

Signs Of Struggle: The Power of Online Protest in Russia (guest blog)

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Olesya Shmagun: "Go out and take part in public debates!" Credit: Pavel Hitzkoy

This photo is just one example of a recent upsurge in Internet activism in Russia. Polis Summer School student Anna-Verena Nosthoff reports.

The road is quiet. A single girl stands there, her hair up, jet black like the thin tights beneath her short coat. She has little in the way of effective protection against the chill of a Moscow winter. The woolly white gloves are holding a single placard proclaiming autonomy. The brown eyes above the sign are those of an accuser. Olesya Shmagun's gaze is a visual call to an internet-minded, global, anonymous community of people.

The photo resonates. Yet its strength is not that of a collective outcry. It is the aesthetics of purity, of red, filigree lines on a white sign forming individual letters of protest. "Go out and take part in public debates!" it says. Olesya means Vladimir Putin. Standing in front of his office, she represents justice. She alone.

There's no smoke from bombs having been hurled, no batons from an executive power grappling for dominance. It is the honest gaze caught on camera of an anonymous opponent struggling for justice. An anti-movement, which only has the appearance of a lone individual.

Revealing Protest

Protest in Russia is not that simple. But mass self-protest still falls within the realm of possibility. It happens subtly and without the characteristic features of a quick-fire event. A photo on the internet, which will hopefully spread, has to reveal itself like the intangible outer layer of state suppression in the non-physical shelter of virtuality.

Olesya's photo is just one example of countless Russian online mobilisations to have materialised and which are becoming increasingly creative and use the internet as a form of expression and protest.



| *"Crisis can be a fruitful time for innovations"*

So says [Gregory Asmolov](#) the co-founder of the Russian crowdsourcing site 'Help Map'. He is currently a PhD student at the London School of Economics and the Silverstone Scholar at Polis. He has been observing for a long time how bottom-up strategies and ever more ingenious forms of internet protest are successfully taking root and becoming more and more widespread.

Global Protest

Asmolov explains that the blogger and activist scene in Russia has learned how to deal with the oppressive methods of the government and how to use these methods for their own purposes. This may be photos with a message that reaches a global audience who consider the message justified and important, irrespective of party political affiliation. Or calls for flash mobs, social commitment or even blogging.

In a country where political suppression and lack of transparency is part of everyday life for its citizens, online activism has become a moral and creative duty for many. The citizens, Gregory says, are "more powerful than ever."

The structures of Russian society have long ceased to resemble an ideological Foucauldian panopticum where a governing collective in the central tower used to observe every movement of its subservient citizens and listen in on

every word.

Screen Savvy

Instead, Gregory says, the totalitarian executive has recently lost control over the practices of the screen savvy protesters. Attempts by the government to hoodwink its people into believing in transparency when it installed countless video cameras in polling stations turned into a free and entertaining reality TV show. Not only that, the internet activists were delighted with faster Wi-Fi connections, which the additional technological devices had enabled. This was the paradox— and the bloggers chalked it up as a success. Olesya Shmagun was not arrested for her protest, since it was legal. Protest in the virtual world has become a collective movement of autonomy.

Issues of justice and transparency remain very difficult and in truth, the idealism of internet protest is still somewhat utopian. But it can have a practical setting. A few days ago the small Russian town of Krmysk was struck by deadly flood waters. The governor defended himself against accusations that his warnings came too late – and for making others responsible. Internet activists used online platforms both to promote protest but also to crowd-source assistance for victims of the flood.

The Russian online protesters continue their protest. They are seeing to it that social media systems are no longer separate from traditional media. In the technological postmodern age they have redefined the media dividing line: either free or non-free. Wherever freedom is possible, they seek truth.

This article by [Polis Summer School](#) student Anna-Verena Nosthoff

For more on Russian Internet Activism, [click here](#) or search on this blog for articles by Gregory AsmOLOV.

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