

## THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNET COMMUNICATIONS ON ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN RUSSIA (2011-2016)

Leonid V. Davydov<sup>1</sup>

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The article is devoted to the analysis of a number of conceptual and application-oriented aspects of the functioning of Internet communications, which are elements of the modern political debates and progressive media space for transmission of political messages nowadays. The categorical nature of Internet communications was defined in the research, the analysis of their use in the political space of the different countries of the world was carried out, and also the peculiarities of formation of social consciousness and public opinion, due to these communications, were also revealed. The distinctive features of Internet communications influence's on electoral processes were explored during the election campaign in the State Duma (2011-2016), using the example of Russia through a prism of post-totalitarian transformation of political structure and media space of the country in the course of formation of global information society. The results of the research helped to formalize the existing problems in Russia and the difficulties in development of political communications on the Internet, and also it helped to note the prospects of further researches and developments.

**Keywords:** Politics, party, internet, communications, social networks, Russia, elections, electorate, consciousness, information.

### INTRODUCTION

In the modern world there is an active process of formation of information society, which can be characterized by the development of progressive Internet technologies and their wide use by public authorities, public organizations, political forces and civil society in general (Zhogal, 2017). A social media plays an important role in this process. And they are actively used as the important communication channel in the political sphere.

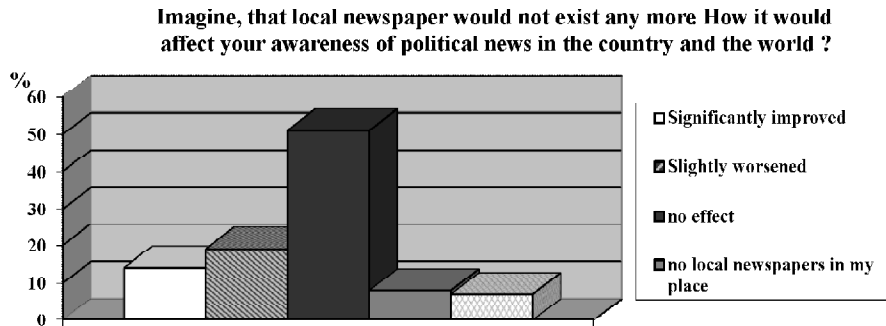
World practices of involvement of citizens to political participation through Internet communications have shown that the virtual media space is the favorable environment of formation of civil identity. It also has the powerful potential of public self-organization that can be successfully used for strengthening of civil society, and also in political goals – for example, for conduction of agitation events, the electoral companies, for the organization of large-scale changes in the country, etc. (Feltus, Goldstein & Dallek, 2016). A sociological survey, which was conducted by Konrad Adenauer's (KAS) Fund, in 2016 in 28 countries of the world, clearly shows the this tendency (Figure 1).

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Thus, we can confidently say that in recent years process of a mediatization of the political sphere has got new dimensions around the world. The Internet

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<sup>1</sup> Chairman of the Board, Public Relations Foundation "Peterburgskaya politika", St Petersburg, Russia, E-mail: 985760il@gmail.com



**Figure 1:** The influence of local newspapers on the awareness of political news (Bulgarian Media Monitoring, 2013)

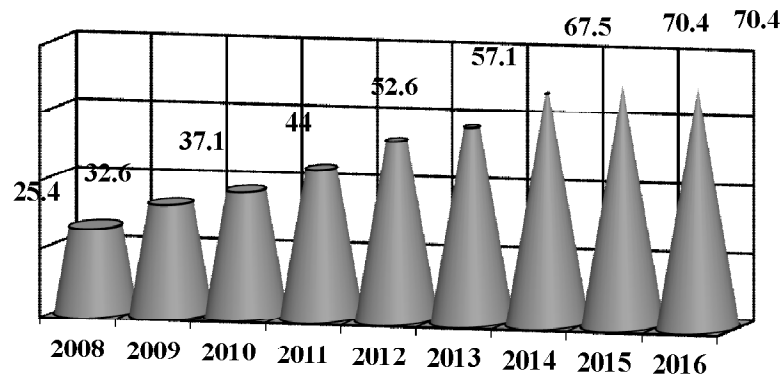
communications, which appeared as result of media convergence and modern information technologies demonstrate a significant growth in the audience of virtual media users, putting pressure on television and the press. And if in the western countries disputes around impact, tools and measures of use of Internet communications in political goals have lessened, and the polemic is conducted mainly around their characteristics. But in the countries with transformational economy, the integration of policy into the Internet and social media has begun rather recently and today it intensively develops. In this connection the significant field for researching the interaction of politicians, media and voters in Internet's network opens.

In this context close attention is drawn to Russia, because its residents are the most active Internet users and consumers of public content, especially in social networks, throughout the former post Soviet Union space. So, according to the Russian branch of research concern of GfK (Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung Group), the Internet audience steadily grows in Russia though in recent years, due to reaching of the extreme values of coverage, the growth rates of Internet penetration have slowed down (Figure 2). At the same time, social networks make 71,8 % of the total volume of all public content (Figure 3).

At the same time according to AIST Foundation 2016, the Russian users of social networks have defined three most popular news, which they constantly watch - it is music, culinary recipes, and also political and economic news (Ignatov *et al.*, 2017).

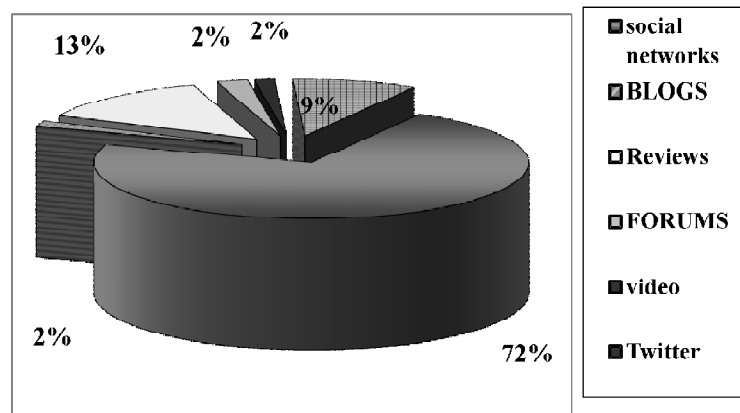
So, taking into account all the information above, indisputable is the fact, that actively penetrating into the political sphere of Russia, new information and communication technologies can change qualitatively "old" representations, attitudes, stereotypes and models of relations between political institutes and individuals. At the same time issues, which are connected with the efficiency of use of network communications by political functionaries are being updated; with

**84 million of people at the age of 16 and older are Internet users in Russia**



**Figure 2:** Internet penetration in Russian Federation (% of the population over 16 years of age) (Podolsky, Gritsenko & Peredera, 2016)

**698 million of messages was generated by these users of social networks**



**Figure 3:** Social media activity by source types 2016 (Kosurin & Kireev, 2016)

the transformation of the Internet into the arena of race for power; with the increase in a role and value of global network for domestic party elite; efficiency of Internet communications in the direction of positioning Russian politicians and political parties as progressive actors of the modern society and their use as the effective mechanism of political struggle.

Thus, the research of new models of mass communication - “from many to many” and even “from all to all” in the plane of political processes and political

filling of content with the help of modern Internet communications is an actual scientific and practical task, which causes interest not only in expert circles, but also draws attention to a wide range of different layers of modern society. All these generally determine the choice of the topic of this article.

It is necessary to notice that departments, investigating the impact of new media on society were created in most of the world's leading universities. So, the most famous are: ETH Zurich - Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Stanford University, Imperial College London and other space.

So, we can say, that the subject of influence of Internet communications on electoral process isn't new for modern scientific researches. At the same time, the analysis of specifics of their use as an instrument for forming a political image in countries with transition economies, particularly in Russia, is mainly fragmentary. More scientists conduct a superficial monitoring of reactions of social networks users to different messages of political parties and their leaders. At the same time not enough attention is paid to feedback in the establishment of political communications and the use of public content. That fact, that most of Western scientist researches are not translated in Russian constrains the deep researches of this question in Russia.

Thus, taking into account all these facts, the purpose of the article was to determine the categorical nature of Internet communications as the element of the modern politics, to analyze their use in the political arena of different countries of the world and to reveal the features of formation of social consciousness and public opinion. Also another purpose was to research the distinctive features of the influence of Internet communications on electoral processes in Russia (2011-2016) through a prism of post-totalitarian transformation of political structure and media space of the country in the process of formation of the global information society.

Internet communications are highly interactive platforms, that use both mobile and Internet technologies and they allow to certain users and their communities to exchange, to create, to discuss and modify the created content (Vlasenko, 2016).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The potential of such Internet communications as websites, social networks, blogs, microblogging services in the context of providing new forms of dialogue in civil society, as well as between voters and political elites, was especially important during this research, taking into account its goals and objectives.

Election campaigns in developed countries in recent years clearly demonstrate how naturally Internet communications can be adapted for contacts with electorate, personification of messages, and motivation of voters. David Karpf even has introduced a new term - "policy 2.0" (by analogy with the Web 2.0), meaning the new political and communication opportunities revealing during the use of the Internet for the purpose to create more open, transparent, interactive

political institutes capable to interact with citizens at the new level (Bercovici, 2013).

So, one of the best examples of effective use of Internet communications in the political sphere is B. Obama's election company.

During the election of 2008, Obama has provided his presence in all popular social networks. He became one of the first politicians actively using the Internet to improve his image. The 44th USA President has introduced himself as the brand in the Internet, thus spending much less money on his electoral campaign.

One of Barack's main media instruments became his own social network, which was called MyBarackObama.com (Yanes & Carter, 2012). It was a very good agitation, on which you do not need to spend money all the time, in contrast to TV advertising, articles in press or materials on radio. According to sociologists, not less that 30% of American voters have watched at least one B. Obama's propaganda clip on "YouTube" (Hendricks & Denton, 2010). During the campaign in 2008, Obama's headquarters managed to achieve the following results thanks to the Internet: they collected 6.5 million dollars of donations; they collected a database with 13 million e-mail addresses; they registered 2 million users on MyBarackObama.com; and created 35,000 volunteer groups (Harfoush, 2009).

As a second example, we can say about the "color revolutions", which recently passed in many countries of the world. The director of the Institute of Africa of the Russian Academy of Sciences - Alexei Vasiliev claims, that the revolution of the beginning of the XXI century became possible due to communication through social networks. "With the help of such social services as" Facebook "," Twitter "," Youtube " , young people were able to pick up the rebellion, organize and unite first dozens, and then hundreds of thousands and millions of people" (Karpovich, 2015).

Based on the analysis of the use of Facebook during the election campaigns in England, Hana S. Noor Al-Deen and John Allen Hendricks concluded that there was a direct correlation between the number of Facebook users who support the candidate and his results in the elections (Noor Al-Deen & Hendricks, 2012).

Thus, these examples demonstrate that Internet communications become more and more important phenomenon in the political sphere, effectively performing functions of information exchange between participants in political interaction, political institutes and civil society organizations.

Passing to the next stage to analyze of influence of Internet communications on electoral processes in Russia, we need to note, that monitoring will be made using the example of State Duma elections of 2011-2016. Despite the presence of numerous channels and forms of Internet communications and considering the limits of this article, we will place emphasis on the research of functioning of the political websites and activity of political parties and their leaders on social networks and blogs.

On the first stage it is necessary to determine the level of development of the technological network infrastructure in Russia, since without taking it into account, the results will be biased and inconsistent.

As the data of the GfK concern, which were already mentioned at the beginning of the research and also the results of the sociological survey of Worldbank and ITU, in 2011, even half of residents of Russia were not users of the global network, which makes it possible to claim about the existence of a “digital divide” (Table 1) (GfK marketing research; Gurov and Partners Company; ITU: Committed to connecting the world).

TABLE 1: THE PROFILE OF INTERNET USERS IN RUSSIA

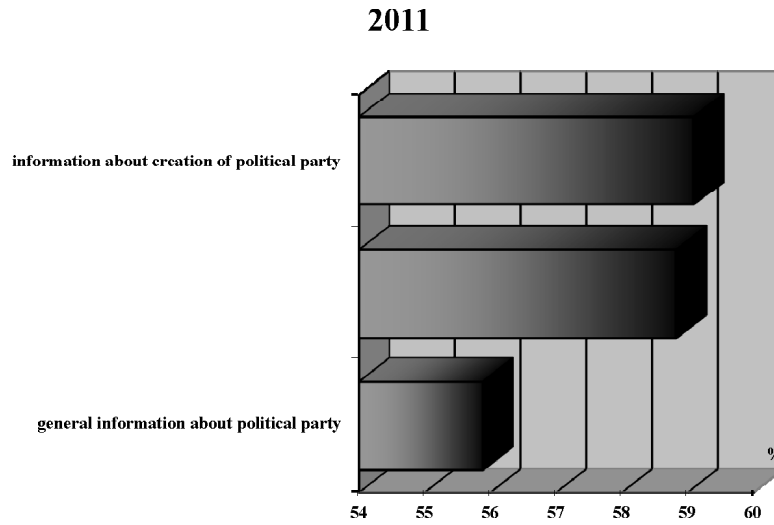
<i>Source of sociological data</i>	<i>Number of Users</i>	<i>Profile of users</i>			
		<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender m/w</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Settlement type</i>
GfK	44	<35 (64%)	52/48	Higher/not finished higher	City (87%)
Worldbank	42,1	25-30 (58%)	49/51	Higher	City (84%)
ITU	43,5	» 40	51/49	Secondary-Higher	City 85%)

Of course, till 2015 the situation has improved, but it is obvious that the unevenness of access to the network was a significant obstacle to the use of Internet communications in the electoral processes in Russia

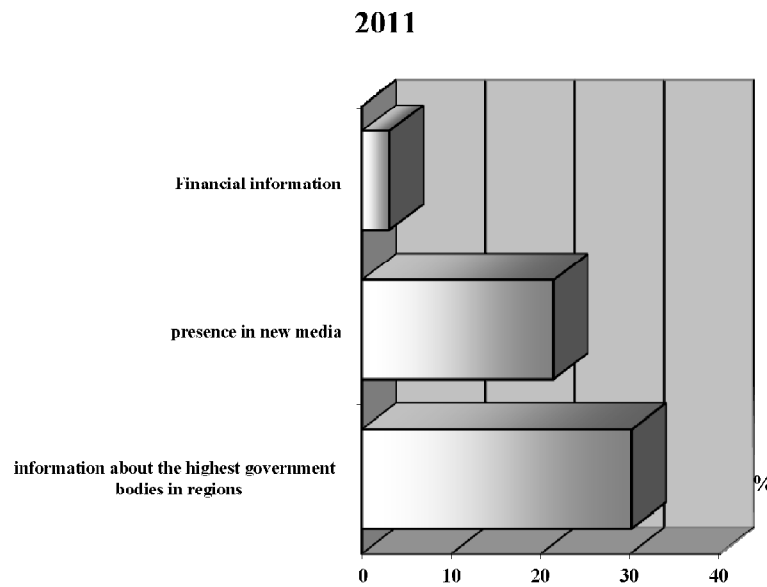
The study of political parties’ representations on the Internet, during 2011 and 2016 elections, demonstrates that all parties that ran for the State Duma had their own official websites. However a difference between the interactive forms which are present at these websites is enormous.

We can state with sure, that official sites of political parties in 2011, which should be their virtual representation, a source of information, a tool for attracting supporters, did not fulfill their functions, as it is evident from the content and accessibility of information placed on them. So, the top-ranking of the most presented information on the sites of political parties in 2011 is shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5 represents the rating of information that was not on the sites, or that was limited (information is provided by the Freedom of Information Foundation, the ratings are based on the coefficient of information availability (Monitoring sites of political parties)).

The connection with the politician or political force, which should be formed with the help of the site, was practically absent in 2011, not only for technical reasons, but also because of unwillingness to react. A number of sites in 2011 (for example, the site of the “Patriots of Russia”, “Right Cause”, “Fair Russia”) had the “non-working” forms and sections, as well as many announced, but inaccessible information (only 33% of the information on the site was accessible, 67% of the information either was not on the site at all or with it was impossible to get acquainted with it)



**Figure 4:** The most complete information information on the websites of political parties



**Figure 5:** The least represented information on the websites of political parties

At the same time we need to note, that situation has positively changed till 2015. So, the information on the party's charter and program, contact information, information about the leaders of the political party and its regional branches,

membership in the political party, the procedure for joining the political party, announcements of the party's activities appeared on the websites of political parties. Besides, websites began to update links to other party resources on the Internet regularly, there was dynamic content, publications about political party in media, appeared dynamic content, publications about political parties in media, links to them, a photo and media materials. A special attention we need to pay to that fact, that websites became more interactive, sections for journalists have been created; forms of sending messages for users were created as well, as services of online vote for citizens; integration with social networks and services was organized, and information about attendance of the website and its quoting became open.

However, despite significant progress, it should be noted that that the presence of all the listed characteristics and service can not boast of any site of a political party participating in the elections to the State Duma in 2016. Moreover, the parties which have overcome a 5% barrier are not on the top of ratings on openness and technological effectiveness of the websites. At the same time the websites of parties, which haven't gathered and the tenth share of percent on elections in some characteristics are leaders (Table 2).

TABLE 2: RATINGS OF KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SITES OF POLITICAL PARTIES, PARTICIPATING IN ELECTIONS TO THE STATE DUMA IN 2016 (GUROV AND PARTNERS COMPANY)

<i>Parties</i>	<i>Total of voices, %</i>	<i>EPI*</i>	<i>Information openness</i>	<i>Interactivity</i>	<i>technological effectiveness</i>
United Russia	76,22	75,85	12,4	8,0	8,33
Communist party of Russian Federation (CPRF)	9,33	70,04	14,75		9,42
Liberal Democratic party of Russia (LDPR)	8,67	71,32	10,7	6,40	8,42
Fair Russia	5,11	67,52	15,25		8,08
Communist of Russia	0	48,93	9,4		
Yabloko	0	73,08	13,50	7,0	
The Russian party of pensioners for justice	0	55,6			
The Motherland	0,22	56,8			
The Party of the Growth	0	51,5			
Greens	0	56,62			
Parnas	0	52,18			
Patriots of Russia	0	61,75	13,75		
Civic platform	0,22	55,09			
Civic power	0	47,01			

EPI – effectiveness of presence on the Internet

EPI > 60% – effective presence; 50% < EPI < 60% – good presence; 40% < EPI < 50% – low presence; 25% < EPI < 40% – not satisfactory presence; EPI < 25% – destructive presence.

Information openness – max 17 points; Interactivity – max 10 points; technological effectiveness – max 12 points.



So, a comparison of the results and indicators of the functioning of sites of political parties in 2011 and 2016 demonstrates that eventually, political forces have recovered their presence on the Internet.

However, apart from the traditional “draining compromising evidence”, spreading of rumors, video jokes and caricatures, custom discussions on forums and blogs, a real dialogue with voters is not yet observed. Sites of parties in majority still have only one role - the placement of press releases. The main target audience of these sites is the media. The press service fills information on the websites. As a result, there is practically no sense in such sites. After all, all interested media and individual journalists receive political releases directly through their mailings.

A classical role which the websites should play - interaction with fans, any Russian political force couldn't reach yet. A proof of it we can see in the Table 2 and Table 3.

For example, the Yabloko party, whose website is second in terms of interactivity, and the third for information openness, has not even approached the 5% barrier to pass to the State Duma. The Patriots of Russia party has an information openness of the official site even higher than that of the ruling United Russia, but this did not affect its electoral success, judging by the results of the Duma elections.

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS ON THE WEBSITES OF POLITICAL PARTIES DURING 2010-2015 (KOSURIN & KIREEV, 2016)

<i>Parties</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>
United Russia	20546	23176	19943	12322	12980	18546
Communist party of Russian Federation (CPRF)	9446	10986	11244	2297	10850	11213
Fair Russia	4013	4418	3486	3393	3079	3398
Liberal Democratic party of Russia (LDPR)	1352	1812	1784	1570	1801	1843

According to table 3, the activation of placement of materials on party websites is observed mainly during the preparation for the next elections that of course, on the one hand, is quite logical, and with another, demonstrates that domestic parties aren't ready for adjustment and support of long-term communications with voters. At the same time even before the elections, the news line of the state news agencies or reprints from the regional party websites are posted on the websites of political parties that obviously doesn't cause a considerable interest of electorate.

Of course, the success of political parties depends not only from presence on Internet, but from a lot of other factors, but this situation shows that Internet communications play rather small role in the Russian electoral process. It is not a problem for top politicians and political parties to create and finance the activities of the Internet resource. There are such cases, when websites were created only for

election, as an information and agitation project. But then we can't talk about their significant role in the electoral process.

As it was already noted, social networks are an important tool of the socio-political discourse between political functionaries and citizens. At the beginning of the study there were some examples, which showed, that social networks have become a powerful advertising tool of political parties and their leaders in many countries of the world.

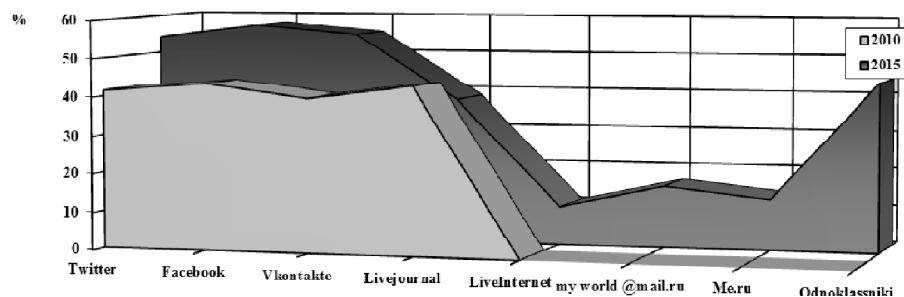
If we want to understand the level and character of influence of social networks on the electoral process in Russia in 2011-2016, than we need to make a content-analysis of parties and politicians.

Thus, the electoral program of 2011 showed that Russian politicians did not realize at that time, and as a result, did not use the full potential of social networks. Although the United Russia had officially announced about the beginning of active work with the audience in social networks in May 2011, on the eve of the elections to the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation of the VI convocation, this did not greatly affect the party's presence in social networks.

During the election political parties to a certain extent, used such social networks as "Facebook", "Vkontakte", "Twitter". But at the same time, the presence on the new domestic social platforms was almost zero. So, during the election fully functioned only the webpage of "United Russia" in Facebook. The webpage of "CPRF" began to function and to update only since Oct 2010. The party Yabloko had its page on Facebook since 2010, but it was not administrated until August 2012.

A situation changed to better side when domestic parties began to use social networks during the active period of the electoral campaign in autumn of 2015 (Figure 6 and Table 4).

In the eve of the Duma elections in 2015, more attention was paid to such networks as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki and single uncoordinated actions were replaced by systematic work. In result, the parties had a stable number of subscribers



**Figure 6:** The presence of political parties in social networks in 2010-2015 (constructed on the basis of the final information accessibility coefficient (Freedom of Information Foundation))

and they were able to ensure the generation of a certain number of posts per day (Table 4).

TABLE 4: INTERNET ACTIVITY OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA IN JUNE-JULY 2015.

<i>The party</i>	<i>Social networks</i>	<i>Adress</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Average numbers of posts per day</i>
United Russia	Vkontakte	<a href="http://vk.com/er_ru">http://vk.com/er_ru</a>	31420	6
	Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/er.official/">https://www.facebook.com/groups/er.official/</a>	12764	6
	Twitter	<a href="https://twitter.com/er_novosti">https://twitter.com/er_novosti</a>	82433	21
CPRF	Vkontakte	<a href="http://vk.com/kprf">http://vk.com/kprf</a>	32812	8
	Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/kprfnews">https://www.facebook.com/kprfnews</a>	4562	3
	Twitter	<a href="https://twitter.com/kprf">https://twitter.com/kprf</a>	12267	8
Yabloko	Vkontakte	<a href="http://vk.com/yabloko_ru">http://vk.com/yabloko_ru</a>	6883	2
	Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/yabloko.ru">https://www.facebook.com/yabloko.ru</a>	1986	1
	Twitter	<a href="https://twitter.com/yablokoru">https://twitter.com/yablokoru</a>	10300	2
Motherland	Vkontakte	<a href="http://vk.com/partiarodina">http://vk.com/partiarodina</a>	4338	2
	Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/partiarodina">https://www.facebook.com/partiarodina</a>	3677	5
	Twitter	<a href="https://twitter.com/PartiaRodina">https://twitter.com/PartiaRodina</a>	1630	6

But it is necessary to note, that domestic political parties, even providing a certain number of subscribers and generating a daily number of messages per day, do not think of what they can offer to a multimillion audience of social networks, placing, first of all, advertizing of party or creating its own page. The promotion of some specific videos, photos, texts, including those that have signs of black PR is the main direction of these Internet communications (Makarenko, 2016).

It is obvious that politicians should not consider social networks only as one of the instruments of election campaign. Communications through social networks should be built as an environment of synchronous interaction between politicians and society, as an effective tool for their dialogue. When page is created and works only “under the election”, surely it will cause a low level of trust from people.

The blogosphere occupies a separate place in the domestic politics when the election campaign is activated. By the way, it should be noted that this type of Internet communications has received the greatest distribution and development in Russia (Figures 7, 8).

One of the first politicians who made its own blog was Vladimir Zhirinovskii, a leader of the LDPR. Due to internal statistics of Mail.ru portal, more than 15 thousand people read him in friends’ tapes. And more than 12 thousand people are subscribed to his blog.

In October of 2017 in “LiveJournal” such community as izbircom had appeared: of the 15 members of the Central Electoral Commission, four people had their diaries, including the head of the Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov.

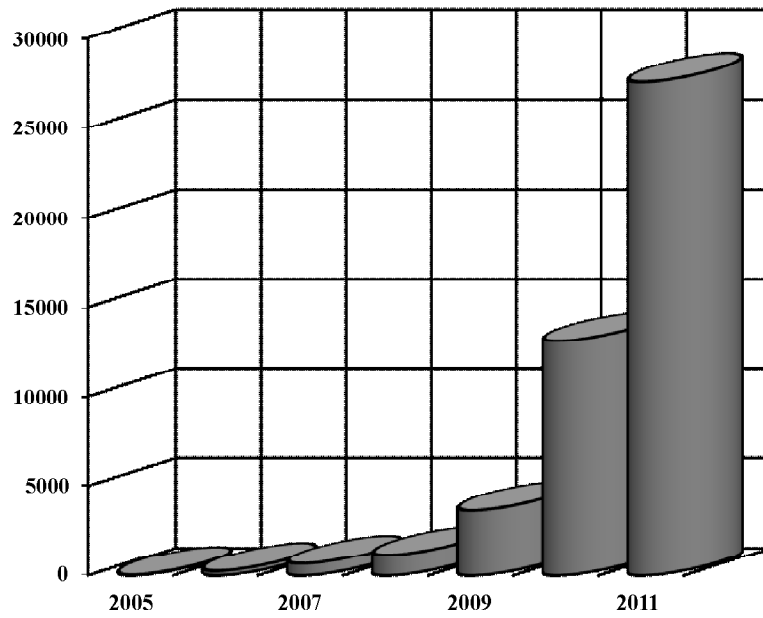


Figure 7: Citing the materials of blogs by information agencies

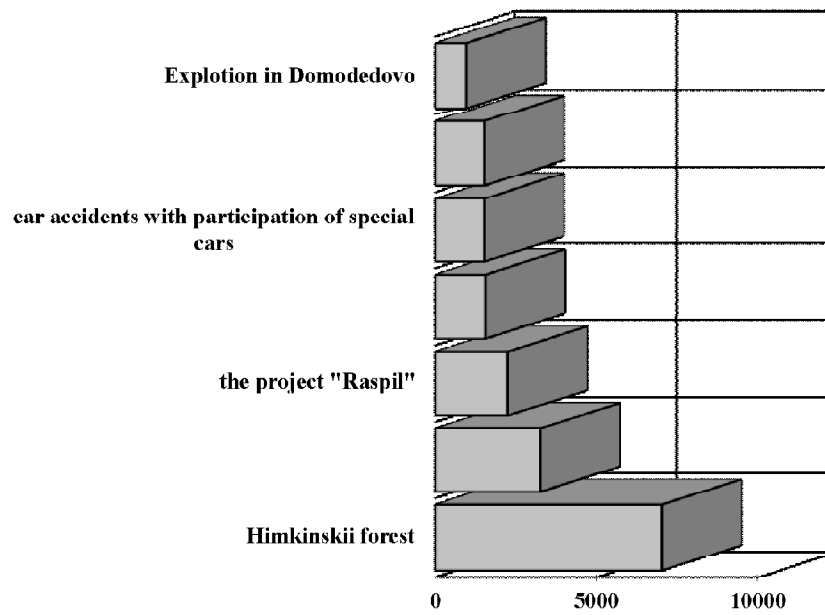


Figure 8: Top events of blogs in 2011

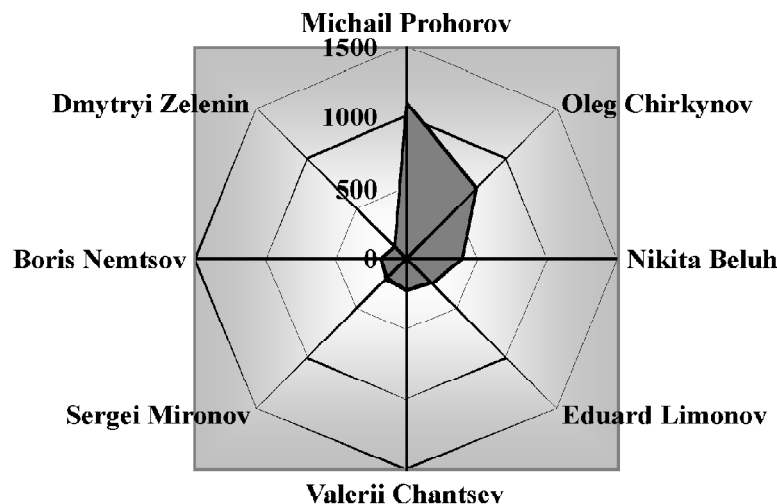
In October 2008 a blog of Dmytryi Medvedev, a President of Russia, was published on the Kremlin's official website [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru). In April 2009, Dmitry Medvedev started another blog in LiveJournal.

However, despite the intensification of blogs during the pre-election race of 2010-2011 most of them had serious systemic shortcomings. So they turned mainly into a translator of official documents and press releases, instead of an open platform for dialogue and establishing feedback from voters. Moreover, as practice showed, bloggers did not have the necessary skills of dialogue with citizens at that time.

For example, A. Beshtanko, who is the first deputy governor of the Omsk region, received a reputation as a blogger, who "rather argues with everyone, but does not answer the correct question, and if he does, it would be better not to answer" (Beshtanko has become the leader in citing among officials – bloggers, 2012).

Although, despite all shortcomings, the blogs of the political leaders began to set up high rates of updating the information flow and were an effective tool for establishing dialogue with voters during the pre-election campaign of 2011 (Gribovod, 2016). At the same time, we need to note, that blogs of regional leaders had the greatest citation, because they turned out to be closer and more accessible for voters (Figure 9).

But till the 2015 the situation has changed. The interest of internet audience towards blogs of political leaders increased. At the same time growth was accompanied by an extremely uneven distribution of the number of subscribers: the apparent superiority was no longer on the side of regional representatives, but on the side of the leader of the party, the main media person. As an example we can use the rating of the twitter-activity of politicians (Table 5).



**Figure 9:** The most cited blogs of politicians and officials in 2010 in media

TABLE 5: THE RATING OF THE TWITTER-ACTIVITY OF POLITICIANS.

	<i>Politics-users of Twitter</i>	<i>Readers</i>	<i>Read</i>	<i>Twitov</i>
1	medvedevrussia	2 703 111	62	972
2	kremlinrussia	1 465 349	29	4365
3	zhirinovskiy	991 697	8	3052
4	navalny	731 779	709	70 700
5	vrsoloviev	625 934	238	97 880
6	md_prokhorov	450 947	0	689
7	advorkovich	376 011	316	23 712
8	rogozin	329 303	118	13 609
9	rfdeti	189 871	18	11 792
10	nikitabelyh	182 965	632	32 600

Thus the conducted analysis of blogs and the activity of politicians in it demonstrates that this type of Internet communications successfully develops and becomes a full participant in political marketing, especially it was evident in the pre-election race of 2015. And what is most important, this channel provides the most effective communication and dialogue between politicians and their voters.

So, summarizing the results of conducted research we can make, the following conclusions. Today, it is obvious that Internet communications become more important phenomenon for the political sphere. This is especially noticeable during the election campaigns in developed countries with democratic principles, which already have a considerable experience in this area. It is possible to assume, predicting the further development of the Internet and the tools that will be used to influence voters, that since Internet communications are often focused on political propaganda and even political and legal influence, this is the reason for considering them not only as kind of mass media, but also as an instrument of politics.

The use of Internet communications for political purposes becomes especially valuable for developing countries. Considering the fact that Russian residents are the most active users of the Internet and consumers of public content in the post-Soviet space, in this article a research of the peculiarities of the use of Internet communications in the political sphere and their impact on electoral behavior was conducted using the example of election companies to the State Duma in 2011-2016.

The received results of the study, allow us to assert that the building of an effective electoral dialogue with the use of modern network technologies in Russia only gets its development. So, Internet communications did not have a real impact on the results of the elections in 2011. In general, there are several reasons for this: the digital divide, the age structure of Internet users, the dominant position of traditional media, the certain archaic nature of political parties in the use of Internet communications, the orientation of politicians to time-tested classical technologies of communication with voters.

At the same time, the national information space in Russia has already managed to be sufficiently structured till 2015, and politicians realizing that Internet communication are an effective tool of influence in electoral behavior, begun to use them actively particularly widespread were blogs, webpages of parties and party leaders in social networks

But at the same time there is a complex of difficult and unresolved problems in this sphere, particularly concerning building of effective media strategy and tactics in modern competitive conditions by domestic politicians and targeted use of social networks for the formation of civil identity, and so on.

These problems, in turn, determine the direction of future researches. Thus, political and communicative patterns of various groups of users of social networks deserve special attention. Besides, data on the activities of online communities engaged in various forms of political activity and public organizations using network communication channels need to be processed. Also the adequate assessment of the recruiting capacity of social media at different stages of the electoral cycle and the potential for sewerage of protest moods is also on the agenda; also an analysis of the general specifics of the political participation of Russian citizens requires a detailed monitoring.

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