin [28], “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” Therefore, we consider that the case study research approach is well suited for accomplishing our goal: investigating the possibilities of the Internet in facilitating democracy in Russia.

In particular, as part of our data collection process, we reviewed existing documents relevant to the cyberprotests in question, and related publications by both Russian and international news services, as well as observed how events were developing in

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/DisplayCountry.aspx?code=RUS>.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., “Site of ‘Novaya Gazeta’ is down. We suspect a DDOS attack” (January 26, 2010, in Russian). Retrieved from: <http://novayagazeta.livejournal.com/156760.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Formed of the blogs “interlinked net of political information with “track-back” capacity for reciprocating links and RSS feeds that breeds cross-fertilization of political messages and an organic vetting process of such information” [26].

Russia. Additionally, we continuously and in real-time monitored primary data sources (websites and blogs)<sup>7</sup> directly involved in the cyberprotests. We triangulated data from several independent sources. The digital artifacts used in our research are systematically preserved (archived) on our digital hardware, as well as printed out on paper, with all the original URLs kept intact.

Dubé and Paré [29, p. 618] stress that in order to ensure that the information presented in a case study is reliable, researchers must also maintain a logical chain of evidence: “the principle is to allow an external reviewer or observer to follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions.” In our research we tried to adhere to this principle. This requires a relatively long paper since we have two cases, and each of them should be described with all the relevant details included. But as a result we will be able to follow the dynamic development of the situations around each particular cyberprotest case, to trace the role of Internet-based ICTs in that development, to analyze it from the information science point of view, and, eventually, to compare the cases and derive conclusions sufficient for answering our main research question. Accordingly, as a data analysis strategy we used *explanation-building* – “a form of pattern-matching in which the analysis of the case study is carried out by *building* a textual explanation of the case” [29, p. 619]. This strategy is especially useful for *exploratory* case studies, in which the researchers explore a phenomenon previously not well known. Cases of cyberprotest in Russia definitely fall within this description.

#### 4. The case of Ingushetiya.ru

Ingushetia is a small, semi-autonomous “republic” of the Russian Federation, bordering Chechnya, with a population of only about 500,000 [30]. *Ingushetia.org* (formerly *Ingushetiya.ru*) is an Ingushetian news portal which was established in 2001 and owned by a known local oppositional politician, Magomed Yevloyev<sup>8</sup>. This website is among the few which provide alternative news on the republic. *Ingushetiya.ru* was openly opposed to the local regime headed by the Kremlin-backed regional governor (“president”) Murat Zyazikov, and regularly published materials criticizing the widespread corruption among Ingush authorities. Zyazikov threatened the news portal and repeatedly tried to shut it down, alleging “extremism” (further details below). Because of Ingushetia's location in the very sensitive and unstable Caucasus region, the Russian federal government probably also played a major role in the campaign against the website: for example, in October 2007 the Russian federal Procurator General reopened an eight-year-old case against Magomed Yevloyev [31], as a pretext to persecute the website's owner.

Further, on November 13, 2007, according to the *North Caucasus Weekly* [32], Ingushetia's interior minister, Musa Medov, “ordered two Ingushetian Internet providers, ZAO ‘ITT’ and OOO ‘Telekom’, to block internet users' access to *Ingushetiya.ru*.” In particular, “the director of OOO ‘Telekom’ Ibragim Albakov and his programmer Iles Dzaurov were summoned on November 12 by Medov and ordered to block access to *Ingushetiya.ru*, warning that OOO ‘Telekom’ would be closed down if they did not comply” [32]. As a result, anyone who tried to get access to *Ingushetiya.ru* from inside the republic was simply redirected to a pornographic website.

Soon the access to a companion LiveJournal blog, <http://ingushetiya-ru.livejournal.com/>, was also blocked [33]. Interestingly, the blog author's nickname (*ingushetya\_gru*) is a wordplay on the names of the Russian national domain (.ru) and the Russian army's secret service, GRU, or *Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie*. GRU is considered by many as more harmful than even the KGB [34]. The blog nickname was possibly chosen to taunt Russia's authorities and to show that its powerful secret services can do little against online dissidents. Despite the blockade, both the main website and the blog were still reachable from outside the republic. Therefore Ingushetia inhabitants merely used independent proxy servers located outside Russia to reach the sites. Some of them were also able to access the Internet via satellite [35], thus bypassing local ISPs. According to Magomed Yevloyev [36]:

After the blocking system was introduced, our traffic across Ingushetia increased two times over. So, they gave us good publicity, and people started, people learned to get around the block using anonymizers. ... [T]he satellite companies that provide internet access... these companies made a fortune in one month, because around 2000 satellite dishes were purchased to connect to the internet.

During the blockade, printouts of materials published on *Ingushetiya.ru*, including instructions on how to bypass the technical banning of the website from inside the republic, were also posted by the activists in numerous places (for instance, the walls of houses) all around Ingushetia [35]. Another website<sup>9</sup> was created on an anonymous blog platform beyond the reach of Russian authorities to offer an English-language summary of *Ingushetiya.ru*'s news feed and to seek international exposure. Further international attention to the case was achieved through regular appearances, with the help of the *Ingushetiya.ru*'s team, of their news on other international websites, like the *Finnish–Russian Civic Forum*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the authorities failed to effectively block people's access to Ingushetia-related oppositional materials.

The *North Caucasus Weekly* [32], a periodical published by the *Jamestown Foundation*, reports that the Interior Minister Medov acted, as described above, by order of Ingushetia President Zyazikov, who was afraid of the possible mass unrest if *Ingushetiya.ru* was allowed to continue its activity. At the time of this intervention by authorities, *Ingushetiya.ru* was actively being used in the process of planning a November 24, 2007, mass demonstration in Nazran, Ingushetia's biggest city. Therefore, Medov also required

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ingushetia.org/>, <http://ingushetiya.wordpress.com/>, <http://bakhmina.ru/>, <http://www.popravkam.net/>, etc.

<sup>8</sup> See Yevloyev's own presentation at <http://www.theotherrussia.org/2008/09/05/slain-opposition-leader-explains-ingushetiya-video/>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://ingushetiya.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., <http://www.finrosforum.fi/?p=1266>.

the main local mobile phone operators — Beeline, Megaphon and MTS — to cut access to Ingushetiya.ru through cell-phones located in Ingushetia. According to the aforementioned periodical, the website was also blocked because Zyazikov feared “that the truth about the situation in Ingushetia will reach ‘a maximum amount of the population’” [32]. Nevertheless, the popularity of the website significantly increased [35], and Ingushetiya.ru was virtually the only information outlet which gave full coverage of the November 24th demonstration that was stopped by the special police forces.

There is evidence that both federal and the republic's authorities' priority was not only to stop any protest in Ingushetia, but also to control all information flows related to the events. For example, they not only produced a large amount of disinformation in order to “muddy the waters,” but also actively restricted the abilities of the traditional mass media to provide timely and detailed coverage of the protests [37]. Several journalists representing a number of Russian federal information outlets based in Moscow were brutally arrested by the Ingushetia authorities and deported from the republic [38]. Under these conditions, the role of Ingushetiya.ru's coverage of the events in the republic cannot be overestimated.

During the winter of 2007–2008 the website came under numerous hacker attacks, apparently coordinated from the same location, when it organized the “*I didn't vote!*” campaign after the December 2007 Russian Parliamentary elections. The campaign was able to gather evidence of about 90,000 Ingushetia citizens, approximately 54% of its eligible voters, who declared that they had not cast a vote. Thus this campaign provided evidence that the official results of the regional voting in Ingushetia (about 99% voter turnout with almost all of them allegedly supported the governing *United Russia* party) could be fabricated [39]. According to a cited report, on January 31, 2008, *Reuters* quoted Yevloyev as saying that the authorities hacked into Inshugetiya.ru to silence opposition: “They want to silence us and all the people of Ingushetia, but they will not succeed.”

After the authorities failed to effectively block Ingushetiya.ru, they decided to try a different tactic. In January 2008 they created a website with nearly the same name, Ingushetiya.ru.net, in an effort to confuse people and to attack Ingushetiya.ru. The authorities' project obtained a high priority status and was headed by Arsamak Zyazikov, a relative of President Zyazikov [40]. But even with these “competitive advantages”, the authorities' new website was unable to deceive Internet users or to attract much of their attention. The last update to the site was on June 22, 2008; Ingushetiya.ru.net disappeared on October 29, 2008. Those who are interested can see the site's archive through the *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*.<sup>11</sup> Ingushetiya.ru.net published many articles “discrediting” Ingushetiya.ru. In response, Ingushetiya.ru's team exhibited a sense of humor when it officially praised its rival “for the free advertisement” of their work [40].

Ingushetiya.ru was given more “free advertisement” by the authorities when its team published, at the beginning of February 2008, a photomontage of Putin and Medvedev allegedly examining the Ingushetiya.ru website.<sup>12</sup> The editors never tried to conceal that it was a photomontage, but still, the website's chief editor, Roza Malsagova, was fined — ironically, on April 1st [41] — and forced to remove the picture from the website, though it still can be seen in a corresponding LiveJournal community blog.<sup>13</sup>

The significance of Ingushetiya.ru in counteracting the regime's propaganda was highlighted at the beginning of March 2008 with the appearance of reports about turnout in the republic during the all-Russian presidential and local parliament elections of March 2, 2008. Ingushetiya.ru reported [42] that a local group of observers counted that only 5742 people (or 3.5% of all registered voters) took part in the elections in Ingushetia. Republican authorities, however, reported that more than 90% of the republican electorate participated. Objectively, this is a very unlikely number for such a troubled republic: the all-Russia official result is less than 70% of the electorate (and even this number is questioned by the Russian opposition, claiming that it is unbelievably high). At the same time, in other Russian territories on the North Caucasus where no alternative information outlets such as Ingushetiya.ru existed, local authorities persisted in declaring high participation rates (Chechnya — 91%, Dagestan — 90%, Kabardino–Balkaria — 92%, Karachay–Cherkessia — 92%)<sup>14</sup> and their people's full support for the Kremlin, both of which are objectively very unlikely.

The public revealing of the alternative vote count in Ingushetia troubled the authorities, and the republic's prosecutor-general Yuri Turygin accused Ingushetiya.ru, one more time, of “extremism” [43]. According to him, disputing the legitimacy of the local Ingush parliament elections is a “provocative public activity that can destabilize the situation within the republic”, so he insisted on the immediate suspension of the oppositional website.

In May 2008 the republican prosecutor-general's office launched yet another attack on the website — this time asking the court to recognize an article it reprinted from the respected Moscow newspaper *Vremia Novostei* as being extremist. The article, which accused republican authorities of corruption, is still openly available on that newspaper's website,<sup>15</sup> and *Vremia Novostei* was never accused of any illegal activity connected with this publication [44]. Nevertheless, a Moscow court on the 26th of May ordered the suspension of Ingushetiya.ru for “extremism”, and its complete closure on the 6th of June.

Ingushetiya.ru's owner, Magomed Yevloyev, called the decision “unlawful” and promised that the website would continue its activity: “only the website's editors can decide on it being shut down, but they were not involved in the trial, so they are not planning to abide by it” [45]. He added that the editors are going to file a court appeal. Further on in this interview, Yevloyev also stressed that “political pressure” was the main reason for the prosecution and named it “an attempt to silence the last independent voice in the republic.” He also claimed that the Russian authorities have no legal right to close the website since it was registered in a foreign country.

<sup>11</sup> Available at: [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://ingushetiya.ru.net](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://ingushetiya.ru.net).

<sup>12</sup> The original picture can be seen at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/text/images/159036.shtml>.

<sup>13</sup> [http://community.livejournal.com/real\\_politics/280047.html](http://community.livejournal.com/real_politics/280047.html).

<sup>14</sup> Data from the official website of the Central Elections Commission of the Russian Federation available at: [http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100022249920&vrn=100100022176412&region=0&global=1&sub\\_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vi-bid=100100022249920&type=227](http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100022249920&vrn=100100022176412&region=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vi-bid=100100022249920&type=227).

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.vremya.ru/2008/20/4/197273.html>.

Apparently, because they were unable to physically reach and shut down the oppositional website, the authorities switched their focus to the members of its team. In particular, in July 2008 the website's chief editor, Roza Malsagova, was forced to flee from Russia to Western Europe as a result of persecution by the authorities [46]. On August 31, 2008, the website owner, Magomed Yevloyev, who still lived in Russia, was shot dead by police [47]. According to Tekushev [48], Mr. Yevloyev was killed after his website published a petition calling for Ingushetia's independence from Russia. Immediately after Yevloyev's death, his website urged Ingushetia's residents ("all those who are not indifferent") to gather for a protest demonstration in Nazran [47,49].

That demonstration was violently broken up by police, but the Ingush opposition continued peaceful protests while warning its younger supporters who were seeking weapons for revenge on the authorities. Nevertheless, the authorities' pressure gave rise to retaliatory force from the Ingush people. Armed attacks on police and other government authorities have become a near-daily occurrence in Ingushetia, and have prompted the Russian federal Interior Ministry to send additional troops into the republic. But their presence has done little to restore calm, and the violence in Ingushetia continues to spiral out of control [50].

Through all this, Ingushetiya.ru continued supplying the world with information about events in the small republic. Another known Ingush opposition sponsor and human rights activist, Maksharip Aushev, became temporarily in charge of the Internet resource.<sup>16</sup> Hackers' attacks on it, which were rumored to be organized by the Russian secret services, became more aggressive, but were only able to disrupt the website's normal activities for very short time intervals [52]. Eventually, on September 25, 2008, the authorities took more action. Musa Pliyev, the lawyer for the website, told journalists that he had received a letter from "the Regional Center for the Registration of Domain Names" saying that it was revoking the website's Internet address in the national domain of Russia (.ru). But even this very ethically questionable action by the Russian "Regional Center for the Registration of Domain Names" was unable to shut the website down – it was immediately "relocated" from the Russian domain name Ingushetiya.ru to the international domain name Ingushetia.org, reserved by the website team in advance [53].

Finally, in October 2008, Russia replaced both Ingushetian President Zyazikov (despite his connections with the KGB and high appreciation by the Russian central authorities<sup>17</sup>) and Interior Minister Musa Medov, in order to pacify the republic. On October 30, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov was nominated by Russian President Medvedev, and was approved as the new Ingushetia President by the People's Assembly of Ingushetia the very next day. This move was endorsed by Ingush opposition. That endorsement, apparently, was appreciated by the new republican leadership, and during the following week, on November 7, 2008, the Supreme Court of Ingushetia completely exonerated the oppositional website from all previous accusations of extremism [54].

After Yevkurov came to power, he started fighting corruption in Ingushetia. In this activity Ingushetia.org became a great help. Yevkurov read all of the critical publications produced by the website's team and kept their printouts in a special folder. All printouts carried his instructions to Ingushetia's high officials requiring them to "check, examine, and report" [55] on issues touched upon in the publications. The results of these actions were published openly. Moreover, Kaloi Akhil'gov, a lawyer defending Ingushetiya.ru in various courts against Ingushetia's then-authorities, became Yevkurov's official press secretary [56].

It is possible that Yevkurov's anti-corruption activity alone caused a very serious attempt on his life in June 2009 [57] – one which he barely survived, spending several weeks in a hospital and returning to work only in August 2009. Andrei Piontkovsky, hinting at the corrupted officials who could be behind that attempt, notices [58] that no guerillas hiding in the woods would have been able to plan and carry out such a sophisticated attempted murder. Part of President Yevkurov's anti-corruption activity was also to create a joint commission with local NGOs aimed at the defense of human rights. Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, who visited Ingushetia in September 2009, referred to these relations between Yevkurov and the NGOs as "exemplary" [59].

In May 2009, Magomed Khazbiev, one of the leaders of Ingush opposition, in an interview at the *Moscow Echo* radio station, admitted that the Ingushetiya.ru/Ingushetia.org website played the main role in the positive changes which occurred in Ingushetia. In particular, he mentioned the importance of the alternative information coverage of the events in the autonomous republic under the rule of its former president Zyazikov. Both the disseminated information and the feedback from the website's readers greatly contributed to the whole world's knowledge (both directly from the website and from other information resources citing it) about what was going on in Ingushetia. If not for that information, many of the Ingush opposition leaders would simply have lost their lives under the cloak of the information blockade in the republic [60].

In the same interview Mr. Khazbiev also expressed his apprehension that after president Zyazikov's resignation Ingushetia.org stopped being an oppositional website and started serving the interests of the incumbent Ingush authorities headed by president Yevkurov. Not all Ingush opposition activists agree with Mr. Khazbiev about the change in Ingushetia.org's political orientation: some insist that the website's team is almost intact (Magomed Yevloyev's younger brother is in general charge of the resource, and Rosa Malsagova is still its editor-in-chief<sup>18</sup>), and that though the website definitely became more loyal to the incumbent Ingush authorities, it still offers a place for the viewpoints of the opposition [61,62]. Nevertheless, in the summer of 2009 Mr. Khazbiev initiated creation of the new Ingush oppositional Internet resource Ingushetiya.org, which should restore and maintain the traditions of Magomed Yevloyev's Ingushetiya.ru opposition website.

<sup>16</sup> One year later, on October 25, 2009, he was also killed [51].

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Zyazikov's extended referenced biography (in Russian) at [http://www.lenta.ru/lib/14161008/full.htm\\_Printed.htm](http://www.lenta.ru/lib/14161008/full.htm_Printed.htm).

<sup>18</sup> At least, according to the website's "About the project" section (<http://ingushetia.org/project.html>, accessed November 23, 2009). Though earlier, on August 4, 2009, the website announced that Malsagova resigned as the editor-in-chief because of numerous serious threats which came online to her address (see <http://ingushetia.org/news/20102.html>). That announcement also informed readers that until the new editor-in-chief is assigned, the website will continue its work under the guidance of the board of its correspondents. But later that day *Kavkaz-uzel.ru* informed (<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/157492>) that Malsagova herself announced that still "she needs time to discuss the situation and take final decision".

The new website was uploaded in July 2009<sup>19</sup> and has the same design as the old Ingushetiya.ru website (Ingushetia.org has the same design as well, so both currently active websites are outwardly almost the same, but have rather different content). The new website's content is more radical in comparison to Ingushetia.org, and the incumbent Ingush authorities have already expressed some concerns about that [61]. Initially the new Ingushetiya.ru website was not as popular as Ingushetia.org. Apparently understanding this, Mr. Khazbiev also opened a personal blog<sup>20</sup> in LiveJournal in October 2009, so currently Ingush radical opposition has at least doubled its Internet presence, which could strengthen its influence. In addition, it looks as if the above-mentioned Ingushetiya.ru's companion blog<sup>21</sup> currently also supports the position of the more radical Ingush opposition. Thus, we see that the success of the Ingushetiya.ru/Ingushetia.org website in its struggle against the regime of president Zyazikov inspired the Ingush opposition to create new oppositional Internet resources in its fight for liberty. Taking into account the generally still-poor situation of the alternative mass media in Ingushetia, as well as in the whole of Russia's North Caucasus region (and the whole of Russia, too), the appearance of several new independent Internet resources in Ingushetia is a very positive trend.<sup>22</sup>

The Russian secret services understand the threat coming from the new alternative mass media. Continuous DDoS attacks on the Ingush opposition's new website started approximately just one month after its launch, in mid-August 2009,<sup>23</sup> and the website was "destroyed" for approximately two days [63]. These attacks reached their next major peak around October 18–20, 2009, just after the site published materials revealing falsifications during the October 11, 2009, local elections in Ingushetia [64]. On October 21, 2009, the website's editor, Lidiya Mikhailchenko, said that Ingushetia's incumbent president Yevkurov had recently told her that the Russian federal secret service had already approached him with complaints about the new website [63]. On October 27, 2009, Mr. Khazbiev reported [65] that Ingushetiya.ru had sustained a powerful new DDoS attack and that he was sure that an attack of such a magnitude (with millions of IP addresses involved) could be organized only by the secret services. Mr. Khazbiev expressed his confidence that this last attack was connected with the above-mentioned assassination of one of the leading Ingush figures and the former supervisor of Ingushetiya.ru/Ingushetia.org, Maksharip Aushev. As a result of this new round of DDoS attacks, the website could not operatively supply people with information about the events related to the murder. Apparently, the Russian secret services quickly learned a lesson from the events happened after the murder of Magomed Yevloyev, when Ingushetiya.ru played a major role in fueling and coordinating the mass protests which eventually led to the change of the republic's regime. We suggest that if Ingushetiya.ru had several well-defended mirrors, the cyber-attack would be unable to effectively shut them all down—and, accordingly, a powerful new cyberprotest in Ingushetia would become possible. Incidentally, the website's team reported on November 3, 2009, that it had just prepared such mirrors and is ready to activate them when necessary [66].

Thus, in the case of Ingushetiya.ru we see a typical manifestation of a cyberprotest — the intertwining of the online and off-line protests with their mutual self-reinforcement. This was especially noticeable during the mobilization efforts for the street protests in Ingushetia in November 2007 and September–October 2008. But besides showing the Internet's leading role in organizing modern protests, this case also proved that under authoritarian regimes controlling practically all traditional mass media, the Internet becomes the only powerful and effective source of alternative information about the real situation on the repressed territory, as we saw in the examples of Ingushetiya.ru's coverage of the elections in December 2007 and March 2008. We also saw that in the absence of alternative sources of information and mobilization of people the regimes in the neighboring North Caucasus republics easily continued supplying the public with dubious information. This case shows that, even in the reality of today's Russia, an oppositional Internet resource, if it follows the right strategy, can robustly struggle against the authoritative regime and, eventually, win. We summarize this strategy in Table 1 further below and dwell more upon analysis of this strategy in our subsequent "Discussion and implications" section.

## 5. The case of Bakhmina.ru

Svetlana Bakhmina was a business lawyer who had never actively participated in politics. In 2004 she was accused of embezzlement and evading taxes, and arrested. Subsequently she was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment. Prior to her arrest she worked for Yukos, a Russian oil company [67]. She served her term in Mordovia — a region infamous for its high-security penal colonies for political prisoners, described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his *Gulag Archipelago*.

The case of Svetlana Bakhmina is considered to be a political one (see, e.g., [68]) because of her involvement with Yukos and its leadership. Mikhail Khodorkovskiy, a well-known and politically active philanthropist, was one of Yukos' executives targeted by Putin's regime. One of Russia's richest men, he funded oppositional political parties. Khodorkovskiy was arrested in 2003 and sentenced to eight years in an eastern Siberian labor camp. The case against Svetlana Bakhmina is considered to be a part of the authorities' politically-motivated vengeance on Khodorkovskiy.

Bakhmina appealed to postpone her imprisonment because she then had two little children (2 and 6 years old), and was legally entitled to such a postponement, but was refused it [69]. At the beginning of September 2008, Bakhmina appealed for early release — this time she had the right for such an appeal because she had already served half of her term. But her appeal was refused again, even

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/157100>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://m-hazbiev.livejournal.com/>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://ingushetiya-ru.livejournal.com/>.

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, several more of alternative Ingush mass-media appeared online recently — such as *angusht.com* or *ingnews.ru*.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://ingushetiya.ru/news/20303.html>.

**Table 1**  
Comparing the two cases.

#	Process/Activity	Ingushetiya.ru case	Bakhmina.ru case	Consequences or possible reasons
1	Organizing and mobilizing the off-line protest activities of people	Active promotion and support, by the websites, of the Ingush people's protests	Active support and promotion, by the related to the main website blogosphere, of the people's protests against holding Bakhmina in custody	Mostly successful outcomes of both the cyberprotest movements
2	Different reaction/attitude from the authorities towards the websites	Active open struggle of the authorities against the website, including both legal and secretive actions	Silent and not so active struggle of the authorities against the website	Clear and present danger to the regime in the case of Ingushetia Indirect and not so clear threat to the regime in the Bakhmina case
3	Overcoming legal and technical censorship imposed by the authorities	Adequate legal and successful technical counter-actions of the website's team for the vitality and reach of the website	Not enough information available for this case	Good technical literacy of the Ingushetiya.ru's team and apparent availability of enough financial support; adequate legal support of the website's activity
4	Appearance of the counter-website (spoiler)	The rival (Ingushetiya.ru.net) website mostly only raised the popularity of the target website	The rival (Bakhmina.net) website mostly only urged the supporters of Bakhmina to strengthen their efforts	Both counter-website projects actually failed: apparently, the truth was so obviously on the side of the targeted websites, that mostly people just simply did not "buy" the counter-websites
5	Blogosphere's involvement	Active support from the blogosphere	Active net support from the blogosphere	Both cases caused an active reaction in the blogosphere
6	Use of the supplementary off-line methods	Supplemental off-line dissemination of the website's materials (posting in the "wall newspapers")	Off-line gathering of the signatures; rallying for the petition	Active and successful struggle with the authorities, who have the full control over the traditional mass-media, for the impact on the off-line public
7	Spreading the related information over to the traditional mass-media	Some success	Mostly successful	Clear and present danger to the regime in the case of Ingushetia – active and strong censorship in the traditional mass-media, apparently, was used in order to prevent attraction of the public's attention to the case. Indirect and not so clear threat to the regime in the Bakhmina case, plus wide and active international informational support. Additionally, the scopes of the cases are unequal – small North Caucasus republic in the first case, and all-Russian interest in the second case
8	The websites as sources of the socially-important information otherwise unavailable to the public	Almost <i>the only</i> source of the alternative information on the region	Even the formally politically-neutral online petition became a source of the alternative and protest ideas	In the information environment where practically all traditional mass-media are under the authorities' control, the Internet becomes the main source of the alternative socially-important information

though Bakhmina was then already in the seventh month of her third pregnancy. Her appeal was also completely ignored by the majority of Russian traditional mass media.

Bakhmina's lawyers are known for their very restrained and reserved position, trying to avoid any political discussion around their client (see, e.g., [70]). Therefore, if not for her high school classmate, Olga Kalashnikova (Bogdanova) (LiveJournal user name plushkin\_shar), the wider public would probably know nothing about the recurrent refusal of Bakhmina's appeal, and she could still be in a Mordovia camp. But on September 25th Kalashnikova uploaded to her blog an open letter to President Medvedev.<sup>24</sup> The letter attracted notice among Russian bloggers, many of whom are influential people, and the word quickly spread through the Internet. For example, the very next day (September 26th) information about Bakhmina's appeal appeared on the blog of the famous Russian football (soccer) commentator Vasilii Utkin.<sup>25</sup> Vasilii received 239 comments on his post, which is a typical figure for his best football analyses. On the initial blog post by Ms. Bogdanova, readers posted nine pages of comments in less than a week.

According to Pan [71], among people attracted by Ms. Bogdanova's letter was Valery Balikoyev – a middle-aged progressive businessman from Moscow known for his previous involvement in sponsoring various socially-oriented projects, like building modern hospitals in rural Russia [72], who openly expressed his feelings about Bakhmina's case: "I was struck especially by my own powerlessness, by my inability to do anything about it" [71]. Before this Balikoyev had invested in Internet-related business projects, but had never dealt with politics. He decided to write a petition for Bakhmina's release and to set up a website, Bakhmina.ru, so people could appeal to the Russian president online. On October 7th Balikoyev set up such a website. In order to enhance its credibility the site was manually coded to ask the signers to confirm their identities through personal email. Initially Balikoyev "hoped to gather a few hundred signatures, but supporters quickly flooded the site, forcing him to move it to a more powerful computer" [71].

<sup>24</sup> Available at: <http://plushkin-shar.livejournal.com/55073.html>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.sports.ru/blog/utkin/5819045.html>.

The very next day, October 8th, the petition was widely mentioned and linked across the Russian Internet. The online newspaper *izbrannoe.ru* [73] took a particular interest. Journalist Lyudmila Telen, who became famous during *perestroika* times for her work at the *Moscow News* (considered as one of the main *glasnost* mouthpieces) led the online paper. Given her history with the *Moscow News*, it is no surprise that under Putin's regime Ms. Telen could not find a place in the Russian traditional mass media and needed to create an online newspaper to express her views. Subsequently, Telen's online outlet closely followed the case of Bakhmina. Simultaneously, a collective blog, *Pomoch Svetlane Bakhminoi*<sup>26</sup> (*Help Svetlana Bakhmina*), was created with active participation by Telen to inform the Internet community about the recent events connected with the Bakhmina case.

The Internet petition in support of Bakhmina on *bakhmina.ru* opened with a call to citizens to not only *talk* against the government and the "inhuman system", but to *act*. This appeal was heard, and people started protesting both virtually and physically, leaving their houses to rally, holding signs and photographs of Bakhmina, and gathering petition signatures in the crowded places in Russian cities (e.g., near subway stations in central Moscow). During one of these days, October 13 (Bakhmina's birthday), a video with various people greeting her was recorded and uploaded to *Vimeo.com*,<sup>27</sup> an online video-sharing service. It immediately gained widespread attention online not only in Russia, but globally, because many bloggers shared it.<sup>28</sup>

The online petition for Bakhmina's release was available not only in Russian but also in English, Italian, Spanish, and French. Therefore, among the signees on the *bakhmina.ru* website are professionals, managers, college students, homemakers, workers, police officers, famous politicians, scientists, writers, actors, journalists, etc., representing not only Russia, but also many other countries. Among others, the petition was supported by Mikhail Gorbachev (in his interview with *izbrannoe.ru* [74]) and the well-known French philosopher André Glucksmann [75].

Many people also used an option of the online petition allowing them to add their comments after signing. Young [76] mentions some of them: "some people appeal to Medvedev's Christian mercy; others say that the request should be a demand. Some blast Medvedev and Putin as 'vicious clowns' or 'criminals,' or refer pointedly to Medvedev's lack of true authority. Some angrily denounce the current regime and its injustices while others sound poignantly resigned: 'How sad that we live in such a time,' or simply, 'God help us.'" Thus, the act of gathering signatures online, many from people who had never been involved in political activity, became a form of resistance to the regime. Famous modern Russian writer Boris Akunin (who also signed the petition) named this movement "a seed of civil society" in Russia; another petition signer, one Moscow mathematician, addressed Bakhmina: "Stay strong! With your help, Russians are opening their eyes!" [76]. The online appeals and related off-line protests even caused a handful of Russian politicians, parliamentarians and some other known public figures, usually regarded as supporters of Putin's regime, to endorse the petition.

Two weeks after the petition was started, the number of signatures exceeded 60,000, and on October 23, 2008, all 575 pages containing them were officially submitted to the Russian president's administration [77]. The next day the Kremlin's spokesperson confirmed that Medvedev "definitely knows about the appeal for clemency, but has not made a decision yet" [78].

In the meantime, on October 19, 2008, the alternative website *Bakhmina.net* was launched. It contained a petition calling for Bakhmina to serve out her full sentence. But in spite of wide advertising on the pro-Kremlin Internet resources,<sup>29</sup> this rival petition had relatively little support. Moreover, a respected Russian magazine, *The New Times*, conducted an investigation which revealed that at least some of the signatures collected by *Bakhmina.net* were falsified [79]. The magazine also states that the *Bakhmina.net*'s creators "don't conceal that their gathering of signatures is a fabrication, and they do it only to report back to some people who gave them money for their website" [79, p. 33]. According to Nowak [80], "some Russian commentators allege that the rival site may be a Kremlin creation, but there has been no evidence of any official link."

It is important to note that, in addition to the Internet coverage, the protests for the release of Bakhmina were covered in Russia only by two relatively independent radio stations as well as a couple of printed media sources (mostly by one magazine — the above mentioned *The New Times* — and one newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, which already lost several of its journalists who were killed during the last ten years of the Putin-Medvedev regime<sup>30</sup>). Therefore, it was a surprise when, on October 30, 2008, one Russian TV channel broadcasted a debate on the Bakhmina case between Soviet-era dissident Valeria Novodvorskaya, and writer Maria Arbatova, who then implicitly supported the authorities' position. Apparently, the authorities hoped in that way to "debunk" the online campaign for Bakhmina's release. During the debates, Novodvorskaya offered to serve Bakhmina's prison term instead of Bakhmina; Arbatova, on the contrary, said that women should not demand special treatment, and even "urged Medvedev to deny the appeal, arguing that female convicts breed like rabbits to gain access to better prison conditions" [71]. The show caused enormous feedback from Russian bloggers, and the majority of them explicitly supported Novodvorskaya [81]. Apparently, the authorities also realized that in this case they could not win in open debate (e.g., on the TV screen) and gave up any further attempts. In the meantime, the online petition for Bakhmina's release inspired a number of respected Western information outlets, like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, to write about Bakhmina's case. This coverage attracted further international attention to the case of Bakhmina.

Eventually, the Kremlin apparently wavered, and on November 1, 2008, the Russian news agency *Interfax* spread the news that Bakhmina was secretly transported from the penal colony to a civilian hospital (maternity clinic) in the Moscow region [82]. On

<sup>26</sup> <http://bakhmina.presscom.org/>.

<sup>27</sup> <http://vimeo.com/1960151?pg=embed&sec=1960151>.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., <http://continentsmith.blogspot.com/2008/10/svetlana-bakhmina.html>.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., <http://strelac.livejournal.com/28452.html>.

<sup>30</sup> See <http://en.novayagazeta.ru/>.

November 28, 2008, Bakhmina gave birth to a daughter. According to unofficial information, this happened in one of the private clinics in Moscow [83].

There were rumors that Bakhmina might be released on parole after the child was born [84]. Another hearing of her court case was originally scheduled for December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008, but was postponed until January 21, 2009 [85]. Thus Bakhmina and her newborn daughter spent all New Year's and the Christmas holidays (in Russia they are often celebrated until January 19<sup>th</sup>) in prison. The formal pretext for the postponement was that the prosecution called for a more detailed examination of the case. But then the bureaucracy continued further: on January 21<sup>st</sup>, the Mordovia Supreme Court sent the case back to the local court in Mordovia "for further consideration" [86]. On March 4<sup>th</sup> the local court in Mordovia sent the case "for further consideration" to Moscow [87]. Only on April 21, 2009, did a court in Moscow order, at last, Bakhmina's release with her little daughter [88].

During all that time people continued signing the online petition on Bakhmina.ru, so that by the time of her release more than 96,000 signatures were collected. After Bakhmina's release, her lawyer also confirmed that she was aware the whole time of the online signature gathering, and that it was very important for her morale and helped her to stay strong to the end while in prison [88]. Bakhmina's release was very much welcomed by the progressive part of the Russian society, and the role of the online information campaign in that release can hardly be overestimated. For example, known Russian sociologist Professor Yevgenii Gontmakher admitted that "in the thus created informational-societal situation the Russian authorities had no other way than to release Bakhmina" [89].

Additionally, the case of Bakhmina had one more important consequence for the development of civil society in Russia: Valery Balikoyev, who set up bakhmina.ru, was so impressed by the success of the online gathering of signatures that he established a special website, girus.ru, for online petitions in defense of civic initiatives – the first site of that kind in Russia [90]. On the main page it features comments of people who signed Bakhmina's petition, and its motto is "Civil Society in Action." Since then the website has become home to a number of online petitions, some of which facilitated serious off-line protest activities. For example, in January–February 2010 fans of one of Russian provincial soccer clubs "Krylia Sovetov" (Samara) used girus.ru to attract public opinion to its catastrophic financial situation (caused, in the fans' opinion, by the local authorities' destructive attitude) and to mobilize citizens of their city for protest rallies involving many thousands of people. Because of the poor economic situation of the Samara region, very soon the protests moved from purely social to political, with slogans against central Russian authorities [91]. As a result, Russian central government, in order to somehow mitigate the protests (now they are still in effect, though in a more latent phase), was forced to find millions of dollars to save the club financially.

Thus, from the above case study we see that the cyberprotest for Bakhmina helped to significantly improve the welfare of Svetlana and her child and, eventually, led to their release. Implicitly, these cyberprotests also became a distinct catalyst of the oppositional democratic forces in Russia. These cyberprotests also debunked the myth that Russian society is apathetic. For example, Fossato & Lloyd, with Verkhovsky, lament [92, p. 51] that "Russian internet users appear not to respond actively to political campaigning on the web." Instead, from our case study we clearly see that the Internet in Russia offers an information channel through which the oppositionists can communicate and coordinate their actions effectively, simultaneously gathering powerful support both within the country and worldwide. Bakhmina's story started with a single blog discussion and evolved into a full-blown, successful cyberprotest movement that also involved masses of those people (many representatives of the older generation) who probably have never used the Internet in their lives. According to Pan [71], Anton Nosik, a prominent Russian Internet entrepreneur, admitted that the movement for Bakhmina's release is a vivid example of how the Internet is facilitating organization of the grass-roots campaigns in the reality of today's Russia.

## 6. Discussion and implications

In our paper we answered the call expressed by many researchers about the pressing necessity to thoroughly examine the political potential of the Russian segment of the Internet. For example, Fossato [93] correctly notes that "a comprehensive assessment of content available in the Russian segment of the Internet, including an analysis of online civic and political engagement is, to my knowledge, noticeably lacking." At the same time, our findings can be applicable to similar non-free states where dissidents also can successfully use cyberprotest in their fights against the regimes in power. Therefore the following considerations based on the two cases researched should also be of value to the non-democratic and non-free countries where the authorities control the main traditional mass-media and actively, using both legal and covert means, try to marginalize and suppress opposition which, in turn, is able to use Internet-based ICTs skillfully.

In this paper we provided two cases, each of which disconfirms the notion about unfitness of Internet-based ICTs for political protest in Russia [92]. Of course, there are also a number of cases when political cyberprotest did not achieve its main goals (e.g., during the Belarusian "Jeans" Revolution of 2006, or an attempted color revolution in Armenia in 2008). But, first, the dynamics of those events should be considered (like the Orange Revolution in Ukraine with its first "unsuccessful" phase of 2000 ("Kuchmagate" events) and the second, successful, one of 2004), and, second, we should take into account both the cyberprotest's context (e.g., how skillfully the authorities mitigated the protests and the surrounding international situation), and how skillfully the dissidents used the Internet-based ICTs to facilitate their activities. We are currently involved in a major multi-case study of political cyberprotest under (semi-)authoritarian regimes that takes into account all of these factors. This research effort will be used to build a comprehensive general theoretical framework describing the phenomenon (and, in particular, comprehensively delineating conditions of the political cyberprotest success and their ICTs-facilitated differences from the general conditions of success of the traditional political protest [94]).

Based on the two cyberprotest cases and their comparative analysis (see [Table 1](#) and the discussion below) presented in this paper, we consider that we can now affirmatively answer the question of whether or not the Internet can provide an effective tool for politically-interested people in Russia (or other similar non-democratic countries) to conduct their dissident activities under the (semi-)authoritarian regime. In both cases researched, the authorities tried to spoil the cyberprotest movements by employing various methods of both brute force and sophisticated information-war and cyber-war, including numerous means, both legal and illegal, all of which eventually failed. Instead, the cyber-dissidents practically achieved their *off-line* goals using extensively various *online* means.

In these cases the authorities, as the theory predicts [95], also used a variety of technical methods to discourage the dissidents, from direct censorship to forcing the local ISPs to prevent users' access to the websites, and even forcing the national domain name registrar to revoke the domain assigned to the website, to (probably) employing hackers to attack the websites in question (see [Table 1](#), row #2). But the websites teams' technical preparedness allowed them to maintain the vitality of the websites without major interruptions (see [Table 1](#), row #3). The users, in order to get access to the alternative information online, successfully employed various technical means to circumvent the blockade – from using proxy servers to accessing the Internet via satellite (the latter approach also looks very promising globally – it is technically rather difficult and/or time-consuming (at least, on a mass scale) to block such an Internet connection type). Thus we were able to confirm McLaughlin's [95] conclusion that the devoted and sophisticated cyber-dissidents will be able to successfully counteract the authorities' attempts (by technical or any other means) to suppress the online flows of information. When, in both our cases, a more sophisticated method of information-war (the spoiler websites) was employed (see [Table 1](#), row #4), people seemed to easily discern between the truth and the lie, and to choose the right website without much hesitation.

In our cases we also answered the concerns expressed by some researchers that only limited numbers of people (“information elites”) actively use the Internet. We established that the sheer numbers of Internet penetration do not matter much – more important is the quality of the use. In particular, in both our cases small teams of cyber-enthusiasts were able to achieve considerable social and political success due to the skillful use of the above-described great potential of Internet technology for political struggle (see [Table 1](#), row #1). Thus we can come to conclusion that even in those non-democratic countries where the authorities strongly suppress any organized groups of dissidents of any considerable size, small groups of dissidents and even initially a single oppositionist can significantly influence political environment if they *skillfully* use the Internet-based ICTs.

We were also able to provide the counter-argument to the one expressed by Fossato and Lloyd, with Verkhovskiy, for whom [92, p. 51] “it seems that leaders of internet sites can often be co-opted, compromised or frightened.” Instead, Ingushetiya.ru's team proved the opposite. Even when these oppositionists eventually achieved their goal and started cooperating with the new and praised (by respected Western human rights leaders) government of the republic, whom they supported from the beginning, they still offered their website's space for the more radical opposition, which, in its turn, also set up its own website. Eventually, the alternative voices in the republic became even more audible.

In both our cases, the blogosphere played an important role in maintaining and reinforcing the cyberprotests (see [Table 1](#), row #5). In the case of Ingushetiya.ru, blogs safely situated informational content in cases where the main website was temporarily unavailable due to the technical measures taken by the authorities, provided information about the events in the republic in other languages, and acted as repositories of the website's materials officially banned by censorship. In the case of Bakhmina.ru, blogs ignited cyberprotests, creating forums for dissidents to coordinate their off-line protests and providing information about the events happening around the petition. Thus we see that in Russia the blogosphere plays an especially important role in the development of political cyberprotests. Moreover, according to some researchers (see, e.g., [27]), the Russian blogosphere's effective networked structure ensures that both the members and the readers of the blogs may be quickly summoned, through the Internet, for potential actions of political protest. Therefore further researching of the blogosphere's possibilities would significantly contribute to the creation of the general theoretical framework of political cyberprotest under (semi-)authoritarian regimes.

In both our cases, the cyberprotest activists also skillfully used complementary off-line methods of delivering their ideas depending on the particular context in which they operated (see [Table 1](#), row #6). In the case of Ingushetiya, when direct access to the website from inside the republic was banned, the website's team and other opposition activists disseminated Ingushetiya.ru's materials by more traditional methods for this North Caucasus place – by posting printouts with the website's articles on fences and the walls of buildings and other suitable surfaces located in usually crowded places like local farmers' markets or bus stops. In Bakhmina's case, organizers employed the tactic of gathering signatures off-line in crowded places such as near subway stations to attract more people's attention to Bakhmina's destiny. Use of such combinations of the online and off-line dissemination of the protest materials is also especially useful on the territories with low Internet penetration rates – when the cyberdissidents can send online materials to the local Internet “hub” (e.g., some central city or town in the province) where they can be printed out on paper and further disseminated in the surrounding towns and villages (for the employment of this tactics by Pora movement during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 see [96]).

A portion of the success of cyberprotest in authoritarian states is due to the spread of information from online informational outlets to traditional mass media (see [Table 1](#), row #7). In the case of Bakhmina, the traditional Russian (as well as international) mass media played an important role in her eventual release. In the case of Ingushetiya, the authorities did their best to prevent mass media coverage, and almost succeeded, but still the important information about the website owner's murder and subsequent mass protests leaked, through online resources, to the traditional mass media, including foreign ones. This closely resembles the tactics of, for example, the Zapatista movement which used the Internet to garner international attention and support to their struggle (the so-called “Zapatista effect” [97]). Thus our cases confirmed the effectiveness of these tactics for dissidents fighting under conditions of (semi-)authoritarian regimes in various countries of the world.

Here it is also important to note that, with time, as the “digital generation” grows, the role of Internet-based media will only increase in comparison to traditional mass media. Current post-Soviet teenagers will likely form the basis of the future information elites in their countries. Unlike their Soviet counterparts of the early 1980s, who desperately turned the knobs of their short-wave radio sets trying to catch forbidden Western rock-music and “anti-Soviet” radio stations and who, after becoming university students, formed an important part of the democratic movement of the late 1980s–early 1990s in the USSR, Russian teens today mirror the “digital natives” [98] of the West. Like other “digital natives,” they spend more of their time on the Internet and less time listening to the radio, watching TV, or reading printed media. For example, Lapina–Kratasyuk [99] surveyed students (18–22 years old) of one of Moscow’s universities and found that the Internet was mentioned as the primary source of information by 48% of them, while TV was mentioned by only 36%. Eventually she came to the conclusion that “Runet [(the Russian segment of the Internet)] can present significant opposition to Russian TV” (p. 62). Therefore, among the “digital natives” the Internet will play an increasingly important role in organizing political movements (see also [100]). Thus, if we want to influence youth, we should do so through this new information medium. It is important that in many (semi-)authoritarian countries youth constitutes significant portions of the population (e.g., in Iran currently about 70% of people are younger 30 years old [101]). Therefore the Internet-based ICTs are potentially essential for democratization of such countries.

We can also deduce, based on the cases examined, that when all other means of mass information in Russia are under the strict control of the Russian authorities, the Internet remains the only mean to ensure the information flows necessary for successful dissident activity in that country. Similarly, we can conclude that in general in the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries, where practically all traditional mass media are under the authorities’ control, the Internet can frequently become the main reliable source supplying alternative information to the people (see Table 1, row #8). This is also supported by findings of other researchers. For example, according to Lapina–Kratasyuk [99, p. 68], during the Russian–Georgian war of 2008, “in the situation of war and... [its] patriotic covering on [Russian] TV, the Internet was the only mass-media which could equally present the alternative points of view”. Recent (March 2010) report by the respected international organization *Reporters without Borders* also maintains that “the Internet became the freest space for discussion and information-sharing in Russia” [10, p. 49]. This report analyzes the situation with the Internet-related press freedom in about two dozen countries (mostly – (semi-)authoritarian) worldwide, and posits that in the majority of them the Internet became the last bastion of information freedom. Thus, in general, in the non-democratic countries globally, the Internet’s role as an independent source of alternative information cannot be overestimated. Moreover, with the Internet’s wider penetration, with broadband service availability to wider circles of the people at an affordable price (so they would be able to listen to the alternative Internet–radio and watch alternative Internet–TV), the role of Internet-based ICTs in the political cyberprotest activity worldwide will only grow with time.

According to Vasi [102], the success of a protest mobilization depends on both the presence of a “trigger event” and the accessibility of ICTs which would spread relevant information. Internet-based ICTs are among such tools, and the Ingushetiya.ru case illustrates how a cyberprotest can contribute to a major political change. In that case, serious change was achieved on the local (“republican”) level, because events, which triggered local peoples’ mobilization, occurred at a local level. But if the trigger is something of importance at the national level (like the current economic crisis in Russia), it can promote change of the political situation of the whole country. Then the Internet would play its unique role as both the main supplier of relevant information and also a robust communication tool. In general in the non-democratic countries rigged elections often can be such a powerful trigger event (like we recently saw in Iran and Moldova, and earlier in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, Kyrgyzstan and other countries which had electoral (“color”) revolutions). In such events skillful use of Internet-based ICTs would be of vital importance. Therefore our findings can be of use in the similar events in the future.

Thus, in the conditions of the practical absence of other powerful alternative means of information in Russia (or similar (semi-)authoritarian countries), the Internet fulfills the role of informing the people about the real situation in the country and in the world, and ensures the communication between dissident actors that is necessary for the successful accomplishment of their tasks. As we see from the above cases, the Internet as a tool for the dissident activity in such countries has great potential to influence the political processes and proves to be very effective for the organization and mobilization of greater masses of the population. Without the Internet these activities would probably not be successful, or even possible. As the current economic crisis in Russia grows and continues, the Internet will continue to play an even more indispensable political role there. The same is also valid for other non-democratic countries in the case of trigger events that are significant for them.

## 7. Conclusion

Researching the role the Internet plays in political activity of democratic dissidents in semi-authoritarian countries is important. According to Oates’ suggestion [103, p. 15] that “understanding how the internet acts as a catalyst ... we need to look at a broader range of elements than the content that is shown on the website. Rather, ... we need to find case studies that reflect issues in the off-line world and measure how the internet has an effect (or lack of effect) on political change,” we consider that we were able to provide such clear and comprehensive examples of how the Internet in Russia does have a strong effect on political change in the off-line world. In particular, in our paper we discussed the potential of the Internet as a tool for supplying information necessary for the organization and mobilization of successful movements in opposition to a non-democratic government. We paid special attention to the Internet’s built-in abilities to better involve people in the political process, as well as to the repressive authorities’ attempts to censor the Internet.

Considering the complexity of the phenomena under investigation, the case study approach is the optimal research methodology. Based on this approach we investigated, in detail and for the first time, practically in real-time, the examples of the

roles the Internet plays in the current and ongoing cyberprotest processes in Russia. We found that the Internet (and its robustness) can significantly contribute to the successful protest activities of democratic dissidents in the (semi-)authoritarian states. Consequently, we came to the conclusion that, especially under conditions of the current major economic crisis, the effective usage of the Internet can play the decisive role in the success of the democratic oppositional movements in the former USSR countries, or other non-democratic countries if they experience significant trigger events. All non-democratic regimes, of course, have their own peculiarities. But their principles of preservation of power and their attitudes towards dissidents and citizens in general are similar. Therefore, from researching cases of successful political cyberprotests in one such country (Russia in our case), we were able to derive implications useful for cyberdissidents in other parts of the world, too.

The Internet remains the last robust bastion against the total control of the repressive authorities over the political information flows in the majority of the non-democratic countries. Therefore the political and social implications of the Internet use in Russia, other post-Soviet states, and authoritarian countries globally, definitely merit further research. Additionally, it is difficult to make robust generalizable conclusions based on only two cases, though salient. Therefore currently we are conducting research on Internet use for dissident activity in several non-democratic countries. Based on this research we will be able to develop and test a widely applicable model (the middle-range typological theory) both describing and ensuring the successful use of the Internet for democratic cyberprotest under non-democratic conditions in the former USSR and other countries around the world with (semi-)authoritarian regimes.

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