

# Did Russia (Nearly) have a Facebook Revolution in 2011? Social Media's Challenge to Authoritarianism

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What has become known as the 'coloured revolutions' first emerged as a distinctively post-Soviet phenomenon. In December 2011 it appeared as if Russia might have a coloured revolution of its own, having met several of the basic preconditions, notably a contested election and widespread social protest co-ordinated through social media. Using a national survey conducted immediately after the December 2011 Duma election, this article reveals widespread concern about the integrity of the election and strong public support for the demonstrators' demands. Social media, in the form of Facebook, are found to have been instrumental in disseminating information about the protests. The implications of these findings for the use of social media in future anti-regime protests are discussed.

**Keywords:** Russia; elections; colour revolutions; Twitter; Facebook

The partial collapse of authoritarianism in several of the former Soviet republics during the 2000s was often attributable to the process of irregular executive change that became known as 'coloured revolutions'. The two clearest examples were Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution and Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, both of which originated from popular protest against disputed elections; both events led ultimately to the replacement of their incumbent presidents following new elections (Lane and White, 2010; O'Beachain and Polese, 2010).<sup>1</sup> The concept of the coloured revolution has also been exported to the Middle East, most recently with Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and Egypt's Lotus Revolution, both of which led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in 2011.

The post-Soviet coloured revolutions share at least five characteristics that distinguish them from other anti-authoritarian movements, past and present (see also Finkel and Brudny, 2012; Lane and White, 2010; McFaul, 2005). First, they are sparked by a disputed election result, often involving very obvious and public electoral fraud. As Joshua Tucker (2007) argues, such a motive makes collective public action a more effective means of correcting a manifest injustice. Second, the protests are generally non-violent and involve various forms of civil resistance such as street demonstrations, petitions and meetings. Third, the protests employ tactics that are designed to maximise visibility and spectacle; a common tactic has been for participants to wear distinctive coloured T-shirts, which conveys the impression of greater public support than might actually be the case.<sup>2</sup> Fourth, support is concentrated among younger people, often students, and is generally loosely organised.

The fifth characteristic of a coloured revolution, which we focus on in this article, is the role of the Internet. The Internet, and particularly social networking, has been a crucial ingredient in many of these events through the rapid and effective mobilisation of supporters. The nature of the Internet, with its ability to convey information instantly and to bypass official media and avoid censorship, makes it an ideal tool for co-ordinating social protest. However, use of the Internet varies widely across the post-Soviet states. In Russia, Internet penetration is around 44 per cent of the adult population, compared with 46 per cent in Belarus and 34 per cent in Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> However, in many of the central Asian republics Internet penetration is less than 10 per cent. Indeed, in Turkmenistan an outside observer commented in 2007 that ‘the internet is about as familiar as a flying saucer’ (quoted in O’Beachain, 2010, p. 232).

In this article we examine the role of the Internet and social media in the December 2011 Russian Duma elections. In principle, the aftermath of the elections fitted the five characteristics noted above, including a contested election result giving rise to peaceful social protest which was orchestrated in the main through the Internet. How close did Russia come to a coloured revolution – or, as it was soon dubbed by the Western media, a ‘snow revolution’? To what extent did ordinary Russians see the election result as unfair? What role did social media play in orchestrating the demonstrations and spreading popular dissatisfaction with the election result? And ultimately, why did a coloured revolution fail to materialise? Using a national survey conducted immediately after the Duma election, we address these questions. The survey provides a unique opportunity to examine popular support for the demonstrations, and to analyse the role of social networking in the protests.

## Social media and agenda-setting

The rise of social media, and particularly Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, has dramatically changed the role of the media in agenda-setting. The traditional media are characterised by high fixed costs, relative slowness in their ability to react to events and a reliance on routine, bureaucratic sources of information (Meraz, 2009). The main consequence of this has been that political elites can exercise considerable control over the traditional media through setting the political agenda, framing the issues advantageous to them and by priming the public to respond to issues and events in a predictable way. By contrast, the low entry costs of the new social media, its huge diversity of topics and interests and not least its egalitarianism and immediacy, have meant that it is all but impossible for elites to control. In authoritarian states such as China the only means of controlling social media is to invest huge resources in firewalls and in monitoring websites and web traffic (Lei, 2010; MacKinnon, 2008; Yang, 2009).

Perhaps the most distinctive political characteristic of the new media landscape is political blogging (Staney, 2009). Now a major online industry, blogging challenges the traditional media in ways unimagined just a decade earlier. It can react almost instantaneously to an event and it is the media most often accessed by politically sophisticated citizens (Oates, Owen and Gibson, 2006; Semetko, 2007). In general, bloggers owe no allegiance to established political elites and take their cues from the issues and concerns of their Internet followers. They therefore have the potential to challenge traditional political elites by raising issues that elites would rather exclude from the political agenda. While there is considerable evidence from the established democracies that the traditional media have tried to acquire the blog

form in order to limit its influence, these efforts have had at best only partial success (Meraz, 2009, p. 702; Stanyer, 2009).

While the new social media have major consequences for established democracies, their implications for authoritarian regimes are more serious. Three implications have long-term ramifications for the ability of authoritarian regimes to maintain effective control over their populations. First, these regimes effectively lose control of the political agenda as agenda-setting moves to the Internet. In particular, the blogosphere creates a virtual sphere within which contributors create their own agenda with little or no control by the authorities. Second, the decentralised and participatory nature of the Internet naturally attracts those opposed to the regime creating a virtual opposition. Social media tools such as Facebook have options that allow users to sign up to groups or for specific events and receive instant information in a way that is impossible for the regime to control. Third, microblogging tools such as Twitter provide a further complexity for authoritarian regimes; for example, in the 2011 Arab protests Twitter rapidly became a major source of news since the traditional media were regarded as under the control of the authorities (Stepanova, 2011).

Authoritarian regimes have responded to the challenge that the social media pose to their political control in several ways (see Deibert, 2009; Deibert and Rohozinski, 2008; Kalathil and Boas, 2003). One strategy is information denial by shutting down the Internet at crucial times in order to halt the flow of information. Both Egypt and Tunisia used this tactic in 2011 in unsuccessful attempts to halt the protests against the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes. A second approach is information monitoring in order to identify and possibly apprehend the most frequent bloggers. In addition, monitoring Internet discussions between protesters can provide the regime with important information about planned demonstrations which can then be countered. Third, information flowing through the Internet can be manipulated by placing a different interpretation on events in order to cast the regime in a favourable light (Morozov, 2011). All of these tactics have been used at different times by various regimes with limited success.

The December 2011 Russia Duma election provides an important case study by which to examine the role of the social media in opposing an authoritarian regime. Not only is Internet penetration high, but Russia has an educated and politically active population, many of whom wish to see the introduction of a competitive democracy with free and fair elections. We ask four questions in the article. First, to what extent is the Internet in general, and social media in particular, used for political discussions in Russia? Second, did voters regard the outcome of the December 2011 election as unfair? Third, to what extent did dissatisfaction with the conduct of the election foster sympathy with the anti-regime demonstrations? And fourth, what role did social media play in the demonstrations? Before addressing these questions, the next section examines the context of the 2011 Duma election.

## **The 2011 Russia Duma election**

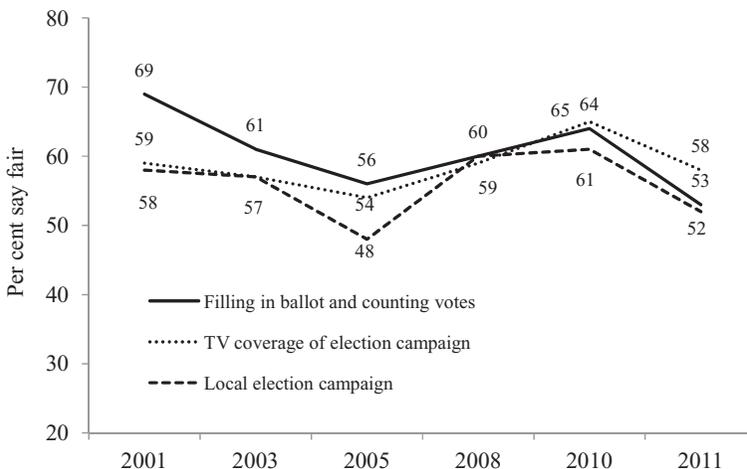
In the period immediately following the collapse of communism, it appeared that Russia would gradually develop the free, competitive elections that have long existed in established democracies. But following the election of Putin to the presidency in 2000, the integrity of Russian elections was increasingly questioned (McAllister and White, 2011; Rose and Mishler, 2009). Reflecting this reversal, the US-based organisation Freedom House reclassified Russia in 2004 from 'partly free' to 'not free', where it has remained since (as of 2012 it was considered to be a 'consolidated authoritarian regime'). By contrast, Ukraine has moved in the

opposite direction, although Belarus has been consistently classified as ‘not free’ from 1996, along with most of the other post-Soviet republics. Of the original 15 post-Soviet republics, only the Baltic states were regarded as ‘free’ in 2012; of the others, only Georgia and Moldova as well as Ukraine were as much as ‘transitional’ or ‘hybrid’.<sup>4</sup>

The integrity of the electoral process in Russia has been undermined in three main ways. First, electoral laws have been frequently altered to the advantage of the incumbents. The Russian parliamentary election law, for example, was amended 26 times between its adoption in 2005 and the spring of 2012 (White, 2012); a particularly important change was the elimination of single-member constituencies and with them the possibility of electing independent candidates. Second, the electoral commissions throughout the country are disproportionately staffed by regime loyalists. The head of the Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov, himself a long-standing friend of Putin, was widely celebrated for his ‘first law’ – that ‘Putin is always right’ (*Kommersant*, 9 April 2007, p. 1). Third, electoral fraud often occurs on election day itself, involving pressure to vote, to abstain or to vote in advance, as well as inducements, including cash payments.<sup>5</sup>

The net effect has been widespread public scepticism about the fairness of Russian elections. National surveys conducted across the post-communist period asking about the fairness of different aspects of the conduct of elections confirm this view. In 2001, for example, 69 per cent regarded the filling in of ballots and the counting of the votes as fair, but by 2011 this had declined to 53 per cent (Figure 1). The trends show that the public formed an increasingly negative view of the conduct of their elections through to 2005; but for a period thereafter elections were regarded as becoming fairer, only to decline again following the 2011 Duma

**Figure 1: Perceived fairness of Russian elections, 2001–2011**



Sources: Russian surveys, 2001–2011.

Notes: The questions were: ‘In your opinion, to what extent are elections in Russia fair in relation to ... the composition of the ballot paper and counting of votes ... television coverage of the election campaign ... the conduct of the electoral campaign in your district?’

election. Indeed, the decline in the public perception of fairness between 2010 and 2011 was the largest change observed over the course of the decade.

When asked about the overall fairness of the 2011 Duma election, survey respondents were almost equally divided in their views. Based on a 5-point scale, from completely fair to completely unfair, a total of 31 per cent considered the election to have been fair, but rather more – 36 per cent – considered it to have been unfair (28 per cent took an intermediate view). However, of those expressing the strongest opinions, the proportion seeing the election as completely unfair (18 per cent) outnumbered those seeing it as completely fair (8 per cent) by more than two to one; and relatively few respondents – just 5 per cent – had no opinion about fairness of the election. These results confirm the public's concerns about the conduct of the election and establish the basic precondition for social protest leading to a coloured revolution.

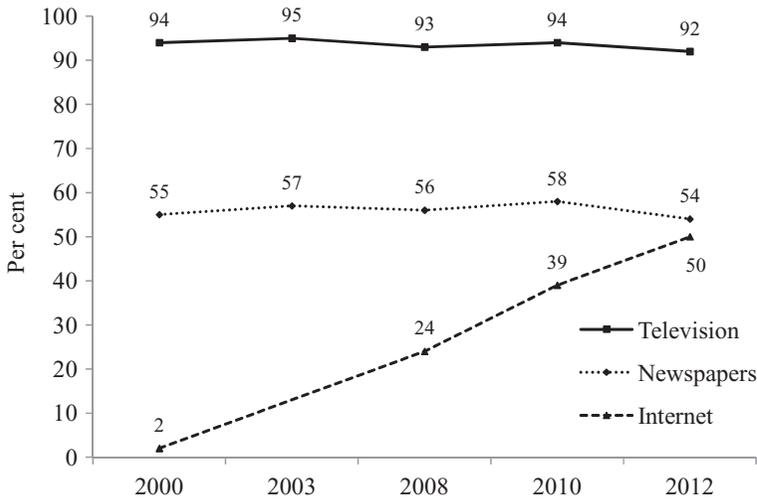
## Data and method

The December 2011 Russian Election Survey is part of a series conducted by the authors designed to examine long-term trends in Russian voting. The 2011 survey was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and conducted by Russian Research Ltd between 4 and 20 January 2012 using a personal interview method. A nationally representative sample of 1,600 respondents was achieved, using a random route method of household selection and the last birthday method of selecting the respondents. The response rate was 50 per cent. The sample was a multi-stage, stratified random sample of the adult population aged 18 years and over.

The analyses reported in Tables 3 and 4 use ordinary least squares regression methods which assume that relationships between the variables are linear and additive. Exploratory analyses using other methods confirmed that these were reasonable assumptions. In Table 3 the dependent variable, fairness of the election, is scored 4 = generally fair, 3 = somewhat fair, 2 = not fair, 1 = not fair at all. Frequency of media use is scored 4 = routinely, 3 = sometimes, 2 = seldom, 1 = never. In Table 4 the dependent variable, agreement with the demonstrators' demands, is scored 4 = fully agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = fully disagree. Social media use is scored 4 = routinely, 3 = sometimes, 2 = seldom, 1 = never. The control variables in both tables are scored as follows: age (decades); gender (1 = male, 0 = female); university education (1 = yes, 0 = no); good living standards (5 = very good, 4 = good, 3 = average, 2 = poor, 1 = very poor); interested in politics (4 = very interested, 3 = somewhat interested, 2 = not very interested, 1 = not at all interested).

## Results

As in most other societies, use of the Internet in Russia has been growing consistently over the past two decades and is beginning to exceed use of traditional media. Figure 2 shows the proportions regularly using the Internet, newspapers and television since 2001. While watching television and reading newspapers regularly has been relatively constant over the decade, Internet use has grown exponentially. In 2001, when the question was first asked, just 2 per cent of the survey respondents reported regular Internet use. By 2011 that figure had climbed to 50 per cent, almost on a par with regular newspaper readership. This places Internet use in Russia on a par with many of the established democracies (Brandtzæg, Heima and Karahasanović, 2011; Oates, 2013).

**Figure 2: Regular media use in Russia, 2001–2011**

Sources: Russian surveys, 2001–2011.

Notes: The question was: 'How often do you ... read national newspapers ... watch national television ... access the Internet?' Estimates are for 'regularly' and 'occasionally' except for 2003 which is 'routinely' and 'sometimes.' The Internet was not part of the question in 2003.

In line with increasing Internet use across the Russian population, social media have grown in importance. In 2010 there were estimated to be 41.7 million social network users in Russia, climbing to 51.8 million in 2012, representing 78 per cent of all Internet users or 42 per cent of the adult population.<sup>6</sup> There are two main social networking sites in Russia. The first is Vkontakte (or 'In Contact'), abbreviated to VK, which is the second most visited website after Yandex, a Russian-based search engine. VK has 190 million registered users and is consciously modelled on Facebook. The second social networking site is Odnoklassniki (or 'Classmates'), which has 45 million registered users.<sup>7</sup> It is designed as a means of keeping in contact with friends, particularly from school, and is targeted at the under-35-year-olds.

In contrast to VK and Odnoklassniki, the two major Western social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter, have far fewer followers. Facebook is estimated to have just 9 million registered users in Russia, compared to 800 million users worldwide, making Russia the 29th ranked country for Facebook use. Twitter has even fewer users – 4.5 million – compared to around 500 million users worldwide. However, Twitter includes among its users more individuals from the political class, particularly those involved in opposition and anti-regime politics (Kelly et al., 2012). Like its counterparts in the established democracies, Twitter is used to send short political messages to supporters, often in response to specific events.

The patterns noted above emerge in the 2011 Duma Election Survey, which asked respondents how frequently they used the various social media. Across the sample as a whole, Table 1 shows that around one in four 'routinely' said that they used one or more of the social media sites, with a further 17 per cent saying that they accessed at least one site 'sometimes'. Among Internet users, those not using at least one social networking site were a small minority.

**Table 1: Frequency of social media use in Russia, 2011**

	All	Vkontakte	Odnoklassniki	Facebook	Twitter
Routinely	26	19	19	5	3
Sometimes	17	12	14	5	4
Seldom	8	7	9	8	7
Never/don't use social media	7	20	16	39	43
Don't use Internet	41	41	41	41	41
Don't know	1	1	1	2	2
Total (N)	100 (1,605)	100 (1,605)	100 (1,605)	100 (1,605)	100 (1,605)

Source: 2011 Russian Duma Election Survey.

Notes: The questions were: 'How often do you access the Internet?'; 'How often do you use social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, Vkontakte, etc.)?'

Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki were about equal in their use across the population. However, both Facebook and Twitter were very much in the minority; about one in 10 reported using Facebook on a regular or semi-regular basis, while just 7 per cent reported using Twitter with the same frequency.

The use of social networking in Russia is similar to – or perhaps even exceeds – use of social networking in the United States, the country where the technology was invented and first utilised. For example, the Pew Research Center's *Internet and American Life* project report for 2011 found that 65 per cent of online adults used social networking sites, with 83 per cent use among 18–29-year-olds (Pew Research Center, 2012). The same estimates for Russia, based on the December 2011 Duma Survey, are 74 per cent across the adult population and 86 per cent for 18–29-year-olds. By the time of the 2011 Duma election, then, Russia fulfilled two of the basic preconditions for a coloured revolution: a contested election and widespread social networking use, skewed towards the young.

Following the 4 December 2011 Duma election and widespread reports of electoral fraud, a series of demonstrations took place, mainly in Moscow but also in other cities, with the demonstrators demanding fresh elections. The demonstrations were some of the largest protests seen in Russia since the last years of Soviet rule. Substantial numbers were already involved by the evening of 5 December led by prominent anti-corruption campaigners such as Alexei Navalny, who was himself arrested. Navalny used Twitter to disseminate evidence of electoral fraud, including pictures taken on smartphones, in order to rally supporters (Kelly et al., 2012, p. 5). However, the main demonstration took place in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow on 10 December, with estimates of the protesters varying between 25,000 and 50,000. The demonstration was advertised in advance by a Facebook group called 'Saturday at Bolotnaya Square' and was widely publicised among online social network groups.

The scale of the demonstrations attracted considerable national and international media attention and this is reflected in the proportions of survey respondents who said they had some knowledge of the events. The first set of results in Table 2 shows that around one in four of the respondents claimed to know 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' about the demonstrations, with a further 44 per cent saying they knew 'a little'; just 27 per cent said they knew nothing.

**Table 2: Knowledge of and agreement with December 2011 demonstrations**

	<b>Knowledge of demonstrations</b>		<b>Agree with demonstrators' demands</b>
A lot	6	Fully agree	23
A fair amount	21	Agree	43
A little	44	Disagree	14
Nothing	27	Fully disagree	10
Don't know	2	Don't know	10
Total (N)	100 (1,605)	Total (N)	100 (1,011)

Source: 2011 Russian Duma Election Survey.

Notes: The questions were: 'How much do you know about the meetings and protests that took place in Moscow and other Russian cities after the elections to the State Duma?'; [if knew something about the protests] 'Do you share the demands of the demonstrators?'

Those who said they knew something of the demonstrations were then asked if they agreed or disagreed with the demonstrators' demands. The second set of results in Table 2 shows that two in every three agreed with the demonstrators' demands, with just one in four disagreeing. By any standards, then, a large majority knew about the demonstrations and among this group there was very considerable sympathy with the demand for fresh elections.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Internet played a major role in spreading information about instances of electoral fraud. The Internet was particularly important in this regard since the traditional media were reticent about publicising evidence of this kind. Similarly, online social networking appears to have been pivotal in advertising the demonstrations, particularly the Bolotnaya Square demonstration on 10 December, since again these were rarely mentioned in the traditional media until they had actually taken place. To assess the role of the Internet in these events, a two-part analysis is employed. The first part examines the role of the media in shaping perceptions of the fairness of the election, while the second part evaluates the specific role of social networking in generating support for the demonstrations. The analyses are conducted using ordinary least squares regression methods.

The findings confirm that the media did indeed play a major role in shaping the public's views about the fairness of the election. The results in Table 3 show that, net of a wide range of other factors, the greater the frequency of watching television, the more likely the person was to view the elections as having been fairly conducted; by contrast, more frequent use of the Internet resulted in seeing the election as unfair. Apart from living standards, views about the fairness of the election were also generally unrelated to a person's background characteristics or to their interest in politics, suggesting that media consumption was the major agent in shaping opinions. The strong influence of living standards on perceptions of fairness is also worthy of note since it suggests that individuals of higher socio-economic status, all other things being equal, were more likely to recognise the potential for political instability and the associated risks to their living standards if the election was seen to have been unfairly conducted.

**Table 3: Frequency of media use and fairness of 2011 election**

	<b>b</b>	<b>beta</b>
Frequency of media use		
National newspapers	-0.05	-0.04
National TV	0.21**	0.11**
Internet	-0.08**	-0.08**
Controls		
Age (decades)	0.01	0.02
Gender (male)	-0.16*	-0.07*
University education (0, 1)	0.06	0.02
Good living standards (1 to 5)	0.28**	0.16**
Interested in politics (1 to 4)	0.04	0.02
Constant	1.66	
Adj R-squared (N)	0.04 (1,528)	

Source: 2011 Russian Duma Election Survey.

Notes: \*\*Statistically significant at  $P < 0.01$ , \*  $P < 0.05$ .

Ordinary least squares regression estimates showing partial (b) and standardised (beta) coefficients predicting the probability of seeing the elections as fair. See text for details of variables and scoring.

The second part of the analysis examines the impact of social networking on sympathy for the demonstrators' demands. Table 2 has already shown that a clear majority sympathised with the demonstrations; to what extent did social networking play a role in shaping their views? Table 4 addresses this question by estimating the impact of media use on agreement with the demonstrators' demands, net of a wide range of other factors, including views about the fairness of the election. The estimates are calculated for those who said that they used the Internet and had knowledge of the demonstrators' demands.

The results in Table 4 show that social networking did indeed have a major impact on beliefs about the demonstrations, but only in the context of Facebook; there was no statistically significant effect for either of the two Russian social networking sites, VK and Odnoklassniki, nor was there any effect for Twitter. Watching television also increased the likelihood of sharing the demonstrators' demands. Overall, the effect of Facebook is the second largest effect in the model, after beliefs about the fairness of the election itself. These results confirm the importance of Facebook in generating support for the demonstrations and in disseminating anti-regime information. The results are all the more remarkable given that our sample is a national one, with the bulk of the demonstrations being restricted to Moscow and to a much lesser extent to a handful of other major cities.

Although a larger demonstration than the Bolotnaya Square protest was mounted on 24 December, by the end of the year it was clear that the demonstrations would not achieve their main goal of securing new elections. Further large-scale protests in February took place in the shadow of the presidential election campaign, but by then it was evident that not only would the presidential election proceed, but that Putin would be re-elected. There had also been some minor changes in election procedure that took account of at least some of the demonstrators' demands: an elaborate system of webcams was installed in virtually all of the

**Table 4: Social networks and agreement with demonstrators' demands**

	<b>b</b>	<b>beta</b>
Frequency of social media use		
Vkontakte	0.01	0.02
Odnoklassniki	-0.02	-0.03
Facebook	0.10**	0.14**
Twitter	-0.02	-0.03
Other media use		
National newspapers	-0.01	-0.02
National TV	0.09*	0.08*
Controls		
Age (decades)	0.00	0.00
Gender (male)	0.06	0.04
University education	0.07	0.04
Good living standards	0.06	0.05
Interested in politics	0.03	0.03
Elections were fair	-0.20**	-0.34**
Constant	2.59	
Adj R-squared (N)	0.13 (777)	

Source: 2011 Russian Duma Election Survey.

Notes: \*\*Statistically significant at  $P < 0.01$ , \*  $P < 0.05$ .

Ordinary least squares regression estimates showing partial (b) and standardised (beta) coefficients predicting the probability of agreeing with the demonstrators' demands. Estimates are for Internet users only, who had knowledge of the demonstrators' demands. See text for details of variables and scoring.

country's 93,000 polling stations, ballot boxes were transparent so that fraud could more readily be detected, and thousands of ordinary citizens took to the streets to monitor the voting in person (the government paper *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 5 March 2012, p. 3, claimed that 'about a million active citizens' had taken part).

## Conclusion

Coloured revolutions are a phenomenon most closely associated with the post-Soviet states. In December 2011 it seemed as if Russia itself might succumb to this peculiarly post-communist innovation. Many of the preconditions existed for such an event, not least an election that was widely seen as fraudulent; indeed, little more than one in three of the respondents in the post-election survey analysed here regarded the election as having been conducted fairly. Coupled with this belief in electoral irregularity were vibrant, widely used social media and an opposition movement concentrated among the young, who for the most part aspired to a Western model of democracy. In all important respects, then, Russia had a potential coloured revolution in the making.

The results presented here have confirmed the importance of the Internet in general in shaping views about the unfairness of the election. They also demonstrate the importance of

Facebook in particular in helping to mobilise support for the anti-regime demonstrations. Given the relative lack of penetration for Facebook, why did the protesters choose this website, rather than the much more popular VK? The answer may be related to the main means by which authoritarian regimes seek to counter the impact of social media: information denial and information monitoring. VK is owned by a Russian business consortium, and its servers are located in Russia. Anti-regime protesters would therefore have much less security than they would enjoy with Facebook, which is US-based and less subject to Russian government interference or censorship.

The broader question is that of why a coloured revolution failed to develop in Russia in 2011. There are four main explanations. First, while the Duma election was rigged, it was perhaps not rigged enough. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) report on the election identified numerous flaws, not least 'frequent procedural violations and instances of apparent manipulation, including several serious indications of ballot box stuffing' (OSCE, 2012, pp. 1–2); nevertheless, the election result was broadly in line with the predictions of the opinion polls. For example, a Levada survey conducted two weeks after polling day found that 46 per cent had voted for United Russia (the official result was 49.3 per cent), the Communist Party took 17 per cent (the official result was 19.2 per cent) and Fair Russia and the Liberal Democrats both took 12 per cent (the official results were 13.2 and 11.7 per cent, respectively) (Rose, 2012, p. 26). In other words, while the evidence of electoral malpractice may have offended many voters, no one had failed to win office, or lost office, because of it. This is fundamentally different from the other coloured revolutions, where democratically inclined challengers have lost to their authoritarian incumbents, generating a widespread sense of grievance.

A second explanation focuses on the effectiveness of the Putin administration in countering the protests, using techniques of information denial and information manipulation. Several social networking websites apparently experienced denial of service attacks at crucial points during the December protests, and mobile Internet was unavailable in Bolotnaya Square during the 10 December 2011 demonstration. The regime had also established numerous groups which characterised the protesters as Western-funded and anti-Russian. The administration had also encouraged a youth movement, Nashi, which had employed the Internet and social networking to oppose the protests against the government (Finkel and Brudny, 2012). In addition, while the administration countered the demonstrations with selective arrests, there was no policy of mass arrests and no one was killed. This effectively weakened the incentive for further protests and reduced the risk of an escalating confrontation between the authorities and the protesters.

The third explanation concerns the popularity of Putin himself. As Michael McFaul (2005) has noted, coloured revolutions require a discredited leader as a focus for opposition to the regime. By contrast, in Russia Putin remained highly popular throughout the 2000s, particularly from 2005 onwards as economic growth increased significantly on the back of high energy prices, with positive flow-on effects to the living standards of ordinary Russians (White and McAllister, 2008). There was a general recognition that while Russia was far from being a competitive democracy in the Western mould, many were prepared to forgo full democracy in return for economic security, and to ensure that there would not be a return to the economic chaos that had accompanied the collapse of communism in 1990–1991. In addition, Putin's robust foreign policy which was aimed at countering Western influence was generally popular and was seen as having returned some of the international standing that Russia had lost during the Yeltsinite 1990s.

Fourth and finally, while several of the main preconditions for a coloured revolution existed in December 2011, equally others did not (see Finkel and Brudny, 2012; Hale, 2013; McFaul, 2005). We have already mentioned the popularity of the incumbent Vladimir Putin, which robbed the opposition movement of a widespread sense of grievance against an unpopular leader. In addition, a vibrant civil society which could channel and mobilise political disaffection with the regime is largely absent in Russia. Similarly, there have been no major divisions in the political class, which could have juxtaposed an alternative leader to Putin and provided a focus for the opposition. Nor have there been divisions within the police or military, the agencies that ultimately defend the state. Of course, not all factors are of equal importance, nor could all be expected to be present in any one case. Nevertheless, these are major impediments to the opponents of the Putin regime garnering sufficient support to mount a serious challenge.

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## Notes

- 1 The coloured revolutions are often dated back to the 1986 'People Power' or 'Yellow Revolution' in the Philippines. There was also the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 which, although sparked by a disputed parliamentary election, also saw considerable violence.
- 2 In Georgia in 2003 a similar tactic was to spray paint the word 'Kmara' (meaning 'enough') on walls all over the country.
- 3 Estimates are generally for December 2011 and are available from: <http://www.internetworldstats.com> [Accessed 16 December 2012].
- 4 The rankings from 2002 until 2012 are available from: <http://www.freedomhouse.org> [Accessed 31 July 2012].
- 5 The best independent evidence of electoral fraud in Russia is provided in Myagkov, Ordeshook and Shakin (2009).
- 6 Estimates are from: <http://www.emarketer.com/Articles.aspx/Article.aspx?R=1009418> [Accessed 12 November 2012].
- 7 Estimates of registered users are from the websites themselves, <http://www.vk.com> and <http://www.odnoklassniki.ru> [Accessed 10 December 2012].

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