

Problems of Social Network Institutionalization in Modern Russia as Exemplified by Vkontakte Social Network

Vladimir P. Miletskiy

¹Department of sociology of the political and social processes

Saint-Petersburg State University

²Department of sociology and political science

Saint-Petersburg state electrotechnical university "LETI"
falesm@mail.ru

Aleksandra N. Pisareva

Department of Sociology and Political Science

Saint-Petersburg State Electrotechnical University "LETI"

Saint-Petersburg, Russia

al.pisareva@gmail.com

Abstract—The paper is dedicated to the analysis of and some issues with the process of social media socialization in Russia, as exemplified by VKontakte (vk.com), the most popular social networking site by the results of many social surveys. Attributes of the social media institutionalization are considered, as well as some issues in the process.

Key words—Social networks, institutionalization of social networks, modern communications

I. INTRODUCTION

Sociological literature treats social institute as a supra-individual and depersonified social formation that is a stable structure of standardized social actions and practices, organizing, regulating and coordinating individual and collective actions of people aimed at satisfying their basic needs on a normative foundation, as well as consolidating them into consolidated communities of various size. The modern neoinstitutionalism goes further and defines the social institutes as structured forms of social interaction that combine rules, behavioral mechanisms and norms, providing minimization of transactional costs (D. North, O. Williamson and others). While there seem to be differences, in both cases we are talking about each social institute coming to life in such moment and location, when and where individuals and groups of individuals start having especially valuable, long-term and basic needs that require satisfaction. That is why, each new institution is firstly meant to satisfy the needs of people and society, thanks to which it forms them into consolidated communities.

The above-mentioned may be to the full extent related to social networking sites in the modern Russia, where the social media currently undergo active institutionalization. During this process they not only do provide transformation of satisfying certain individual and societal needs into a regulated practice, but also a transformation of their social movements into organized communities that regulate the process of their own activities forming networked organizations with defined structure of relations, hierarchy, discipline and rules of behavior.

II. ATTRIBUTES OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN RUSSIA

Social media simultaneously satisfy several especially significant needs of users, but unite and consolidate them into social communities of various strength. By their nature, social networking sites are web sites intended for building, reflecting and organizing social interactions between their users in the Internet and that is why they primarily satisfy the need of the users in communication, which allows associating them with the social institutions. But that is not all.

As an example, let us turn our attention to the VKontakte social networking site (vk.com). According to a number of surveys, VKontakte is the most popular social media platform in the modern Russia. Pavel Durov, then a student of Saint Petersburg State University started it in 2006, and in the beginning, it was intended only for tertiary education students. However, possibility for registration was later extended. During the first 4 months, the network attracted 50,000 users, now there are 97 million of active users every month [8].

2.1 Satisfying the needs of users

While in the beginning, Pavel Durov was chastised for copying the interface of the American social network Facebook, several years later his networking site found its own individual interface that is continuing to evolve, giving the users a wider set of possibilities in comparison with the American competitor: listening to music, creation of fully fledged communities and others. Thus, VKontakte social network simultaneously satisfies several quite significant needs of its users while performing more and more socially important function during its institutionalization. If we rank them according to Maslow, they are at the top of the Maslow Pyramid of social, prestige and spiritual needs [2]. It seems possible to put them in the following order:

- Need for communication (*Messages* functionality). According to survey, young respondents (age 18-24) named VKontakte as the most used messenger [9]. It was named by 69 per cent of respondents. At that, there exists Telegram, a messenger also created by Pavel Durov. The owners of the social network react to interests of users in using the social

networks. For example, Messages functionality underwent significant changes during the existence of the network. In 2014, a Dialogs feature appeared which was later extended with a Conversations functionality where messages are opened in a separate fixed window, allowing browsing through other sections of the social network in parallel.

- Need for recognition (Like and Repost functionalities). In 2010, I Like It button appeared in status strings and user messages. Currently, about 40 per cent of users are active authors [11], while the majority is involved in assessment (liking) and commenting of content published by someone else. Meanwhile, as a survey among 18-30-years-old active users of VKontakte has shown, a significant share of respondents admitted that they repost entries from groups, communities and their friends (among absentee users 31% do it regularly and 63% rarely, among active users 38% do it regularly and 58% rarely).

- Need for self-expression (Photo, Video, Entries and other functionalities). Users may create their own content that becomes available to a wide range of other users by means of a large number of users and various functionalities of the social network. For example, a community named Young Musicians includes more than 22,000 members [10]. Works of subscribers are regularly published on the community's wall.

- Need for participation in communal life (News functionality, hashtags). News functionality allows browsing entries published by friends, groups, public pages and other users. Young people are the most active users of social networks. The maximum level is expectedly observed in the age group of 18-24 years. Among them, 91% use social networks almost every day. Among those in the 25-34 years group, such users comprise 69% (and only 15% among those over 60) [9]. Social networks allow young people tracking information, including that pertaining to political issues. From the results of multiple surveys of students in Saint Petersburg, young people monitor political activities and have their own political preferences and favorites (in this survey, students' favorites were V.V. Putin, A.Merkel, N. Sarkosy). Moreover, one shall note that most of the young people are aware of a large number of social and political youth movements, and a third of respondents had an experience of participating in their activities. These movements have their public pages, where the young people get information and actively interact with each other. For example, the public page of the Young Guards in VKontakte has 65,500 subscribers, Soldier Mothers Committee has 13,091, StopHam has 435,000 (the organization was liquidated under the court decision on September 21, 2018, however, entries about their activities are still published in the community).

During the last 20 years, contrary to complaints from political opposition, freedom of speech in Russia took root not only legislatively, but in day-to-day life as well. Appearance of social networks competing with TV, radio and printed press played an important role in it. They appeared in the middle of 20th century and gained widespread currency in the first years of the current millennium. Thanks to the social networks, the users may form their own information flows and a new culture of communication was born. [3] Users form the agenda on their

own. As a result, information distribution takes a viral nature, the age of press releases comes to an end, while media releases become more important; the degree of influence of journalists declines, while that of PR specialists increases. There is also a radical transformation of news and information consumption. In other words, social media allows for exercising an open discussion, fast distribution of information to a broad spectrum of users and getting feedback by means of commentaries, reposts, messages, etc.

Various functions of social media allow their users getting information that matches their beliefs and needs, depending on the type of service (microblogs, videoblogs, blogs, etc.). For example, there is a function of subscription to certain channels, accounts and communities where information undergoes a very low level of filtration. Practically, it is perceived as true. Thus, the highest weight is gained by popular communities (city- and topic-specific public communities) and accounts of influencers, popular bloggers with the number of subscribers on par with circulation of various printed media. Of course, it is often seen that popularity comes to those bloggers who dedicate their entries to computer games, make-up and entertainment. Nevertheless, many of them pay attention to political issues. For example, Ilya Varlamov has 451 thousand subscribers to his YouTube channel. In VKontakte he has 184 thousand subscribers. Maxim Kononenko has over 4,000 subscribers in one Facebook account and 2,300 in the second one, which was created due to regular blocking of the first one as a result of complaints from other users. Nikolai Starikov has 207 thousand subscribers in VKontakte. Stanislav Apetian has over 40,000 Twitter followers. Marina Yudenich has 33,000 followers in Facebook. Irek Murtazin has 22,500 friends on his LiveJournal account.

At that, bloggers usually select one platform where they actively participate but also have accounts in other social media as well. This is mostly due to appearance of new social media with interface that is convenient for a certain type of media, for example YouTube is used by Alexey Navalny to publish his films. He started as a blogger on LiveJournal, a platform that has somewhat lost its popularity recently as it is evident from polls of the Russian users asked to name the most popular social media sites). According to the VCIOM survey undertaken in 2018, VKontakte has the largest outreach in Russia. 28% of respondents visit their website daily, Odnoklassniki (ok.ru) takes the second place with 19%, and the third place belongs to Instagram with 14%. At that, daily outreach of Google+ is 7%, while Facebook and Moy Mir have 4% each. Twitter and LiveJournal have 1% each [9]. In their turn, hashtags help conduct online political events, flash mobs, etc. Using such marking, one may filter entries authored by a broad range of users covering any issues, including political ones.

- Need for structuring time (Reminders, Meetings and other functionalities);
- Need for self-identity (Profile, public page);
- Need for personal space (Music, Wall, Photos, Status, and profile customization). In this regard, one may talk about substituting the physical personal space of a user (e.g., personal living space, which may be inaccessible due to financial and other reasons) with the virtual space.

2.2 Regulation of user activity in the social media

Performing manipulations in the social media, the user takes leads from several limiting conditions that include some unwritten moral norms. This refers to the fact that information published online, just as in real life, may be subject to condemnation on behalf of friends, subscribers and other users. Besides, currently there are lists of recommendations listing content that should not be published due to security reasons. This list includes information about departure, geotagging of certain persons, obscene photos, photos of children and detailed information on their habits (so that a criminal could not win their trust), home address, confessions and statements that may have a negative influence on the user's personal life (for example, a video where an adolescent is beaten by his classmates published by of them should not have been published for both ethical considerations and for the sake of criminal proceedings). For that matter, it is worth mentioning that in September of 2018, two players of Spartak soccer club were benched for putting their likes under blog entries critical of their coach.

There are also rules of the social networking site itself, breach of which is punished by being blocked (temporarily or permanently); among the punishable offenses are constant change of IP address, bot-like activity, abuse of technical support personnel and Pavel Durov personally, publication of pornographic, sadistic, deviant materials and participation in groups dedicated to such subjects. Cases of the latter are also governed by the legislation of the Russian Federation, according to which distribution of such information online is considered equivalent to that in real life. It should be noted, that the above mentioned unlawful acts become a basis for launching criminal cases against social media users under Article 282 of the Criminal Code of Russia (Incitement of hatred or animosity, as well as violation of human dignity), Article 280 of the Criminal Code of Russia (Public calls to extremist activity) and others. At that, a number of cases are launched as a result of testimony from other users. In August 2018, a Russian journalist was charged with propaganda of Nazi symbols for photos of German fascist rallies attached to her article.

2.3 Distribution of roles among the users of social networking sites

Charges extend to organizers of thematic communities, among others. The roles of users are clearly established in the social media nowadays. Besides regular users there are also technical support personnel that performs a control function, administrators and moderators of groups, authors of personal pages. According to the law on bloggers of 2014, those of them who have more than 3 million subscribers are equated with traditional media in legal matters [6]. The website itself, according to the same law, is included into a registry of Roskomnadzor, which from the legal point of view automatically makes any publication there public, independent of the number of readers. Besides, there are unofficial but powerful roles of opinion leaders and popular users with a large number of marks and comments.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, satisfying needs of individuals, a clear establishment of functions, rights and responsibilities, which are among the main attributes of a social institutes according to many scholars (including, e.g., A.G. Efendiyev [4]), who state division of labor, depersonalized requirements to people taking up certain functions, a strict regulation mechanism, etc.

The rules for blocking in VKontakte, as well as conditions for group administrators and strictly delimited capabilities of authors comply with these attributes.

From the above mentioned, one may say that the VKontakte social networking site is in the process of institutionalization. By its functional content, it pertains largely to an institution of spiritual and cultural life and acts similarly to traditional media. It distributes certain attitudes and behavior patterns (openness, readiness to publish and exchange information), cultural symbols (VK logo), utilitarian cultural features (accounts with various capabilities), codes of conduct (rules of the social networking, the law of the Russian Federation), etc. Speaking of the ideological component of its functional activity, despite the large mass of users, its identification is not possible yet. However, the lack of this functional role may speak of the VKontakte social networking site is in the process of institutionalization, and only in the future it will become a true social institute in the virtual space of modern Russia.

References

- [1] G. Nikiporets-Takigava, E. Pain, "Internet and ideological movements in Russia: A collective monograph", Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2016, pp. 480
- [2] A. Maslow, "Motivation and Personality (Russian edition)", Piter, 2014.
- [3] V.P. Miletsky, N.P. Pimenov, "Political and sociological dimension of social dynamics in political communications in contemporary Russia", Publishing house of Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University, 2017, p. 69-76.
- [4] A.G. Efendiyev, General Sociology: A Study Guide, Moscow: INFRA-M, 2000, 654 p.
- [5] M.Yu. Pavlyutenkova, "Political communications in social media, Political Communication Science: Theory, Methods and Practice", Moscow: Russian Association of Political Science: Russian Political Encyclopedia, 2012, pp. 295-307.
- [6] Federal Law no. 97-FZ dated May 5, 2014, «On Introducing Changes in the Federal Law On Information, Information Technologies and Information Security».
- [7] H. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society", The Communication of Ideas, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948, pp.203-234.
- [8] About VKontakte. Retrieved from: <https://vk.com/about>
- [9] To each age – their own networks, Official Website of the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center. VCIOM. Retrieved from: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=116691>
- [10] Young Musicians, VK community. Retrieved from: <https://vk.com/11minyt>
- [11] Peculiarities of the public of VKontakte, Official Website of the Demis.ru digital agency. Retrieved from: <https://www.demis.ru/articles/celevaya-auditoria-vkontakte/>