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Counterpublics, Attitudes, and Social Change in Authoritarian Regimes

An analysis of digital communities on Russian YouTube

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1. Introduction

There is a general belief among experts that any social and political change in Russia will likely be the result of top-down dynamics, such as the formation of counter-elites within existing governmental structures.¹ Whether this is indeed the case is still debatable. However, what cannot escape the gaze even of a casual observer are the shifting social attitudes among ordinary citizens in Russia. Indeed, different layers of Russian society are increasingly becoming more supportive of change, whatever this change might actually mean.² Not only have people become more supportive of change, they also seem to be more active in expressing their support by taking it to the streets.³ While the Kremlin has attempted to deny that there is an unusual increase in protest activity, experts predict a growing politicisation of ordinary citizens and a further rise in protests.^{4,5} Against this backdrop, there needs to be a discussion, both theoretical and empirical, about the potential for a bottom-up change in Russia. Not only because there are clear indicators of shifting social attitudes in Russia⁶—just consider Vladimir Putin’s fading trust ratings⁷—but also because the feasibility of any lasting top-down socio-political change will be contingent upon the bottom-up support of the public.

In semi-authoritarian countries like Russia, where a centralised media manufactures public consent and ensures conformity, the public is unlikely to be widely and radically opposed to the official discourse.⁸ This is perhaps the reason why some observers have characterised the Russian public as deeply depoliticised. The information offered to the public by official media sources is usually one-sided and filtered through layers of self-censorship, and the systemic opposition only exists as a facade of democracy, thus offering no substantial informational alternative.⁹ However, a recent wave of protests in Russia as well as a seeming increase in critical attitudes towards the state have demonstrated that the reach

¹ See, for example, Tatiana Stanovaya, »Opposition From Within: Russia's New Counter-Elite«, in: *Carnegie Moscow Center* (online), February 9, 2019, <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/67873>> (accessed December 18, 2019). Kadri Liik, »The Last of the Offended: Russia's First Post-Putin Diplomats«, in: *ECFR* (European Council on Foreign Relations) (online), November 19, 2019, <https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Kadri_Liik_russias_first_post_putin_diplomats.pdf>.

² Denis Volkov, »Russian Society Wants Change-But of What Nature?«, in: *Carnegie Moscow Center* (online), August 29, 2017, <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/72933>>.

³ See, for example, »Russia's New Resistance 'Meduza' Analyzes the Rise of a New Wave of Protest Movements« in: *Meduza*, August 7, 2019, <<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/08/07/russia-s-new-resistance>>.

⁴ TASS, »Kreml Ne Otmechaet Rosta Protestnoy Aktivnosti v Rossii v Tekushem Godu«, November 25, 2019, <<https://tass.ru/politika/7192425>>.

⁵ Jelena Mukhametshina, »Eksperti Predskazali Rost Socialnih Protestov i Ih Politizaciyu«, in: *Vedomosti* (online), October 28, 2019, <<https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/10/28/814909-eksperti-predskazali>>.

⁶ Olga Khvostunova, »Russian Youth in the Moscow Protests«, in: *Atlantic Council* (online), October 28, 2019, <<https://atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/long-take/russian-youth-in-the-moscow-protests/>>.

⁷ See Olga Khvostunova, »Russian Youth in the Moscow Protests«, in: *Atlantic Council* (online), November 20, 2019, <<https://atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/long-take/russian-youth-in-the-moscow-protests/>>.

⁸ Or else defined as electoral authoritarianism. See, for example, Vladimir Gelman, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

⁹ Luke March, »Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime: Just Russia and Parastatal Opposition«, in: *Slavic Review*, 68 (Fall 2009) 3: pp. 504-527

and persuasiveness of official rhetoric may be waning. Social media, and the Internet more generally, seem to be playing an important role in facilitating this process.¹⁰ Not only do they offer access to a wider range of information than official media channels, but they also facilitate digital communication, thus allowing individuals to engage with this information and to discuss it more actively with their peers. The increasing role of YouTube, considered as nearly the only platform where free speech can be practiced without being legally penalised, deserves particular attention in this regard.¹¹ Consider the recent case of Egor Zhukov, who received a suspended sentence for a YouTube video in which he urged the public to express their disagreement with the government.¹² One can only speculate what the outcome of this trial would have been, if it had not been for the public outcry that brought attention to his case. Moreover, as is evident from their concern with 'the illegal mass events', Russian authorities seem to be well aware of YouTube's potential to instigate dissent.¹³ However, while the potential for the emergence of critical attitudes in non-institutionalised environments such as YouTube is intuitively self-evident, how this potential plays out and what the exact reasons behind the emergence of such attitudes in digital communities are remains unclear.

In this paper, an analysis of YouTube in Russia as a potential site where a dissenting public (further, counterpublic) can emerge is offered. Simultaneously, by taking the concept of publics seriously, this paper advances a bottom-up approach to social change in Russia. While YouTube's non-institutionalised environment and its increasing popularity among Russians may explain its role in shifting social attitudes, these loose observations fall short in helping to understand the exact conditions responsible for the emergence of counterpublics. The paper thus attempts to flesh out the link between YouTube in Russia and the formation of critical attitudes towards the state, by inquiring into how YouTube facilitates the emergence of counterpublics in Russia.

To answer this question, the paper will first turn to the literature on social change and the role of social attitudes in contributing to such change. It will be argued, in the first section, that a shift in social attitudes is indispensable for social change and that such a shift requires reflective agency, that is, a critical reflection on the part of the public. Following this, the conditions under which reflective agency is likely to emerge are outlined. The paper further argues that an empirical identification of the aforementioned conditions in Russia might point to a favourable environment for the emergence of counterpublics. In the second section, methods and data for the analysis of such conditions on YouTube in Russia are introduced. Finally, the last section turns to an empirical analysis of Russian YouTube and argues that it does in fact satisfy the conditions for the emergence of reflective agency, and thus facilitates the emergence of counterpublics.

¹⁰ Kris Ruijgrok, »From the Web to the Streets: Internet and Protests under Authoritarian Regimes«, in: *Democratization*, 24 (August 2016) 3, pp. 1-23.

¹¹ Macfarquhar, Neil, »Looking for Free Speech in Russia? Try YouTube«, in: *The New York Times* (online), June 9, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/09/world/europe/youtube-russia-putin-state-tv.html>>. «Russians Are Shunning State-Controlled TV for YouTube», in: *The Economist*, (online), March 9, 2019, <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/03/09/russians-are-shunning-state-controlled-tv-for-youtube>>.

¹² Lucian Kim, »The Russian Student Who Has Become Moscow's New Face Of Dissent«, in: *NPR* (online), September 19, 2019, <<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/19/761596001/the-russian-student-who-has-become-moscows-new-face-of-dissent>>.

¹³ »Russia Tells Google Not to Advertise 'Illegal' Events after Election Protests«, in: *Reuters* (online), August 11, 2019, <<https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-protests-google/russia-tells-google-not-to-advertise-illegal-events-after-election-protests-idUKKCN1V10BY>>.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Bottom-up change: from social to political

The vitality and endurance of most modern political systems depend on their ability to sustain domestic social order by mobilising popular support and thereby ensuring the resonance between political and social systems.¹⁴ Of course, different types of political systems, be they characterised by democratic governance, authoritarian rule or a combination of both, employ different means for such mobilisation.¹⁵ However, ultimately, every sovereign state must secure public recognition in order to assert its own legitimacy not only before its own citizenry, but also before the international community. The failure to do so often results in international isolation, which is hardly conducive to the stability of a domestic socio-political order. Domestically, the failure to ensure at least implicit public support inevitably results in a tension between the public, which composes the social system, and the state, which represents a political system. Such tensions, as Samuel Huntington argued, consequently lead to internal disorder and instability, increasing the likelihood of socio-political disturbances.¹⁶ As socio-political instability requires immediate adjustments between the public and the government in order to stabilise the system, a positive implementation of these adjustments will lead to what might be called a social change or social transformation. A change in this sense simply means a qualitative leap from one set of cultural, economic, and political arrangements to a different one.

Understandably, the role of the public is significantly more substantial in democratic political systems than in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, where public opinions and attitudes, if not completely neglected, are heavily manufactured by the centralised media through which the formation of public opinion mostly takes place. However, despite the oftentimes feeble public influence in authoritarian regimes, even there the government needs to constantly ensure—by means of propaganda, intimidation or display of power—the alignment of the social with the political system.¹⁷ That being said, regardless of its form of governance, in the modern state popular support, that is, support by the governed, seems to be an indispensable element of a stable socio-political order.¹⁸

¹⁴ Daniel Walther/ Johan Hellström, »The Verdict in the Polls: How Government Stability Is Affected by Popular Support«, in: *West European Politics* 42 (2018), 3, pp. 593-617. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven, Univ. Press, 1979.

¹⁵ In this paper, the concept of a political system refers to a type of governance, such as democracy, autocracy, or something in between. In other words, it refers to the formally institutionalised practices of governing. A social system, by contrast, encompasses informal norms and institutions upon which humans rely in their day to day interactions.

¹⁶ Huntington, *ibid.* A similar but sociological argument can be found in Robert King Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, IL, Free Press, 1957. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, London, Routledge. Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, Malden, Polity, 2017.

¹⁷ Barbara Geddes/John Zaller, »Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes«, in: *American Journal of Political Science*, 33(1989) 2: p. 319. Jie Chen/ Yang Zhong/ Jan William Hillard, »The Level and Sources of Popular Support for China's Current Political Regime«, in: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30 (1997) 1, pp. 45-64.

¹⁸ Richard Rose/ William Mishler/ Munro, *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime: the Changing Views of Russians*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

As already mentioned before, the likelihood of a political system change, according to Huntington, increases as a discordance between the public and the government grows. The further course of a socio-political transformation will depend on the extent to which the political system exemplifies at least a bare minimum of democratic characteristics (e.g. the rule of law and various political freedoms). Indeed, the leaders of authoritarian regimes demonstrate a tendency to resist social change more eagerly than their democratic counterparts, and their attempts to remain in power often extend beyond the legal means.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the necessity of a discordance between the public and the government is mostly a requirement in cases of a bottom-up initiation of change (e.g. resulting from protests, riots, strikes, or any other self-organised practices of civil resistance). By contrast, a top-down change, resulting, for example, from a foreign intervention, a coup, or an unforeseen replacement of political elites, does not necessarily require such discordance, since top-down interventions often aim to directly change the political system, circumventing the often tedious process of changing public attitudes (although persistent public discontent certainly might serve as a cause for a coup or a foreign intervention).¹⁹ However, for the purpose of this paper, the further focus will be on bottom-up change and the analysis of the publics that facilitate such change.

2.2. Social attitudes and attitude change

Granted that popular support in both democratic and authoritarian political systems is indispensable to sustaining a socio-political order, change in public attitudes, which form the motivational basis of such support, is likely to result in the adaptive adjustment of a political system.²⁰ Evidently this is more likely to be the case in democratic systems than in authoritarian ones.²¹ This is, of course, not to say that a change in public attitudes will automatically lead to a socio-political change, meaning any alteration in social structures. For such a change to occur, attitudes must be followed by collective action on the part of the public. It is worth mentioning that the initial definition of attitudes in social psychology included three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. The cognitive component is expressed in one's beliefs about an attitude object (e.g. I believe that the leaders of the non-systemic opposition are correct in their harsh critique of the government). The affective component, by contrast, involves emotions that one has towards an attitude object (e.g. I feel solidarity with Navalny). Finally, the behavioural component refers to an action corresponding to one's attitudes (e.g. joining anti-government protests). Recent scholarship on attitudes, however, tends to exclude the latter component, since the positive evaluation of, for example, a political opposition leader by the audience does not necessarily yield an overt behaviour corresponsive to the respective attitude.²² Nonetheless, this should not be a

¹⁹ Of course, radical top-down interventions, while potentially resulting in socio-political changes, do not necessarily result in socio-political stability.

²⁰ As was mentioned before, the failure to bridge the gap between the social and political systems inevitably leads to a socio-political mishap, which in turn poses an existential threat to the political community as a whole. This argument can be found not only in Huntington's study on political orders, but also in Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, who argued that every social system strives towards equilibrium and homeostasis (see Parsons and Luhmann above).

²¹ Since authoritarian regimes are more likely to abuse extra-legal instruments in order to coerce the public to comply, such regimes may safeguard the socio-political system from internal pressures. However, as the Arab Spring demonstrated, even authoritarian regimes do not always possess sufficient means to avoid social change.

²² Dolores Albarracín/ Sharon Shavitt, »Attitudes and Attitude Change«, in: *Annual Review of Psychology*, 69 (April 2018) 1: pp. 299-327. However, cf. Gerd Bohner/ Michaela Wänke, *Attitudes and Attitude Change*, London, Psychology Press, 2014.

problem for research on social attitudes as long as attitudes are conceptualised as communicative acts, that is, as by definition including behaviour. Construed in this way, the distinction between attitudes-as-beliefs and attitudes-as-actions is one of degree and not of kind, since expression of one's attitudes and participation in protests are both conceptualised as social practices.

But what, then, is meant by attitude? In the socio-psychological literature, the term *attitude* refers to an evaluative judgement of an attitude object.²³ An *attitude object* can be virtually anything ranging from concrete objects and figures (e.g. a flag, a building, Vladimir Putin, etc.) to abstract concepts (e.g. equality, justice, democracy, etc.). Because social attitudes are socially learned, they are not typically personal, but reflect social structures within which individuals are socialised.²⁴ In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, attitudes can be construed as often unconscious tendencies and dispositions, constituting one's *habitus*, that is, a system of structured dispositions, determined by one's position in a social structure.²⁵ In this sense, the content mobilised for the normative evaluation of an attitude object is drawn from pre-existing cognitive templates, internalised by actors in the process of socialisation.

However, if attitudes are the product of lifelong socialisation and institutionalisation, how can bottom-up change ever be possible? How can there be a change in social attitudes without a preceding change in social structures? A common approach to social change often starts from the premise that critique of social and political orders is indispensable for social transformation.²⁶ Such a critique can take a top-down approach, whereby the injustice and domination upon which a social order rests should be unmasked by experts. This approach assumes the ignorance of the masses and privileges experts and researchers as having the necessary technical and theoretical knowledge of human action. In this way, experts are seen as transcending ideology and thus bearing a normative obligation to enlighten the deluded and uneducated masses. A recent pragmatic turn in sociology and international relations, however, questions these assumptions for their implicit elitism, and stresses the importance of locating the potential of critique and reflective agency within publics themselves.²⁷ Indeed, an overemphasis of structural and discursive influence on human social attitudes largely excludes agency—a capacity to independently adjudicate over the social world. Taking a somewhat bottom-up approach, pragmatic scholars then seek to identify the scope conditions under which a development of agency within publics, and a subsequent change in their habitus, is most likely to take place without the preceding structural transformations.

²³ David Voas, »Towards a Sociology of Attitudes«, in: *Sociological Research Online* 19 (2014) 1, pp. 1-13. Percy S. Cohen, »Social Attitudes and Sociological Enquiry«, in: *The British Journal of Sociology* 17 (1966) 4 : p. 341. Donald T. Campbell, »Social Attitudes and Other Acquired Behavioral Dispositions«, in: *Psychology: A Study of a Science. Study II. Empirical Substructure and Relations with Other Sciences. Volume 6. Investigations of Man as Socius: Their Place in Psychology and the Social Sciences.*, n.d., pp. 94-172. R. T. Lapiere, »Attitudes vs Actions«, in: *International Journal of Epidemiology* 39 (2010) 1: pp. 7-11. This is not to say that heritability does not influence individual attitudes. However, since the types of attitudes discussed in this paper are of a social and political nature, there is no need to include a purely psychological definition, which is often concerned with the neurobiological origins of beliefs.

²⁴ Qualter, Terence H., *Opinion Control in the Democracies*, London: Macmillan, 1985, pp. 88-106.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990, p. 53.

²⁶ Thomas Kern/Thomas Laux/ Insa Pruisken, »Critique and Social Change: An Introduction«, in: *Historical Social Research/ Historische Sozialforschung*, 42 (2017) 3: pp. 7-23.

²⁷ Ibid.

Ted Hopf, drawing on cognitive psychology and social theory, provides a list of such conditions.²⁸ The first such condition, and perhaps the most crucial, is a *presence of difference*.²⁹ In sociological terms, *difference* can be conceptualised as a discourse that contradicts or stands in opposition to a hegemonic, that is, to a dominant discourse currently prevailing in society. In other words, *difference* is introduced when one encounters a counter-hegemonic discourse. The mere presence of difference alone does not ensure reflection, however. After all, every socio-political system, even an authoritarian one, has a counter-hegemony. There is thus a second condition which refers to *exposure to difference*. This exposure is necessary for the perception of difference as a recurrent social practice, because a one-time exposure to a counter-hegemonic discourse does not guarantee reflection. However, if one persistently encounters reoccurring beliefs, values or attitudes that contradict a worldview prevailing in a particular social setting, then not only do chances to notice the difference increase, but peer pressure forces one to actively engage, by either agreeing or disagreeing, in adjudicating over an issue. Of course, difference, and moreover exposure to it, is not always something freely available, especially in authoritarian regimes. Therefore, the third condition which is necessary for developing reflective agency is a *less institutionalised environment*. Because individual choices often take the path of a lesser cognitive effort, it is habits or, in other words, institutionalisation and socialisation which provide individuals with pre-made, not cognitively costly, templates that determine the rules for action. As a consequence, in those environments where institutionalisation is reduced to a minimum, the breathing space for encountering difference is naturally greater. The final condition relates to *exogenous shocks*, which for the purposes of this paper are interpreted but not reduced to any relevant socio-political information triggering a public discussion. In a sense, it can be virtually anything that the audience finds newsworthy. It is thus also directly linked to the first two conditions in that exogenous shocks are created by both hegemonic discourse, framing a certain issue in a certain way, and a counter-hegemonic discourse framing it *differently*.

2.3. Rhetorics and networked counterpublics

While identifying the scope conditions which facilitate a change in attitude, and subsequently social change, may be a psychological enterprise, identifying the sites in which such conditions obtain is a task for sociology. The most suitable analytical concept for an explication of such sites, as is further suggested in this paper, is the concept of the public sphere.

Introduced by Jürgen Habermas in the mid-1960s, the public sphere refers to any non-institutionalised discursive environment in which people freely discuss matters of common concern by criticising, if necessary, claims of their interlocutors and subsequently forming social attitudes regarding public issues.³⁰ For a discursive environment to be qualified as a

²⁸ Ted Hopf, »Change in International Practices«, in: *European Journal of International Relations* 24, (February 2017) 3: pp. 687-711. In this paper, I am not employing all conditions specified by Ted Hopf, leaving out, for example, liminars. In this sense, my own interpretation of the conditions under which reflective agency emerges, which I try to justify in the following subsection as well as in the methodology and the empirical sections.

²⁹ The neuroscientific literature indicates that while beliefs and attitudes are resilient for the most part, holders of particular beliefs are capable of changing them once they develop a so-called reflective agency. Such agency is more likely to develop when an individual is confronted with a belief that contradicts his or her original beliefs, but which nevertheless has to be accepted as correct. In this way, an individual begins to hold two contradictory beliefs. This situation leads to mental discomfort, the resolution of which requires some sort of adaptive reflection.

³⁰ Jürgen Habermas/ Sara Lennox/ Frank Lennox, »The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)«, in: *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974), p. 49. Gerard A. Hauser, »Vernacular Voices: the Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres«, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2010. Robert Asen, »Toward a Normative Conception of

public sphere, it has to fulfil a number of criteria: *autonomy from the state, issue(s) of common concern, discursive inclusivity, and exchange and critique of claims*.³¹ Due to these definitional criteria, the public sphere thus represents an indispensable environment for developing social attitudes.³² Importantly, defined as a discursive site, the public *sphere* should be distinguished from a public *space*, which by definition requires some physical location in which social interaction can take place.³³ Construed in this way, the public sphere is not bound by a geographical locus, but can stretch across or even beyond national borders, provided there is media through which individuals inform themselves about the state of current affairs.³⁴ In contemporary society, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and more recently the Internet, play the role of such media.³⁵ Thus, the process of informing oneself about current socio-political issues and publicly discussing these issues with other citizens, no matter where such a discussion takes place, constitutes the crux of the public sphere.

As society has become more differentiated and socio-economic issues have become more divisive, multiple competing publics have emerged, each with their own normative preferences and demands.³⁶ However, while such a plurality of values may arguably be a feature of contemporary liberal democracies, in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, where the state has a *de facto* monopoly over media, the public sphere to a large extent reflects the hegemonic discourse.³⁷ As a consequence, the public in such regimes is divided into two camps: an official public sphere, largely reflecting the dominant values and beliefs, and all those publics which for various reasons oppose the hegemonic discourse—counter-publics.³⁸ However, in the authoritarian contexts, breathing space for the emergence of dissenting views is often limited to a few non-institutionalised sites. The Internet has proven to be perhaps the most effective among all such sites, as it allows users to relatively freely and, more importantly, anonymously discuss and exchange information, thereby facilitating dissemination of information through various media platforms, such as Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, Instagram, etc. On the basis of these media platforms, online networks of people have emerged, loosely organised around domains of common concern.³⁹ These online networks constitute contemporary public spheres and counterpublics, which in contrast to their progenitors are characterised by a greater potential to affect social change through protest, mobilisation, and digital activism.⁴⁰ Especially relevant for this paper is YouTube, which not only fulfils the Habermasian institutional criteria specified above, but

Difference in Public Deliberation», in: *Argumentation and Advocacy* 35 (1999) 3: pp. 115-129. Non-institutionalised in this sense means separate from the state, formal economy, and the family.

³¹ Jürgen Habermas, 1964.

³² Hartmut Wessler et al., »Public Sphere«, in: *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets*, 2011. <<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0030.xml>>.

³³ France Aubin, »Between Public Space(s) and Public Sphere(s): An Assessment of Francophone Contributions«, in: *Canadian Journal of Communication* 39, (2014) 1: pp. 90-110.

³⁴ Nancy Fraser/ Kate Nash, *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2014.

³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, 1964, p. 49.

³⁶ Nancy Fraser, »Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy«, in: *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): pp. 56-80.

³⁷ Alexander Dukalskis, *Authoritarian Public Sphere: Legitimation and Autocratic Power in North Korea, Burma, and China*, London, UK, Routledge, 2017.

³⁸ Anastasia Denisova/ Aliaksandr Herasimenka, «How Russian Rap on YouTube Advances Alternative Political Deliberation: Hegemony, Counter-Hegemony, and Emerging Resistant Publics», in: *Social Media Society*, 5 (2019) 2: pp. 1-11.

³⁹ Jonas Kaiser et al., »What Happened to the Public Sphere? The Networked Public Sphere and Public Opinion Formation«, in: Carayannis, Elias G./Campbell, David F. J./Efthymiopoulos, Marios Panagiotis (eds.), New York, the US, Springer, *Handbook of Cyber-Development, Cyber-Democracy and Cyber-Defense*, 2017, pp. 1-28.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Earl, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*, S.L.: Mit Press, 2013. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2015.

also offers a wider array of communicative options to engage with fellow citizens than Habermas originally envisioned.⁴¹

As noted above, communication based on a discussion and criticism of claims constitutes an important part of the public sphere, and is indispensable to the formation of social attitudes. Such communications, whereby social attitudes are expressed by means of utterances, are communicative acts. In this paper, three types of communicative acts pertinent to the (networked) public sphere are considered, each corresponding to a specific psychological faculty responsible for attitude formation, discussed in the previous subsection (see Table 1). The first is an *epistemic* communicative act, which is typically seen as a (Habermasian) ideal of communication, as it aims at a discussion in which participants appeal to reason as a means to rationally adjudicate over the contentious issues.⁴² The second is an *affective* communicative act, which is traditionally associated with populist discourse.⁴³ In the public sphere, the *modus operandi* of this type of communicative act is to use emotionally loaded language in order to gain salience and mobilise popular support against a political adversary (be it a specific political actor or a more general political order).⁴⁴ The final kind of communicative act—influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin and less discussed than the previous two, but gaining traction in recent years—is what referred to in this paper as *comic*.⁴⁵ This includes irony, satire, parody, jokes, or any other humorous acts aimed at mockery, which is an especially effective and powerful subversive instrument in authoritarian contexts, since it allows counterpublics to avoid censorship by veiling political messages in indirect and metaphorical language.⁴⁶ While not being related to a particular faculty *per se*, the comic communicative acts often engage both epistemic and affective faculties, insofar as mockery typically includes reasons and evokes an emotional response at the same time.⁴⁷

Epistemic and affective communicative acts relate not only to the faculties that are responsible for attitude formation, but also to two rhetorical modes of persuasion: *logos* (reason) and *pathos* (emotion). Thus, both rhetoric and communicative acts turn to reason and/or emotion in order to achieve the objective of persuasion.⁴⁸ However, rhetoric should

⁴¹ Edgerly, Stephanie et al., »YouTube as a public sphere: The Proposition 8 debat«, <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephanie_Edgerly/publication/265268922_YouTube_as_a_public_sphere_The_Proposition_8_debate/links/54b9303e0cf2d11571a31c71/YouTube-as-a-public-sphere-The-Proposition-8-debate.pdf> (accessed 25 February 2015).

Mary Grace Antony/ Ryan J. Thomas, »This Is Citizen Journalism at Its Finest: YouTube and the Public Sphere in the Oscar Grant Shooting Incident«, in: *New Media & Society*, 12 (2010) 8: pp. 1280-1296

⁴² Habermas Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991.

⁴³ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, 2018.

⁴⁴ Chantal Mouffe, »Which Public Sphere for a Democratic Society?«, in: *Theoria* 49, (January 2002) 99: pp. 55-65. Jingrong Tong, »The Formation of an Agonistic Public Sphere: Emotions, the Internet and News Media in China«, in: *China Information* 29, (2015) 3: pp. 333-351.

⁴⁵ Lauren Langman, »The Carnivalization of the Public Sphere«, in: Diana Boros/James M. Glass (eds), *Re-Imagining Public Space*, Springer, 2014, pp. 191-214. Mathew Yates/ Reza Hasmath, »When a Joke Is More than a Joke: Humor as a Form of Networked Practice in the Chinese Cyber Public Sphere«, in: *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 4 (2017) 1.

⁴⁶ Kennan Ferguson, »Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance«, in: *Contemporary Political Theory*, 18 (2018) S4: pp. 247-250. Srdja Popovic/ Mladen Joksic, »Why Dictators Don't Like Jokes«, in: *Foreign Policy*, (online), April 5, 2013, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/05/why-dictators-dont-like-jokes/>>. Anastasia Denisova, »Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts«, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

⁴⁷ For example, the joke "given how long Russia is getting up off its knees, it must have twenty knees" refers to the yearly promises made by various officials about the improvement of socio-economic conditions in Russia, on the one hand, and the twenty years of Putin's reign, on the other. In this sense, the underlying conclusion and premise can be reconstructed in epistemic terms as follows: "the promises made by Putin's regime are empty, because these promises have not come true since Putin has come to power".

⁴⁸ From now onwards, communicative and rhetorical acts shall be used interchangeably.

not be seen as reducible to merely an act of propaganda by institutional actors (e.g. by the state or the media).⁴⁹ A more encompassing definition suggests that rhetoric is any socially meaningful utterance, insofar as the presence of meaning implies a persuasive intent which might or might not be convincing.⁵⁰ A public sphere based on such a definition of rhetoric extends beyond institutional actors' privileged position in informing the public, to include *vernacular* exchange as a means by which social attitudes can be negotiated between ordinary people.⁵¹ Conceptualising the public sphere in terms of vernacular rhetoric is useful for two reasons. First, it shifts the analytical focus from macro-level political actors and processes to micro-level everyday interactions, thereby emphasising the agency of ordinary people. Second, it allows to empirically assess whether Hopf's scope conditions obtain in particular communicative contexts.

Linking Hopf's scope conditions and networked counterpublics more explicitly, this paper argues that if the public sphere does exist within a particular social environment, it will satisfy Hopf's conditions. The presence of such conditions consequently facilitates the emergence of counterpublics. The link is fourfold. First, *presence of difference* is conceptualised in this paper in terms of epistemic, affective, or comic rhetorical acts, as long as they exhibit a counter-hegemonic discourse. The importance of these particular acts is due to their relation to the faculties engaged in social attitude formation (i.e. affective and cognitive). Moreover, the public sphere, as shown above, has three incarnations (epistemic, affective, comic), each corresponding to a particular rhetorical act (or to both in case of *comic*). Thus, a discussion of common matters (within the public sphere) that includes one of these acts (epistemic, affective, or comic), as an essential form of communicating *difference*, is conducive to social attitude change (i.e. the emergence of counterpublics). Second, *exposure to difference* refers to the degree to which a certain piece of information is circulated in the public sphere. Insofar as the public sphere organises itself around a particular issue, its formation depends on the degree to which a certain piece of information circulates and irritates the public mind. This then includes a fourth link, which is related to *exogenous shocks*. Such shocks can otherwise be considered as *rhetorical situations*, that is, situations which give content to be discussed by the public.⁵² These situations are rhetorical because they are presented in one or the other form of the abovementioned rhetorical acts.⁵³ Finally, the *non-institutionalisation* requirement is tacitly assumed by virtue of the Internet's relative independence from state interference.

Thus, these four conditions are presupposed by the public sphere. Moreover, and more importantly, identifying their empirical presence indicates a favourable environment for the emergence of reflective agency, which is in turn conducive to change in social attitudes and the formation of counterpublics. Of course, the mere fact that YouTube can be considered as the public sphere (in that it fulfils the above specified institutional criteria) does not have any effect on critical reflection. In liberal democracies, for example, there are simply too many publics for this to be the case, and hence an inevitability of identity clashes. By contrast, authoritarian regimes are simpler in a sense that they are usually divided between the publics and counterpublics. When someone disagrees with a hegemonic discourse, that someone can be considered to belong to a counterpublic, irrespective of whether his or her

⁴⁹ Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: the Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2010, p. 89.

⁵⁰ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2013, p. 172.

⁵¹ Hauser, 2010, p. 90.

⁵² Lloyd F. Bitzer, »The Rhetorical Situation«, in: *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, (January 1968) 1: pp. 2–4.

⁵³ Of course, a piece of information within one text can be at the same time affective and argumentatively justified, and then finished with a joke. However, as I will try to demonstrate in the empirical section, it is common for a rhetor to stick to one form of rhetorical acts when presenting a particular issue.

views entirely align with the views of other members of the counterpublic. Thus, libertarians, liberals and socialists can all belong to the same counterpublic as long as they express a shared disagreement towards the current political system. As it will be argued in this paper, Russian YouTube, being a public sphere, provides conditions under which social attitudes have the potential to become more critical of Russian hegemonic discourse. Such a shift, it shall be argued, creates counterpublics.

Table 1

Communica- tive/Rhetori- cal act	Rhetorical appeal and rhetorical form	Theoretical influences
Cognitive	Appeal to reason/Argumentation	Jürgen Habermas
Affective	Appeal to emotion/Populism	Chantal Mouffe
Comic	Appeal to both/Mockery	Mikhail Bakhtin

3. Methods and Methodology

The analysis offered in this paper aims to determine whether Russian YouTube meets the four conditions for the emergence of reflective agency. A positive answer would allow us to reinforce the argument that counterpublics in Russia emerge digitally and that therefore the independence of the Internet is not only of great value to democracy and civil society, but also conducive to social change. As mentioned in the theoretical section, the four conditions are: *the presence of difference*, *exposure to difference*, *external shocks* (further *rhetorical situations*), and *a non-institutionalised environment*. The latter condition is tacitly presupposed in this paper, as YouTube is not governed or directly regulated by the Russian authorities. The methods for the analysis of the remaining conditions will be covered below. But first, it is worth briefly mentioning the process of data gathering.

The first empirical step was aimed at pinpointing topics of rhetorical situations. These topics can be seen as salient themes widely circulating in the socio-political context. For this purpose, a thematic analysis was selected, as the identification of themes required interpretation on the part of the analyst. Further, a two-tier rhetorical analysis of presence of difference was conducted. On the one hand, three different YouTubers (further referred to as *rhetors*) were selected and the type of their rhetorical acts was analysed. On the other hand, the paper also analysed the rhetorical acts of the audience, that is, the discussions in the

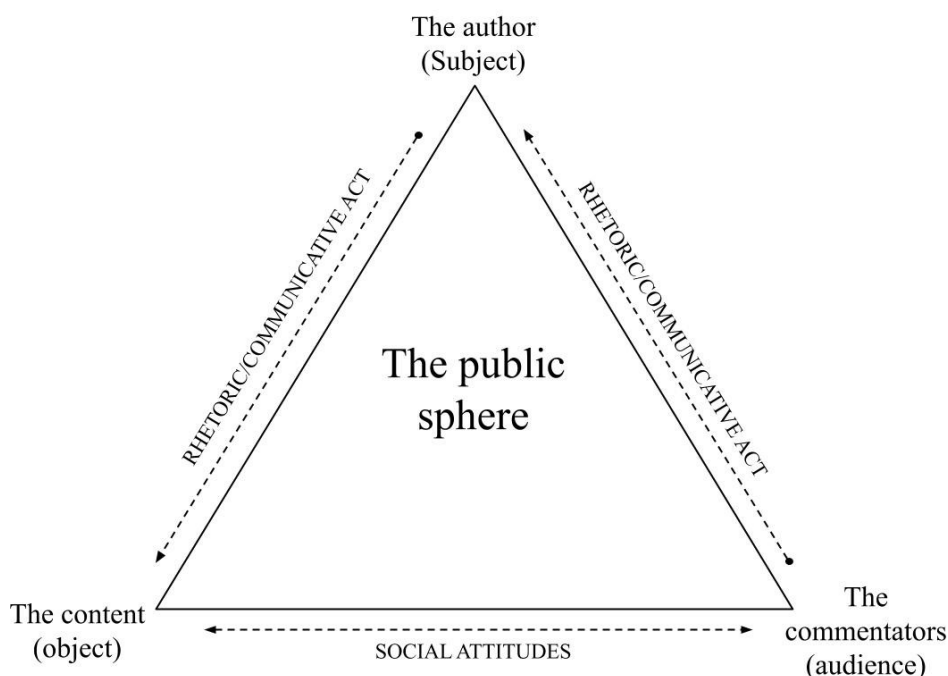


Figure 1

comment sections of a particular video. The analysis of rhetorical acts was crucial not only to identify the communicative form with which the difference was introduced by both the rhetor and the audience, but also to indicate potentially persuasive intent inherent in the respective speech acts, as the latter is responsible for affecting social attitude formation. Finally, the potential to be exposed to difference was analysed by conducting another set of thematic analyses. In this sense, YouTube as a public sphere was methodologically approached in terms of a triadic interaction between subject (rhetor), object (topic), and audience (commentators) (see Fig. 1).

The selection of videos and the adjacent comment sections (further, I refer to both as digital communities) was based on the following three criteria: the topic, the views, and the popularity of a YouTuber. The first criterion ensured that the videos under examination thematically fell under a broad political category (e.g. communication, censorship, protests, us versus them narrative [see below]). The second criterion guaranteed a high degree of dissemination of the respective topics in Russian-speaking digital communities. In this sense, an attempt was made to partially solve the methodological problem of so-called 'echo chambers' or 'bubble filters'.⁵⁴ In addition, it has been argued that digital algorithms of Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube reinforce preconceived attitudes by suggesting to unwary Internet users news items based on their previous searches. These phenomena might be an exaggeration or simply a myth, as Alex Bruns has recently argued.⁵⁵ Whatever is the case, this paper attempted to avoid potential pitfalls by selecting videos according to the criterion of trending. The latter, as YouTube claims, "aims to surface videos that a wide range of viewers would find interesting".⁵⁶ In this sense, the selection of trending videos ensured that they are suggested to a wide range of Internet users.

Based on these criteria, three YouTubers were selected: Yuri Dud, Alexei Navalny, and Danila Poperechny. Each of them represented a particular, albeit not necessarily always homogeneous, rhetorical act: epistemic (Yuri Dud), affective (Alexei Navalny), and comic (Danila Poperechny).⁵⁷

A number of videos were selected from each author that corresponded to a respective rhetorical act. Three interviews by Dud were selected, representing epistemic rhetorical acts. The claim that Dud's interview format is epistemic, rather than affective or comic, is justified by the fact that the selected interviews addressed knowledge of the interviewees on a particular topic via exchange of reasons, rather than merely by asking their opinions.⁵⁸ In this sense, the communication involved arguments on both sides. Three videos by Navalny were chosen, representing affective rhetorical acts. While Navalny's videos are often related to investigative journalism of sorts and can broadly be classified as argumentative in that regard, his rhetoric is often equated to populism in Mouffe's sense. Indeed, in his appeal to the public Navalny attempts to mobilise people against a specific pro-governmental figure, thus drawing an ideological line between 'us', the people, and 'them', the state. Finally, three videos by Poperechny were identified, representing comic rhetorical acts.

⁵⁴ These two phenomena refer to a situation whereby a person is exposed (or exposes himself or herself) to news that adhere to or are consistent with preconceived ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, thus further reinforcing them. See Eli Pariser, »Beware Online filter bubbles«, in *TED* (online), <https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles?referrer=playlist-how_to_pop_our_filter_bubbles, 2011>.

⁵⁵ Axel Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

⁵⁶ See <<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7239739?hl=en>>.

⁵⁷ Yuri Dud is if not the most recognised, then certainly the most popular interviewer on Russian YouTube. He is also known for his liberal attitudes towards many social and political issues. Alexei Navalny is Russia's most outspoken opposition figure. He started off as a blogger, rising to popularity through various digital platforms. Danila Poperechny is a blogger and a stand-up comedian who, besides being the first comedian to fill the Olympic Stadium, is known for his explicit mockery of the Russian authorities.

⁵⁸ Svend Brinkmann, »Could Interviews Be Epistemic?«, in: *Qualitative Inquiry*, (2007) 8: pp. 1116-1138.

These videos are different in kind: one stand-up performance, one music video and one commentary, reviewing the 2019 Moscow protests. Despite the stylistic differences, their common underlying thread is that in all these videos Poperechny employed irony, parody or satire in order to mock Russian hegemonic discourse (see Table 4 in the annex for illustration).

3.1. Thematic analysis (i): content

The first step involved an explication of the rhetorical situation which the three selected YouTubers exploited in their videos. For this purpose, a thematic analysis of content was employed, comprising three stages. First, the *titles, contents and tags* were extracted from each video (3 videos per YouTuber). The titles referred to the names under which a YouTube video can be found on YouTube. The contents referred to the core topics touched upon in a video. Finally, tags referred to #hashtags assigned to a video by the author. These tags referred to keywords that make it easier for the audience to find particular videos. Second, after titles, contents and tags were extracted, they were manually sorted out and analysed in order to further extract from them some common patterns, or codes, which could indicate the presence of publicly significant or salient issues. Because such common patterns were not always evident, the quality of the thematic analysis depended on some cultural fluency on the part of the analyst. For example, 'Kiselev' in the title; discussion of propaganda in the content; and 'media bias' in the tags were grouped under the code 'Biased media'. In this sense, 'biased media' was interpreted as something that recurred in discussions, titles, and tags. It was not necessarily evident in the language used that a discussion was related to propaganda. However, in the context of previous accusations of propaganda, Kiselev's name could be meaningfully linked to propaganda and media bias. Such common patterns can be found on the left side of Table 3 (see annex). Finally, the codes were collated together in order to identify broader themes. For example, 'biased media', 'dodging the questions' and 'state propaganda' were assigned to the broader theme 'hegemonic communication'. These themes can be found on the right side of the table. They represent more abstract topics uniting all three YouTubers.

The objective of this exercise was not to assign a specific "rhetorical situation" to each YouTuber, that is, to find out which issue a particular YouTuber talks about the most, but to examine the general informational environment constituting the YouTube public sphere. In other words, an examination of common and frequent themes referenced by YouTubers helped to identify publicly relevant topics around which the publics normally cluster together to further discuss them.

3.2. Rhetorical analysis (i): author

The second step was to understand which rhetorical form the author used to present a rhetorical situation to the audience. The answer to this question determines, at least in part, the presence of difference, that is, the *active* presence of attitudes differing from the hegemonic discourse. In this sense, an *active presence* refers to the fact that there is a counter-hegemonic discourse, but that this discourse, besides being merely present on YouTube, is also rhetorically enacted, thereby reacting to and generating a counterpublic. As argued in the theoretical chapter, there are three rhetorical acts affecting attitude formation: the cognitive basis for attitude formation; the affective basis; and the comic basis. Therefore, in order to find out whether the presence of difference *constituting the public sphere* was in place, it was necessary to analyse those rhetorical acts introducing a rhetorical situation.

There are two reasons behind the selection of these particular rhetorical acts. First, each rhetorical act indicates the existence of a particular public sphere, where social attitude formation can take place. Second, by empirically capturing all three existing rhetorical acts constituting the public sphere indiscriminately, the chances to account for all dimensions of social attitude formation also increase. Because the introduction of difference and social attitude change can be achieved by means of a good and convincing argument, affective language or through humour, it was crucial that all three modes were accounted for.

In order to analyse rhetorical acts, a set of utterances was taken from each video that corresponded to the themes identified in Section 3.1. The selection of utterances relied on their resonance with the audience, that is, the extent to which a particular utterance was circulating in the comment section. For example, Dud's and Kiselev's brief verbal exchange about price increases in Russia was not only picked out by the commenters, but also became something of a local meme, thereby highlighting its importance for the public. After selecting a few resonant utterances, each of them was analysed in terms of its rhetoric. The purpose of this examination was to identify the form in which difference was introduced to the public by the rhetor.

This step, of course, did not imply that the mere fact of the rhetor offering a counter-hegemonic rhetoric would automatically change social attitudes of the audience (although this might be the case if the rhetor holds a high degree of authority in the eyes of the public). However, cognitive, affective or comic rhetorical acts can both trigger a debate and organise the public around a particular issue. Thus, the rhetor's rhetoric is indispensable to presenting difference to the audience, especially because YouTubers fulfil the role of traditional media in the digital public sphere.

3.3. Rhetorical analysis (ii): audience

Insofar as reflective agency and subsequently the emergence of counterpublics require an active engagement of the public, the presence of difference cannot be reduced to the rhetor alone. Thus, by extending the logic presented in the second step, in the third step rhetorical acts of audiences were the primary focus of analysis.

Methodologically, it followed the second step in that three forms of rhetoric were approached: cognitive, affective and comic. In order to analyse the audience, this paper turned to comment sections, as they provide a dialogical space in which commenters engage in discussions, exchange of reasons, populism and mockery as a response to rhetorical situations. In this sense, the public and the rhetor represented two sides of the same coin, insofar as both were an analytical entry point for understanding how difference is communicated. In short, the rhetor creates a rhetorical situation by presenting the content (in our case) in counter-hegemonic terms (e.g. by presenting protests as something positive) and the public, after receiving the message, further reproduces the content by digitally discussing it, thereby generating a digital community of sorts. The presence of difference on both ends is thus an indispensable condition for changing social attitudes, as it forces the public to engage in all sorts of communicative behaviour, be it reason-giving, populism or mockery.

In order to examine how the presence of difference plays out within the public, the first three or four most highly ranked comments were taken into consideration. The selection of sources was determined by the largest number of 'likes' and responses (i.e. ranking), as it guaranteed their visibility and public relevance.

3.4. Thematic analysis (ii): social attitudes

Besides the *presence of difference* and rhetorical situation, the formation of counterpublics also requires a continuous discursive encounter with *difference*, whereby someone is exposed to a particular set of beliefs, values, or attitudes. The aim of the final step was therefore to apply a thematic analysis to comment sections in order to identify the most salient, visible, and circulating themes within the audience. These themes could then be considered as indicators of the audiences' social attitudes towards an attitude object (e.g. Kiselev, Mikhalkov or Navalny). Consider the following example. Being a conservative-leaning citizen, you encounter an argument in the comment section about climate change. There is a chance that you will delve into the argument, but it is perhaps more likely that a single encounter will make you scoff and leave it at that. Imagine now that you persistently encounter comments with the same argument. Not only does this argument express a social attitude that differs from yours, it also makes the argument more salient. Imagine now the entire comment feed filled with arguments resembling the one contradicting your prejudice. Such an abundance of information significantly increases its salience and visibility, thus making the reader more likely to be exposed to difference.

Methodologically, the thematic analysis mirrored the strategy outlined in Section 3.1. First, the top ten comments and responses to them were selected. The 'top comments' meant that they either received the largest number of expressions of approval (e.g. by being liked) or were highly contentious (e.g. by having a large number of responses). In either case, the chance of being visible in the feed was high. Then these comments and sub-comments were grouped together according to their semantic commonalities. For example, a number of comments that in different ways accused Kiselev and Mikhalkov of being deliberately obscure when they were asked questions about Putin or about their wealth, shared a semantic commonality which was referred to in this paper as '*The guest is shying away from provocative questions*'. Another set of comments, for example, pointed out Kiselev's and Mikhalkov's inability to respond to simple questions. These comments did not mean that Kiselev's and Mikhalkov's responses were deliberately obscure, but rather indicated the complete absence of a response, whether or not this was intended. This set of comments was grouped under the name '*Inability to provide an answer to simple questions*'. Both of these 'codes' were then grouped on the basis of their similarity under a more general heading: '*Guests' attempts to dodge Dud's questions*' (see Table 3, annex). This overarching thematic cluster, encompassing more specific codes with even more specific comments, was intended to offer a snapshot of some of the actively circulating social attitudes.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Social networks and YouTube

Why Russian YouTube? First, recent research released by the Levada Center, a non-governmental polling organisation in Russia, has suggested a significant increase in the use of social networks among youth (aged 18-24), from 33% in 2013 to 63% in 2019. Concurrently, the surveys have shown a steady decrease in television consumption among the same age group.⁵⁹ This can be explained by a growing distrust in the official media sources, which are virtually equated with the state, and a greater trust in social networks and online news.⁶⁰ Second, according to Deloitte, YouTube is currently the leading social platform in Russia, with 86% of active users, interested in watching the content created by both celebrities (34%) and ordinary people (30%).⁶¹ Unfortunately, the research does not capture the social and political dimensions of these views. Thus alone these numbers are not sufficient to indicate the presence of a politicised public sphere. Nonetheless, secondary sources suggest that YouTube offers anonymity and provides its users with an interactive environment in which unconstrained political communication can unfold.⁶² It is for these reasons—the increased media consumption among Russians and YouTube’s growing popularity—that Russian YouTube deserves more attention.

4.2. Thematic analysis (i): content

In order to demonstrate that Russian YouTube indeed provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for the emergence of reflexive agency, and consequently of counterpublics, it is first necessary to identify the pertinent themes constituting the rhetorical space on Russian YouTube. This rhetorical space in turn constitutes a rhetorical situation which organises the public sphere.

After a manual coding procedure during which titles, contents and tags from each author’s videos were grouped together under codes corresponding to the recurring patterns, a number of common themes have emerged: hegemonic communication, censorship, the effectiveness of government, protests, and the ‘us versus them narrative’ (see Table 2). In light of the recent protests, the salience of some of these themes can also be corroborated by Levada’s post-protest survey.⁶³ Each of these themes represents a rhetorical situation or

⁵⁹ See Denis Volkov and Stepan Goncharov, «Rossiyskiy Media Landshaft 2019: televidenie, pressa, internet i socialnye seti», [Russian Media Landscape: television, press, the Internet and social media], in: *Levada-Center* (online), <<https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/LevadaMedia2019-1.pdf>>, 2019, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9.

⁶¹ See Deloitte, «Mediapotrebleniye v Rossii», [Media consumption in Russia], <<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ru/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/russian/mediaconsumption-russia-2019.pdf>>, 2019, pp. 28.

⁶² Anastasia Denisova/ Aliaksandr Herasimenka, «How Russian Rap on YouTube Advances Alternative Political Deliberation: Hegemony, Counter-Hegemony, and Emerging Resistant Publics», in: *Social Media Society*, 5 (2019) 2: pp. 1-11. Mary Grace Antony/ Ryan J. Thomas, «This Is Citizen Journalism at Its Finest: YouTube and the Public Sphere in the Oscar Grant Shooting Incident», in: *New Media & Society* 12, (2010) 8 : pp. 1280-1296.

⁶³ See Levada report, «Protests», 2019, <<https://www.levada.ru/en/2019/10/08/protests-4/>>.

an exogenous shock that prompts a discussion. They recur in the rhetor's rhetorical acts, thereby making the issue more salient.

As is evident from the box below, the themes refer either to recent events such as protests and censorship or to widely known social issues such as effectiveness of the government. These themes also intensively circulate in the official public sphere. However, their framing is generally one-sided, thus precluding any formation of an independent public. The penetration of these themes into YouTube, which originally was a rather bleak place for political engagement, is thus an important element for the facilitation of a free discussion.

Table 2

Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State propaganda • Dodging the questions • Public diplomacy • Biased media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hegemonic communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of speech • Sokolov's case • The Russian Orthodox Church • Political correctness • The offensive nature of jokes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Censorship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corrupted government • Elite stealing from the poor • Lack of legitimacy • Putin' mismanagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The effectiveness of government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police brutality • Freedom of assembly • Demonstrations • Moscow elections • Civil disobedience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protests
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patriotism • The West and the US are enemies • Sanctions • Russia's participation in Syrian war • Crimea is ours and the Donbas war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Us versus them narrative

4.3. Rhetorical analysis (i): author

A free and active discussion is an important element for forming one's attitudes. However, as with anything else, the role of a rhetor, that is, the one who frames a theme, should not be underestimated. While YouTube increasingly includes politicised themes, this inclusion is not accidental and is often facilitated by famous YouTube personalities. In this sense, YouTubers are rhetors transmitting information, much as other more traditional media sources, such as newspapers, radio or television. Therefore, the way in which the issue is framed largely determines the subsequent attitude formation of the audience. Moreover, the way in which a theme is presented plays an important role, too.

Take, for example, Yuri Dud's interview with Dmitry Kiselev, a famous news anchor in Russia, working for the pro-governmental TV channel Russia24. In this interview, among other things, Kiselev was asked why his weekly news show leaves out or misrepresents important information. Consider the following dialogue:

Dud: Why has the increase in prices not been mentioned even once in the news after New Year's?

Kiselev: It [the increase in prices] is nothing new... We [Russia24] often mention the unsatisfying economic growth...

D: Let me specify. The unsatisfying growth or the economic decline?

K: If there is a decline, we talk about a decline...

D: Is it now a decline or a growth?

K: Now? A growth.

D: What is this hypothesis based on?

K: This is not a hypothesis (laughs). It is data provided by Rosstat.

D: Explain to me... if there is an economic growth, why are prices growing?

...

K: I am not an economist. But I think that it [the increase in prices] is not a dramatic issue in Russia ... for most people.

Besides repeatedly asking the question 'why' after most of Kiselev's responses—which indicates the epistemic character of the interview, since it puts Kiselev in a position where he has to provide justifications—every rhetorical act by Dud is epistemic in principle, as it is aimed at an exchange of reasons. Dud challenges Kiselev's arguments by asking thematic questions, thereby creating a rhetorical situation around which a public can mobilise and to which this public can respond. Thus, this example is not about how Kiselev responds and whether he is factually correct or not, but about the argumentative and dialogical structure of the conversation, as it is precisely its epistemic nature that endows the rhetorical act with a persuasive force. The difference is then introduced through the process of questioning the official narrative espoused by Kiselev. The same holds for Dud's interview with Nikita Mikhalkov, a film director known for his pro-governmental stance. In this case, too, the difference is introduced by an epistemic rhetorical act. In this particular case, however, through an analogy:

Dud: ... I mean responsibility. If the film is bad, it is the director's fault.

Mikhalkov: Yes...

D: If the Ministry of Emergency Situations in a country does not function properly...

M: the president is responsible, among others.

...

D: the Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets has just announced that the number of people below the poverty line ... has increased by 2 million people. Whose fault is that?

M: I think that... I think that the fault is... in my, I repeat, in my opinion... an ill-conceived—in substance—possibility of human... so to say... In those categories of his possibilities that he today has. I think that in one way or another, that the government which exist today... I don't understand why the government remains the same. I don't understand it.

D: Nikita Sergeich, is it Dmitri Medvedev's fault?

M: I think yes...

D: But who kept Medvedev in office?

M: Absolutely. That's why I do not understand it.

Besides an awkwardly lengthy and convoluted answer, Mikhalkov proved unable to answer a simple question which he seemed able to answer when it did not require uttering Putin's name. However, again, the point is not in Mikhalkov's factual inaccuracy, but rather in introducing the difference. Put differently, the rhetorical situation at hand (i.e. Putin and the effectiveness of government) is brought about by Dud who addressed the issue of Putin's responsibility to Mikhalkov, whereas the latter failed to respond to the question. Again, the rhetorical framing of this dialogue is epistemic in principle, as it is aimed at extracting reasons, albeit by means of an analogy.

While Dud's position might not be immediately evident, it definitely becomes more explicit when both interviews are compared with those where Dud's views seem to be more aligned with the position of the interviewee. Consider an excerpt from an interview with Navalny:

Dud: Why is there so much negativity in your political agenda? You focus exclusively on bad things that happen in Russia.

Navalny: No. We have both positive and negative points. We even have a project called 'Санация права (Sanitation of law)'. It lists a number of laws that should be removed ... we offer justifications for why they must be revoked or revised.

D: Absolutely. But name the three most recent public things in Russia you were happy about ... Most of what you say is correct, but...

Throughout the interview, Dud struggles to find points of disjuncture with Navalny. Compared against this excerpt, Dud's counter-hegemonic discourse in the first two excerpts becomes more explicit. In the first case, Dud refers to something that is already thematically present in the public discourse—state propaganda—thus putting Kiselev in a position where he has to justify whatever Dud imputes to him. Similarly, in the second case, Dud points to the publicly discussed issue of Putin's responsibility, thus forcing Mikhalkov, as a person known for his pro-Putin stance, to respond. Both cases present a counter-hegemonic engagement with the interlocutors, based on an exchange of reasons between the interviewer and the interviewee. That the claims or reasons may be factually incorrect on either side is beside the point, however. It is the introduction of difference that plays a role in constructing a counterpublic.

Consider now a different rhetorical act used to engage with the public, this time espoused by Navalny. The following excerpts are the statements with which Navalny concludes each of his videos:

"I suggest to everyone to compare this man (Denis Popov) who is responsible for putting the protesters in jail—with his stolen real estate—on the one hand, and the normal and honest people, on the other hand."

"We have beaten you in elections and the only thing you can do is to break into our houses and take away our phones. But we have beaten you and will continue beating you. The entire country hates you."

"You people with your low salary will be paying income taxes and social contributions, and they [the deputies] will not. You will have a tiny pension, be forced into a survival mode, while they have received several apartments for their civil service."

In this case, Navalny engages in what Chantal Mouffe calls a construction of the political. That is, Navalny engages the public affectively by drawing the line between us and them, where 'us' refers to 'normal and honest people', 'the entire country', 'people with low salaries' and 'them' refers to the government. Although it falls short of the Habermasian ideal of publics engaged in a communicative exchange of reasons, the affective mobilisation of counterpublics should not be underestimated, as the affective element is an indispensable component of social attitudes. Moreover, the introduction of difference by appeals to injustice or exclusion often proves to resonate more intensively if the themes discursively fit with the experiences of people. In addition, Navalny, by creating a hegemonic target responsible for the injustice, succeeds in introducing the difference in a blunt and direct manner, which facilitates the creation of counterpublics.

Consider now a set of yet different rhetorical acts, framing the themes identified in Section 3.1 by means of humour. The rhetorical acts are taken respectively from Poperechny's stand-up comedy performance, from a music parody in which he presumably ridicules Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, and from a video in which he reviews recent protests and bushfires in Russia:

"Why does the vatnik pray for so long? Because he can't get up off his knees"

Poperechny sings the following lines dressed as a priest: "I am the main mediator between God and money. For a symbolic price I will pray away your sins. Everyone feels better, I just need to read a verse [from the bible]. The only thing that bothers me: what if God does exist?"

"The police is beating up old people who just sit on benches. (Sarcastically) This is the scariest electorate on the streets—old sitting ladies, now they probably should sit someplace else [implying jail]"

These are three very different jokes. The first joke makes fun of 'vatniks', a slur referring to slavish followers of the Kremlin's propaganda. The claim that Putin brought Russia off its knees, meaning that he made it great again, is often attributed to 'vatniks'. In the second example, Poperechny ridicules the Russian Orthodox Church, especially Patriarch Kirill of Moscow for his lavish lifestyle, linking it to corruption. While this is not an explicitly anti-governmental position in that it does not criticise the political institutions directly, it nevertheless—due to the increasingly politicised nature of the Church in Russia—refers to a counter-hegemonic discourse.⁶⁴ The third joke, finally, is a reference to the 2019 Moscow protests, where the police were not only arresting protesters for what was considered by the public as legitimate acts of political expression, but were also attacking random or curious passers-by who either just happened to be walking past the protest or were observing it from afar. Hence Poperechny's mention of the old ladies sitting on benches. While these examples cover different topics, they are similar in two aspects. First, in all examples Poperechny employs a counter-hegemonic discourse. Second, in all examples his aim is to ridicule specific rhetorical situations: patriotism, governmental effectiveness and protests. In this regard, Poperechny's rhetorical acts introduce difference by means of the comic, which appeals to both the cognitive component of attitudes, since every joke can be reconstructed in terms of an argument, as well as the affective component, since these jokes mock and ridicule a specific political target.

Each rhetor considered above, be it Dud, Navalny or Poperechny, thus introduces a difference by creating a rhetorical situation through a counter-hegemonic rhetorical act, thereby facilitating the emergence of counterpublics.

⁶⁴ See for a review Jeremy W. Lamoreaux/ Lincoln Flake, »The Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin, and Religious (Il)liberalism in Russia«, in: *Palgrave Communications*, 4, (2018) 1-4. Or Dmitry Adamsky, »How the Russian Church Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb«, in: *Foreign Affairs* (online), June 17, 2019, 1-4. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-06-14/how-russian-church-learned-stop-worrying-and-love-bomb>>.

4.4. Rhetorical analysis (ii): audience

While the difference introduced by a rhetor is important for initiating a discussion, it offers only one side of the coin. In order to understand whether a social attitude change, that is, the formation of a counterpublic is agential and not simply the result of, for example, a personal attachment to a YouTuber, it is necessary to consider the audiences and their rhetorical acts seriously.

Consider two high-ranked comments to Mikhalkov's and Kiselev's interviews:⁶⁵

Nanko48 (16k likes and 328 sub-comments):

- Nikita Mikhalkov, what will you tell Putin when you meet next time?
- Vov [short for Vladimir], sorry if I said something wrong at the interview. I was dodging the questions as much as possible.

D23 FOOTBALL (3.5k likes and 30 sub-comments):

"When your apartment costs 160 million, then the increase in prices is indeed not dramatic"

Each of these comments, as well as the sub-comments, picked out a specific rhetorical situation—dodging the questions and economic growth, respectively—as well as Kiselev's and Mikhalkov's responses to it, in order to subject them to ridicule. In the first example, the user *Nanko48* pointed out Mikhalkov's inability to respond to what another user in the sub-comments referred to as "uncomfortable questions". In the second example, the user with the nickname *D23 FOOTBALL* brought together two bits from the interview—one in which Kiselev mentioned the price of his new apartment and his previous assertion about the non-dramatic increase in prices—as an indication of Kiselev's indifference to the economic recession. These two comments are not the only ones ridiculing or mocking. Most comments with a high approval rating in one way or another ridicule or criticise both of Dud's guests. Compare with the comments to the interview with Navalny:

Nurbol (3.2k likes and 28 sub-comments)

"We demand the second part!!! Give us more Navalny."

Nikita Ochnev (2.5k likes and 27 sub-comments):

"Actually, these [Dud's] questions made it clear that Navalny is able to respond to provocation on a decent level [and] with good argumentation. Better than various compotes."⁶⁶

Kirill Guliaev (2.3k likes and 12 sub-comments):

"In my opinion, the only man who was able to answer and respond to Dud. Good interview."

Evidently, Navalny enjoys greater digital support than the two previously mentioned official media personalities, at least among Dud's audience. However, the point here is not to argue who is more popular, although it is indeed an appropriate task for future research. Instead, the reason is to demonstrate that the audience is active and is engaging in meaning construction through a digital dialogue with the rhetor as well as other members of the public.

Not only does the audience engage in an evaluation of the arguments by ridiculing two preeminent mouthpieces of the official discourse, its members also engage in affective and epistemic discussions with their peers. Consider a few comments to Navalny's videos:

⁶⁵ The translations were adapted to fit English grammatically and stylistically.

⁶⁶ Kiselev's last name is phonetically reminiscent to *kissel*, a drink made out of *compote*. Thus, in this context, the use of the word *compote* is a witty way to refer to Kiselev.

Chmoshnik Normalnogo Cheloveka (212 likes)
“Let’s ... make [the video] popular”

OdinNaLdine (243 likes)
“Write comments like that, like them and keep the video trending”

Evgeniy Gagloev (367 likes)
“Like other comments and comment yourself, let’s bring the video to the top!”

Angels of the Ages (511 likes)
““The entire country hates you’ - an absolutely correct statement about the current government and Putin”

As already mentioned before, Navalny’s rhetoric is saturated with affective language, which helps him to draw the line between us and them, as a means to mobilise the just ‘us’ against the unjust ‘them’. Unsurprisingly, this form of rhetoric has been often equated with populism, of which Navalny is repeatedly accused.⁶⁷ However, affective rhetorical acts are nevertheless an effective means to foster solidarity, which is clearly seen in the examples above. All three commenters appeal to their peers, asking them to engage in a digital activism of sorts, while the last picks out Navalny’s statement in order to express his or her agreement with it. Again, what is relevant here is the communicative activity with which the audience is engaging. In this sense, the audience is not passive, but actively *reproduces* difference after encountering it online. In other words, in addition to the difference introduced by a rhetor on the basis of themes, the audience takes up this difference and engages with it communicatively. This is indicative of the formation of a counterpublic.

In the case of Poperechny, the top comments were less politicised, perhaps because in Poperechny’s stand-up performance, his parodies or his overviews, politics and social issues are far from being the central topic. This might mean that as a consequence Poperechny’s viewers are less susceptible to exposure to difference, simply because difference does not occupy the central place on his YouTube channel. Nonetheless, there is a number of comments that give us at least a snapshot of commenters’ social attitudes:

MAKER [Roman] (5.6k likes and 43 sub-comments)
“To the point about the government. Funny and sometimes touching... Poperechny is ... courageous ... A stand-up which highlights what we try not to think about but what we encounter in our everyday life”

S G (3.8k likes and 20 sub-comments)
“[QUOTES] ‘The only thing that bothers me: what if God does exist?’ this is excellent!”

Alexander Sourjikov (2.4k likes and 17 sub-comments)
“Bloggers are now the primary informational source in Russia. Danya, bravo! I expected something like this from you. You did the right thing speaking about this.”

While such politically oriented comments occasionally reoccur, they easily get lost in the comments that pick out other, perhaps more entertaining, elements of Poperechny’s stand-up comedy or of his blogging. Thus, in comparison to Dud and Navalny, Poperechny’s comment section does not exemplify those social attitudes that can be considered as exposing to difference. Accordingly, the emergence of reflective agency should be seen as having a lesser impact in comparison with Dud and Navalny.

⁶⁷ Andrey Pertsev, «Alexei Navalny’s Techno-Populism», in: *Carnegie Moscow Center* (online), 2017, <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/72913>> (accessed December 18, 2019).

4.5. Thematic analysis (ii): social attitudes

It is evident from the previous rhetorical analysis that the commenting audience is an active and not merely passive consumer of the rhetor's rhetoric. Unpacking the audience shows that commenters discuss, debate, bring arguments and counterarguments against one another, express affection for or dislike of particular attitude objects, and engage in creative mockery of the authorities. Not only does the audience discuss political matters of common concern, its rhetorical acts, as it was shown in the previous section, are inherently persuasive, and therefore have the potential to shift social attitudes. However, while the presence of difference and the form in which this difference is introduced are important to counterpublic formation, continuous exposure to such difference is equally important. Indeed, research suggests that a random passer-by is likely to be more motivated to invest time and effort in re-examining and reflecting on an issue if s/he perceives a consensus on that particular issue within a particular digital environment.⁶⁸

In other words, an extra condition under which critical attitudes and thus counterpublics can emerge refers to the extent to which these attitudes are visible to the not-yet-converted others. While, on the one hand, visibility can be assessed by examining a video's popularity and its circulation, on the other hand, exposure to difference can occur in the comment sections themselves, where people actually interact. That the former case (the video's popularity) fulfils the aforementioned condition is tacitly assumed in this paper, as all videos were selected according to their popularity. Let us examine whether the comment sections fulfil this condition too.

When studying online social attitudes, the first heuristic step is to pay attention to the like/dislike ratio, as it might tell us something about the general sentiment regarding the video. For example, an evidently pro-governmental music video, uploaded by Timati and Guf the day before the Moscow City Duma elections, received over one million dislikes, making it the most disliked video on YouTube in Russia and forcing the authors to remove it from YouTube.⁶⁹ This clearly indicates popular anti-governmental sentiments in digital communities. Similarly, one can compare the like/dislike ratio for Dud's interviews with Kiselev (68% of dislikes) and Mikhalkov (19%)⁷⁰ on the one hand, and Navalny (8%) on the other, in order to get a general idea of popular attitudes towards these persons.⁷¹ It should be noted, however, that Navalny's percentage of dislikes is perhaps higher than it would otherwise have been, due to state-sponsored Russian web brigades, which targeted popular videos with anti-governmental content before the 2018 presidential elections.⁷² In comparison, the more recent videos by Navalny receive somewhere between 1% and 5% of dislikes, a support rate which also holds steady for most of his videos.⁷³

⁶⁸ Stephan Lewandowsky et al., »Science by Social Media: Attitudes towards Climate Change Are Mediated by Perceived Social Consensus«, in: *Memory & Cognition*, 47, (2019) 8: pp. 1445-1456.

⁶⁹ »Timati Udalil Klip 'Moskva', Poluchivshiy Million Dizlaikov«, [Timati deleted the music video "Moscow" after it received one million dislikes], in: *Radio Svoboda*, September 10, 2019, <<https://www.svoboda.org/a/30155163.html>>.

⁷⁰ 19% of dislikes concerning the interview with Mikhalkov might be surprising, especially in comparison with Kiselev's 68%. Such a comparatively low number may be explained by the different content of both interviews. In Kiselev's case most questions were broadly political, while Mikhalkov was asked, among other things, about his work as a director. However, the digital audience evidently cared more about Mikhalkov's political sentiments.

⁷¹ The percentage refers to the percentage of dislikes in relation to the likes: the number of likes divided by the total number of likes and dislikes.

⁷² Sergey Sanovich, »Computational Propaganda in Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation«, Working Paper No 2017.3, <<https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Comprop-Russia.pdf>>. Ilya Varlamov, »Vot i Vsi, Menya Slivayut« [That's it. I am being flushed down], <https://varlamov.ru/2898190.html?page=8&cut_expand=1>.

⁷³ The three videos offered in the methodology section are have 1.3%, 1.7%, 4.8% of dislikes respectively.

The themes (see Table 3, annex) recurring in the comment sections also correspond to the social attitudes expressed by the like/dislike ratio. The top ten most visible comments (i.e. with the most likes and sub-comments) to Dud's interviews with Kiselev and Mikhalkov, for example, point out the 'obnoxiousness' of the interviewees, their 'faulty argumentation' and 'the inability to answer questions appropriately'. By contrast, under the video with Navalny, commenters express solidarity and stress his competence and honesty in the way he responds to Dud's questions. Even more solidarity can be found directly in the comment sections to Navalny's own videos, where people are especially vigilant in encouraging users to keep the video trending—and as a consequence to make it more visible—by leaving comments and liking it. Another recurring theme derived from comments to Navalny's videos can be broadly categorised as 'people versus the government' in that commenters, in one way or another, refer to the government's direct responsibility for socio-economic injustice, police violence, and political inefficacy. For example, two of the top comments pointed out the wealth gap between the authorities and the people, initiating a discussion and receiving substantial support from other users. Yet another set of comments accused the government of seeking to safeguard their mercenary interests at the expense of the people. Taken together, these comments will appear to a random passerby as exemplifying a particular *anti-governmental* social attitude, thus creating the perception of a consensus of sorts.

By contrast, the case of Poperechny is more ambiguous. Poperechny's audience is likely to be younger than Dud's and Navalny's, as his content is primarily focused on entertainment, despite his open disagreement with the current regime. However, some anti-government themes circulating in the comment sections can still be discerned. For example, the commenters seem to emphasise Poperechny's bravery, notably related to his anti-government rhetoric, and express their support, as is evident, for example, in "we won't allow them to put you in jail for this" posts and the like. A number of commenters also pointed out that Poperechny's humour delivers more truthful information than official media sources. However, these comments, while located at the top when the research was conducted, can easily sink into the flow of comments which refer to other bits of Poperechny's stand-up routine. In this sense, exposure to difference in comments to Poperechny's video can be considered as being lower than in the cases of Dud and Navalny.

By entering a particular comment section one can thus perceive a certain consensus among users with respect to the government. While disagreements also often occur, people's attitudes, as represented by the top comments, tend to be more or less uniform. By being among the top comments, they also increase the salience and visibility of critical attitudes, thereby increasing exposure to them. One could argue that these commenters might be supporters of Navalny, or that they are Dud's staunch fans. While this indeed may be the case, a few remarks must be made. First, comment sections are not a conflict-free locale, defined by uniformity alone: people in the comments disagree with Navalny and debate Dud. Rather than offering an all-permeating consensus, these comment sections are a dynamic and interactive space for exchange of opinions. There are comments that explicitly denounce Navalny's rhetoric and there are commenters who counter this rhetoric by responding with arguments, populist language, or humour. Thus, there is no reason to assume that the digital publics of Navalny or Dud are driven by an inexorable ideological uniformity. Second, digital communities not only congregate around rhetorical situations created by Dud, Navalny and Poperechny, but they also grow in number: views, subscribers and comments multiply every day, and while it is impossible to demonstrate the political preferences of those responsible for this growth, this growth cannot be reduced to a fan base alone. Although further research is needed in order to examine and understand the dynamics of growth, it is evident that the popularity of YouTubers expressing anti-governmental

attitudes increases. Finally, the mere fact that anti-governmental rhetoric increasingly enjoys popularity on YouTube makes it almost impossible for a passer-by to miss it. Given that YouTube is currently one of the leading digital platforms in Russia, the chance of exposure to difference among the Internet users also increases. However, while this paper has approached social attitudes from an interpretative perspective, that is, by inquiring into the most common social attitudes associated with some of the most prominent YouTube videos, further quantitative research is needed in order to understand the reach of these attitudes across different YouTube channels as well as different digital platforms. Only by answering these questions can we understand the dynamics of social attitudes and their persuasive potential.

5. Conclusion

Any progressive socio-political change in authoritarian regimes like Russia is predictably difficult, largely because civil society is subjected to continuous assaults, while the public sphere is too often hijacked by the loyal henchmen of the regime. However, the web, and YouTube in particular, seem to offer the public a foxhole, where it can relatively freely share information and engage in discussions on political and social issues. By examining Russian YouTube, this article has attempted to show how in this particular digital environment a shift in social attitudes and the emergence of counterpublics are likely to occur, thus advancing a bottom-up approach to social change. The paper has proceeded in three steps. The first section reviewed and linked three distinct, yet interrelated theoretical terrains: social-political change, social attitudes change, and the public sphere. This section advanced the claim that a change in social attitudes must precede any bottom-up social change, and that the former is contingent upon the public's ability to develop a reflective agency, that is, a capacity to reflect upon one's previously held beliefs. The four conditions under which such reflective agency is likely to emerge were outlined and then linked to the emergence of counterpublics. On the basis of the theoretical discussion, the ensuing methodological and empirical sections have shown that all four conditions obtain to different degrees on Russian YouTube, thereby allowing for counterpublics to emerge.

These four conditions are: *a non-institutionalised environment, exogenous shocks, presence of difference and exposure to difference*. The first condition has been assumed as given. Due to its non-institutionalised nature, Russian YouTube harbours a variety of often contradicting attitudes which translate into more concrete discourses. These discourses tend to compete against each other, which in itself might signify a more democratic environment than Russia's official media allows for. What is evident, however, is that an explicit critique of the authorities in online communities on Russian YouTube is more salient than in the offline world. Second, these more salient and critical discourses rely on specific themes (i.e. exogenous shocks), thereby creating rhetorical situations around which various digital publics congregate. These themes represent resonant socio-political events which enjoy a particular salience in the media. For example, one such theme may be the Moscow protests or a wave of censorship swelling across the country. However, while these themes create a rhetorical situation by prompting online discussions, they are in themselves value-free until they are rhetorically enacted by a particular rhetor. In that regard, the state media might frame protests in a negative light or barely mention them at all, whereas particular YouTubers might describe them positively in terms of, for example, a struggle against social injustice. Also, a mere mention of themes does not suffice. They have to be communicated in a way that engages the public. Thus, the third relevant condition for the emergence of reflective agency is communication, or rather a particular type of rhetorical communication by means of which a difference (i.e. a counter-hegemonic discourse, a theme) is presented to the public. In this paper, three such types (referred to as rhetorical acts) have been discerned: cognitive, affective and comic. Each type corresponds to a particular psychological faculty responsible for attitude change as well as to a particular public sphere. For example, Habermas's public sphere is based on deliberation, whereby persuasion depends on the epistemic quality of reasons, and Mouffe's public sphere is based on agonistic interaction, whereby persuasion is achieved through affective language. This paper discussed three of

the most-watched YouTubers—Dud, Poperechny and Navalny—in order to show that Russian YouTube exemplifies the features of all three types. It has been argued that the rhetorical act through which Dud presents particular themes may be considered as cognitive, whereas Poperechny's and Navalny's rhetorical acts are comic and affective, respectively. Moreover, the paper has shown that the audience is not a passive recipient of information, but plays a substantial role in discussing themes, exchanging arguments, appealing to emotions and mocking the authorities. Finally, the paper has demonstrated that the presence of social attitudes that differ from the official state attitudes is not incidental. They populate both the Russian YouTube in general and the comment sections in particular, thereby increasing one's chance to be exposed to counter-hegemonic attitudes.

It is worth noting, however, that while the emergence of counterpublics and, with them, the shift in social attitudes towards the Russian authorities, does not imply the inevitability of civil disobedience, this should not discourage one from expecting further tectonic shifts in Russia's political landscape. This paper suggested to conceptualise both acts of protesting and acts of commenting as social practices, not necessarily because verbal expressions of dissent are equivalent in their efficacy to political demonstrations, but because the tacit dissent, bred within the realms of the digital web, where the Kremlin's reach remains limited, is yet another political front where resistance endures. Moreover, despite all the fuss and excitement around the recent protests, Levada's polling suggests that people in general appear to be more reserved about going to the streets, preferring digital activism instead.⁷⁴ This sentiment should not be overlooked, and rather taken as a further auxiliary indicator of emerging online counterpublics. However, optimism about unhindered online publics enjoying digital freedom should not overshadow the reality of Russia's political aspirations.⁷⁵ Indeed, while the Internet still remains a bastion of dissent, it is a fragile place, especially in light of Russia's increasing attempts to control it.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See Levada polling, »Bolshinstvo Rossiyan Otkazalis Mitingovat Radi Izmenenija k Luchshemu« [Most Russians Refused to Protests for the Better Future], in: *Levada-Center* (online), 2019, <<https://www.levada.ru/2019/02/13/bolshinstvo-rossiyan-otkazalis-mitingovat-radi-izmenenij-k-luchshemu/>>. This does not mean that there will be fewer protests in the future. It simply means that the majority of Russians is still more comfortable with expressing dissent digitally.

⁷⁵ Alexandra Prokopenko, »What's Behind Russia's New Offensive Against the Internet Economy?«, in: *Carnegie Moscow Center* (online), August 12, 2019, <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79660>>.

⁷⁶ Max Seddon, »Russian Technology: Can the Kremlin Control the Internet?«, in: *Financial Times* (online), June 5, 2019, <<https://www.ft.com/content/93be9242-85e0-11e9-a028-86cea8523dc2>>.

6. Annex

Table 3

Code: commonalities among the comments	Overarching thematic clusters
<p>Kiselev and Mikhalkov at Dud's:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The guest is shying away from provocative questions ● Logical inconsistencies in guest's arguments ● The guest is obnoxious ● A constant reiteration of propaganda topics by the guest ● Inability to provide an answer to simple questions ● Mikhalkov's link to Kiselev in terms of their rhetoric ● Uncomfortable questions about Putin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Guests' obnoxiousness ● Guests' attempts to dodge Dud's questions and guests' faulty argumentation
<p>Navalny at Dud's:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Navalny's correctness ● Navalny's ability to respond to questions reasonably ● Requests of another interview with Navalny ● Navalny's 'adequate' answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Navalny's competence ● Support for Navalny
<p>Navalny:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Appeals to keep the video trending ● The government working against the interests of people ● Shaming the the officials ● Trench between the poor people and the rich officials ● 'People are with you, Navalny' and 'Don't give up, Navalny' ● Appeals to write more comments and to like the video ● Police brutality across the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expression of solidarity with Navalny ● People versus the government
<p>Poperechny:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tolerance in Poperechny's discourse ● Poperechny's brave rhetoric about the government ● Separation of God and the church ● Mockery of Kiril the Patriarch of Russia ● Political satire ● The possibility of imprisonment ● Stand-up as a source of information ● Expressions of gratitude for Poperechny's openly political position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Poperechny's bravery ● Stand-up as a source of 'true' information

Table 4

AUTHOR	TITLE	SUBSCRIBERS	VIEWS	A YOUTUBE LINK (all sources retrieved on December 28, 2019)
Yuri Dud	Kiselev – brother in the USA, nephew in the war, pensions	6.45M	9,569,472	https://youtu.be/7JrIAY5G7jE
Yuri Dud	Mikhalkov – the government, the anthem, Badcomedian		10,831,931	https://youtu.be/6cjcgu865ok
Yuri Dud	Navalny – about a revolution, Caucasus and Spartacus / Big interview		16,014,432	https://youtu.be/Bf9zvyPachs
Alexei Navalny	The secret life of a foreign agent	3.19M	3,488,689	https://youtu.be/Yr4f7m69-F4
Alexei Navalny	URGENT: Putin stomps his feet. Raidings across the country		2,962,928	https://youtu.be/GtJ0i6GB7ro
Alexei Navalny	Circus on ice: Putin's insanity grows stronger		4,682,880	https://youtu.be/PSs-fvkKO-Mg
Danila Poperechny	Danila Poperechny: "IMPARTIAL" ⁷⁷	2.69M	17,672,763	https://youtu.be/lqfHqld8
Danila Poperechny	POPERECHNY – POP CULTURE		15,377,590	https://youtu.be/wlh2B5oDIxo
Danila Poperechny	FIRE / RALLIES / A BIG INTERVIEW WITH KSHISHTOVSKI		1,683,673	https://youtu.be/tDmIpQhZSSI

⁷⁷ In the original title, the word is «нелицеприятный» (nelicepriyatnii). A dictionary definition of this word is “impartial”, “unbiased” or “candid”. However, the word can also mean something or somebody vexing or disagreeable. This semantic ambiguity is likely to have played a role in choosing the name for Poperechny’s stand-up routine.

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