

## **State Mobilized Contention: The Construction of Novorossiia**

Samuel A. Greene

Kings College London

and

Graeme B. Robertson

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In the early spring of 2014, Igor Grebtsov became a little green man. He boarded a flight from Ekaterinburg, in the Russian Ural mountains, to Simferopol', capital of the Ukrainian Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and "assisted" – as Vladimir Putin later admitted many active-duty Russian troops did – in the occupation and dubious referendum that led to the peninsula's annexation by Moscow. That mission accomplished, though, Grebtsov declined to return home; instead, he and numerous others who had taken part in the Crimean operation decamped to the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, where he joined the army of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic as a volunteer. In December of the same year, wounded in a tank battle, he returned home to recuperate – and to tell his story in the local newspaper to a public who saw him as something of a hero.<sup>1</sup>

Grebtsov's story is just one of many that constituted a huge 'rally around the flag' spurred by Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in the eastern Ukrainian Donbas region in 2014 – and the geopolitical stalemate with the U.S. and Europe that ensued. During and

---

<sup>1</sup> Eismont, M. (2015) "Sindrom opolchentsa," in *Snob.ru*, 5 May. (<https://snob.ru/selected/entry/89001>, accessed 20 May 2016); ---- (2014) "Gost' nedeli. Zhitel' Lesnogo pomogal 'otvoevyvat' Krym. Ekskliuzivnoe interv'iu opolchentsa," in *Kachkanarskii Chetverg*, 23 April. (<http://www.kchetverg.ru/2014/04/23/zhitel-lesnogo-pomogal-otvoevyvat-krym-eksklyuzivnoe-intervyu-opolchenca/>, accessed 20 May 2016).

after the Crimean annexation, Russia witnessed a huge increase in support for President Vladimir Putin. More importantly, perhaps, for events on the ground, the rally was not limited to changes in political approval but extended to the mobilization of large numbers of volunteers, donors and sympathizers in support of military action outside the country's borders. Both online and offline, a surge of activism was unleashed to strengthen militarily and ideologically the claim that Crimea and eastern Ukraine were somehow a natural part of Russia that had been accidentally and wrongly alienated by the idiosyncrasies of the collapse of the USSR. The movement was known alternatively as the Russian Spring or the Novorossiia movement, reflecting the intertwined ideas of a revival of ethnic Russian consciousness, the return of a previously dormant Russia back onto the international stage, and the Tsarist-era basis of the Russian claim to much of what is today southern and eastern Ukraine.

In this chapter, we take advantage of the fact that much of the organizational and ideological work behind this movement took place online. This allows us to examine in detail patterns of pro-Russian contention and how it changed over time. We can see how events on the ground drove levels of engagement and shifted the aspirations and goals of activists over time. We look at patterns in the content and framing of claims made by members of the movement, illustrate the proliferation over time of the different groups involved in pro-Russian contention and demonstrate shifts in patterns of influence or authority among those groups. In the process, we describe the construction of a cross-border community of action in support of Russian state goals.

Our analysis sheds new light on this crucial period in Russian and Ukrainian politics, but also has implications for scholars thinking about the nature of contemporary authoritarianism more broadly. The conventional wisdom on the 'Russian Spring' / 'Novorossiia' movement

holds that it was brought into existence by a combination of propaganda and ‘astro-turf’ organizing, heavily directed from the Kremlin. While there is undoubtedly some truth to both of these claims, we argue here that much of the groundswell of support for the Kremlin and its intervention in Ukraine came through the engagement of existing nationalist ideas and constituencies that had previously been either neglected or actively suppressed by the state. Thus, rather than reorienting loyal citizens towards a new cause sewn out of whole cloth, Russia’s Novorossiia movement drew on existing ideas and networks to spur disaffected but politically available constituencies to rally to the flag, bringing on board a motivated following who had previously seen little reason to support whoever was occupying the post-Soviet Kremlin.

From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that we must see citizens of authoritarian states less as passive recipients of mobilizational stimuli produced by their leaders, and more as active participants in the construction of the legitimacy that makes it possible for autocrats to rule – in much the same way that voters in democracies provide the electoral, ideational and organizational resources on which their own leaders rely for power. A corollary to this idea is that authoritarian citizens are also limiting factors for the regimes that govern them: if the Russian example can be generalized, it suggests that even dictators have to act within the ideational boundaries of their own societies.

### **Mobilizing Contention in Democracy and Dictatorship**

The dominant image in most media accounts of social movements, especially in authoritarian contexts, is of a set of weak or politically marginalized actors attempting to break

into the public sphere and achieve change in ways that could not be achieved without transgressive forms of contentious political action. However, students of social movements have long recognized that things are more complicated than this simple David and Goliath model would suggest. In reality, mobilization takes place in an interactive field, with the dynamics of political contestation depending heavily on the interaction between movements, state structures and other organizations. As we show in this section, scholars of mobilization in both democracies and autocracies have become increasingly conscious of the interactive nature of mobilization, even in those cases where the state seeks to play a leading role.

In the literature on contention in democratic states, much of the recent focus has been on the interaction between political and economic elites and the organizational work behind movements and campaigns. It has long been understood that political organizing is a highly specialized activity and over time such work has become increasingly professionalized.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the repertoire of actions of mass social movement organizations have increasingly been integrated into interest group politics, with private, often corporate, interests adopting the same techniques used by grassroots organizations. This has led to the emergence of a phenomenon known as “astroturfing”, whereby the real initiators or sponsors of a political campaign are hidden behind an artificially constructed façade of grassroots organizing. Front and center in this discussion is the role of public affairs consultancies, for-profit professional organizations dedicated to the management of political and issue campaigns. Unsurprisingly, given the importance placed on civic activism in contemporary theories of democratic politics and democratization, the emergence of the professionalized campaign and so-called “memberless

---

<sup>2</sup> John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 82, no. 6, May 1977, pp 1212-124.

organizations” has led to concerns about the impact on the nature of public policy-making, on civil society and on what Howard calls the “managed citizen”.<sup>3</sup>

However, more recent work has tended to take a less top-down view of the role of professional consultants, not least because of the ubiquity of their activities across the political spectrum. Walker (2014), while still alive to the acute normative issues at stake, sees advocacy professionals not so much as generating a fake or controlled citizenry, but rather as creating “subsidized publics” where a select of group of citizens have their participation facilitated by the money and expertise of professional organizers.<sup>4</sup> This term does not have quite the negative connotations of “astroturf” and citizens are treated not as dupes so much as activists who genuinely care about the issues at stake. Nevertheless, the role of political consultancies in mobilizing selected groups still puts a rather heavy thumb on the political scales.

The evolution of notions of contention and mobilized contention in the literature on long-standing democracies has fascinating parallels in work on the question of mobilization in authoritarian regimes. Early research that interpreted approved or supportive political action in autocracies as predominantly top-down and heavily (and usually clumsily) managed, is starting to be challenged by analyses that take a more nuanced and co-produced view of pro-regime political action in contemporary non-democratic regimes.

The degree to which a regime seeks to either mobilize or demobilize its citizenry was one of the key distinguishing features between different kinds of non-democratic regimes,

---

<sup>3</sup> McNutt, J.G. & Boland, K.M. (2007). “[Astroturf](#), technology and the Future of Community Mobilization: Implications for Nonprofit Theory, *Journal of sociology and social welfare*, 34 (3), 165-179., Philip N. Howard, *New Media Campaigns and The Managed Citizen*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Walker, *Grassroots for Hire: Public Affairs Consultants in American Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

according to Juan Linz's classic analysis.<sup>5</sup> For Linz, totalitarian regimes were defined by deliberate and intensive efforts to mobilize citizens into pro-regime political action. In contrast, authoritarian regimes were those that actively sought to demobilize citizens and keep them away from political participation.

However, even non-totalitarian leaders need to mobilize citizens on occasions, particularly if the practices of the regime involve an electoral component. In post-Yugoslav Serbia, for example, nationalist mobilization formed part of a broader regime strategy designed to "make alternatives to its rule unavailable", by marginalizing and fatiguing opponents and enforcing passivity among the bulk of the citizenry.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a large literature on clientelism was developed in which participation in authoritarian political institutions, and in particular elections, was explained by a trade of votes and participation for patronage and transfers.<sup>7</sup> Magaloni referred to this system as a "punishment regime" in which costs could be imposed upon voters who attempted to defect from the regime.<sup>8</sup> This largely economic approach to rewards and punishments shaping political mobilization in authoritarian regimes continues to be influential. Specifically in the post-Communist context, scholars have looked to political and economic incentives to explain patterns of labor protest and voting.<sup>9</sup>

However, recent work on pro-regime mobilization is changing the emphasis of the conversation in important ways. For example, Chen Weiss argues for much more autonomy and

---

<sup>5</sup> Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Lynn Rienner, July 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Eric D. Gordy. (1999) *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*. Penn State University Press, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno and Valeria Brusco, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Beatriz Magaloni. *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Graeme B. Robertson, "Strikes and Labor Organization in Hybrid Regimes", *American Political Science Review* November 2007, Vol. 101, No. 4, pp. 781-98. Timothy Frye, Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi, "Political Machines at Work: Voter Mobilization and Electoral Subversion in the Workplace", *World Politics* (66:2), 2014.

efficacy on the part of pro-regime protesters in China than is usually assumed in economic models.<sup>10</sup> In her book, nationalist protests are driven largely from below but are tolerated or repressed depending upon the relationship between the protests and the particular foreign policy goals of the government. Nationalist street protest in China – when judiciously allowed by Beijing, for reasons mostly to do with foreign policy signaling – is often critical of the regime itself, which is seen (evidently genuinely) by willing protesters as insufficiently robust in the protection and projection of China’s national (and nationalist) interests.<sup>11</sup>

The issue of state mobilization has been particularly extensively engaged in recent literature on contemporary authoritarianism in Russia, with a number of new strands being added to the conversation as the Putin regime has stepped up its efforts to engage supportive forces in society. Some scholars have emphasized the top-down element in pro-state mobilization, particularly of young people, in state-organized and supported “ersatz social movements”.<sup>12</sup> Others have focused more on the agency of the societal actors themselves. Cheskin and March, for example, focus on what they call “consentful” contention, by which they mean autonomous protest that, nevertheless, follows regime-sanctioned goals.<sup>13</sup> Others still look at less visible forms of sanctioned contention such as Public Monitoring Commissions or the promotion of

---

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss. (2013) “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China,” *International Organization* 67(1): 1-35.

<sup>12</sup> Harley Balzer, “Managed Pluralism: Vladimir Putin’s Emerging Regime”, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19(3): 189-227, 2003. Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman & Henry E. Hale, “Three dilemmas of hybrid regime governance: Russia from Putin to Putin”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2013. Graeme B. Robertson “Managing Society: Protest, Civil Society and Regime in Putin’s Russia” *Slavic Review*, Fall 2009, Vol. 68, No.3, pp 528-547. Graeme B. Robertson *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Ammon Cheskin and Luke. “State-society Relations in Contemporary Russia: New Forms of Political and Social Contention”, *East European Politics*, 31:3, 261-273, 2015.

social and economic rights.<sup>14</sup> Julie Hemment has taken the idea of citizen agency in the context of state mobilized contention in Russia the farthest, arguing that from the very moment the idea of a movement is out of the minds of the politicians and into the world, it takes on a life of its own as interpreted, developed, adopted or rejected by citizens in the light of their own ideas and prevailing trends in the world.<sup>15</sup> In the rest of this paper, we build upon the idea that both the state and protesters enjoy agency even in the context of intensive state-led mobilization.

### **State Mobilization In Post-Soviet Russia**

Active efforts to mobilize elements of society in support of the regime have been a key characteristic of the politics of Russia in recent years. This represents a sharp contrast to the first Putin presidency when, buoyed by high oil and gas prices, the regime was largely able to leave society to its own devices as the administration focused on neo-liberal economic reforms and the re-establishing control over media and natural resource companies. However, with the end of relatively easy economic times and increasing pressure from the international environment, the Kremlin has become active in its mobilization efforts and, in doing so, has resorted to ever more nationalist and imperialist ideas.

The post-Soviet Russian state began to become interested in mobilization in a concerted way in reaction to the wave of popular uprisings that helped topple authoritarian rulers in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2000-2005. The Kremlin saw (and publicly portrayed) what came to be known as the ‘Color Revolutions’ as part of a Western-led effort to install friendly

---

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Owen, “Consentful contention” in a corporate state: human rights activists and public monitoring commissions in Russia”, *East European Politics*, 31:3, 274-293, 2015, Eleanor Bindman, “The state, civil society and social rights in contemporary Russia” *East European Politics*, 31:3, 342-360, 2015, and Anna Tarasenko, “Russian welfare reform and social NGOs: strategies for claim-making and service provision in the case of Saint Petersburg”, *East European Politics*, 31:3, 294-313, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Julie Hemment, *Youth Politics In Putin’s Russia*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2015.



governments in the region. While authoritarian rulers in various countries responded to this wave of regime changes in different ways, Vladimir Putin's Russia settled on a strategy that included aspects of coercion, co-optation and pre-emptive occupation of mobilizational spaces but focused primarily on persuasion, as the Kremlin sought to convince Russians – particularly young Russians – that its policies and ideas were more attractive than anything that might come from the West.<sup>16</sup> While consolidating control over television and the party system, the leadership created an ecosystem of pro-Putin youth movements and loyal 'GONGOS' to take the president's case to the public, and to harass Putin's opponents. Participants in *Nashi*, the largest of the resulting youth movements, were frequently found protesting outside the US, UK and Estonian embassies, shouting down opposition protesters, and so on.

Throughout most of the 2000s, however, and until the end of President Dmitry Medvedev's term in office, the Kremlin was content to rely on a largely "technocratic" arsenal of managerial – as opposed to ideological – weapons to defend its positions. Relatively favorable economic conditions in the country backed up its popular legitimacy – most Russians, after all, had never had it so good – and created space for the administration to experiment with new techniques for cementing the leadership's power. These included repeated changes in the party system, reforms to the electoral system and manipulation of the rules covering candidate registration, a switch from elected to appointed regional governors and back again, changes to the management of regional politics, tighter state control over 'strategic industries' in natural resources, high finance and the media, and so on.

---

<sup>16</sup> Evgeny Finkel & Yitzhak M. Brudny. (2012) "No more colour! Authoritarian regimes and colour revolutions in Eurasia," *Democratization* 19(1): 1-14.

The Kremlin's first cut at shaping civil society was similarly "technocratic" and in many ways built on Soviet era legacies, adapting them to the new competitive authoritarian context. In addition to *Nashi*, key elements involved creating a system for licensing non-governmental organizations that would give the state extensive tools to harass and marginalize groups and organizations that the incumbents perceived to be oppositionist in orientation, and the creation/support of a variety of ersatz social movements that were directly funded by the Kremlin and operated in close cooperation with leading Kremlin officials.

Nevertheless, when faced with allegations of massive election fraud in the parliamentary elections of December 2011, the system failed to prevent major anti-Putin protests in a number of big cities, but most prominently in Moscow. These protests, which initially at least seemed to catch the Kremlin off guard, provoked an increased reliance on repression, but also led the Kremlin to double-down on its ideational appeal. In the face of its first major crisis of legitimacy, the Putin administration set out to draw a thick line between supportive "healthy" elements in society and dangerous, immoral, western-backed forces seeking to overthrow the regime. The strategy tied together domestic and international components that portrayed Russian civilization as a hold-out and bulwark against the decadence of the west. Internally, laws against offending Orthodox believers and anti-gay legislation were part of an effort to drive a sharp wedge between Russian and "western" values. Internationally, the Kremlin sought to expand its view of Russian civilization beyond the borders of the Russian Federation to include a broader "Russian world" (*russkii mir*) of mostly Russian-speaking Slavic people spread around the former USSR.

At the heart of the Kremlin's ideological strategy, however, has been nationalism and, in particular, a related set of imperialist ideas commonly known as Eurasianism. Although attitudes in the Kremlin towards nationalism have varied throughout the post-Soviet era, nationalist

parties and movements maintained a significant popular appeal, famously dominating parliamentary elections in 1993, presenting a credible challenge to Boris Yeltsin in the 1996 presidential election, and persisting on into the 2000s. In addition to ethnic chauvinism and anti-Semitism, these movements generally included strains of great-power nationalism, imperialism and statism, and their mobilizational rhetoric attacked the Kremlin for being both insufficiently “Russian” and insufficiently strong.<sup>17</sup> For these movements’ adherents – both among elites and masses – the ‘loss’ of Ukraine and the sight of that country’s own nation-building process was always an open and festering wound.<sup>18</sup> After Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia won a surprise victory in the 1993 parliamentary elections, it was successfully co-opted into mainstream politics and now thrives tamely under the Kremlin’s patronage. Rodina, new nationalist party created in 2003 in part at the Kremlin’s instigation, was abruptly shut down after threatening to become too successful.

Locked out of mainstream politics, nationalist ideas found sway in a large ‘illiberal’ civil society, which soaked up most of the fervor that might otherwise have gone into robust right-wing parties.<sup>19</sup> From time to time, however, establishment politicians would pick up on these and other ‘nationalist’ grievances for their own purposes; throughout the 1990s, for example, the populist Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov harped on the issue of Crimea, both to boost his visibility

---

<sup>17</sup> Alan Ingram. (1999) “‘A Nation Split into Fragments’: The Congress of Russian Communities and Russian Nationalist Ideology,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51(4): 687-704.

<sup>18</sup> Taras Kuzio. (1997) “Borders, symbolism and nation-state building: Ukraine and Russia,” *Geopolitics and International Boundaries* 2(2): 36-56.

<sup>19</sup> Andreas Umland. (2002) “Contextualizing the decline of post-Soviet Russian parties of the extreme right wing,” *Demokratizatsiya* 10(3): 362-391; Alexander Verkhovsky. (2000) “Ultra-nationalists in Russia at the onset of Putin’s rule,” *Nationalities Papers* 28(4): 707-722.

and bolster his own presidential ambitions, but nationalism was not central to either domestic or foreign policymaking in the first Putin administration.<sup>20</sup>

However, with the economic and political crises that surrounded the return of Putin to the presidency in 2012, the administration increasingly adopted nationalist ideas and, in particular, a set of doctrines loosely grouped under the label of 'Eurasianism' became increasingly evident in both the Kremlin's rhetoric and its policies. Related to the nationalist ideas, but with its own baroque elements, Eurasianism draws on late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> Century ideas about Russia's particular place in the world. Eurasianism explicitly rejects the possibility of Russia participating in processes of European integration and instead asserts Russia's essence as a land empire exercising dominance over the territories lost in the Soviet collapse.<sup>21</sup> This discourse was important in the Soviet foreign policy establishment and retained its attractions in the post-Soviet era as Moscow protested over NATO expansion (quietly) and involvement in Yugoslavia (loudly).<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, until Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia neither pursued regional integration projects with anything that might be mistaken for vigor, nor sought consistently to intervene on behalf of Russian-speaking minorities in the 'near abroad' (though there were notable exceptions in Estonia and Georgia). Even as it failed to consolidate as an organized movement or a structural part of the Russian foreign policy establishment, however,

---

<sup>20</sup> Timothy J. Colton. (1999) "Understanding Iurii Luzhkov," *Problems of Post-Communism* 46(5): 14-26.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Clover. (2016). *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*, Yale University Press.

<sup>22</sup> David Kerr. (1995) "The new Eurasianism: The rise of geopolitics in Russia's foreign policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 47(6): 977-988; Mark Bassin. (2003) "'Classical' Eurasianism and the Geopolitics of Russian Identity," *Ab Imperio* 2003(2): 257-266.

Eurasianism as a loose ideological community (and its disparate correlates and variations) persisted, both prodding the Kremlin from the sidelines and serving as an occasional resource.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, when the Kremlin turned to Eurasianist (and related) discourses in the context of its annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas, it was able to draw both on existing ideas and constituencies, and on an existing ecosystem of think tanks, charities and mobilizational structures, with varying initial degrees of closeness to the Kremlin. Lutsevych describes these as consisting of three tiers, depending on their closeness to the Kremlin and the extent of funding.<sup>24</sup> The first tier is made up of federal agencies, state grant making agencies, Kremlin-friendly large corporations and a few large charities. These organizations channel funds to a second tier of “implementing partners” including youth groups, think-tanks, veterans and Cossack groups, as well as a number of associations and small foundations. Finally, there is a third tier of organizations operating more or less independently but sympathetic to the Kremlin that supports nationalist causes, training camps and other pro-Russian activities.

### **State Mobilization and Society in the Russo-Ukrainian Crisis**

It was in this context that the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and the beginnings of uprisings in eastern Ukraine took place in February-March 2014. Pro-Russian organizations from the *russskyi mir* communities and elsewhere quickly sprung into action online and also on the streets of Russia. Major demonstrations in support of Russian

---

<sup>23</sup> Marlène Laruelle. (2004) “The two faces of contemporary Eurasianism: an imperial version of Russian nationalism,” *Nationalities Papers* 32(1): 115-136; Andrei P. Tsygankov. (1998) “Hard-line Eurasianism and Russia’s Contending Geopolitical Perspectives,” *East European Quarterly* 32(3): 315-334.

<sup>24</sup> Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*. Research Paper, Russian And Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, April 2016.

military action in Crimea took place on March 2, 2014 in Moscow, with some 27 000 people in attendance (much smaller anti-war demonstrations took place at the same time).<sup>25</sup> A Kremlin supported motorcycle club, the Night Wolves, also joined the demonstrations and organized similar events in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Other demonstrations, typically involving students, public sector workers, veterans and Cossack organizations and members of political parties also took place around the country, particularly in southern Russia.<sup>27</sup> These participants joined existing far right groups, but tended to crowd them out as national patriotic rhetoric and support for Russian speakers in Ukraine displaced the existing anti-immigrant message of the far right. Moreover, nationalist groups that were formerly opposed to the Kremlin, such as Eduard Limonov's "Other Russia" movement, now rallied to the cause.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to organizing support amongst activists, the Kremlin's state television propaganda machine went into overdrive. Night after night Russian state television bombarded its enormous viewership with images and stories of the plight of Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine and on the new "fascist junta" that had taken power in Kyiv. This blanket coverage interacted with pre-existing patriotic sentiment in Russia to create a huge wave of popular support.<sup>29</sup> According to polls, more than three-quarters of Russians used television as their primary source of information on the conflict in Ukraine, a proportion that increased to nearly 90 percent by August 2014. Moreover, more than 70 percent of national survey respondents thought

---

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya-photogallery/obshchestvo/251576-voina-i-mir-kak-mitingovali-v-moskve-storonniki-i-protivnik/photo/1>

Some 361 people were arrested at the anti-war demonstration (<http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/m.225936.html>). There were no reports of arrest at the pro-government action.

<sup>26</sup> <https://lenta.ru/news/2014/03/02/wolfes/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://ria.ru/society/20140304/998132179.html#ixzz48yB2PCiC>

<sup>28</sup> <http://polit.ru/article/2015/03/25/xeno/>

<sup>29</sup> Greene and Robertson 2016

that the relentless coverage on television was “objective”.<sup>30</sup> The result was enormous support for action to protect Russians in eastern Ukraine. According to the polling company Levada Center, some 67 percent of Russians blamed radical Ukrainian nationalists for the crisis in Crimea and some 58 percent supported the introduction of Russian troops to Crimea. President Putin’s personal popularity ratings also rose dramatically to almost 90 percent, as measured by Levada. And it is there that the puzzle arises: How does a regime – indeed, can a regime – manufacture a supportive movement with such colossal success?

The Russian annexation of Crimea was popular, but it was not a popular movement. Grievance over the loss of Crimea to an independent post-Soviet Ukraine had always been present in Russian public opinion and had occasionally motivated nationalist-minded politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy or Yury Luzhkov, without ever becoming an official plank of Russian foreign policy under Boris Yeltsin or, indeed, Vladimir Putin.<sup>31</sup> It was, however, a priority of the Kremlin to maintain the lease on the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol – the renewal of which was one of Viktor Yanukovich’s first official acts as Ukrainian president – and the Kremlin would periodically play up the region’s divided loyalties to pique either whomever was in power in Ukraine, or the West in general. Thus, in July 2009, not long after welcoming Barack Obama to Moscow to launch a short-lived ‘reset’ of US-Russian relations, Putin met with the ‘Night Wolves’ biker gang and presented them with an outsized Russian tricolor to take with them on a ride from Moscow to Sevastopol.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> <http://fom.ru/Mir/11731>

<sup>31</sup> Marples, D.R. and D.F. Duke. (1995) “Ukraine, Russia and the question of Crimea,” in *Nationalities Papers* 23(2): 261-289; Sherr, J. (1997) “Russia-Ukraine *rapprochement*? The black sea fleet accords,” in *Survival* 39(3): 33-50.

<sup>32</sup> ---- (2009) “Putin podaril ‘Nochnym volkam’ rossiiskii flag dlia Sevastopolia,” in *Lenta.ru*, 7 July. (<https://lenta.ru/news/2009/07/07/bikers/>, accessed 20 May 2016).

But when protests erupted in Sevastopol, the regional capital Simferopol and other parts of the peninsula after Yanukovich's flight from Kyiv, the decision to mobilize 'little green men' – a combination of regular troops and volunteers, well trained and well equipped but without insignia – in order to wrest Crimea from Ukrainian control was made quietly.<sup>33</sup> In no real sense were Russians themselves asked before the move to acquire Crimea was made, but the response was nevertheless positive. The "return" of Crimea to the Russian Federation – a historic moment that was publicly justified by the Kremlin in syncretic terms of defending Russian-speaking civilians, resisting Western advances on strategic Russian positions, regaining a supposed cradle of Orthodox Christianity, restoring the acquisitions of Russian tsars and righting the wrongs of Soviet leaders<sup>34</sup> – brought almost immediate dividends. Putin's popularity, which had been flagging since before his reelection, in the wake of protests and economic malaise, and which had not been significantly boosted by the spectacle of the Sochi Olympics, rose dramatically, as Russians rallied around the flag.<sup>35</sup>

What Putin would later describe as a carefully planned special operation became the model for a conflict that would be considerably more fraught. By late spring, 'little green men' – who had been referred to by Russian officials as 'polite people' – began popping up in Eastern Ukraine, occupying government buildings in scenes that looked to be a carbon copy of what had

---

<sup>33</sup> Higgins, A. and S. Erlanger. (2014) "Gunmen Seize Government Buildings in Crimea," in *New York Times*, 27 February. ([http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/crimea-ukraine.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/crimea-ukraine.html?_r=1), accessed 20 May 2016); Raibman, N. (2014) "Putin rasskazal, kakovy byli zadachi 'vezhlivyykh liudei' v Krymu," in *Vedomosti*, 17 April. (<http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2014/04/17/putin-rasskazal-kto-takie-vezhlivye-lyudi-v-krymu#/ixzz32dm5Jbc9>, accessed 20 May 2016); Agence France Press (2015) "Putin describes secret operation to seize Crimea," in *Yahoo! News*, 9 March. (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/putin-describes-secret-operation-seize-crimea-212858356.html?ref=gs>, accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Putin, V. (2014) "Address by President of the Russian Federation," 18 March. Moscow: Presidential Administration. (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Gudkov, L. (2015) "Russian Public Opinion on the Aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis," in *Russian Politics and Law* 53(4): 32-44; Greene, S. and G. Robertson. (2014) "Explaining Putin's Popularity: Rallying round the Russian flag," in *WashingtonPost.com*, 9 September (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/09/explaining-putins-popularity-rallying-round-the-russian-flag/>, accessed 20 May 2016).



transpired in Crimea. The Russian government has maintained that it has no direct command-and-control relationship with any of the Russian citizens – many of them active-duty troops – who arrived to take part in what turned into a long and bloody military conflict; the government has allegedly gone to great lengths to hide the resulting casualties from its own population.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the image of ‘little green men’ and ‘polite people’ – ridiculed in the West as a symbol of Russian state subterfuge – became a point of pride for many Russian citizens.<sup>37</sup> Tents began popping up in Moscow and other cities, outside metro stations and other public places, bearing the black, blue and red flag of the Donetsk People’s Republic, with agitators seeking recruits and donations. As the war in Ukraine stretched into 2015, some 7 percent of Russians reported knowing someone who had volunteered to fight in Donbas, while 65 percent of respondents had a favorable opinion of the volunteers (against 22 percent who thought negatively of them).<sup>38</sup>

The relationship between the Russian government and the fighters themselves remains unclear, even if most observers have little doubt that many of the fighters are regular Russian troops, and all of them rely on Russian supplies of arms and money.<sup>39</sup> While much of the recruitment evidently operated through military channels (even if informally), much of it also

---

<sup>36</sup> Petlianova, N. (2014) “Lev Shlosberg prosit glavnogo voennogo prokurora rassledovat’ gibel’ desantnikov 76-oi pskovskoi divizii VDV,” in *Novaya Gazeta*, 17 September. (<http://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/1687093.html>, accessed 20 May 2016)

<sup>37</sup> Oliphant, R. (2014) “Ukraine Crisis: ‘Polite people’ leading the silent invasion of Crimea,” in *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 March (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/10670547/Ukraine-crisis-Polite-people-leading-the-silent-invasion-of-the-Crimea.html>, accessed 20 May 2016); Kashin, O. (2014) “Vezhliiye liudi s pushkami,” in *OpenDemocracy Russia*, 16 April (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B3-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%B8%D0%BD/vezhliiye-lyudi-s-pushkami>, accessed 20 May 2016).

<sup>38</sup> ---- (2015) “Opros: rossiiane odobriaiut poezdki dobrovol’tsev v Donbass,” in *BBC Russian Service*, 20 March. ([http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2015/03/150320\\_russia\\_polls\\_volunteers](http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2015/03/150320_russia_polls_volunteers), accessed 20 May 2016)

<sup>39</sup> ICG (2016). “Russia and the Separatists in Eastern Ukraine,” *Europe and Central Asia Briefing No. 79*. Brussels: International Crisis Group. (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/ukraine/b079-russia-and-the-separatists-in-eastern-ukraine.aspx>, accessed 20 May 2016)

appears to have happened online. For that purpose, the site dobrovolec.org was registered on 22 February 2014, the day after Yanukovich fled Ukraine, abandoning power to the leaders of the Euromaidan, although it remained dormant until the summer of that year, when it began advertising for experienced soldiers only, particularly those capable of driving tanks and flying helicopters.<sup>40</sup> (See Figure 1)

*Insert Figure 1 here.*

By late in the summer of 2015, official reports estimated between 30,000 and 50,000 Russian volunteers serving in the Donbas, and leaders from the region spent considerable time in Russia building up networks to recruit more.<sup>41</sup> Separatist leaders, meanwhile, made no bones about their ties to Russian officialdom. Igor Girkin, who became the Donetsk People's Republic's defense minister under the *nom-de-guerre* of Strelkov, publicly claimed to be a serving colonel in the FSB, Russia's state security service.<sup>42</sup> In making those claims, and in building their on-line and off-line presences in Russia and on Russian-language social media, Girkin, Zakharchenko, Pushilin and other separatist leaders – alongside their ideological comrades in Russia and Ukraine – built a cross-border community of action, even as that action itself ran the gamut from 'liking' a post on VKontakte to volunteering to fight in Donbas.

For the Novorossiia/Russian Spring leaders and activists, claiming ties to the Russian state, even if the state did not reciprocate those claims, evidently served to boost the internal legitimacy of the community and its actions. In broadening their appeal to the point where they

---

<sup>40</sup> ICANN WHOIS: dobrovolec.org (<https://whois.icann.org/en/lookup?name=dobrovolec.org>, accessed 22 May 2016); Kostiuichenko, E. (2014) "Armiia i dobrovol'tsy," in *Novaya Gazeta*, 3 September. (<http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/65096.html>, accessed 20 May 2016)

<sup>41</sup> TASS (2015). "Donbas Volunteer Union set up in Russia," in TASS, 27 August. (<http://tass.ru/en/russia/816955>, accessed 20 May 2016)

<sup>42</sup> Strelkov, I. (2014) "Interview zhurnalista Aleksandra Chalenko s I.I. Strelkovym." VKontakte post, 1 December. ([http://vk.com/strelkov\\_info?w=wall-57424472\\_32149](http://vk.com/strelkov_info?w=wall-57424472_32149), accessed 20 May 2016)

could generate millions of ‘likes’ a month, however, they had help from ideational frames that had been present in Russia for years. This is not only – and not even primarily – the ‘Eurasianist’ ideology that has provided something of an intellectual justification for both territorial acquisition and conflict with the West.<sup>43</sup> The Russian political observer Sergei Medvedev has pointed to an emerging ideology of *ressentiment*, beginning with Putin’s now-famous line about the fall of the USSR being the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s “greatest geopolitical catastrophe”.<sup>44</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, the Russian-speaking winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for literature, argues that this *ressentiment* is embedded in the Russian population at large: “There is a collective Putin, consisting of some millions of people who do not want to be humiliated by the West. There is a little piece of Putin in everyone.”<sup>45</sup> To this, other observers add an increasingly dichotomous politics, which both divides ‘us’ and ‘them’ more starkly and widens the gap between them, and a more emotion-laden, aggressive and sometimes hateful language that has come to dominate both social media interaction and, at times, the nightly news.<sup>46</sup>

The availability of a fertile discursive field and a constituency inclined to nationalist sentiment did not make pro-regime nationalist or patriotic mobilization inevitable, however. In his investigation of the ways in which nationalist mobilization has been used to support the legitimacy of post-Soviet regimes, Goode points in particular to the ability of leaders to “seek legitimacy by echoing nationalist stances and repertoires inherited and refashioned from the

---

<sup>43</sup> Laruelle, M. (2004) “The two faces of contemporary Eurasianism: An imperial version of Russian nationalism,” in *Nationalities Papers* 32(1): 115-136.

<sup>44</sup> Medvedev, S. (2014) “Russkii resentment,” in *Otechestvennye Zapiski* 2014(6). (<http://www.strana-oz.ru/2014/6/russkiy-resentiment>, accessed 20 May 2016)

<sup>45</sup> Donadio, R. (2016) “Svetlana Alexievich, Nobel Laureate of Russian Misery, Has an English-Language Milestone,” in *New York Times*, 20 May. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/21/books/svetlana-alexievich-a-nobel-laureate-of-russian-misery-has-her-english-debut.html>, accessed 20 May 2016)

<sup>46</sup> Baunov, A. (2014) “Rossii ne do smekha,” in *Otechestvennye Zapiski* 2014(6) (<http://www.strana-oz.ru/2014/6/rossii-ne-do-smekha>, accessed 20 May 2016); Sorkin, K. (2014) “Obshchii iazyk nenavisti,” in *Otechestvennye Zapiski* 2014(6) (<http://www.strana-oz.ru/2014/6/obshchiy-zyazk-nenavisti>, accessed 20 May 2016).

cycle of anti-Soviet mobilization.”<sup>47</sup> This presented a problem, however, for would be patriotic mobilizers in the Kremlin. Post-Soviet Russia had not been born out of a drive for independence and nation-building, and the Russian ethnic movements that had emerged under *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* had an adversarial relationship with both the Yeltsin and Putin Kremlins. In fact, Russia’s most prominent ethno-nationalist movement – motivated by antipathy towards labor migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia – has found more common cause of late with the anti-regime opposition than with Putin.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, when the overtly Kremlin-sponsored ‘anti-Maidan’ protests marched through Moscow and other major cities, they carried portraits of Putin and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, as if to demonstrate the breadth of the regime’s ethnic tent.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that most of the pre-Donbas content in the VKontakte groups that would later evolve into the network we studied here displayed an attachment primarily to the past: to the memory of victory in WWII, to nostalgia for all things Soviet, and to the old dream of pan-Slavic and Orthodox unity.

The Novorossiia/Russian Spring mobilization created something new: a connection for Russian patriotic nationalists to the here and now, and to the state. In the Donbas, the Kremlin pursued a war against an enemy that could be framed in the comfortable tropes of the past: ostensibly fascist and anti-Soviet, Western-backed and anti-Russian. What’s more, the Kremlin seemed to be fighting on behalf of an ostensible victim whose Russianness transcended national borders and harked back to a shared history, both Soviet and pre-Soviet. In providing images of heroic participation – the ‘little green men’ and ‘polite people’ – and by allowing separatist

---

<sup>47</sup> Goode, J.P. (2012) “Nationalism in Quiet Times,” in *Problems of Post-Communism* 59(3): 6-16.

<sup>48</sup> Laruelle, M. (2014) “Alexei Navalny and challenges in reconciling ‘nationalism’ and ‘liberalism’,” in *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30(4): 276-297.

<sup>49</sup> Azar, I. (2015) “Rasserzhennye patrioty,” in *Meduza*, 21 February.

(<https://meduza.io/feature/2015/02/21/rasserzhennye-patrioty>, accessed 22 May 2016)

leaders to boast (with a wink and a nod) of their ties to Moscow, the regime gave patriots a pathway of participation that could be as real or as virtual as each individual's biography allowed. In doing all of this, the Kremlin provided a discursive and mobilizational field on which it could find common ground with a constituency it had previously failed to motivate.

### **Novorossiia Online**

In this paper, we review an original dataset of activity and content from 16 public VKontakte communities, involving more than 500,000 posts made between 13 December 2011 and 2 May 2016. We employed a 'saturating snowball' sampling technique, whereby we began with the largest groups on VKontakte found by searching for content including "Donbas" and "Russkaia Vesna" (Russian Spring), and then following VKontakte's built-in affinity algorithm – 'if you like this group, you'll also like...' – until the sample had exhausted all relevant groups with at least 25,000 followers.<sup>50</sup> Counts of activity were plotted across the network over time, 'authorities' (the most influential sources of text across the network) were identified, and a random sample of 100 texts were human coded for content. Figure 2 shows activity on the network over the period, beginning to gather steam as the Euromaidan captured headlines in late 2013, reaching an initial peak of some 5.5 million 'likes' per month during the annexation of Crimea in April 2014 and an all-time high of more than 6 million likes/month later that summer, during the war in Donbas and the downing of a Malaysian airliner, flight MH-17, over separatist-controlled territory.

*Insert Figure 2 here.*

---

<sup>50</sup> Data were collected using: Romanov, A. (2016) "UniSocial4. A cloud-powered high-performance system for data collection from social networks." (<https://github.com/NewMediaCenterMoscow/UniSocial4>)

In the months and years before the Euromaidan, the online network that would emerge as the core Novorossiia/Russian Spring community was quiet, but not dormant. Topics in 2012-13 included news on the state of the Russian military, nostalgia for the Soviet Union and victory in World War II, the ‘problem’ of non-Slavic labor migrants in Russia, and the wedge issues that the Kremlin deployed against the opposition, including LGBT rights and the role of religion (particularly Russian Orthodoxy) in society. Putin was mentioned only once in the sample, in relation to laws he had signed banning ‘gay propaganda’ and offending the sensibilities of religious observers. An overriding theme was what might be called ‘Slavic nationalism’, strongly identifying with ethnic Russianness (often in a very expansive sense, which would include Belarusians and Ukrainians, as well as affinities with Serbs), rather than with the Russian state or its leadership. Amongst nationalistic poems and vignettes were sentiments along the following lines:

*The historical truth is that it was the Russian people who blocked the path for German fascism to world domination, who carried on their shoulders the greatest weight of the second world war and who made the decisive contribution to achieving Victory. (vk.com/public33066465, “Respublika Novorossiia | Velikaia Rus”, 1 October 2013.)*

In the period prior to the Euromaidan, only two of the 16 groups in the dataset had any activity – one titled “The Republic of Novorossiia | Great Rus”, and another titled “For Russia, Novorossiia, DNR, LNR and A.V. Zakharchenko”. (It is likely that both of these groups, which have held these titles since the summer of 2014 at the least, carried different titles prior to that.)

Notably, while the pre-Euromaidan texts concern events in Russia, the EU and the Baltics, Ukraine itself is not mentioned in the sample until the fourth quarter of 2013. From that point onward, the makeup of the network, its content and its geography of interest shift dramatically. The interest shifts decisively away from Russia and to Ukraine. Interest in the Donbas emerges simultaneously with interest in Ukraine, and Odessa somewhat later; curiously, Crimea is mentioned only once in the sample, in the first quarter of 2014 (just prior to the annexation). (A summary of the text coding for the sample is provided in Table 1.)

*Insert Table 1 here.*

As the geography shifts, so does both the content and the framing. General philosophizing about Russia and Russians gives way to analysis of the situation in Ukraine, criticism of the Euromaidan and, somewhat later, war reporting; by the second quarter of 2014, reports from the front lines in Eastern Ukraine dominate the sample. Meanwhile, pan-Slavic nationalism gives way to Russian state-linked patriotism. The military conflict is couched first and foremost in terms of the fight against fascism – picking up on earlier tropes – and then in terms of outright separatism.

The separatism, however, does not appear to have been the immediate reaction to events in Kyiv. Thus, as the Euromaidan gathers steam, posts were focused not on breaking away, but pragmatically on the place Eastern Ukraine could occupy in a new political constellation. To wit:

*Looking at the report we've been discussing, I do not in any way want to suggest that [Party of Regions Deputy Igor] Markov could be the candidate from the South-East. I've had a somewhat different thought. For the overwhelming*

*majority of the population of Ukraine, the phrase 'Party of Regions' provokes little else than disgust. Why not undertake a rebranding and create a new political force, based in the South and the East of our Country, and to take that force into the elections? What's more, the Party of Regions is clearly headed for a split, as association with the EU is not beneficial for all of the oligarchs. And Markov, most likely, will be a visible representative of the splitters. (vk.com/public35438576, "Za Rossiiu, Novorossiiu, DNR, LNR i A.V.Zakharchenko", 24 October 2013.)*

As 'little green men' began appearing in Eastern Ukraine, however, occupying government buildings and declaring the breakaway people's republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, the tone and purpose of communication shifted: language became more emotional, particularly as the 'fascism' tag emerged, and the talk shifted to war. Moreover, while the bulk of the networks participants seem to be in Russia, at least in the initial year of the conflict there was a clear link between the online communication and events on the ground, suggesting that the VKontakte groups themselves were being used to coordinate efforts in Donbas and elsewhere in Ukraine, mobilizing both virtual and physical support networks. Thus:

*Urgent, Lugansk, tell the guys!!!!!! NEWS!!!!!!!!!!!! I just watched [Ukrainian news broadcaster Savik] Shuster. There's a journalist on the barricades in the SBU building. Her name is Irina (that's how she presented herself). She's*



*leaking all the info about [what's going on at] the SBU.*

*She's wearing a red sweater with a hood. Guys!! Block that beast!!! (vk.com/public62241455, "Russkie Online", 9 April 2014.)*

*In Odessa last night, someone set fire to two branches of Igor Kolomoisky's Privatbank. Hello from our Odessa cell to that bastard. (vk.com/public68578180, "Partizany Novorossii/DNR/LNR", 18 June 2014.)*

Over time, new themes emerged, including the state of the Ukrainian and Russian economies, the role of the United States in the conflict, and the Minsk Agreements. The number of posts that talked about Donbas without mentioning Ukraine also grew, including reports on separatist leaders like Zakharchenko visiting hospitals, opening new schools and trying to get the lights back on. The steady drumbeat of war reporting continued unabated, however, through into 2016, even as the fighting itself died down. Writers often tried to convey a sense of urgency, even when there was not much to report:

*There has never been such a glut of munitions. The shipments keep us up at night. And this is happening on both sides. Strafing and battles – ever day and every night. This is what 'the prolonged Minsk Agreements, to which there is no alternative' look like in reality. By the way, what were [separatist leader] 'Pushilin and co.' going on about, about 'agreements to ban exercises, so as not to*

*provoke the sides' and other idiocies? Hypocrisy!*

(vk.com/public57424472, “Svodki ot opolcheniia Novorossii”, 7 October 2015.)

As activity on the network increased, so did diversity. The explosion of participation – from a few hundred thousand to more than 5 million ‘likes’ per month in the spring of 2014 – was accompanied new entries into the online field. Thus, as Figure 3 shows, the network was dominated by two groups in the fall of 2013 and still only four in February 2014 (when the Euromaidan came to a head and Yanukovych fled the country), but all 16 groups in our dataset were represented by that summer.

*Insert Figure 3 here.*

The network, of course, is not a closed system and is not entirely self-sufficient in terms of content. Of the more than half a million posts in the network from 2011 through April 2016, some 59,000 – or about 12% -- were ‘reposts’, texts that users or community moderators found on other VKontakte pages and shared with their own community’s followers.<sup>51</sup> Reviewing these ‘shares’ or ‘reposts’ allows us to identify ‘authorities’ in the network – those, whether part of the network or brought into it from outside – whose contribution to the discourse is particularly influential. The top 10 authorities in the network, ranked by average monthly rank, are listed in Table 2, and represented graphically, with the full network, in Figure 4.

*Insert Table 2 here.*

*Insert Figure 4 here.*

---

<sup>51</sup> This figure does not include text that is ‘copied and pasted’ from another page, but only those ‘reposts’ where direct links to other VKontakte pages are present, similar to the ‘share’ function on Facebook.

The structure of authority is not stable over time, however. As activity on the network increases, ‘authorities’ rise and fall in rapid succession; only a very small number of contributors manage to remain authoritative for more than four or five months, and once authority is lost, it is not generally regained. (See Figure 5). There are, however, patterns in the apparent chaos, and they mirror the shifts in framing and content reviewed earlier. As shown in Table 3, in the early months of mobilization the chief authorities were longstanding groups characterized by a mixture of Slavic pride, nostalgia and generalized patriotism, as well as a bit of humor (see Figures 6-8). Among these was a group currently known as ‘The Republic of Novorossiia | Great Rus’, which was present in the network from mid-2013, though it may initially have been known by a different name (see Figures 9-10).

*Insert Table 3 here.*

*Insert Figures 5-10 here.*

By 2015, however, the initial authorities had faded, and the network was dominated by groups and content much more focused on the ‘here and now’ of the conflict. These included groups like ‘Russians Online’ (see Figure 11), whose symbolism draws together emblems of both Russia and the Donetsk People’s Republic, and ‘News Front’ (see Figure 12), providing up-to-the-minute reporting from the front lines.

*Insert Figures 11, 12 here.*

## **Conclusions**

Some light on the process that brought Igor Grebtsov and thousands of others like him onto the battlefields of eastern Ukraine – and that brought a perhaps equally powerful army of online ‘combatants’ into cyberspace – is shed by the foregoing analysis. What we find on VKontakte is a vibrant, fluid and evidently genuine community of energized partisans, whose loyalty to the Russian state and willingness to expend time, emotion and, in some cases, blood on that state’s behalf was procured by the Kremlin through real-world action, rather than rhetoric or direct co-optation. Within this community, which includes important local and transnational elements, mobilization is heavily driven by events on the ground, while there is little indication of strong, central authority – something we would have expected to find if what we were observing was a largely state-controlled phenomenon.

To say that the Novorossiia / Russian Spring movement is not truly state-controlled, however, is not to say that it isn’t state led. The Russian state clearly exercises quite significant power over and through the movement, largely because of its ability to command and control events on the ground. As noted above, once the outbreak of war draws larger numbers of VKontakte users into the relevant communities, the online mobilization remains largely event-focused and event-driven; when things on the battlefield go quiet, activity in the network eventually fades. The agenda for mobilization is thus set by the state, rather than by the movement, reacts enthusiastically to ‘facts on the ground’ and helps to escalate them, but does not create them. When the activists we observe online do become involved in events on the ground – such as through the collection and distribution of information, some of which may then have been used by actual combatants – their role is tactical, rather than strategic. Unlike the anti-

Kremlin protests in 2011-12, the campaign to capture Donbas was evidently not coordinated on an online social network.

But there is power in the movement, too. The meaning of the Russian state's actions in Donbas and Crimea is refracted through the preexisting ideational prisms of long-established communities, and it is apparently because the state's actions have finally come in line with these citizens' orientations that they are willingly drawn into mobilization – including, for people like Grebtsov, quite high-risk mobilization. While the decision-making mechanisms through which the war in Donbas is prosecuted remain opaque – and while there are always a multiplicity of actors in war, including adversaries and uneasy allies – if the maintenance of a mobilized constituency such as the one observed on VKontakte is among the Kremlin's objectives then the Kremlin cannot easily ignore how its actions (and inactions) are received. Prior to Crimea and Donbas, the constituencies that make up the Russian Spring / Novorossiia movement were not friendly to Russia's rulers, due largely to what they perceived as those rulers' abdication of Russia's and Russians' interests. This understanding may thus encourage the Kremlin to press forward with the campaign in Donbas, less it risk being seen as abandoning the cause. Similarly, the lack of a pre-existing constituency may partly explain why Russia's intervention in Syria provoked a much less robust popular response. This suggests that there are limits to the state's ability to lead mobilization, and that these limits are set in large part by the availability of ideologically committed constituencies in society.

## State Mobilization – Figures

Figure 1: dobrovolec.org, June 2012

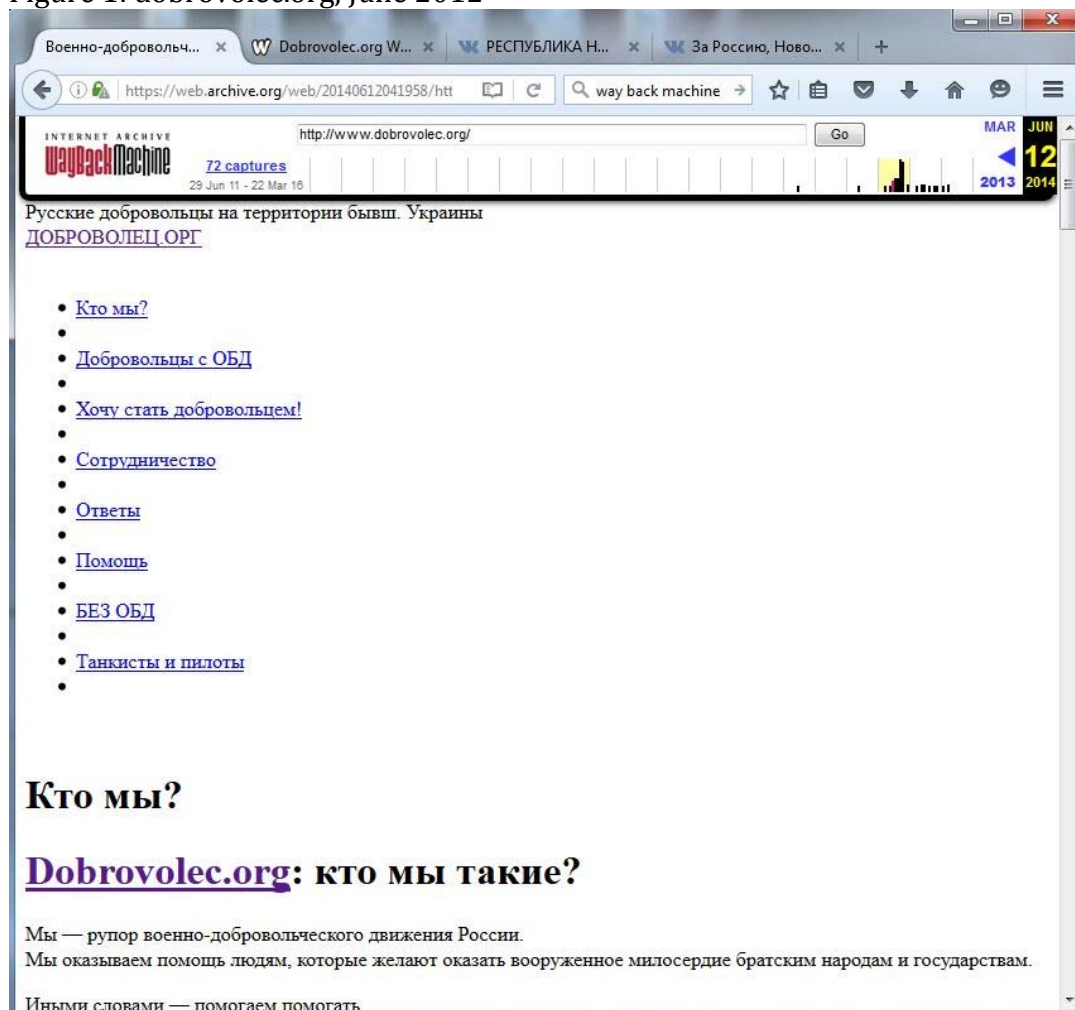
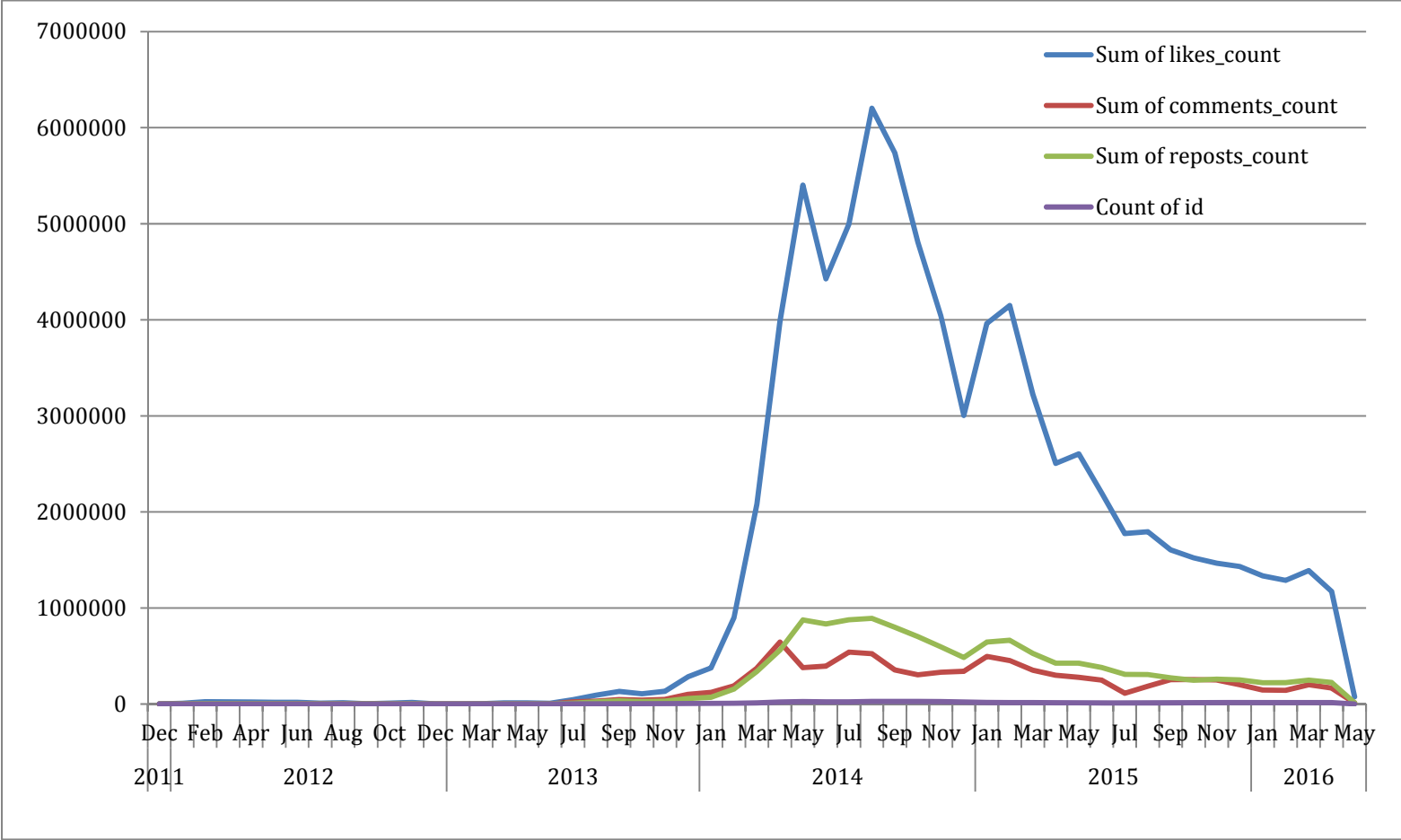


Figure 2: Donbas-Russian Spring Network Activity, 2011-2016







Crimea									1										1
Donbass							1	2	4	4	7	7	8	6	4	3	4		50
Europe					1				1				1			2			5
Odessa									1					1		1			3
Russia	1	3	1			1	3	3	2		1				3	2			20
Ukraine								2	6	7	4	5	4	8	5	4	5	5	55
USA								1	3	1							2		7
Syria																1			1

Figure 3: Network Composition Over Time

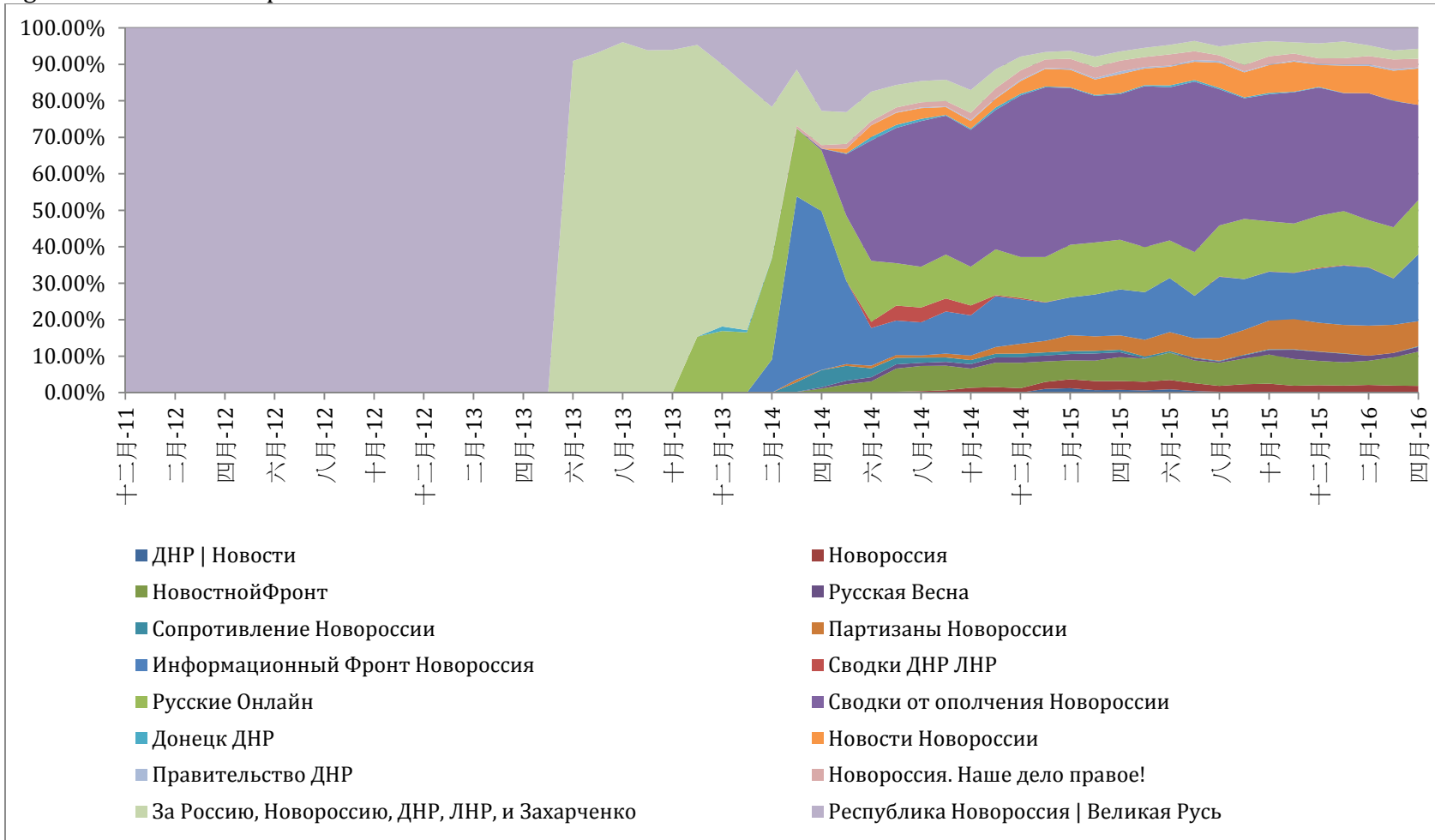


Table 2: Authorities by Average Monthly Ranking

	<b>Authority</b>	<b>Average Monthly Rank (Inverse)</b>	<b>First Appearance (Rank)</b>	<b>Last Appearance</b>
1	Red Way Красный Путь <a href="https://vk.com/club39902460">https://vk.com/club39902460</a>	2.8846	July 2013 (1)	November 2014 (4)
2	Russian Observer Русское обозрение <a href="https://vk.com/public54012242">https://vk.com/public54012242</a>	2.5769	May 2014 (9)	April 2016 (2)
3	This country can't be beaten! Эту страну не победить! <a href="https://vk.com/public53474">https://vk.com/public53474</a>	2.2885	February 2013 (4)	July 2015 (7)
4	People's News Народные новости <a href="https://vk.com/public56182693">https://vk.com/public56182693</a>	1.9231	April 2015 (5)	April 2016 (5)
5	Russian Political Demotivators Русские политические демотиваторы <a href="https://vk.com/public42162154">https://vk.com/public42162154</a>	1.6731	April 2013 (1)	January 2015 (7)
6	Russians Online Русские Онлайн <a href="https://vk.com/public62241455">https://vk.com/public62241455</a>	1.5962	October 2014 (6)	February 2016 (10)
7	Slavic Movement Славянское Движение <a href="https://vk.com/public33752628">https://vk.com/public33752628</a>	1.4423	January 2012 (1)	December 2014 (5)
8	Khar'kov – First Capital Харьков – Первая Столица <a href="https://vk.com/public63519614">https://vk.com/public63519614</a>	1.3077	March 2015 (5)	February 2016 (3)
9	Republic of Novorossia   Great Rus' Республика Новороссия   Великая Русь <a href="https://vk.com/the_republic_of_new_russia">https://vk.com/the_republic_of_new_russia</a>	1.1923	February 2014 (8)	October 2014 (5)
10	BERLOGA   Intellectual Journal БЕРЛОГА   Интеллектуальный журнал	0.9808	February 2012 (6)	September 2012 (10)

	<a href="https://vk.com/rus_berloga">https://vk.com/rus_berloga</a>			
--	---	--	--	--

Figure 4: Network Communities & Authorities

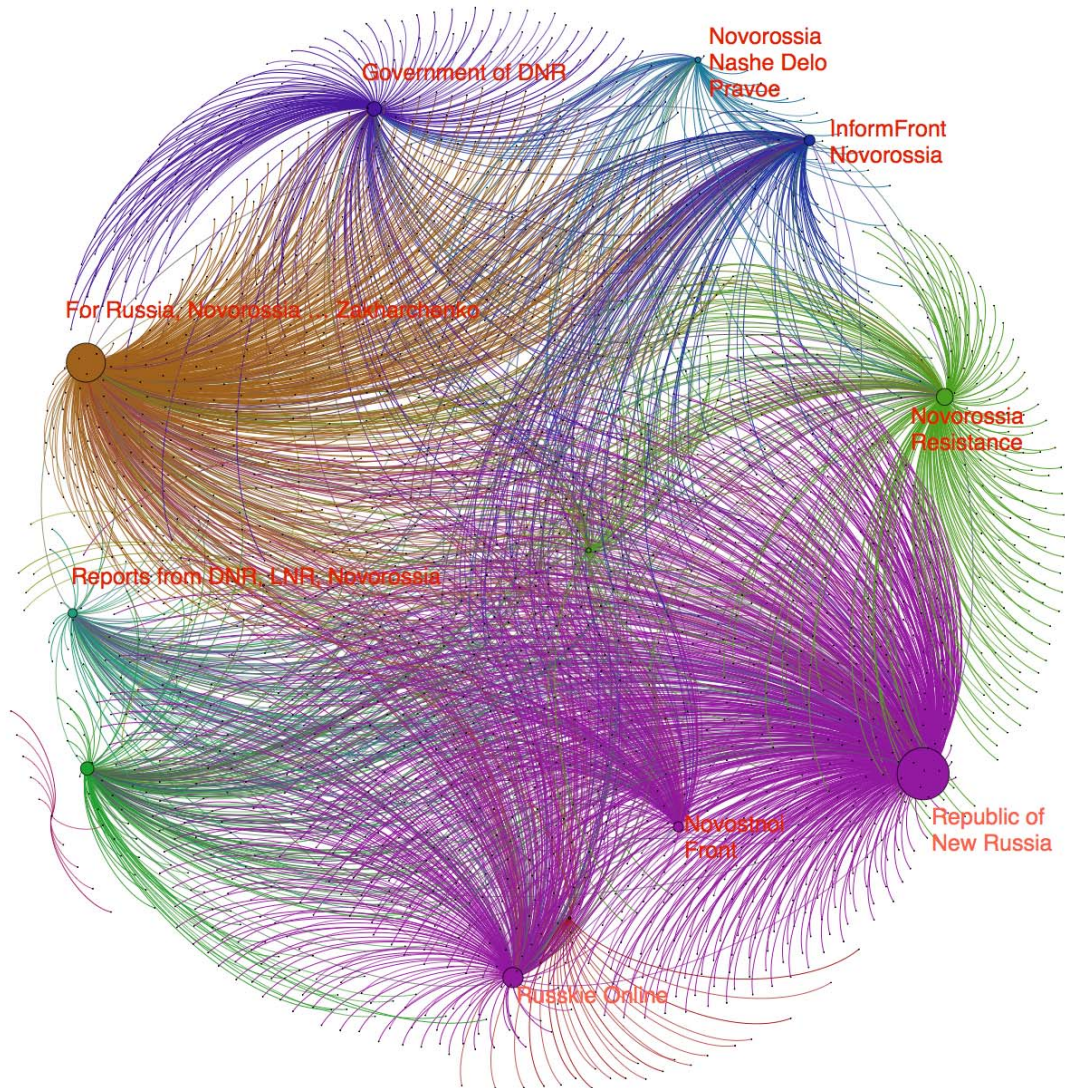


Figure 5: Dynamics of Authority

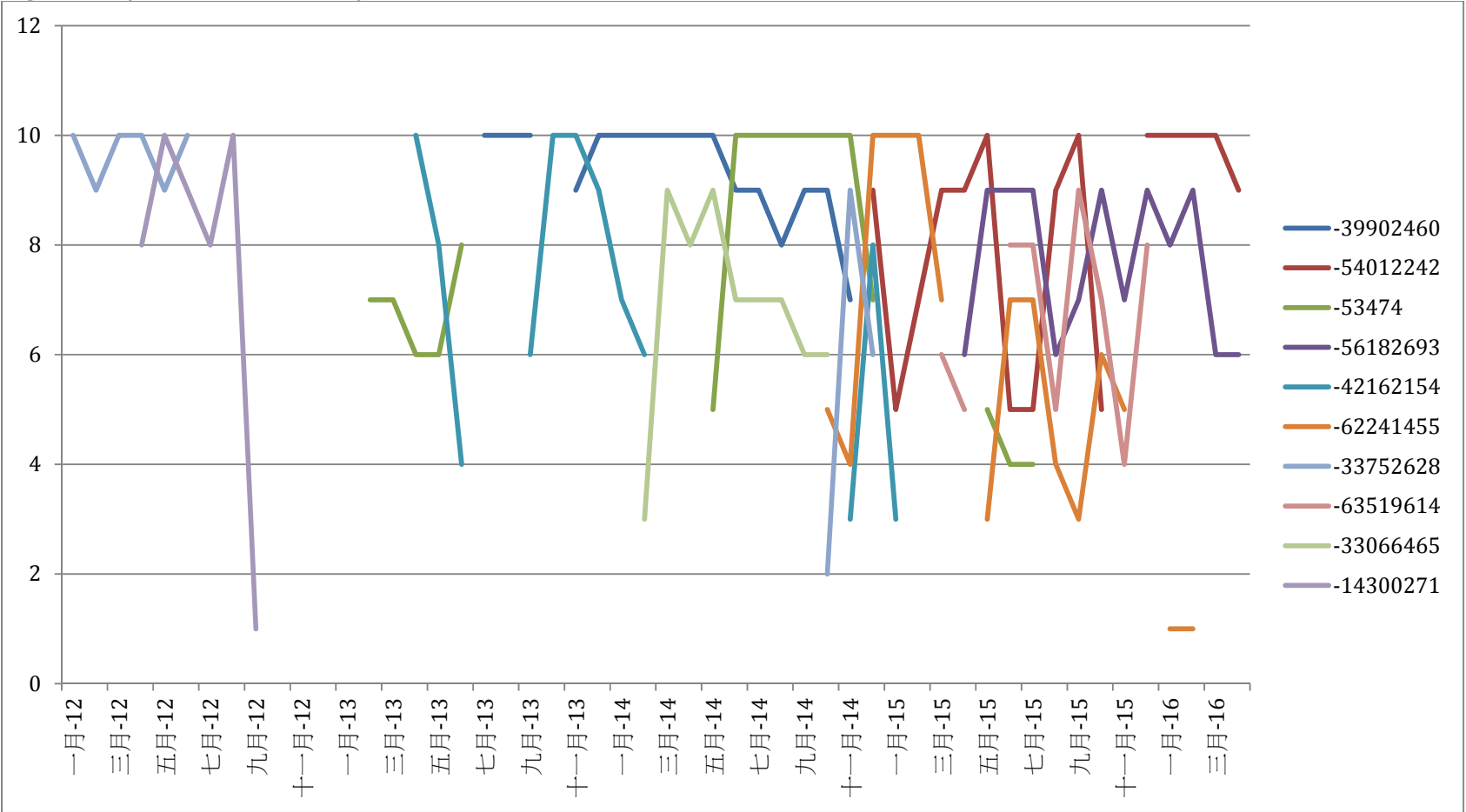


Table 3: Authorities at Peak Periods of Activity

	<b>May 2014</b>	<b>August 2014</b>	<b>January 2015</b>	<b>February 2015</b>
1	Red Way Красный Путь <a href="https://vk.com/club39902460">https://vk.com/club39902460</a>	This country can't be beaten! Эту страну не победить! <a href="https://vk.com/public53474">https://vk.com/public53474</a>	Russians Online Русские Онлайн <a href="https://vk.com/public62241455">https://vk.com/public62241455</a>	Russians Online Русские Онлайн <a href="https://vk.com/public62241455">https://vk.com/public62241455</a>
2	Republic of Novorossia   Great Rus' Республика Новороссия   Великая Русь <a href="https://vk.com/the_republic_of_new_russia">https://vk.com/the_republic_of_new_russia</a>	Russian Patriots    Union of Slavs Русские Патриоты    Союз Славян <a href="https://vk.com/russian_patriots_union_of_slavs">https://vk.com/russian_patriots_union_of_slavs</a>	News Front Новостной Фронт <a href="https://vk.com/public70204174">https://vk.com/public70204174</a>	Putin Путин <a href="https://vk.com/public76835213">https://vk.com/public76835213</a>
3	This country can't be beaten! Russian motivators, humor Эту страну не победить! Русские мотиваторы Юмор <a href="https://vk.com/public69786071">https://vk.com/public69786071</a>	Red Way Красный Путь <a href="https://vk.com/club39902460">https://vk.com/club39902460</a>	Putin Путин <a href="https://vk.com/public76835213">https://vk.com/public76835213</a>	Army Армия <a href="https://vk.com/public32356181">https://vk.com/public32356181</a>

Figure 6: Red Way

The image shows a screenshot of a VK.com page for the community "КРАСНЫЙ ПУТЬ". The browser address bar shows "vk.com/club39902460".

**Left Sidebar (Login/Signup):**

- Phone or email:
- Password:
- Buttons: Log in, Sign up
- Link: Forgot your password?

**Main Content:**

Open community


===== ★ КРАСНЫЙ ПУТЬ ★ =====

Если крикнет рать святая: «Кинь ты Русь, живи в раю!» Я скажу: «Не надо рая, дайте Родину мою».

**КАК СОВЕТСКИЕ ПОГРАНИЧНИКИ ЖЕСТОКО ПРОУЧИЛИ НАТОВСКИХ НАГЛЕЦОВ**

Эта история произошла во время холодной войны на границе ФРГ и восточной Германии. Светлые головы конструкторов из ФРГ нашли очень оригинальный способ тестировать свои танки в «реальных» условиях – автономно управляемую машину подсовывали под наши пушки, причем специально, сильно нервируя погранцов.

Expand text...



Page СМЕКАЛКА СОВЕТСКИХ ПО.. View page

13 Apr at 9:15 am 59 220

**Right Sidebar:**

- КРАСНЫЙ ПУТЬ**
- ПОБЕДА БУДЕТ ЗА НАМИ!**
- Members**  
104,776 people
- Grid of member avatars: Alexey, Boris, Anna, Egor, Igor, Anatoly
- Links**  
6 links



Figure 7: This Country Can't be Beaten!

The image shows a screenshot of a VK public page. The browser's address bar displays 'vk.com/public53474'. The page header includes the VK logo and a 'sign up' link. On the left side, there is a login section with fields for 'Phone or email' and 'Password', and buttons for 'Log in' and 'Sign up'. The main content area is titled 'Public page' and features a post with the following text:

**ЭТУ СТРАНУ НЕ ПОБЕДИТЬ! Русские не сдаются!**  
Наше дело правое! Победа будет за нами! 🇷🇺

Куда катится этот мир !!? Сообщества с пошлым, русофобским, матерным юмором и голыми девками заполнили весь ВК, некоторые из них уже превышают по численности 7 миллионов человек!

Наш паблик ориентируется на нравственность и любовь к Родине, но мы пока не в состоянии конкурировать с такими мощными сообществами, поэтому просим вас помочь!

Подпишитесь на  "Эту страну не победить! Русские не сдаются!"  и поделитесь этой записью с друзьями и возможно случится небывалое - наш паблик догонит и обгонит МДК и ему подобные сообщества в которых разлагают умы и сердца молодого поколения!

ВМЕСТЕ МЫ СМОЖЕМ БОЛЬШЕ! vk.com/rus\_improvisation 🇷🇺 🇷🇺 🇷🇺

#Осознание@rus\_improvisation #Оборона@rus\_improvisation

Below the text is a large graphic with a woman in a military-style uniform holding a rifle. The text on the graphic reads: "ЕСЛИ ХОЧЕШЬ, ЧТОБЫ СООБЩЕСТВО ЭТУ СТРАНУ НЕ ПОБЕДИТЬ! РУССКИЕ НЕ СДАЮТСЯ! СТАЛО КРУПНЕЕ МДК И ЕМУ ПОДОБНЫХ СДЕЛАЙ РЕПОСТ БУДУЩЕЕ ЗАВИСИТ ОТ ТЕБЯ! vk.com/rus\_improvisation". To the right of the main text is a vertical banner with the same woman and rifle graphic, with the text: "ЭТУ СТРАНУ НЕ ПОБЕДИТЬ! vk.com/rus\_improvisation" and "РУССКИЕ НЕ СДАЮТСЯ". At the bottom of the banner is a logo for "НАК+РОССИИ".

At the bottom right of the page, there is a 'Followers' section showing '271,481 followers'.

Figure 8: Russian Patriots || Union of Slavs

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL `vk.com/russian_patriots_union_of_slavs`. The page layout includes a navigation bar with the VK logo and a 'sign up' button. On the left, there is a login section with fields for 'Phone or email' and 'Password', and buttons for 'Log in' and 'Sign up'. The main content area is titled 'Open community' and features a post from the group 'Русские Патриоты \*||\* Союз Славян'. The post text reads: '22 мая – день памяти святителя Николая Чудотворца. Это наш любимый святой – земной ангел и небесный человек! От всей души желаем покровительства и помощи святителя Николая всем друзьям, посетителям и участникам этой группы. Дивен Бог во святых своих! Святителю отче Николае, моли Бога о нас!'. Below the text are two religious icons of St. Nicholas. To the right of the post is a large graphic with the text 'РУССКИЕ ПАТРИОТЫ СОЮЗ СЛАВЯН' and a red star. The post has 26 comments and 103 likes. Below the post are sections for 'Discussion board' (1170 discussions) and 'Документальное кино' (47 posts). A 'Members' section shows 97,149 people.

Phone or email

Password

Log in

Sign up

Forgot your password?

Open community

Русские Патриоты \*||\* Союз Славян

22 мая – день памяти святителя Николая Чудотворца. Это наш любимый святой – земной ангел и небесный человек! От всей души желаем покровительства и помощи святителя Николая всем друзьям, посетителям и участникам этой группы. Дивен Бог во святых своих! Святителю отче Николае, моли Бога о нас!

Expand text...

Link: [luka.rpcb.ru](http://luka.rpcb.ru)

Nikolay Valuev  
yesterday at 10:22 pm

26 103

Discussion board  
1170 discussions

Документальное кино.  
47 posts. Latest post from Marina Olenek, 19 May at 11:59 am →

Members  
97,149 people

Figure 9: Republic of Novorossia, June 2014

The image shows a screenshot of a web browser window displaying a Wayback Machine archive of a VKontakte (VK) page. The browser's address bar shows the URL [https://web.archive.org/web/20140606191513/http://vk.com/the\\_republic\\_of\\_new\\_russia?](https://web.archive.org/web/20140606191513/http://vk.com/the_republic_of_new_russia?). The Wayback Machine interface indicates 139 captures between May 27 and February 18, 2014, with the current date being June 6, 2014.

The main content of the page is the VK profile for "РЕСПУБЛИКА НОВОРОССИЯ | АНТИМАЙДАН". The profile name is "РЕСПУБЛИКА НОВОРОССИЯ | АНТИМАЙДАН" with the tagline "Мы - русские, какой восторг!". Below the name, it lists "ГЕРОИ НОВОРОССИИ" and includes hashtags: #Новороссия #Ополчение #Славянск #ДНР. Two video thumbnails are visible, featuring "ПАВЕЛ ГУБАРЕВ" (5:30) and "ОЛЕГ ЦАРЕВ" (10:50). The page also features a "Discussion board" with several posts, including "Россия, Украина, Беларусь, должны быть как одно государство?" (338 posts) and "Реквием Украины - новый гимн украинцы!" (107 posts). A "Members" section lists 67,257 people, with profile pictures for Evgeny, Andrey, Alyosha, Oxana, and Antonio. A "Links" section shows 7 links, including "политическая матрешка! Антимайдан!!".

At the bottom of the browser window, a status bar reads "Transferring data from web.archive.org...".

Figure 10: Republic of Novorossia, May 2016

The image shows a screenshot of a VK.com page for the community "РЕСПУБЛИКА НОВОРОССИЯ | ВЕЛИКАЯ РУСЬ". The browser address bar shows "vk.com/the\_republic\_of\_new\_russia". The page layout includes a login form on the left with fields for "Phone or email" and "Password", and buttons for "Log in" and "Sign up". The main content area features a large post from September 7, 2015, with 317 comments and 3070 likes. The post image shows a wall with graffiti: "ДА, Я ИЗ ДОНБАССА" at the top, "ВЕЧНАЯ СЛАВА ОСВОБОДИТЕЛЯМ ДОНЕЦКОГО НАРОДА" in the middle, and "И ГОРЖУСЬ ЭТИМ" at the bottom. To the right of the post is the community's coat of arms, featuring a double-headed eagle with a shield, holding a sword and a banner that reads "СВОБОДА И ТРУД". Below the coat of arms is a "Members" section showing 144,337 people and a grid of member avatars, including Oleg, Olga, Alexander, Maxim, Mikhail, and Ivan. At the bottom, there is a "Links" section with 5 links, including "Страношары".


Figure 11: Russians Online

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying `vk.com/public62241455`. The page is a public VK profile for "Русские Онлайн".



**Left sidebar:**

- Phone or email:
- Password:
- Log in
- Sign up
- Forgot your password?

**Main content:**

- Public page**
- Русские Онлайн**  
ПРАВДА ПОБЕДИТ, С НАМИ БОГ! ВСТУПАЙТЕ К НАМ!
- Челябинский доктор, в фашистском концлагере, спас тысячи жизней.
- Боле 20 лет хирург Георгий Синяков заведовал отделением челябинской больницы. Никто и не предполагал, что во время Великой Отечественной войны он, находясь в концлагере, помог сбежать сотням советских пленным и спас от смерти тысячи заключённых.
- «Летающая ведьма».
- Expand text...
- 

**Right sidebar:**

- 
- Followers**  
184,595 followers
- 

**Public poll:**

- А ты подписался на нашу группу?** Public poll
- Да, правильное дело делаете! 427 82.1%
- Сейчас посмотрю что за группа

Figure 12: News Front

The image shows a screenshot of a web browser displaying a public page on the VK social media platform. The browser's address bar shows the URL `vk.com/public70204174`. The page header includes the VK logo and a "sign up" link. On the left side, there is a login section with fields for "Phone or email" and "Password", and buttons for "Log in" and "Sign up".

The main content area is titled "Public page" and features the following elements:

- Header:** "Новости | ДНР | ЛНР | МИР | NEWS-FRONT"
- Title:** "СПЕЦОПЕРАЦИЯ МГБ ЛНР ПО ЗАДЕРЖАНИЮ СОТРУДНИКА ГЕНПРОКУРАТУРЫ ЗА ПОЛУЧЕНИЕ ВЗЯТКИ"
- Text:** "МГБ ЛНР выявлена и пресечена противоправная деятельность сотрудника Генеральной прокуратуры ЛНР, который систематически вымогал взятки в виде денежных средств в крупном размере у субъектов предпринимательской деятельности."
- Text:** "Установлено, что с декабря 2015 года по май 2016 года один из сотрудников Генеральной прокуратуры ЛНР за денежное вознаграждение оказывал содействие в уклонении от ответственности по выявленным в ходе прокурорских проверок фактам нарушений земельного законодательства рядом местных предпринимателей, а также предлагал осуществлять дальнейшее покровительство в бизнесе."
- Video:** A video player with a play button and a duration of 1:17. The video title is "ВИДЕО: <http://news-front.info/2016/05/21/specoperaciya-mgb-l..>"

On the right side of the page, there is a vertical filmstrip-style image gallery with the "NEWS FRONT" logo at the top and bottom of each frame. Below the gallery, the "Followers" section shows "124,167 followers" and three profile pictures of users named "Konstantin", "Kirill", and "Rodion".