

ASSIGNMENT: RIOTS IN RUSSIA (2011-12)



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Introduction

The assignment is based on a documented case of the power struggle happening in the society, which might involve political, social, economical, or high profile personnel in a conflict. The case depicting the power struggle chosen here is the demonstrations that happened in different corners of Russia during 2011-12 after the first Duma Elections which was highly influenced by social media platforms. The background of the struggle has been described thoroughly. An analysis of the situation has been given along with the description of the power struggle instrument which is the social media platforms. The effect social media had on the people and on the government has been explained in detail. Moreover, suggestions have been provided to show how a better use of the power instruments would have led to a better outcome of the conflict.

Background of the power struggle

The power struggle has taken place between the citizens of Russia and the President Vladimir V. Putin during the elections of 2011-12. Thousands of people came out on the streets with slogans like “Putin is a thief” and “Russia without Putin” showing public discontent which has not been witnessed in the country since Mr. Putin became the president 12 years ago (Barry,2011). The Moscow crowd overflowed the city square and chanted “We exist!”. The protest gave the opposition leaders hope that for some moment the Kremlin was not dictating the political agenda and they had some power in their hands. The following days saw many other riots with the liberals, nationalist and communists coming together to the rally. The protests marked a moment of not accepting the political consolidation Mr. Putin had introduced. News channels which did not report news about the criticism of Mr. Putin was incapable of turning their eyes from the several protests going on in the nine different time zones of Russia (Barry,2011). The elections which took place a week before evoked the protests and made the return of Mr. Putin as president difficult. Citizens gathered in the island near the Kremlin to criticize the alleged ballot rigging in the parliamentary elections and demanded a rerun (BBC,2011). The rally in Moscow was stated as the biggest rally since the fall of Soviet Union. Several key protestors were arrested, like Alexei Navalny, an anti corruption campaigner. The previous election got cancelled and the electoral commission chief Vladimir Churov gave a resignation. The arrested protesters were released. Police and riot troops were deployed in the

country all along during the riots and many states that it looks more like a police state than a democratic (BBC,2011). Social media platforms like Twitter were used by both the government and the opposition party for communicating with the citizens about their thoughts and agendas. The government used different communication strategies to shift the support and legitimacy towards them and tried to turn the citizens against the opposition parties (Spaiser et al., 2017). Even after all the riots and protests against the party 'United Russia', in March 2012 when the presidential election was held, Vladimir Putin won the election with fewer votes than he got in the previous presidential election.

Analysis of the situation

One of the power instruments during this conflict was communication power struggle through social media which largely affected the mindset of the citizens of Russia. During the demonstrations of 2011-12 in Russia, social media played a very important role in assembling the opposition and had increased paranoia about the leadership of the political party, 'United Russia' (Gainous, Wagner & Zeigler, 2017). The Russian authoritarian regime started to control the information flow aggressively, and framed the opposition as extremists and stated that they got influenced by the West. The Kremlin started 'diffusion proofing' the country against all the external influences (Koesel & Bunce, 2013). Movements inspired by social media challenged Putin's centralizing premise of the political strategy which depicts a power vertical and said that the Kremlin will be the originating place of all the political power. The accusations of the fraud happening in the Duma Elections were arranged and feasibly presented using the social media platforms, blogs and traditional media platforms. The study led by Spaiser et al. (2017) showed how Twitter users discussed the elections and expressed their thoughts about the ongoing riots in the country. It was noted that people started sympathizing with Mr. Putin after the re-elections and people once again started supporting their party 'United Russia' even though demands for fair elections were expressed. Internal political oppositions were noted which gave out a negative impression about the dissolving opposition and their incapability to stand against Putin. Social media platforms saw comments going around about their dissatisfaction with the opposition. With passing time, the citizens started believing in Putin again and agreed with his statement about the opposition being paid and directed by the west (Spaiser et al., 2017). Pro-putin users in Twitter were seen increasing during January, 2012 and expressed their views thoroughly in the

favour of Putin's governance. Several major and minor traditional media outlets were a part of the communication chain over Twitter which showed how strongly interlinked these forms of media platforms are.

Creation and communication of the power instrument

Russia has their own homegrown social media platforms which were supposed to be open forums for the citizens. A search engine (www.yandex.ru), similar version of a blogging site, LiveJournal (www.livejournal.ru) and a platform very nicely resembling Facebook were included in the list of Russian native language platforms (Gainous, Wagner & Zeigler, 2017). Twitter and Facebook users bypassed the users of homegrown platforms by declaring anti-government information (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2013). Citizens feared that the government had been tapping the native social media platforms and could shut down the accounts whenever they wanted. Russia has been known for controlling the media, which might have led to the increased usage of foreign platforms by the citizens. The government is known for using wiretaps, Distributed Denial of Service (DDOS), and hacking. During 2011-12, the intensified use of social media platforms led to the use of System of Operative-Investigative Measures (SORM) by the Federal Security Service (FSB) which monitored and intercepted the phone and internet services (Gainous, Wagner & Zeigler, 2017). Currently in Europe, the most active social media users are from Russia. Vkontakte, an analog of Facebook made by Russia is one of the most used social media platforms other than Whatsapp, Viber, Snapchat, Instagram, and currently Tiktok (Melkadze, 2021).

Suggestions to use the power instruments for better outcome

Russian government leadership was late in adapting the power of the internet which can influence the state's politics, and could not capitalize from the opportunity of digital technology that gives an offer to influence the citizens and gather their support (Gainous, Wagner & Zeigler, 2017). The growing use of the internet has been vested with the power of creating political viewpoints and attitudes towards the political party. It is a driver of political participation. People's changing attitude is the amalgamation of the knowledge and information they gather through the media platforms. The Russian authoritarian regime could have used the social media handles in Twitter with more precision to demonstrate their political agenda and thoughts about

the ongoing demonstrations. Citizens do not believe the government because they cannot reach them directly. Mr. Putin, who is considered as one of the most influential and popular leaders of the world, did very few interviews describing his political viewpoint (Barry,2011), so using the social media platform would have been very helpful to connect with the people of the country. The ongoing accusations about the corruption in the elections led to the demonstrations in several places which could have readily been avoided or decreased if the government had openly talked about it and corrected the wrong assumptions which were making rounds through the social media. Blocking and controlling new platforms could have helped in regulating the information that would reach the citizens and could help the government from having them under any foreign influence.

Conclusion

The detailed power struggle case about the riots in Russia during 2011-12 after the elections in Duma has been described. A highlighted power instrument- social media platforms specially Twitter has been mentioned. The way social media platforms have affected the citizens' viewpoint against the Russian authoritarian regime and played a role in influencing the conflict have been described. The exchange of thoughts between all the citizens have been considered thoroughly. The way it ignited the ongoing accusations about the government has been mentioned. When the power instrument came to use and its presence in Russia has also been talked about. Suggestion has been given to describe how a better use of this power instrument could have been done which might have mitigated the conflict.

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