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Managing Public Outrage: Power, Scandal, and New Media in Contemporary Russia

Abstract

Over the past three decades, scholars studying the phenomenon of political scandal have mostly based their works on the premise that scandals can only occur in liberal democracies. However, contradictory to this assumption, some of the most heavily discussed phenomena in contemporary semi-authoritarian Russia are scandals arising from a new, vibrant sphere of social media on a largely unfiltered Internet. How do such 'Internet scandals' impact politics in Russia's semi-authoritarian political environment? To address this and related questions, the article juxtaposes two case studies of police corruption scandals that erupted in the sphere of social media in 2009/2010. Drawing on the findings, it is argued that Russia's political elites are presently very much capable of managing these virtual outbursts of public outrage. The two case studies illustrate how public anger is very swiftly redirected towards lower level authorities and foreign, supposedly hostile powers.

Keywords: Social Media – Web 2.0 – Hybrid Regimes - Russia – Internet – Scandal – Corruption – Online Activism –Protest

Short Bio:

Dr. Florian Toepfl is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Aleksanteri Institute for Eastern European and Russian Studies in Helsinki where he is pursuing a project on the reconstruction of the memory of Stalin in media discourses. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Passau in Southern Germany in 2009. Since then, he has worked as a Lecturer at the LMU University in Munich and as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Harriman Institute for Russian and Studies at Columbia University in New York. His research focuses on the relationships between old and new media and political power, especially in the context of Eastern European countries and Russia.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

1. Introduction

Fundamentally, we believe that scandals can only occur in liberal democracies.
(Markovits and Silverstein 1988, 8)

This quotation is taken from the introductory chapter to one of the most cited volumes on the politics of scandal, edited by Andrei Markovits and Mark Silverstein in 1988. Markovits and Silverstein (1988, 9) conceived of a political scandal primarily as 'a betrayal of the public trust in terms of the accountability and process of the liberal democratic state'. According to their approach, in liberal democracies two inherently antithetic principles have to be balanced: (1) the need for power and (2) the simultaneous need to curtail power in order to guarantee the individual's autonomy from the state. In this perspective, the quest for political power at the expense of due process emerges as the driving force behind the phenomenon of political scandal. A strong faith of the members of a society in the liberal process arises as a necessary precondition (see Markovits and Silverstein 1988, 7-9).

Since Markovits and Silverstein's volume was published in 1988, most authors have followed them in their basic assumption quoted above.[1] 'Power and control bodies must not coincide', concurred Sighard Neckel in 2005, nearly twenty years later. 'That is why there are no political scandals in dictatorships, with the possible exception of those that the ruling powers publicly stage themselves because of internal power struggles' (Neckel 2005, 103). In the same vein, Esser and Hartung (2004, 1048) understand scandals 'in the sense of being possible only in open and democratic societies with a free press', arguing that scandals under Eastern Germany's communist regime 'simply could not exist'. Hondrich (2002, 48) points to the fact that the crimes of Stalin did not erupt into scandals at their time, but were unveiled only by his successor Khrushchev years later.

In 2004, the *American Behavioral Scientist* added a series of high-profile articles to the academic discourse by publishing two special issues dedicated to the topic. However, the two editors Howard Tumberland and Silvio Waisboard, again, a priori restricted the scope of their global, comparative approach to 'Political Scandal and Media Across Democracies' (Tumberland & Waisboard 2004a; 2004b). Though research starting out from the premise quoted above has resulted in a series of intriguing findings related to the phenomenon of scandal in Western democracies, this study aims at going beyond this traditional strand of academic literature.

To be more specific, this article aims at contributing to the present corpus of academic literature on the phenomenon of political scandal in at least two points: (1) Over the past two decades, most scholars have based their works on Markovits and Silverstein's basic assumption that scandals can only occur in liberal democracies. Thus this study raises the question: Which specific patterns of scandal communication can be observed in the semi-authoritarian political environment of contemporary Russia? (2) Most of the studies on scandals were authored before the rise of the Internet and social media. Thus this article wants to take under scrutiny scandals that emanate from the new sphere of social media and, for this reason, would not have occurred or would have occurred very differently a decade ago. How do these 'Internet scandals' impact politics in Russia's contemporary, semi-authoritarian political environment?

To embark on this new path of research seems even more timely and of a specific relevance, as a large number of comparably semi-authoritarian, so-called "hybrid" regimes have only recently

emerged in the 'third wave of democratization' (Huntington 1991) since the mid 1970s and especially after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s. Since then, a large 'grey area' of hybrid political regimes has evolved that can neither be regarded as classic authoritarian nor fully-fledged democratic. Trying to capture the nature of these new forms of rule, scholars have developed a whole series of concepts of so-called 'democracies with adjectives' (Collier and Levitsky, 1997; Boogards, 2009). Russia has been typically considered to be one of these new 'defective', 'sovereign' or 'guided' democracies. While at least semi-competitive elections are held on a regular basis, civil rights and political liberties such as the freedom of association or the freedom of the press continue to be severely restricted (Freedom House 2010).
To address the research questions presented above, the article resorts to the case study method, and more specifically to the approach of 'process tracing' as proposed by George and Bennett (2005). According to George and Bennett (2005, 73-88), the study will proceed in the following three steps: (1) The next section develops a research design. It sketches out the research objectives and attunes them to the specific backdrop of the semi-democratic environment of contemporary Russia. Moreover, it carefully selects two case studies and outlines theoretical concepts to be observed. (2) Subsequently, the case studies are accomplished in sections 3 and 4. (3) A last section draws upon the findings of the two case studies to formulate conclusions.

2. Research Design and Socio-political Background

In this section, the research design of the study is developed in five steps (see George and Bennett 2005, 73-79). First, the research objectives are elaborated. Second, the variables to be observed are selected. In a third step, two case studies are deliberately chosen for investigation. Fourth, the variance of the variables is described and, fifth, questions to be asked of each case study are formulated.

(1) Elaborating the Research Objectives. This study hopes to generate significant contributions to the academic literature on the phenomenon of political scandals that arise from the new sphere of social media, primarily of idiographic and heuristic value (George and Bennett 2005, 75). The idiographic goal of this study is to offer a succinct and insightful description of selected media scandals in contemporary Russia that can be prolific for further theory building in a multinational, comparative context. The heuristic objective is to identify a series of new variables, hypotheses, causal mechanisms, and causal paths related to scandals arising from the sphere of social media in a semi-authoritarian environment. While these conclusions are expected to be valid primarily in the socio-political context of contemporary Russia, a certain hypothetical and explanatory value with regard to the complex interrelation between new media, power and scandal in other semi-democratic and authoritarian societies is aspired.

(2) Selecting Variables to Be Observed. Though there are a multitude of sophisticated conceptualizations of the phenomenon of political scandal, especially in the disciplines of sociology and political sciences and with a view to Western democracies[2], the rather basic definition proposed by Esser and Hartung (2004) seemed most suitable to the research objectives of this study. According to Esser and Hartung (2004, 1041), a scandal can be conceived of 'as the intense public communication about a real or imagined defect that is by consensus condemned, and that meets universal indignation or outrage'. To identify meaningful and relevant concepts

for observation, the contextual influence of both, the Russian semi-free media environment and the Russian semi-democratic political system as a whole have to be considered.
As to the Russian media system, this study distinguishes four spheres of media (see figure 1) that differ mostly according to their position vis-à-vis the ruling elites: (1) official mass media, (2) mainstream mass media, (3) liberal-oppositional mass media, and (4) social media.

	Four Spheres of Media in the Contemporary Russian, Semi-Free Media Environment			
	Official Mass Media	**Mainstream Mass Media**	**Liberal-Oppositional Mass Media**	**Social Media**
Channel of Distribution	Broadcast / Print / Internet	Print / Internet / Radio	Print / Internet / Radio	Internet (Networks)
Examples of Media Outlets	Perviy Kanal, Rossiya 1, Rossiskaya Gazeta, NTV	Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestia, Trud, Kommersant'	Novaya Gazeta, gazeta.ru, Echo Moskvy, The New Times	Forums, Blogs, Microblogs, Social Networks
Attitude towards the Ruling Elites	Unconditional support	Largely loyal but selectively critical	Highly critical	Varying
Influence of the Ruling Elites on the Published Content	High	Medium	Low	Low
Audience	Large	Medium	Marginal	Marginal

Figure 1. Four Spheres of the Contemporary Russian, Semi-Free Media Landscape

The first category of official media has to be seen as a very much straight-forward mouthpiece of the Russian ruling elites around the two central figures Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitriy Medvedev. Voices of the opposition or speakers of NGOs are only quoted very rarely. The most powerful media outlets in this sphere are the three most-watched national TV channels *Perviy Kanal*, *Rossiya 1* and *NTV*. These media are controlled by the ruling elites, either explicitly via state-ownership or implicitly via ownership of state enterprises (see Mickiewicz 2006, 6-7; Oates 2007, 1284-1288).
The second category is the sphere of mainstream mass media, flagshipped by a range of widely circulated newspapers such as *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* with one million readers[3] or *Komsomoloskaya Pravda* with approximately three million readers[4]. These media outlets are either owned by wealthy individuals or by large corporations, whose welfare is generally strongly dependent on the benevolence of the ruling political elites. Consequently, in broadest terms, their political reporting is supportive of the semi-authoritarian regime, even though certain measures of the government may be criticised.
The third sphere of liberal-oppositional media sharply opposes the semi-democratic regime and advocates Western, liberal-democratic values. The audience of these media outlets is relatively small. One of the most renowned publications, *Novaya Gazeta,* comes out only three times a week in slightly over 110.000 printed issues.[5] Media content of all three spheres (official, mainstream and liberal) can also be received through the Internet, with some of the outlets in all three spheres being mere online editions.

By contrast, the term 'social media' is understood in the following as 'a group of Internet-based applications […] that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61). A characteristic feature of this sphere is its network structure. In this article, primarily the content of blogs, microblogs, social networks and forums will be analyzed under this category. Roughly 70 percent of the Russian Internet users had established a profile on a social networking site in 2008 (see Alexanyan 2009, pp. 1-4). As of April 2010, approximately 34 percent of all Russians were accessing the Internet at least once a week (VCIOM 2010).
At the time of research in summer 2010, not only freedom of the press was constricted in Russia's 'defective' democracy. Also, the right to free assembly was curtailed. Protests organized by a coalition of opposition groups under the slogan 'Strategiya 31' on the 31th day of each month were repeatedly dispersed by the police, with opposition leaders and participants being temporarily detained. None the less, according to polls carried out by various institutions, approvals rates of the two leading figures President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin continued to range high, between 59 and 73 percent, in the summer of 2010 (Economist 2010).
As to the key policies pursued by the ruling 'tandem of power', since taking office in 2008, President Medvedev has been heavily popularizing and propagating a political strategy of 'modernization' (Kamyshev 2010). To accomplish this goal, Medvedev considered the new medium Internet and new e-government tools of major importance. Other repeatedly announced political aims were the 'reform of the police' and the 'fight against corruption' (Ryzhkov 2010). While Russia's police has traditionally been perceived as extremely corrupt, the situation seemed to become completely unbearable in 2009 after police officers had murdered several civilians (O'Flynn 2009).

In this socio-political context, when comparing communication patterns of scandals, at least the following four variables seemed of outstanding interest to observe: (a) the travelling of news memes and specific interaction patterns between the three traditional spheres of media and the new, networked sphere of social media; (b) the strategies of the ruling elites in dealing with scandals as outbreaks of public outrage; (c) the possible consequences of scandals arising from the new sphere of social media on the social practices of 'corruption' and the 'rule of law'; (c) an evaluation of the success of 'scandal management' of the ruling elites.

(3) Selection of the Cases. As pointed out in the introduction, this article aims, firstly, at the study of scandals that would not have occurred or that would have occurred differently in a traditional media environment without the Internet. Thus in the process of case selection, only scandals were taken into consideration that arose from the new sphere of social media. Secondly, as this paper seeks to elucidate the strategies of the ruling elites in dealing with outbursts of public outrage, the potential impact of a scandal on the perceived legitimacy of the ruling elites figured as a second criterion for case selection. After a thorough evaluation of possible instances on the basis of these two criteria, I decided to juxtapose two largely similar cases that yet greatly differed in one variable: in their potential to endanger the legitimacy of the ruling elites. In the first case study (the so-called 'Living-Shield-Scandal') the scandal posed only a minor threat to the legitimacy of the ruling elites, mainly because the whistle-blower who uploaded the video-clips co-operated with the authorities. In the second case study (around the so-called 'honest police major Dymovskiy'), the whistleblower refused cooperation and the scandal was perceived as a major threat by the ruling elites. Aside from this fundamental difference, the two case studies are similar in their key features: Both scandals erupted after individuals had uploaded videos to YouTube in approximately the same time period between late 2009 and early 2010, and both scandals touch upon the very sensitive topic of police misconduct and corruption.

(4) Describing the Variance of Variables and Questions to be asked of Each Case. To observe the variables and theoretical concepts indicated above, the following questions shall be answered for each of the two case studies:

a) *Travelling of News Memes and Patterns of Communication.* How did the scandal erupt in the sphere of social media and what role did various types of social media (blogs, microblogs, forum entries) play in this process? At what point did the scandal spill over to the spheres of official, mainstream and liberal-oppositional mass media and what role did these traditional mass media play in the eruption and framing of the scandal?
b) *Strategies of the Ruling Elites*. How was the scandal covered and framed in the sphere of official media, i.e. on the leading state-controlled TV channels? What real-life measures were undertaken by the authorities (ousting of officials, lawsuits, pressure on media outlets, etc.)?
c) *Potential Impact on the Rule of Law and Corruption.* Were the scandalized persons punished for their perceived transgressions, and were they punished according to the law? Did the media coverage of the scandal, most probably, deter future transgressors from misconduct and corruption?
d) *Success of the Strategies of 'Scandal Management' of the Ruling Elites.* Were the strategies of the ruling elites in dealing with the scandal successful? Did media coverage of the scandal undermine or promote the legitimacy of the ruling elites and the political regime as a whole?

According to these four groups of questions, a first case study, the so-called 'Living-Shield-Scandal', will be taken under scrutiny in the next section. In this first case study, the whistle-blower agreed to co-operate with the ruling elites.

3. Case Study I: The Living-Shield-Scandal

On 7 March 2010, 29-year-old Stanislav Sutyagin uploaded a self-recorded video to YouTube.[6] The three-minute clip shows him sitting in front of his computer, talking to his webcam, giving a detailed account of how he was stopped by the Moscow traffic police on a city highway two days before at 5.30 am. Together with several other drivers, Sutyagin was ordered to park his old Mercedes crosswise to the road. A couple of minutes later, suddenly, a car appeared that rushed trough the roadblock at high speed, damaging Sutyagin's Mercedes, and endangering him and the other drivers who had all remained in their vehicles. It was only then that Sutyagin realized that he had been taking part in a 'human roadblock', a 'Living Shield' (Russian: *Zhivoy Shchit*) set up by policemen in their hunt for escaping criminals. In his YouTube video titled *Zhivoy Shchit,* Sutyagin complains:

> *'Aren't our lives worth anything in our Russian state? […] I think this is utter lawlessness. The most interesting thing is that they [the policemen, A. N.] told us openly: look, guys, you won't get anything [for your damaged vehicles, A. N.]; we haven't caught the criminals!'*

a) Travelling of News Memes and Patterns of Communication

How did Sutyagin's video statement erupt into a scandal on the Russian Internet? Figure 1 shows the mentions of the term *Zhivoj Shchit* in the days after the video was uploaded. The numbers were compiled with the help of the blog search tool *Puls blogosferi* provided by the leading Russian search engine Yandex.[7] This tool allows tracing separately the number of (a) blog entries, (b) microblog entries (mostly Twitter), (c) comments, and (d) forum entries. As the term *Zhivoj Shchit* is only very rarely used in common Russian language, we can assume that close to all of the counted items are related to Sutyagin's YouTube message. Thus this graph validly depicts the relative intensity of communication about the Living-Shield-Scandal in the sphere of social media in the days after the clip was posted. The absolute numbers of counted items, however, are of less epistemic value. This is mainly because not all users writing about the Living-Shield-Scandal were resorting to the term *Zhivoy Shchit*, especially in the very short text forms of comments or microblog entries.

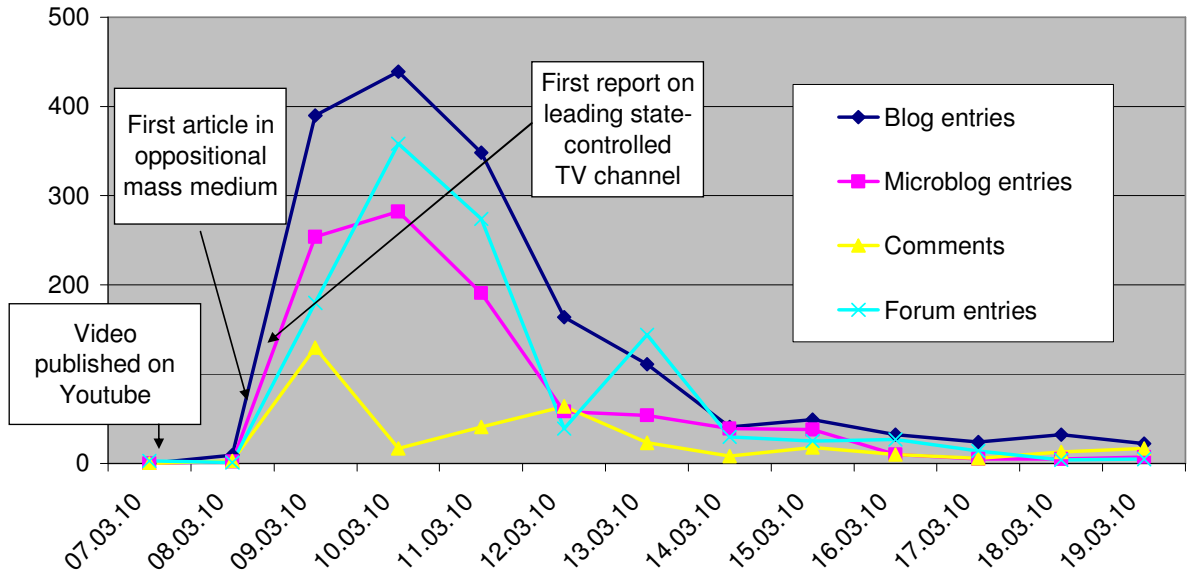

Figure 2. Mentions of the Term Zhivoj Shchit *('Living Shield') in the Sphere of Social Media*

The four graphs in figure 2 trace the number of daily mentions of the term *Zhivoj Shchit* in the sphere of social media, i.e. the numbers of blog entries, microblog entries, forum entries and comments. As can be seen, the intensity of communication reached its peak on 10 March, three days after Sutyagin uploaded his scandalous video message to YouTube. At least 450 blog entries were authored on the topic on that day. In the three days that followed the peak, the intensity of communication decreased steadily. In the days after 14 March, it evened out to a rather low level. From these findings, we can draw three preliminary conclusions: (1) The Living-Shield-Scandal was discussed with similar intensity on blogs, microblogs and forums. (2) The intensity of communication reached its peak four days after the video was published. (3) The scandal irritated the sphere of Russian social media for a relatively short period. After one week, the discussions rapidly ebbed of.

How did the three spheres of official, mainstream and liberal-oppositional media contribute to the emergence of this pattern of communication? The first mass medium to pick up the event was the oppositional online newspaper *gazeta.ru* that published an article about Sutyagin's message two days after the video was uploaded, on 9 March at 12.29 pm.[8] Later on the same day, other oppositional media outlets followed, amongst them the radio station Ekho Moskvy.[9] In the following days, the scandal was covered prominently in all major oppositional and mainstream newspapers. In the sphere of official mass media, the state-controlled channel *Rossiya 1* also reacted astonishingly quickly. Only a few hours after the first article was published by *gazeta.ru*, *Vesti Moskva* (a local appendix to the main news program on *Rossiya 1*) reported the incident on 9 March shortly after 5 pm. Other state-controlled media outlets followed suit within hours.[10]
As these findings reveal, the Living-Shield-Scandal reached its peak in the sphere of social media only *after* it already had been extensively covered in the spheres of mainstream, oppositional and even official mass media (see figure 2). On 8 March, the day before these mass media reported the scandal, only 9 blog entries had discussed the term *Zhivoj Shchit*. The overwhelming majority of the more than 450 blog entries posted on the next day appeared after the scandal was reported by oppositional online media and state television. Thus it can be argued that traditional mass media played a decisive role in the outbreak, and thus most probably also in the framing of the Living-Shield-Scandal, even though the scandal emanated from the sphere of social media and was widely perceived as an 'Internet scandal' by the Russian public.

b) Strategies of Scandal Management pursued by the Ruling Elites

How did the news broadcasts *Vesti* and *Vremya* on the two major state-controlled television channels *Rossiya 1* and *First Channel* frame the Living-Shield-Incident? As pointed out above, the first broadcast by *Vesti Moskva* appeared astonishingly quickly, only five hours after the scandal was first brought to the attention of a wider audience by the online newspaper *gazeta.ru*. Not only the speed but also the technical and human resources employed by the state-controlled television channel were impressive: Already the very first broadcast featured a 3D animation of the accident, alongside with an interview with the blogger Sutyagin. At the end of the newscast, it is announced that the scandal is currently being investigated.
On the very same evening at 9 pm, the most popular Russian news program *Vremya* dedicates a four-minute newscast to the incident.[11] An even more sophisticated 3D-animation is shown. Sutyagin and another participating driver are interviewed, and various speakers of the traffic police apologize. Finally, it is announced that the officers leading the mission were reprimanded and that the chief of the Moscow traffic police, Sergey Kazantsev, will personally make sure that the drivers are compensated.
In the afternoon of the next day, 10 March, the news program *Vesti Moskva* reports that the Duma – very strangely, the Russian parliament – will supervise the investigation, and that another government body, the Public Chamber, has also offered to provide legal support to the affected drivers.[12] Another *Vesti*-newscast announces that the two criminals who rushed through the roadblock five days before have finally been caught.[13] Two – not more than supposedly guilty – Georgian men are shown and rudely questioned in front of the running TV cameras. A *Vesti* journalist comments that 'this time, there was no escape'.
The story is continued on the next day, 11 March, with a news broadcast that shows the chief of the Moscow traffic police, Sergey Kazantsev, bestowing a certificate of bravery to the blogger Sutyagin.[14] Sutyagin even receives a clock as a present. On the same day, the radio channel *Vesti FM* disseminates a newscast titled 'The reform of the Ministry for Internal Affairs was prepared by bloggers'.[15]

c) Potential Impact on the Rule of Law and Corruption

Were the culprits of the Living-Shield-Scandal punished? According to media reports, the chief of the Moscow traffic police Kazantsev received a 'strong reprimand' from a superior official at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The police officer who led the operation, Aleksandr Kozlov, was dismissed, and a lawsuit was filed against several other participating policemen. In a second YouTube-video, Sutyagin confirms that his Mercedes was repaired on 14 April.[16] In this respect, it can be argued that the outcome of the Living-Shield-Scandal most probably had a deterring effect on other lower- and mid-level police officials who might be afraid of resorting to comparable misconduct and corruption in the future. From the findings, one might even infer that the new sphere of social media in Russia contributes to a certain 'control'- or even 'muckraking'-function of the press, as it is typically cherished in Western democracies.
But was rule of law actually enforced? As a closer look reveals, the scandal was not resolved according to the provisions of formal law and with the help of court verdicts, but pursuant to the political strategies and to the common sense of various agents and institutions. The affected drivers were not paid fixed sums of indemnities as established by a court, but their cars were repaired in the workshop of the Moscow traffic police on the orders of police chief Kazantsev. With the parliament declaring that it would supervise the investigation, the institution engaged in an area far beyond its original, constitutional competencies. The police officer who led the living shield mission was fired without a formal investigation that could have clarified the actual course of events and eventual responsibilities. According to Sutyagin, the court trial against the other participating police officers had not been opened by 1 September 2010.[17] Thus it must be concluded that the Living-Shield-Incident as an outburst of public outrage emanating from the new sphere of social media did not contribute to the strengthening of a culture of the 'rule of law' in contemporary Russia, even though it may have well have helped to curtail corruption and misconduct of lower- and mid-level government officials.

d) Success of the Strategies of 'Scandal Management' Pursued by the Ruling Elites

In broadest terms, the message that remained with the majority of Russian media recipients was: 'Misconduct and arbitrariness of our police forces were, at least in the case of the Living-Shield-Scandal, tackled efficiently by our political leaders with the help of critical citizens and the new technology Internet. State bodies – the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the parliament, and the public chamber – were co-operating efficiently to thwart this timely nuisance.' Thus it can be concluded that the Living-Shield-Scandal has not weakened but, to the contrary, strengthened the legitimacy of the ruling elites and the semi-democratic regime as a whole. With the whistle-blower Sutyagin willingly co-operating, the public outrage erupting from the sphere of social media could be quickly tamed and deflected towards lower-level authorities (several irresponsible police officials) and foreign, supposedly hostile powers (two Georgian criminals). However, these strategies of scandal management are much more difficult to pursue and may even partly fail, if the whistle-blower refuses to co-operate – as it will be the case in the scandal under scrutiny in the following section.

4. Case Study II: The Honest Police Officer Dymovskiy

On 5 November 2009, the 'honest police Major Alexey Dymovskiy', as he would later be dubbed by various media outlets, uploaded two videos of approximately six minutes length to YouTube.[18] The two clips show the mid-level police officer sitting in his uniform against a blue background, speaking out calmly but frankly about corruption and misconduct in the police forces of his home town Novorossiysk in Southern Russia, as follows:

> *I am talking to those officers for whom words like 'honour' or 'dignity' are not just words or sounds. […] I have worked for the police for ten years. Ten years I gave away for my motherland. […] I tried to create something fair, something just. […] I have lost two wives who refused to stay with me because my working schedules were not very, how can I say, 'steady'. […] Our bosses treat us like cattle. […] I am talking also to you Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] […] Please understand me. I love my work, I love my work. But I can't stand fulfilling plans by detecting crimes that do not exist and by arresting people that are not guilty. […] I will resign.* [19]

a) Travelling of News Memes and Patterns of Communication

How did Dymovskiy's video message erupt into a scandal in the sphere of social media? To trace the intensity of scandal communication, the *Puls blogosferi* tool was employed to search for items containing the word 'Dymovskiy'. As no other person with the same name was popular in November 2009, we can assume that close to all items that quoted the name were discussing the YouTube-messages of the 'honest police Major Dymovskiy'. As figure 4 shows, a pattern of communication comparable to that in the first case study emerged. The peak intensity of communication was reached on 10 November, five days after Dymovskiy had uploaded his clips to YouTube. Communication levelled off after November 13, though discussions still flared up occasionally in the weeks after the outbreak of the scandal. Thus this scandal irritated the sphere of Russian social media for a considerably longer time period than the Living-Shield-Incident. Interestingly, microblog entries played a minor role in this case study. The latter is probably due to the fact that the Dymovskiy-Scandal occurred five months before the Living-Shield-Incident at a time, when Twitter was still far less popular with Russian Internet users.

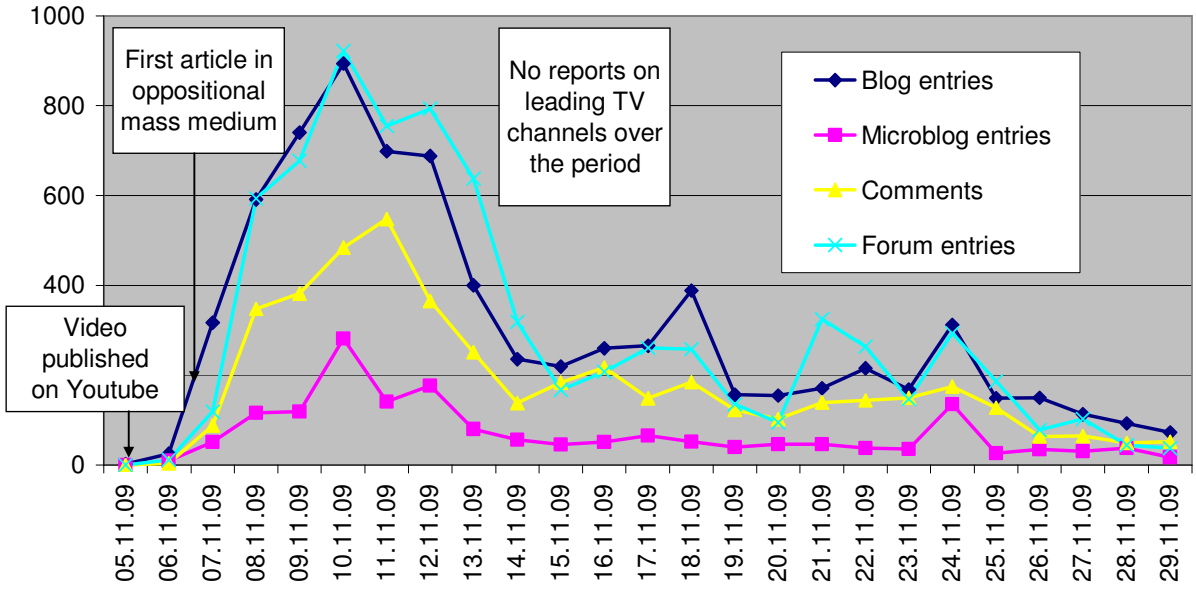

Figure 4. Mentions of the Term Dymovskiy *in the Sphere of Social Media*

How did the four spheres social, official, mainstream and liberal-oppositional media interact in the emergence of this scandal? Dymovskiy published his videos on a Thursday evening, 5 November 2009. In the sphere of social media, the first major discussions started on Friday evening at 6.33 pm on the city server of the town Novorossisk.[20] Three hours later, at 9.55 pm the first entry[21] in a discussion group of war veterans on the popular blogging network Livejournal appeared, and at 9.58 pm the discussions spilled over to the forum *police-russia.ru*.[22] On all of these platforms, the initial posts drew hundreds of comments and replies in the following days.

Again, oppositional mass media picked up the scandalous news at a very early stage, and mainstream mass media followed. *Gazeta.ru* published a first article on the very same Friday evening at 9.03 pm.[23] At 11.15 pm, the radio station Ekho Moskvy followed suit.[24] The sphere of official media, however, reacted very differently in this case study. The main news broadcasts *Vremya* and *Vesti* of the leading state-controlled TV channels completely ignored the incident. The third major TV channel *NTV* reported the story on Saturday, 7 November, in the 8 pm evening news.[25] It followed up on Sunday and Monday, but then stopped completely to cover the occurrences.

These findings visualized in figure 4 suggest at least four conclusions: (1) Just as in the Living-Shield case, oppositional and mainstream mass media outlets played a crucial role in spreading the scandalous news and thus catalyzing the outbreak of public outrage in the sphere of social media. (2) However, on the three leading state-controlled TV channels information about the incident was deliberately suppressed in this case. (3) Nevertheless, the intensity of scandal communication in the sphere of social media was definitely not lower than in the Living-Shield-Scandal. To the contrary, at the peak of the Dymovskiy-Scandal approximately twice as many items were found to contain the indicative keyword as in the Living-Shield-Scandal. (4) Consequently, we can infer that the suppression of information on state-controlled TV channels could not prevent the eruption of the Dymovskiy-Scandal in the spheres of social, oppositional and mainstream media.

b) Strategies of 'Scandal Management' Pursued by the Ruling Elites

After posting his videos on Thursday, 5 November, and gaining rapidly in popularity over the weekend, the 'honest police Major Dymovskiy' held news conferences in Krasnodar on 9 November and in Moscow on 10 November. Even though this news conferences attracted flocks of journalists, none of the three major TV stations *Channel 1*, *Rossiya 1* and *NTV* covered the events (BBC 2009, 6). In the mainstream print media, several acts of blatant censorship occurred. As the news website *Lenizdat.ru* reported[26], the country's most popular tabloid title *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* despite having hosted Dymovskiy's news conference in Krasnodar, later removed nearly all information about the scandal from its website (see also BBC 2009, 6).

Why did the state-controlled TV-channels react, unlike in the first case study, with an information blockade? Obviously, in this case study, the responsible decision-makers realized rather quickly that the 'honest police Major Dymovskiy' was a rather difficult character to handle. According to a forum entry of a fellow police man[27], Dymovskiy was interviewed by journalists of the state channel *Rossiya 1* only a few hours after his video messages started to gain popularity in the social media sphere. However, this footage was never broadcasted. In the weeks to come, according to media reports[28], Dymovskiy refused not only a proposed meeting with generals of the Ministry of Internal Affairs but also, on 20 November, a meeting with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin himself. Very bluntly, Dymovskiy claimed that a meeting with Prime Minister Putin would be an 'offence' to his honour.

The matter became even more delicate, when a series of other law enforcement officials from all over the country started to follow Dymovskiy's example and more and more similar, self-recorded messages started to appear on the Internet (BBC 2009, 2-3). This wave of public denouncements was dubbed the 'Dymovskiy effect' by various media outlets. Encouraged by his initial successes, Major Dymovskiy declared that he intended to found his own party on 23 November. On November 28, protests were organized in Dymovskiy's name with the help of a Facebook group, but only 100 people took to the street in St. Petersburg. Simultaneously, on official media outlets of secondary importance, such as the online platform *Vesti.ru*, Dymovskiy, was denounced as a puppet of foreign, supposedly hostile powers by suggesting that he was travelling around the country at the expense of some 'unknown NGO'[29].

On 22 January 2010, Dymovskiy was arrested in an alleged fraud case. Reputedly, the 'honest police Major' had stolen a battery out of the car of a criminal several years ago. On 18 February, officials announced that Dymovskiy would be subjected to psychoanalytical analysis, obviously in a Soviet tradition of dealing with dissidents. A few days later, Dymovskiy's lawyer was found beaten up in the street with his legs, arms and fingers broken. The person who allegedly had beaten up Dymovskiy's lawyer was later acquitted. According to the official version, the suspect had only wanted to help the lawyer when he saw him being beaten up by strangers. On 7 March, Dymovskiy was preliminarily released. Yet a law suit with a maximum of ten years arrest was announced to be pending

On 23 March, Dymovskiy was found guilty of libelling two of his Novorossiysk colleagues in his video-messages. He was sentenced to pay 50.000 Rubles (approximately 1600 US-dollars) to each of them and to apologize publicly. On 27 March, a court refused Dymovskiy's plea to be reinstalled as a police officer in Novorossiysk. In early April, Dymovskiy published two more video messages that addressed to President Medvedev. Yet Dymovskiy's second series of video-clips[30] attracted considerably less attention in the spheres of social and mainstream mass media. His power to draw public attention had vanished.

c) Potential Impact on the Rule of Law and Corruption

In contrast to the first case study, in the Dymovskiy-Scandal none of the culprits denounced by the police major and his followers were punished, none of the nuisances made public were abolished. To the contrary, two of the accused corrupt lower-level officials were even compensated 50.000 Rubles for being libelled. Moreover, several obviously biased court sentences against Dymovskiy substantiated the wide-spread belief amongst Russians that their judicial system is highly corruptible and prone to the pressure of powerful elites. Thus the perceived outcomes of this scandal erupting from the new sphere of social media, most probably, were detrimental to the belief in the 'rule of law' amongst common Russian and did not deter government officials from taking bribes or comparable misconduct.

d) Success of the Strategies of 'Scandal Management' Pursued by the Ruling Elites

Were the ruling elites successful in managing the Dymovskiy-Scandal according to their political aims? As the leading state-controlled TV channels did not cover the scandal at all, the impact of the Dymovskiy affair on the political opinions of ordinary Russians can be considered as rather limited. According to a survey of the independent polling institute Levada Centre at the end of November 2009, approximately 84 percent of all Russians either had not heard about the Dymovskiy-Affair or had only a vague notion what it was about (Levada 2009). However, this also means that a substantial number of 16 percent of Russians, and amongst them the more educated, active and politically interested, had followed the scandal and its outcomes rather closely. These citizens were left with a series of rather negative impressions. In essence, the course of the Dymovskiy-Scandal and the reactions of the authorities vividly showcased the helplessness of the central government to effectively thwart the problem of wide-spread corruption and arbitrariness of the Russian police forces. Consequently, the endeavours of the ruling elites to avert political damage can be evaluated as only partly successful in this case study.

5. Conclusions

This article juxtaposed two case studies of scandals that occurred in the very specific semi-free media environment of Russia's contemporary hybrid political system. While both scandals emanated from the sphere of social media and touched upon the delicate topic of police corruption, the two case studies differed in the fact that one scandal was perceived as a serious threat by the ruling elites, whereas the other was not. From a comparative view of the findings, the following conclusions can be drawn along the four dimensions elaborated in this article:

(1) Travelling of News Memes and Patterns of Communication. A detailed analysis of communication patterns revealed that in both case studies under investigation the majority of blog, microblog and forum entries appeared in the new sphere of social media only *after* the scandal had been reported extensively by traditional mass media outlets. Thus, even though both scandals emanated from the sphere of social media, and even though both were perceived widely as 'Internet scandals' by the Russian public, traditional mass media played a crucial role not only in the outbreak but also in the framing of the two scandals. One of the most striking differences to be observed was that, while the Living-Shield-Scandal (case study 1) was covered extensively in

the sphere of official media, the Dymovskiy-Scandal (case study 2) was largely ignored by the leading state-controlled TV channels. In the sphere of social media, however, both scandals erupted with an at least similar intensity. From these findings it can be concluded, that in the contemporary semi-free Russian media environment, even an information blockade in the powerful sphere of official media cannot prevent the eruption of major scandals in the sphere of social media. Neither can the ruling elites prevent the spilling-over of these scandals to the spheres of liberal-oppositional and mainstream media.

(2) Strategies of 'Scandal Management' Pursued by the Ruling Elites. Drawing upon the comparison of the two case studies, the basic strategies of 'scandal management' can be summarized as follows: (1) In a first step and wherever possible, the ruling elites sought to collaborate with the whistle-blower who uploaded the scandalous materials. (2) If the whistle-blower agreed to co-operate (case study 1), a favourable (re-)framing of the scandalous events in the sphere of official media was pursued. With the help of the powerful state-controlled TV channels, public outrage was very swiftly deflected towards lower-level authorities and foreign, supposedly hostile powers. Moreover, the ruling elites can instrumentalize the scandal: (a) to conveyed to the audience that they are not only tolerating freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but that they are also fighting social grievances efficiently with the help of critical citizens and the new technology Internet; and (b) to generate public support for specific political aims and strengthen their position in internal power struggles; the framing of the Living-Shield-Scandal, for instance, was used to create a favourable climate for the pending, poignant reform of the police forces and, in particular, to put pressure on the powerful bureaucracy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. (3) If the whistleblower did not co-operate (case study 2) and if the chances for a successful reframing of the occurrences consequently seemed limited, information about the scandal was banned from the sphere of official media and, as far as possible, suppressed in mainstream mass media. In official Internet media of minor importance, a strategy of denouncing the whistleblower was pursued, for instance as suffering from mental illness or acting as puppet of foreign, supposedly hostile powers. Simultaneously, a toolkit of real-life pressure mechanisms was employed against the whistleblower, consisting mainly of physical violence and obviously corrupted court sentences.

(3) Potential Impact on Corruption and the Rule of Law. In the first case study (the Living-Shield-Scandal), the denounced culprits were punished for their misconduct. The victims that suffered from the arbitrariness of the police were compensated, a lower-level police officer was discarded, and the chief of the Moscow traffic received a strong reprimand. These widely reported outcomes of the scandal had, most probably, a deterring effect on other lower-level police officers, who are likely to be more afraid now of resorting to similar misconduct in the future. By contrast, in the second case study (the Dymovskiy-affair), none of the nuisances made public was abolished, and none of the denounced culprits was punished. To the contrary, two of the accused corrupt lower-level officials were even compensated with 50.000 Rubles for alleged libel. In this case, the wide-spread impression of impunity of corruption was reinforced. Comparing these outcomes, we can conclude that the new sphere of social media in Russia's contemporary semi-democratic environment can contribute to limiting arbitrariness, misconduct and corruption of lower- and mid-level authorities – however, only under the condition that vital interests of the ruling high-level elites are not affected. Only under these circumstances is the new sphere of social media able to fulfil a certain 'control'- or even 'muckraking'-function, commonly cherished with regard to media in Western democracies.

Do scandals arising from the new sphere of social media contribute to a strengthening of the rule of law in contemporary Russia? As the two case studies illustrate, this is most probably not the case. In the Dymovskiy-case, the law was bent rather bluntly to bring about a series of highly questionable court sentences in order to pressure the whistleblower to stop his political activities. In the Living-Shield-Scandal, even though the culprits were punished and the victims were compensated, these procedures were not carried out according to provisions of the law. Rather, the measures were achieved on the personal orders of high-ranking officials, and in line with their political strategies and their personal sense of justice. Thus the findings of the two case studies suggest that positive effects of scandals that emanate from the new sphere of social media cannot be assumed.

(4) Success of the Strategies of 'Scandal Management' Pursued by the Ruling Elites. As the two case studies vividly illustrate, Russia's ruling elites are currently very much capable of managing public outrage that arises from the new sphere of social media according to their specific political aims. However, as the findings of the two case studies also exposed, the success of the strategies of 'scandal management' is largely dependent on the willingness of the whistle-blowers to collaborate. In the first case study in which the whistle-blower Sutyagin co-operated, scandal management was utterly successful. In the second case-study in which the whistle-blower Dymovskiy refused collaboration, scandal management turned out to be much more difficult in the complex context of the semi-free Russian media environment. Even though the majority of Russians who perceive news exclusively through state-controlled television did not even learn of the Dymovskiy-Scandal, the audiences of mainstream, liberal-oppositional and social media were confronted with a series of rather negative impressions. The events reported in these spheres well-nigh showcased the helplessness of Russian elites and their incapacity to effectively address the problem of wide-spread corruption within the police forces. However, the audiences of social, oppositional and even mainstream mass media in Russia are currently relatively small in comparison with those of the leading, state-controlled TV channels. As a poll carried out at the height of the Dymovskiy-Scandal indicates, 84 percent of Russians either had not heard about the Dymovskiy-Scandal or had only a vague notion what it was about. Thus it must finally be concluded that scandals arising from the new, vibrant sphere of social media and an unfiltered Internet are currently not posing a serious threat, neither to the reputation of Russia's ruling 'tandem of power' nor to the perceived legitimacy of the Russian semi-authoritarian regime as a whole. If and how this will change with the rapidly growing use of Internet-mediated communication, remains to be seen.

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[1] With exceptions being, for instance, Sabrow (2004) or Klier et al. (1989).
[2] See for instance: Tumber and Waisbord 2004a, 1032; Hondrich 2002, 40; Thompson 2000, 13; Neckel 1989, 56.
[3] According to self-provided data available at: http://ok.mk.ru/load/mk.pdf [This link and all the following links were checked for the accessibility on 9 September 2010]
[4] According to self-provided data available at: http://advert.kp.ru/kp/2/81
[5] As of September 2010 within Russia, according to data of the National Circulation Monitoring Service (Nationalnaya Tirazhna Sluzhba): http://www.pressaudit.ru/registry
[6] Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p03wfPi3xgY
[7] Available at: http://blogs.yandex.ru/
[8] Available at: http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lastnews/2010/03/09/n_1467378.shtml
[9] Available at: http://echo.msk.ru/news/662587-echo.html
[10] Available at: http://www.vesti-moscow.ru/videos.html?id=55892&type=?page=1
[11] Available at: http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/149961.

[12] Availabe at: http://www.vesti-moscow.ru/videos.html?id=55922&type=r
[13] Available at: http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=346474&date=10.03.2010
[14] Available at: http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=346715
[15] Available at: http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=346621
[16] Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Crm2LFN_3Zg&feature=watch_response
[17] Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p03wfPi3xgY
[18] Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G3KbBfpg24&feature=player_embedded and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dJkMLxvulw&feature=player_embedded
[19] Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G3KbBfpg24&feature=player_embedded
[20] This discussion thread is no longer accessible on the server http://www.nvrsk.ru.
[21] Available at: http://b-bratstvo.livejournal.com/149819.html
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