

The balance of crowds: top-down and bottom-up mobilization strategies in Russian election campaign (guest blog)

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/03/03/the-balance-of-crowds-top-down-and-bottom-up-mobilization-strategies-in-russian-election-campaign-guest-blog/

2012-3-3

Polis Silverstone Scholar Gregory Asmolov reports from Moscow on the anti-Putin protests and discovers how Russians are re-inventing democratic activism.



All Photographs By and Copyright of Gregory Asmolov

I was seating at “Shokoladnitza” Café, a popular coffee network in Russia, with a cup of latte. Next table to me two young parents were dressing their 3 year old daughter. “We are going to a place where everyone will put on white, so you should also put white”, explained the mother. The time was 2:02 PM. The place was Sadovoye Koltzo, a circle that surrounds the center of Moscow. The date was February 26, 2012. Sunday.

It was the time and the place for the final action in the cycle of protests that started after the elections to Russian Duma and before the elections of the new Russian president. This protest was very different from big demonstrations on Saharov’s square and Bolotnaya square. The idea was to create a big flash mob that will cover the Moscow’s central circle with people holding the symbol of protests – the white tape, and literally will surround the Kremlin (that placed in the center of circle). It’s called the White Circle.

Making a flashmob and not another traditional demonstration was not only a way to make the protest more original. The discussion of who is going to speak at the protests and how it supposed to be organized became controversial. The protest included people with very different views including communists, democrats, nationalist and people that don’t have any strong political affiliation who had significant difficulties to reach consensus about how the protest should look like.

The idea of “White circle” responded to these challenges. It had no organization committee, no leaders and no speakers, and therefore could avoid controversies. It was also not a classical demonstration that require permit from authorities. Even if the authorities decided to declare the “White circle” illegal, it was very difficult to deal with it due to it’s distributed nature.



In this case, however the major challenge is how to organize an action with a complex structure and mobilize people without having organization committee and leaders? Moreover, it is especially challenging since “White circle” required a high degree of coordination since the idea was to cover the entire circle and avoid gaps.

To address this challenge, a journalist and citizen activist Ilya Klishin together with his friends created a website feb26.org.

The idea of website was very simple. It was a map of the Moscow center that is surrounded by circle, and anyone could check in at a particular location on the circle. The map showed what areas are almost not covered by check-ins and helped to organize equal distribution of the participants.



The website fulfilled two functions. It was a tool for promotion of action, and at the same time it was a tool of organization. 7843 registered for the action and the circle showed relatively equal distributions of check ins. It wasn't enough to cover the circle, but the actual number of people who came was more than 20,000. Moreover, the flashmob had two layers since it included not only people who were standing in the circle, but also hundreds of honking cars that were driving around with the symbol of the protest. As consequence, the flashmob had a dynamic nature since it included interaction between the people in cars and the people who stood in circle

Feb26.ru is an interesting example when a dedicated site created as a tool for organization of particular protest. It shows how information technologies enable new forms of protest, that are based on self-organization and have no leaders. Actually the ideas of the protest, as well as the leadership functions, are embedded within the platform.



These types of protests are also very challenging for authorities. The police know how to deal with traditional demonstration, but addressing distributed flash mob is more difficult both, on the legal layer and on the ground. It might even more challenging in the future, when a dedicated mobile applications will be developed for specific protest and allow real time coordination (some of the mobile based real time coordination of protests was [already used in UK](#)).

The most vulnerable points of this type of protests are the website and the privacy. Since the organization depends on the website, once it doesn't work, it might create a threat to success of the protest. Feb26.ru found itself under heavy DDoS attacks, stopped functioning for about a day and even had to change hosting. In regard to privacy, since the site requires check in, the participants can be monitored online by authorities.

A few days earlier I was seating in another Shokoloadnitsa café (yes, there a lot of them in Moscow) on Komsomolskiy prospect. Actually, I had to sit there, since when I was trying to get home, police blocked the entrance to my neighborhood. The area was flooded with people who were going to [Pro-Putin rally on Luzhniki stadium](#), and the police wanted to ensure that people will go only to the rally's direction. I was not only one who wasn't able to go home. Next table to me was sitting and old couple who also found an asylum from Pro-Putin crowd in the café, and was waiting when police will remove the barrier and they will be able to go home.

I was sitting next to window and watching the people on the street. They were walking by groups. Every group had a leader with a sign, a name of organization or district. Some of the groups were standing and waiting for additional people to come. Those who just came from the Metro approached the leader of the group. It looked like he was putting a “V” next to their name on the attendance list. Some of the group leaders had few slogans in their hands,

and they were giving some of them to members of the group. But what probably was the most amazing thing, almost no one was smiling.

At some point I even started to feel uncomfortable when people that were passing the window of the café were looking on me, having Coffee Latte. It looked like they don't like me and they want to be in my place. At the same time, on the major road dozens of buses full of people were passing also in the direction of the stadium.

The Luzhniki rally was the only pro-government manifestation where Putin himself appeared. Later, one of the bloggers published plan of the audience attendance.

Every group had it's own dedicated sector— social workers, people from local authorizes, pensioners, invalids, workers from some big industries etc. Everything was well planned in advance. Another blogger published on [YouTube a video](#) with hundreds of people leaving the stadium even before the rally started, but already after they were able to register themselves in the list of attendance. He tried to interview some of them why they leave at the beginning, but obviously, people were not so happy to respond and found some creative excuses. Some other videos showed how people were trying to leave the stadium before the end of the rally, but they were blocked by the police (you can watch [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).



Another interesting fact is that the amount of user generated content from participants of Pro-Putin rally is very small, and in many cases it was created by people who doesn't support Putin, but just went to the rally out of curiosity. The oppositional protests flood the Internet with images and personal stories, when the crowd is full cameras.

Having an opportunity to witness the two crowds I was able to see to what extent these crowds are different. The Pro-Putin crowd was well structured and centralized. Almost everyone was a part of a group with organizational affiliation.

The "White Circle" crowd was primarily families, small groups of friends, or single people. What was not less significant is a different energy of the two crowds. If the "White Circle" crowd looked like happening, and was full of smiles and creativity, the Pro-Putin crowd left a heavy feeling, and wasn't really energetic. If many people from the pro-Putin rally tried to leave early, in the "White Circle" flash mob people continued to stand in the circle even after the time of the protest ceased.

What is most interesting, however, is that these two crowds present two different strategies of mobilization. The crowd that participated in Luzhniki rally was mobilized through hierarchical structures. It had clear leaders and organization, as well as financial resources that were invested in mobilization (e.g. transport). Moreover, what we could see, that it's not enough to have resources to mobilize the crowd, but you might also need to use force to keep the crowd at the rally till its end.



The "White Circle" crowd was a total opposite. It had no leaders at all and no organizational structure. The leadership was substituted by an online mechanism of mobilization – the feb26.ru website and social networks. It was totally bottom up horizontal mobilization.

What we can see is that different strategies of mobilization create very different crowds.

At this time, the top down vertical mobilization that is used by authorities still can bring more people than bottom up mechanisms. The government has very powerful administrative resource that if it used in its full capacity, can create a huge crowd. However, the difference in nature of the two crowds might be more important than the number of people.

The struggle between top-down and bottom-up strategies for mobilization of crowds is a key factor for a balance of power in fragile political environment. What we should hope, that the struggle between the strategies, will not lead to a clash between the two crowds, that have so different nature.



This article by Polis Silverstone Scholar Gregory Asmolov, a PhD student at the Department of Media and Communications at LSE

Read Gregory's article on [how the Russian government is creating a new CCTV surveillance system around the elections](#)

More photos from the "White circle" protest by the author of the article can be viewed here:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/asmolov/sets/72157629097187696/>

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science