DIGITAL DISCOURSE, ONLINE REPRESSION, AND CYBERTERRORISM: INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN RUSSIA'S NORTH CAUCASUS REPUBLICS

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ABSTRACT

Zachary Tewell: Digital Discourse, Online Repression, and Cyberterrorism: Information Communication Technologies in Russia's North Caucasus Republics
(Under the direction of Graeme Robertson)

Is the "cyber-utopian" versus "cyber-repression" argument the most effective way to frame the political uses of new technologies? Contemporary discourse on social media fails to highlight political dynamics in authoritarian regimes with weak state control, where independent groups can capitalize on the use of coercive force. In this thesis I will explore the various methods through which information communication technologies are utilized by civil groups, uncivil groups, and the state using Russia's North Caucasus republics as a case study. New technologies are exploited through a variety of means by an array of actors in the North Caucasus whose goals may not necessarily be democratic. Through this evidence I demonstrate that information communication technologies do not inherently aid democratization, nor do they necessarily aid the incumbent regime; rather, they are merely a conduit through which existing groups put forth their agendas regarding their ideals of the modern state.

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Introduction

The adoption of faster communication technologies has historically been linked to questions about how they may influence a state's transition towards democracy. During the Cold War, newfound communication technologies, such as fax machines and photocopiers, were smuggled into the Soviet Union in the hope that they would promote the proliferation of *samizdat* (anti-Soviet literature produced domestically).[1] Larry Diamond refers to information communication technologies (hereafter referred to as ICTs) as "liberation technology." He elaborates, "Liberation technology is any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom…the computer, the Internet, the mobile phone, …[and] 'new social media' such as Facebook and Twitter".[2]

New media types, though a relatively recent phenomenon, have typically been examined in the contexts of open democracies. However, after the events of the Arab Spring in 2011, analysts began studying the use of ICTs in non-democratic environments. In the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, social media[3] had a measurable impact. Though ICTs did not contribute to the social and political inequality between the populations and elites, their use catalyzed internal uprisings capable of regime overthrow.[4] Revolutionary ideals were fomented, articulated, and spread across borders by the use of sites such as Twitter

[1] Morozov, Evgeny. *The Net Delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. PublicAffairs Store, 201

[2] Diamond, Larry. "Liberation technology." *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010): 69-83. 70

[3] In this work I use the terms ICTs and social media interchangeably for stylistic variation.

[4] Stepanova, Ekaterina. *The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the 'Arab Spring'*: PONARS Eurasia, 2011.

and Facebook.[5] Yet, in the cases of Moldova[6] and Iran,[7] online-based social movements failed to galvanize a viable opposition or generate enough political momentum to topple the incumbent regimes. Ultimately, in the latter cases, the movements eventually dispersed; in Iran's case, domestic social media users who protested against the regime were tracked down, intimidated, and in some instances even killed.[8]

The dynamic above highlights the debate among social scientists as to the role of social media in non-democratic regimes: do ICTs promote democratization or merely aid incumbent authoritarian regimes in oppressing their populations? So-called "cyber utopians[9]" lie on one end of the ideological spectrum, espousing optimistic rhetoric, predicting that an online public space would offer a free-flow of democratic ideals and ultimately have a democratizing effect on authoritarian regimes. Clay Shirky writes, "New media conducive to fostering participation can indeed increase…freedoms…just as the printing press, the postal service, the telegraph, and the telephone did before."[10]

In contrast to analysts like Shirky are "skeptics", such as Evgeny Morozov who argue that social media mechanisms allow another avenue for a state to repress its

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[5] Howard, Philip N., Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil Hussain, Will Mari, and Marwa Mazaid. "Opening closed regimes: what was the role of social media during the Arab Spring?." *Working Paper* (2011).

[6] Morozov, Evgeny. "Moldova's twitter revolution is not a myth." Accessed December 8, 2013. http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/10/moldovas_twitter_revolution_is_not_a_myth.

[7] Burns, Alex, and Ben Eltham. "Twitter-free Iran: An evaluation of Twitter's role in public diplomacy and information operations in Iran's 2009 election crisis." (2009): 322-334.

[8] Ibid., 306.

[9] Cyber-utopianism is a logical extension of the ideology of technological optimism, itself a complex and multi-faceted set of beliefs that has existed for decades. For more information on this belief set, see Gendron's "Technology and the Human Condition."

[10] Shirky, Clay. "The Political Power of Social Media-Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change." *Foreign Affairs.* 90 (2011): 28.

citizens. ICTs, in this view, offer authoritarian regimes alternative methods to gather information on dissidents and ultimately strengthen the coercive apparatus of the state.[11] Malcolm Gladwell also disputes the revolutionary attributes of new media types. In a piece for the New Yorker he writes that social media technologies may indeed increase participation, but they do so by devaluing the act of participation itself. For example, the new norm of "activism" has been reduced to online group membership rather than actual protest or civic engagement.[12]

I argue that this debate is limited in scope and oversimplifies a complex social dynamic. Much attention has been paid to the digital interactions between two primary actors: the state and civil society; however, this focus neglects a third important actor, uncivil society. Uncivil society groups are organizations independent from the state that advocate against democratizing reforms. These groups often advocate intimidation and violence as legitimate tools of exerting influence on both the state and local civil society organizations.[13]

In this thesis, I argue that the proliferation of ICTs has affected the political situation in Russia's North Caucasus region[14] in three key aspects. First, ICTs alone do not inherently aid in transitioning a regime in a democratic direction. Second, existing social groups utilize ICTs to the extent to which they will assist in promoting their

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[11] Morozov, *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*.

[12] Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted." The New Yorker, accessed March 12, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?currentPage=all.

[13] This conception will be elaborated upon in the "Uncivil Society" chapter.

[14] The North Caucasus, for the purposes of this work, is defined as the autonomous republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, and Chechnya, all located in the North Caucasian Federal District of Russia. Additionally, due to demographic similarities, I also include two members of the Southern Federal District, Adygeya and Krasnodar Krai.

individual ideologies; in other words, present civil society and authoritarian dynamics determine the role of ICTs in promoting democratic ideals, not the inverse. Third, uncivil society groups are also emboldened by the preponderance of ICTs, and use them to damage the influence of both civil society actors and the state. In particular, this thesis demonstrates the triangular relationship between civil society groups, the state, and uncivil society using ICTs; all three groups use ICTs in varying ways to advance their respective agendas.

The dynamic between uncivil society and civil groups and the state is not captured in contemporary studies on social media use in authoritarian regimes. The purpose of this work is not to side with either the cyber-utopian or pessimistic camps, or to ascribe a "positive" or "negative" role for ICTs on democratization. Rather the goal is to illustrate the complex and varied uses of ICTs among a wide variety of actors in Russia as well as to advance the notion of studying illiberal groups not as a subset of civil society, but as a set of actors that behave in a categorically different way from traditional civil society groups. Finally, this thesis sheds new light on an understudied portion of Russia. Though scholarship exists examining the role of ICTs in Russia in larger metropolitan areas such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg, little research has been conducted solely in the North Caucasus republics.

This thesis will be mapped out as follows. First, I will examine ICTs in a theoretical context, specifically in terms of Robert Putnam's theory of social capital. Within this framework I will present previous scholarship related to the political impact of the proliferation of ICTs among a variety of groups. Following this, I will examine North Caucasian civil society's use of ICTs. Next, I will look at how the political elites in

the North Caucasian republics use ICTs to suppress civil society and deal with the local insurgency. Next, I will identify and analyze the "uncivil" portion of North Caucasian civil society; within this section I will also examine the use of ICTs by these illiberal groups to suppress democratic ideals espoused by civil society as well as attack state resources. Finally, I will address future areas for study and research questions posed by my analysis.

Social Capital and its Link to ICTs

What are some of the theoretical arguments surrounding the effects of ICTs? Put differently, do ICTs provide any added social or political value beyond new forms and methods of communication? Contemporary scholarship on the relationship between nascent information networks and society demonstrates a rise in the social capital of Internet users. In the following section, I will present existing research on the link between social capital and ICTs, as well as draw a link between social capital, ICTs, and democratization. Furthermore, I will expound upon some of the unintended consequences brought about by the proliferation of ICTs among strong authoritarian states and illiberal groups.

First, what is social capital and why is critical for academic examination? Robert Putnam refers to social capital as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity that arise from them."[15] However, social capital measures more than just the sum of one's interpersonal network; it can also translate into demonstrative behavioral changes at the individual level. For example, it increases the likelihood of becoming involved in local

[15] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 2000.

and national level political communities. Shah et al. provide a more nuanced definition: "…social capital concerns psychological and sociological factors that, while not explicitly political, have implications for political functioning."[16] More broadly defined, gains in social capital can result in a larger sense of self-worth and contentment, a strengthening of interpersonal networks, and greater civic engagement. For the purposes of this work, I will expand upon Shah et al.'s characterization of social capital and use it to describe the political implications that come from extended interpersonal relationships and associational memberships.

If researchers have established social capital as critical to interaction with broader local communities, does this associational involvement have an influence upon governance? A study on Italy in the 1970's noted disparities in the success of regional institutions; some created widely popular public programs, while others remained corrupt and inefficient in the eyes of the public. Controlling for ideologies, political parties, and governmental organization the one key difference was that associational involvements (e.g. group membership, the number of local organizations) and civic engagement (e.g. the number of newspaper readers, voter turnout) was higher in the regions with more transparent governments.[17] Increased social capital served as the mechanism to increase popular demand for political accountability and ultimately led to citizens reporting higher satisfaction with their elected officials.[18]

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[16] Shah, Dhavan V., Nojin Kwak, R. Lance Holbert, Dhavan. "'Connecting' and 'Disconnecting' with Civic Life: Patterns of Internet use and the Production of Social Capital." *Journal of Political Communication* 2, (18, 2001): 141-162.

[17] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

[18] Ibid.

Increased social capital can aid in local political participation and spread knowledge of local political issues. This increased associational participation can help solve collective action problems that may otherwise prevent citizens from making clear demands on their local governments. Moreover, increased social capital in populations can also lead to easier governance and higher instances of people adhering to the rules and norms set forth by local institutions. Practical instances of this could be noted as citizens paying taxes in full and on time or following a local anti-littering ordinance.[19]

Importantly, a rise in social capital and the ensuing associational involvement are linked to the development of a strong civil society. The increased trust networks created by the diffusion of social norms and reciprocity ultimately reduce the transaction costs to associational involvement; the requirement to create contracts and fears of free-riding are assuaged when social capital increases. Fukuyama notes, "An abundant stock of social capital is presumably what produces a dense civil society, which in turn has been almost universally seen as a necessary condition for modern liberal democracy…Civil society serves to balance the power of the state and to protect individuals from the state's power."[20] From this estimation, civil society is less likely to flourish under conditions where degrees of social capital are low.

Now that we have established that social capital is one of the primary mechanisms through which civil society is developed, what are the roles of ICTs in developing this capital? In an American survey of 39,000 Internet users in 1998, higher Internet usage

[19] Boix, Carles and Daniel N. Posner. "Social Capital: Explaining its Origins and Effects on Government Performance." *British Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 4 (1998): 686-693.

[20] Fukuyama, Francis. "Social Capital and Development: The Coming Agenda." *SAIS Review* 22, no. 1 (2002): 23-37.

positively correlated with associational involvement and political participation.[21] Further, online organizational participation correlated with offline group involvement as well.[22] Survey data from 2007 of college Internet users demonstrated, that while it was not the main predictor of activity, online social network activity was correlated with civic participation.[23] Further, ICTs were found, in one study, to be more engaging and mobilizing than traditional media sources. Shah et al. write, "Online information seeking and interactive civic messaging – uses of the Web as a resource and a forum – both strongly influence civic engagement, often more so than do traditional print and broadcast media and face-to-face communication."[24]

Researchers discovered a link in the United States between social media usage and civic participation.[25] In survey data gathered from the United States in 2009, social media users who engaged with sites for news and information felt more civically engaged and a stronger development of social capital. In other words, when citizens utilized social media sites (such as Facebook) for information gathering, they were ultimately more

[21] Wellman, Barry, Anabel Quan Haase, James Witte, and Keith Hampton. 2001. "Does the Internet Increase, Decrease, Or Supplement Social Capital? Social Networks, Participation, and Community Commitment." *American Behavioral Scientist* 45 (3): 436-455.

[22] Though this data is useful for the purposes of this work, the study itself addresses a very small sample of the North American population. For example, in 1998 only 41% of adults were online. Combined with the fact that over 40% of the members of this sample was college-educated persons earning over $50,000 per year. For more information, see http://www.pewinternet.org/2007/06/21/the-internet-circa-1998/.

[23] Valenzuela, Sebastián, Namsu Park, and Kerk F. Kee. "Is there Social Capital in a Social Network Site?: Facebook use and College Students' Life Satisfaction, Trust, and Participation." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, no. 4 (2009): 875-901.

[24] Shah, Dhavan V., Jaeho Cho, William P. Eveland, and Nojin Kwak. "Information and Expression in a Digital Age: Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation." *Communication Research* 32, no. 5 (2005): 531-565. 551.

[25] Zhang, Weiwu, Thomas J. Johnson, Trent Seltzer, and Shannon L. Bichard. "The Revolution Will be Networked: The Influence of Social Networking Sites on Political Attitudes and Behavior." *Social Science Computer Review* 28, no. 1 (2010): 75-92.

likely to foster democratic ideals and participate more in the democratic process through mechanisms such as voting and political group involvement.[26] ICTs are a mechanism through which new relationships are built and existing social networks strengthened.

How does social capital apply to actors outside of liberal democracies? Do the same dynamics apply to fledgling democracies or under authoritarian rule? Inferring from the criteria above, researchers originally posited that increases in social capital would result in democratizing effects on regimes. This has proven the case in Russia during Boris Yeltsin's rule as president. As was the case in Italy, social capital in Russia varies widely by region. Social capital in the regions was measured by an index of voter turnout, independent newspapers, and numbers of clubs and cultural associations. The higher degree of social capital in a Russian region determined the effectiveness of its government, based upon indicators such as political competition and political participation in voting for individual candidates as well as referenda turnouts. Areas with lower degrees of social capital elected incompetent or corrupt officials and led to a higher degree of governmental dissatisfaction.[27]

Individual Internet use was also found to be a strong indicator of demand for democratic institutions, although only under a particular set of conditions. In a 28 country survey in Africa and Asia, researchers noted that as individual Internet use increased individuals were "socialized" towards democratic ideals. However, this phenomenon was present only when some sort of democracy already existed in the country. Less

[26] Gil de Zúñiga, Homero, Nakwon Jung, and Sebastián Valenzuela. "Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17, no. 3 (2012): 319-336.

[27] Marsh, Christopher. "Social Capital and Democracy in Russia." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000): 183-199.

democratic states (i.e. those that were listed as "Not Free" on FreedomHouse scores) were less likely to evince this trend.[28] This study suggests that ICTs may not necessarily help spread democratic ideals intrinsically, but rather reinforces existing principles espoused by certain groups.

Heeks and Seo-Zindy analyze digital media tools in an actor-centered perspective[29] under Iran's authoritarian leadership. Specifically, they outline the role of such tools in the development of social movement networks under authoritarian rule. They find that ICTs allow a freer flow of ideas as well as a larger audience for such ideas that may not have been possible under older forms of communication. However, the technologies also prevented the creation of a unified leadership structure, limited engagement with the opposition, and allowed protestors to be more easily identifiable.[30] Ultimately, in Iran's case, social media did aid in creating opposition networks, but such networks were flimsy, spontaneous, and lacked the capacity to maintain themselves over time. The authors point out, "…[T] his loose structure weakened the depth of translation of interests and identities within the protestors, and weakened the ability of the protestors to translate the interests and identities of other actors in practice."[31]

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[28] Nisbet, Erik C., Elizabeth Stoycheff, and Katy E. Pearce. "Internet use and Democratic Demands: A Multinational, Multilevel Model of Internet use and Citizen Attitudes about Democracy." *Journal of Communication* 62, (2012): 249-265.

[29] This concept frames ICTs as an actor in a broader network, noting their distribution contributes to interactions among actors, and not necessarily cause and effect. In this context, ICTs are not a static phenomenon, but rather a dynamic "actor."

[30] Heeks, Richard, and Ryoung Se-Zindy. "ICTs and Social Movements under Authoritarian Regimes: An Actor-Network Perspective." *UK Academy for Information Systems Conference Proceedings* (2013).

[31] Ibid., 19

Chief among the assumptions of "cyber utopians" is that civil society is inherently democratic. Alagappa, in studying civil society among twelve Asian countries draws several conclusions regarding its role in democratization.[32] Chiefly, there are no correlations between civil society and democratizing reforms. He notes, "Civil society groups have both expanded and contracted democratic space."[33] Not all civil society groups promote democratic ideals; some groups espouse exclusivist, nationalistic, and racist rhetoric that is counterproductive to establishing and maintaining a liberal democracy. Thus, we can expect that only when democracy is the prominent ideal espoused by groups will civil societies lead to democratization. Francis Fukuyama explores the effects of social capital on group coherence, noting that there are both positive and negative dimensions involved:

> Social capital within a particular network or group can produce positive externalities by teaching people social virtues such as honesty, reciprocity, and dependability that they can then apply to relationships with other people…On the other hand, human beings have a tendency to build 'in-group' solidarity at the expense of outsiders; thus societies with many tightly bonded groups or networks may be fragmented and rife with conflicts and hostility when viewed as a whole.[34]

Group inclusiveness is important to note among the growth of civil society organizations. If groups tend to remain positively engaged with the broader political and social community (that is, if there is no rhetoric that creates or exacerbates cleavages among

[32] Democratization in this sense refers to the transition of a non-democratic regime (such as a one-party, military, or dynastic authoritarian rule) to a system of governance based on codified rule of law, multi-party elections that are free and fair, and universal human suffrage.

[33] Alagappa, Muthia, ed. 2004. *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[34] Fukuyama, Francis. "Social Capital and Development: The Coming Agenda."

social or ethnic boundaries), they can transcend social boundaries, increase tolerance, and stimulate reciprocity networks.[35]

Can the acquisition of social capital and increase in political participation foster anti-democratic attitudes, intolerance and even violence as well as create associations inimical to the democratic process? As noted above, inclusive groups can bridge gaps between isolated populations and reduce transaction costs for cooperation; however, exclusive groups, while having high intra-relational social capital, can serve to further isolate populations, as well as exacerbate existing social and ethnic cleavages that may ultimately hinder the democratic process. Paxton elaborates, "The internal social capital of other highly member-oriented associations could help mobilize members in favor of policy innovations that do not benefit the community as a whole."[36]

Democratic participation does not necessarily lead to a preponderance of liberal ideals. Putnam notes that in the United States polarized votes, those who lie on the farthest ends of the political spectrum are 50% more likely to vote than moderates.[37] Indeed, civic participation does not necessarily create conditions favorable towards democratization. In fact, the opposite phenomenon can occur under certain conditions. Sheri Berman reminds us that in the case of the Weimar Republic, the political predecessor to the German Third Reich from 1919 to 1933, German civic engagement and associational involvement was quite high. However, this condition in the presence of weak state institutions led to the rise of undemocratic principles, and eventually Nazism.

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[35] Paxton, Pamela. "Social Capital and Democracy: An Interdependent Relationship." *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2002): 254-277.

[36] Ibid., 259.

[37] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

Berman writes, "…high levels of associationism [sic], absent strong and responsive national government and political parties, served to fragment rather than unite German society."[38] Berman's work demonstrates the significance of civil society's role in undermining democratic institutions; the presence of a strong civil society was not a sufficient factor for maintaining a fledgling democracy in interwar Germany.

Indeed, civil society groups are not always democratic and they do not necessarily use ICTs to promote democratic notions. The nature of social media, analyst Robin Thompson elaborates, "[Social media]…easily connects people very quickly with a wide audience, the synergy creates a movement en masse of like-minded persons. A leader is not needed. Ideas are exchanged and people choose to act on them – or not. Groupthink is a very powerful force."[39] Indeed, there is no distinction as to the types of ideals that can be acted upon due to ICTs. Both democratic and anti-democratic rhetoric can become a galvanizing force, and one is no more likely than the other to be espoused through the use of technology.

Contemporary Russia provides a sample of uncivil use of new technologies. *Nashi* (ours) a youth wing of the dominant United Russia party utilizes unorthodox methods to discredit information considered unflattering to Putin's administration and allies. Rather than foster democratic dialogue or participation, the group instead uses ICTs to serve the interests of Putin's authoritarian regime. For example, Internet users are paid to write

[38] Berman, Sheri. "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 401-429. 402.

[39] Thompson, Robin L. "Radicalization and the use of Social Media." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 167-190. 175.

inflammatory comments on particular articles or hit the "dislike" button on YouTube videos from opposition activists.[40]

Authoritarian states are also overcoming the learning curve to technology, and have begun to use them to their advantage. Oppressive states are adopting a new paradigm for addressing popular use of the Internet, which Rebecca MacKinnon deems "networked authoritarianism." Citizens living under networked authoritarian regimes enjoy many of the online freedoms seen in open democracies; degrees of dissent are even tolerated online. However, as new communication technologies have the ability to mobilize populations against regimes, they can also dissuade and intimidate populations from political involvement.[41]

In studying online media in contemporary Azerbaijan, Pearce and Kendzior outline several preliminary findings. First, in 2009 the authors found that Internet users were more likely to support anti-government protests. However, later that year Azerbaijani authorities arrested two producers of a YouTube video which parodied the incumbent and oppressive Aliyev regime. Though the producers were released months later, the message was clear: cyberspace in Azerbaijan was no longer a free arena for opposition.[42] The effects of the Aliyev regime's actions were noticeable almost immediately; news of the arrests went viral on Azerbaijani digital media platforms. Azerbaijani media outlets controlled by the regime embarked on a campaign to

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[40] Elder, Miriam. "Polishing Putin: Hacked Emails Suggest Dirty Tricks by Russian Youth Group." The Guardian 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/07/putin-hacked-emails-russian-nashi.

[41] Mackinnon, Rebecca. "China's "Networked Authoritarianism"." *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 32-46.

[42] Pearce, Katy E., and Sarah Kendzior. "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan." *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 283-298.

discourage Azerbaijani youth from using social media. Ultimately, Azerbaijani Internet users became less likely to mobilize and protest after the government action against opposition bloggers.[43]

So can we take it that ICTs have a net positive or negative effect on the democratization of a regime? The evidence presented above certainly disputes that notion. Though ICTs advance levels of social capital, this result may not necessarily democratize; indeed, though civil groups may benefit from increased associational involvement, authoritarian states and uncivil actors may use these new methods of communication to stall and demobilize democratic reforms. The inclusiveness or exclusiveness of civil society group dynamics influences how they will use ICTs, rather than ICTs themselves influencing group ideology. In the following sections, I will present evidence from Russia's North Caucasus to demonstrate the interactions between civil society, the state, and uncivil groups using ICTs as a medium for their ideology and rhetoric.

Civil Society and the Use of ICTs

According to the technological optimists, one of the purported benefits of ICT proliferation was their aid in expanding civil society and the media sphere in closed regimes. Diamond writes, "[ICTs] may help to widen the public sphere, creating a more pluralistic and autonomous arena of news, commentary, and information. The new ICTs are also powerful instruments for transparency and accountability, documenting and

[43] Ibid.

deterring abuses of human rights and democratic procedures."[44] These benefits have largely been present in the North Caucasus. In the section, I will demonstrate how the proliferation of ICTs has advanced traditional civil society organizations in the North Caucasus through various means.

Civil society itself is a broad category that includes a wide variety of actors and organizations. Marc Howard writing on civil society in Russia noted that although many civil society groups have a goal of influencing policy and the state bureaucracy they "have neither power nor profit as their objective or rationale."[45] In the case of the North Caucasus, civil society groups encompass those independent from state sponsorship. Typically, civil society in the area takes the shape of human rights organizations, independent media outlets, and ethnic advocacy groups.

New ICTs have served multiple functions for civil society organizations in the North Caucasus. First, they have allowed existing groups an extended sphere of influence for the distribution of information. Within such a sphere, civil society groups are able to compete more successfully with the information campaigns of the state and uncivil groups.

When Russia invaded Chechnya in 1994, Akhmed Zakayev immediately joined the Chechen resistance, fighting against the Russian occupation. Later, he embarked upon a lucrative political career; eventually, he landed the position of deputy prime minister of the breakaway Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1997. In 2000, Zakayev was wounded and fled Chechnya for the United Kingdom. A break between radical and moderate forces

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[44] Diamond, Larry. "Liberation technology." 71.

[45] Howard, Marc. *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

operating in Chechnya led to Zakayev's election as prime minister of the exiled government in the United Kingdom.[46] The Chechen insurgency later denounced Zakayev as a traitor; currently, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria government-in-exile has no affiliation with the Islamic insurgency operating in Chechnya today.[47]

Zakayev's government founded the website www.chechenpress.org as a moderate political voice, independent from Islamic separatists, advocating for Chechen independence as well as ongoing peaceful dialogue with Russia. Since the Russian state is increasingly cracking down on online space, www.chechenpress.org provides an alternative view of the conflict, as opposed to the predominantly extremist narrative portrayed by typical Russian media outlets.[48] In the case of Chechnya, ICTs have contributed to a more unified exile community. Krag writes, "…individuals with a shared political identity are prone to make contact in order to renew former political movements in exile. Today, the contact may happen through the Internet and mobile phones…"[49] The moderate Chechen exile community can now communicate, organize, and mobilize more effectively due to these new technological advances.

ICTs can provide a safety and protection mechanism for local journalists and civil society organizations. In particular, new technologies have allowed independent journalists a more modern mode of reporting. The North Caucasus is a notoriously

[46] Krag, Helen. "A Space to Gaze from Hence to Thence: Chechens in Exile." In *A Comparative Ethnography of Alternative Spaces*, edited by Dahl, Jens, and Esther Fihl, 175-196, 2013.

[47] Harding, Luke. "Chechen Separatist Leader Akhmed Zakayev Arrested in Poland." The Guardian, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/17/russia-extradition-chechen-separatist-zakayev.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 177

dangerous location for media outlets; the Russian state and insurgent groups frequently target reporters and rights activists in the area. New media technologies, however, are allowing organizations such as The Caucasian Knot, an independent news organization focused on events in the North Caucasus, to operate more effectively and under a higher degree of protection. Specifically, Gregory Shvedov, editor-in-chief of the Caucasian Knot, utilizes Google technologies to consolidate the works of his reporters.[50] This allows Caucasian Knot to function without a centralized location, as well as to protect the anonymity of its contributors.[51] Digital-only methods of writing and contributing news stories for the area also eliminate the need for traditional brick and mortar news outlets. The relative ease at which The Caucasian Knot operates ensures a higher probability of its survival in the area and assurance of continued moderate news outlets that may not otherwise exist.

Social media has also allowed the voice of independent news organizations to remain intact even when under duress from the state. For instance, the Caucasian Knot was the victim of a *DDoS* attack[52] which rendered the website inaccessible to most users. However, the website was able to continue to disseminate its articles via social media platforms such as Facebook.[53] These new alternative platforms of information allow users multiple pathways for access, ultimately increasing the difficulty for censorship.

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[50] In particular, documents can be uploaded remotely to a centralized location and shared among staff members.

[51] Vanden Heuvel, Katrina. "A Brave and Independent Russian Editor." The Nation, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.thenation.com/blog/167265/brave-and-independent-russian-editor#.

[52] Attacks such as these are known as denial of service attacks which hit a website with so much traffic that render it temporarily disabled.

[53] "Caucasian Knot | during DDoS-Attacks on the Caucasian Knot all News Accessible in Social Networks." Caucasian Knot, accessed December 8, 2013, http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/26237/.

In Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan attacks on human rights defenders and advocates have become routine. Notably, in 2009 Natalia Estemirova, a prominent human rights activist based in Chechnya, was kidnapped and murdered by an unidentified group. As a response to Estemirova's murder, a Swedish group Civil Rights Defenders developed a measure to protect North Caucasian activists. Kogan writes, "[Civil Rights Defenders] unveiled the 'Natalia Project' – named after, and said to be inspired by the fate of, Ms [sic] Estemirova: a security bracelet that combines GPS/GSM technology and social media to provide rapid responses to threats to HRDs [human rights defenders]".[54] The device is meant to track the movements of activists in the case of a kidnapping. Though it is too early to judge the impact of the "Natalia Project", it certainly has the potential to decrease coercion of North Caucasian civil society activists.

Modern ICTs have given way to new social movements from previously marginalized populations. Few studies on social media have given attention to the alternative civil society groups that are now able to communicate more effectively. In the North Caucasus, the Circassian diaspora can now mobilize more effectively due to the advent of new ICTs.

The Circassians are an ethnic group indigenous to the Western Caucasus on the Eastern coast of the Black Sea. As Russia was expanding its territory into the Caucasus, it became involved in a protracted war from 1763-1864 with the sovereign nation of Circassia. As a result, the Circassian populations either fled the Caucasus or were

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[54] Kogan, Vanessa. "Protecting Human Rights Defenders in the North Caucasus: Reflections on Developments from 2009 to the Present." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 5, no. 3 (2013): 500-511.

forcibly deported to parts of the Ottoman Empire.[55] [56] Many died of starvation and illness during the deportations. The current Circassian diaspora primarily consists of populations in Jordan, Syria, Israel, the United States, and portions of Western Europe.[57]

Currently, Circassians in the North Caucasus comprise of several ethnically homogenous groups: the Adyges, the Kabardins, and the Cherkess. These groups are located primarily in the Western Caucasus, in the autonomous republics of Adygeya, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachevo-Cherkessia. In the case of Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachevo-Cherkessia, the Circassians share the territory with the Balkars and Cherkess. Zhemukhov notes, "Circassian lands were divided, during Stalin's experiment on nationalities, into several small administrative units of different status (autonomous republics, oblasts, and regions). These areas did not adjoin each other, and Circassian populations were grouped together with unrelated nations".[58]

The Circassian groups have rallied around two major points: notably, the recognition of the Circassian genocide by the Russian state in the 19th century and to register protest for having the 2014 winter Olympics in Sochi. The city of Sochi, located in Krasnodar Krai, holds important historical value for the Circassians. Before the Circassians were expelled from Russia, Sochi served as the final capitol of Circassia; additionally, the final battle between the Russian empire and the Circassians took place in

[55] Zhemukhov, Sufiyan. "The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism." *Nationalities Papers* 40, no. 4 (2012): 503-524.

[56] Grebennikov, Marat. "Is Leviathan Back? Circassian Ethnic Mobilization After the 2012 Presidential Elections in Russia." *Central and Eastern Europe Political Science Journal* 8, no. 2 (2013): 234-256.

[57] Ibid, 237.

[58] Zhemukhov, Sufiyan. "The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism." 504.

the nearby Kbaada village, approximately 50 kilometers away. Sochi, to the Circassians at large, represents the ultimate blow in the expulsion by the Russians.[59]

The advent of online tools as a means of communication has brought together a previously marginalized community. Polandov explains that new communication technologies have allowed the Circassian diaspora populations around the world a platform to communicate, as well as foster their sense of oppressed ethnic identity.[60] As Morozov notes, "In 2010 a dedicated website was set up to call on residents of the five nations to list themselves simply as 'Circassians' in Russia's 2010 census, and an aggressive online campaign followed".[61] Previously, before the spread of ICTs, the Circassian diaspora in the North Caucasus were geographically isolated from one another and had little means of mobilizing. Indeed, most Circassian lobbying activity was located inside the Circassian-dominant republics of the North Caucasus. However, since 2009, due to the advent of social media, groups have expanded beyond the North Caucasus. [62] Hansen notes, "A significant portion of the young people are internationally oriented in their rights-based approach to civil society action and they have from the outset embraced modern technological tools, such as the intern and mobile telecommunication, where they often are ahead of the older organizations in their working modalities."[63] As a result, multiple forums have emerged as an online gathering space for Circassian nationalists to

[59] Hansen, Lars Funch. "Renewed Circassian Mobilization in the North Caucasus 20-Years After the Fall of the Soviet Union." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 11, no. 2 (2012): 103-135.

[60] Polandov, Demis. "Virtual Circassia." Prague Watchdog, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.watchdog.cz/?show=000000-000024-000004-000020&lang=1.

[61] Morozov, Evgeny. *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. 251

[62] Hansen, Lars Funch. "Renewed Circassian Mobilization in the North Caucasus…"

[63] Ibid., 113

discuss issues relating to the recognition of a common history as well as an eventual repatriation of the Circassian people into Russia.

YouTube has become a source for information dissemination on the "Circassian question." As of this writing, a search for "Circassia" on YouTube yields over 8,000 results. Many of the top hits deal with historical Circassian identity. Indeed, within the top three videos are expositions on the "fragmentation" of historical Circassia by the Russians, as well as an explanation on the various Circassian groups within modern Russia. YouTube as a platform for expression has allowed the Circassians to dispense their narrative of history and marginalization, counter to the official accounts of the Russian state's actions against the group.

Finally, new media platforms can document and disseminate issues of abuse from the state. The advent of technologies such as cell-phone cameras as well as relatively anonymous sites such as YouTube allows virtually anyone to publish a video. An article from "The Nation" chronicles the documentation and viral takeoff of one particular incident in Chechnya:

> Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's troops started shooting paintball guns at Chechen girls not wearing traditional garb on Grozny's streets. Reporting on this incident was first posted on the Knot's site; it was then picked up by veteran reporter Pilar Bonet for the Spanish paper *El País*. Subsequently, the story was carried by many Russian papers, and when Kadyrov's officials denied reports, a video made by the perpetrators themselves was found by *Caucasian Knot* reporters and posted on You Tube. As a result Russia's ombudsman for human rights, Vladimir Lukin, appealed to the procurator general and an investigation was opened. The outcome is still unclear, but *Caucasian Knot*'s role in bringing attention to injustice was important".[64]

A YouTube channel simply entitled "Chechnya" currently has over 40,000 subscribers. In the channel are videos demonstrating the radical transformation of

[64] Vanden Heuvel, Katrina. "A Brave and Independent Russian Editor." The Nation, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.thenation.com/blog/167265/brave-and-independent-russian-editor#.

Chechnya, in particular the city of Grozny, since the two wars in the 90's. However, deeper within the channel are videos demonstrating Russia's brutality in the region.[65] Many of these videos document abuses purportedly committed by Russian forces during the first and second Chechen wars.

On December 12, 2013 a YouTube user uploaded a video of Chechen Deputy Interior Minister Apti Alaudinov speaking with various regional officials. In the video, Alaudinov promotes the use of evidence planting, coercion, and even executions without due process for anyone suspected of affiliation with the Islamic militants of the area.[66] This video adds to the existing material documenting purported human rights abuses by the state in Chechnya.

Although it is important to elaborate that ICTs do not necessarily prevent the occurrence of harassment and coercion from the state, they do aid in documenting such abuses. Tangible documented evidence of rights violations can aid in galvanizing support from international groups. Additionally, YouTube videos and other digital recording platforms provide almost irrefutable evidence of coercion that prove difficult to discredit.

Ultimately, ICTs have aided North Caucasian civil society in expanding its influence in the area. They have provided civil groups the means to protect themselves from the state via offering media outlets independent from the state and

[65] "Chechnya - YouTube." YouTube, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/channel/HCC_Omnjyzg0A/videos.

[66] "New Wave of Reprisals in the Offing in Chechnya?" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, accessed December 31, 2013, http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus-report-chechnya-reprisals/25200751.html

the insurgency, as well as providing a space for mobilization that the Russian state would not otherwise provide.

Social Media and the State

As civil society and democratic ideals can flourish under new communication technologies, the state can use them to repress, subdue, and discredit its populations. How do modern authoritarian states use ICTs? Author Rebecca Mackinnon outlines the framework of networked authoritarianism in her research on media use in China. She notes the difference between a networked and un-networked regime:

> In the networked authoritarian state, while one party remains in control, a wide range of conversations about the country's problems nonetheless rage on websites and social networking services. The government follows online chatter, and sometime people are even able to use the Internet to call attention to social problems or injustices, and even manage to have an impact on government policies. As a result, the average person with Internet or mobile access has a much greater sense of freedom – and may even feel like they have the ability to speak and be heard – in ways that weren't possible under classic authoritarianism.[67]

Though Mackinnon was writing on China, a similar dynamic exists in modern Russia. According to a report compiled by Freedom House in 2013, the state of Russian cyberspace is "partly free" while traditional media sources, such as newspapers and television stations, are rated "not free." While traditional media sources have been consolidated by the state, the Internet was previously one of the few forums for free speech in Russia. Online dissent is tolerated to a much greater degree in Russia than other classic authoritarian states. However, authorities are quickly learning how to effectively

[67] Mackinnon, Rebecca. "China's "Networked Authoritarianism"." *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 32-46. 33.

control Russian cyberspace.[68] In the following section, I will detail how the Russian state[69] uses ICTs to repress local civil society actors, as well as illiberal groups in the North Caucasus.

How can Russian Internet best be characterized? Deibert and Rohozinski offer a nuanced analysis of Russia's cyberspace practices, illustrating the complexity and competing interests of various groups on the Internet:

> …the actions of businesses, governments, civil society, criminal organizations, and millions of individuals affect and in turn are affected by the domain of cyberspace. Rather than being an ungoverned realm, cyberspace is perhaps best likened to a gangster-dominated version of New York: a tangled web of rival public and private authorities, civic associations, criminal networks, and underground economies.[70]

The aforementioned authors present a framework for describing how authoritarian states manage, control, and monitor local Internet use; they delineate these practices into three "generations" of controls. First generational controls involve direct blocking of Internet sites and/or the policing of Internet cafes. Second generational controls generally involve more "legal" means of monitoring. For example, websites may be required to register within a central state-monitored database and be responsible for all content posted. Additionally, the state apparatus may use its power to deter dissent in cyberspace

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[68] "Freedom on the Net | Russia." Freedom House, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.freedomhouse.org /report/freedom-net/2013/russia.

[69] I define the Russian state as the formal state organs, such as security services like the FSB, which contain elected officials or those appointed by regional and federal leaders.

[70] Deibert, Ronald, and Rafal Rohozinski. "Liberation vs. Control: The Future of Cyberspace." *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (2010): 43-57. 46.

by intimidating bloggers, social media users, and the opposition from posting inflammatory, subversive, or anti-regime content. Third generation controls are arguably the most sophisticated and difficult to detect. With this last set of controls, governments use cyberspace as a tool for information gathering, propaganda distribution and demonstrating their base of support.[71]

The North Caucasus demonstrates Russia's use of all three generations of cyberspace control. Regarding first generation Internet controls, the North Caucasus authorities monitor the activity of Internet cafes and their customers. Within the more rural areas of the North Caucasus, some of the only access to the Internet is available through cybercafés. Passports are required to use Internet accessible computers in local internet cafes. Additionally, authorities regularly police cafes where suspected "extremist" material is being viewed.[72] This practice effectively renders anonymity impossible and discourages any sort of online discussion of dissatisfaction with the regime for fear of state reprisal.[73]

Online civil society members are also being targeted by the state. In Dagestan, there have been numerous incidents of journalists being attacked or murdered by masked men. Despite all attempts at protection and anonymity, a journalist for the news website

[71] Ibid.

[72] Soldatov, Andrei, and Irina Borogran. "Russia's Surveillance State." World Policy Institute, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/fall2013/Russia-surveillance.

[73] "PRIMA-News: Internet Access Only with Passport? <<JFNC Message Boards - Freedom & Fear." Justice for North Caucasus, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.justicefornorthcaucasus.com/jfnc_message_boards/freedom_and_fear.php?entry_id=1138777560&title=prima-news%3A-internet-access-only-with-passport%3F&comments=comments.

Caucasian Knot was fired upon near his home by a suspected group of extremists.[74] One prominent Dagestani journalist, Khadzhimurad Kamalov, was gunned down in 2011. Kamalov frequently reported on contentious and dangerous issues in the region, such as corruption and police brutality. Though the perpetrators were never officially identified, the journalist's name did appear on an "execution list," consisting of suspected collaborators with the local Islamic insurgency.[75] [76]

The Russian state also employs second generation controls in the North Caucasus republics. In 2000, Russian president Vladimir Putin approved the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation. This document outlined Russia's need to increase cyber-security with the goal of increasing domestic and international security. Within the document are implicit references to the North Caucasian insurgency, particularly "the imposition of a ban on the use of electronic media airtime for the distribution of programs propagandizing violence…" and "counteracting the negative influence of foreign religious organizations and missionaries".[77] Deibert and Rohozinski write that the

[74] "Akhmednabi Akhmednabiev, Correspondent of 'the Caucasian Knot', Attacked." Caucasian Knot, accessed December 8, 2013, http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/23067/.

[75] Schwirtz, Michael. "Journalist is Shot Dead in Russia's North Caucasus Region." New York Time, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com /2011/12/17/world/europe/journalist-is-shot-dead-in-russias-north-caucasus-region.html?_r=1&.

[76] "Hajimurad Kamalov Killed in Dagestan had been on a 'Punishment List'." Caucasian Knot, accessed December 8, 2013, http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/19352/.

[77] "Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation." Ministerstvo Inostrannyh Del Rossijskoj Federacii, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/2deaa9ee15ddd24bc32575d9002c442b.

primary domestic purpose of this doctrine was to limit the online informational influence of the Chechen insurgency.[78]

The state employs a federal "blacklist" of certain websites deemed inflammatory or to contain extremist material. Among these sites is the primary domain controlled by the North Caucasian insurgency: Kavkazcenter.com.[79] Also blocked are websites to North Caucasian *jamaats* in Kabardino-Balkaria as well as a prominent Ingushetian news agency.[80] [81] In the case of Ingushetia, local authorities blocked access to the alternative news site Ingushetia.ru. When webmasters started a companion blog to the site in response to its unavailability, it was quickly blocked as well. The regional governor went so far as to petition local cellular companies to deny access to Ingushetia.ru and any of its affiliates from mobile devices.[82]

State officials do not limit their activities to blacklisting websites. They also target specific Internet users for "hate speech", intentions to spark ethnic outrage, or those writing on certain political issues in the North Caucasus. In Dagestan, a hotbed of insurgency, a social media user took to his *odnoklassniki* (classmates) account to

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[78] Deibert, Ronald, and Rafal Rohozinski. "Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace." In *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*, edited by Ronald Deibert et al., 15-34. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.

[79] "Kavkaz Center Now Officially Banned in Russia. KGB Included it into its Black List." Kavkaz Center, accessed December 8, 2013, http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/11/16/15392.shtml.

[80] "Federal'nyj Spisok Èkstremistskih Materialov Perevalil Za 1000 Punktov." Informacionno-analitičeskij centr «SOVA», accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/news/counteraction/2011/11/d23033/.

[81] "Freedom on the Net | Russia." Freedom House, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2013/russia.

[82] Lysenko, Volodymyr, and Kevin Desouza. "Cyberprotest in Contemporary Russia: The Cases of *Ingushetia.Ru* and *Bakhmina.Ru*." *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 77, (2010): 1179-1193.

advocate for a jihad against infidels. A Russian court later fined the user 150,000 rubles (approximately 4,500 dollars).[83]

Russian authorities closely monitor bloggers writing on contentious issues such as human rights or the insurgencies in the North Caucasus. Some North Caucasian bloggers report visits from security forces in an effort to coerce and pacify their rhetoric. The government reportedly employs around five people to monitor blogs for certain keywords, such as "pussy riot" or "Kadyrov." If such terms are used with high frequency, the bloggers risk having their accounts suspended.[84]

Third generation controls exist through the social media accounts of the North Caucasian governors. North Caucasian authorities, in addition to blacklisting certain websites, use the Internet for disseminating propaganda and portraying the situation in the area as peaceful. During the rule of Dimitri Medvedev, many Russian governors began blogging, particularly after Medvedev's first video blog entry in 2010. Toepfl argues that this quick adoption of ICT's by the Russian governors was an attempt to emulate Medvedev's activities. Additionally, he posits that these blogs help regional leaders maintain legitimacy by acting as a proxy of communication for constituents.[85]

Almost all of the North Caucasian governors have some sort of online social media presence, via platforms such as Twitter, VKontakte, Facebook, and LiveJournal. For example, the governors of Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria are

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[83] Magomedova, Aida. "In Dagestan, Court Fines User of 'Odnoklassniki' for Advocating Extremism." Caucasian Knot, http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/23894/.

[84] Bst, Mari. "The Caucasus Network: The Subtleties of Censorship." Global Voices Online, accessed December 31, 2013, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/12/13/the-caucasus-network-the-subtleties-of-censorship.

[85] Toepfl, Florian. "Blogging for the sake of the president: The online diaries of Russian governors." *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 8 (2012): 1435-1459.

routinely active on their Twitter accounts. For example, the Governor of Dagestan Ramazan Abdulatipov provides almost weekly addresses to his Twitter account. His "tweets" mostly consist of well wishes for holidays, reports from various governmental meetings, or pictures of local momentous events in Dagestan, such as youth congresses or celebrations.[86] However, lacking in these addresses to the online community is any substantive political commentary; rather the tweets of Abdulatipov, as well as other North Caucasus governors present the illusion of a business-as-usual political environment, where opposition groups and the insurgency are absent. Bode and Makarychev write, "…the governors use the blogosphere as a means of highlighting in a virtual form their particular identities without jeopardizing relations with the Kremlin." [87]

One of Russia's most well-known and visible politicians, the current president of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov is prominent on several social media platforms. As of this writing, Kadyrov has more than 19,000 "likes" on Facebook, and 48,000 followers on Twitter. Most striking is Kadyrov's Instagram account. The pictures filling this account run the gamut from Kadyrov the falconer, to Kadyrov the serious Russian politician, to Kadyrov the everyday man of the people.[88] Each of Kadyrov's photos on Instagram generally receives upwards of 5,000 "likes" from his group of followers. It remains difficult to disentangle Kadyrov's actual followers from "faked" online profiles, but his social media strategy remains clear. In the face of various allegations of human rights abuses, Kadyrov is attempting to construct a competing narrative of his regime as one

[86] Abdulatipov, Ramazan. Twitter, accessed December 8, 2013, https://twitter.com/Abdulatipov05.

[87] Bode, Nicole, and Andrey Makarychev. "The New Social Media in Russia: Political Blogging by the Government and the Opposition." *Problems of Post-Communism* 60, no. 2 (2013): 53-62.

[88] Kadyrov, Ramzan. Instagram, accessed December 8, 2013, http://instagram.com/kadyrov_95.

characterized by near-universal support of his constituents. By publishing photos, blogs, tweets with artificial amounts of "likes," Kadyrov as well as the other governors of the North Caucasus inflate the image of their popularity to not only local groups, but to the international community as well.

Though it is important to study how the Russian state censors content through various modes of control, it is equally useful to examine what is not present in North Caucasian cyberspace. In a study on the Russian blogosphere, it was noted that political issues largely dominated the topics of discussion.[89] However, among North Caucasian blogs, the political dimension is largely absent. Indeed, the most prominent bloggers in the North Caucasus prefer to author pieces on personal reflection and life in the area; they avoid topics relating to contentious political issues.[90] Mari Bst notes that many bloggers in the North Caucasus self-censor their content when writing. Instead of fearing retaliation by the state for anti-regime sympathies, bloggers omit writing on sensitive issues in order to protect their livelihoods and to prevent cultivation of images as "dissidents."[91] Through the mechanism of self-censorship, the Russian state can point to the lack of anti-authority discourse among North Caucasian Internet users to justify its regimes and the practices of its governors. By using self-censorship, local authorities do

[89] Jagannathan, Malavika. "Comparing the Habits, Attitudes of Russian-Language and English-Language Bloggers." Blogging Common, accessed January, 22, 2014, http://bloggingcommon.org/2012/06/28/comparing-the-habits-attitudes-of-russian-language-and-english-language-bloggers/.

[90] Bst, Mari. "The Caucasus Network: What they Blog about." Global Voices Online, accessed January 22, 2014, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/12/14/the-caucasus-network-what-they-blog-about/.

[91] Bst, Mari. "The Caucasus Network: The Subtleties of Censorship." Global Voices Online, accessed December 31, 2013, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/12/13/the-caucasus-network-the-subtleties-of-censorship.

not need to waste valuable monetary and personnel resources rooting out local online oppositionists.

Though the Russian state was slow to catch on to the nascent public space offered by ICTs, it has now adopted these technologies to pursue its own version of "networked authoritarianism" on civil society and uncivil society groups in the North Caucasus. ICTs are used to coerce, repress, and discredit the aforementioned groups as well as to give legitimacy to strong-armed Russian governors in the area.

Uncivil Society and Technology

As established earlier, not all civil society groups place demands for democracy upon the state. In fact, some may even actively advocate against a democratizing state. Like civil society and the state, such groups exist in the North Caucasus and use ICTs to advance their agendas. I label these groups "uncivil society" due to the difference between them and traditional civil society organizations. In the following section, I will first outline my conception of uncivil society, its operatives in the North Caucasus and how they operate in the area. Then, I will present evidence to demonstrate how these groups have advanced their non-democratic agendas by means of intimidating civil society leaders and targeting state resources by the means of ICTs.

Not all organizations and groups independent from the state fall under the traditional umbrella of civil society. Indeed, in the North Caucasus liberal voices are frequently attacked, verbally and physically, by organizations that are both anathema to the authoritarian state and advocate against democratization. The term "uncivil society" has been coined by several authors in a variety of contexts; this work's operationalization

of uncivil society stems from author Maha Abdel Rahman. In her work focusing on Egypt, Rahman explains that an authoritarian state does not necessarily hold a monopoly on the domestic repression of liberal ideas. In the case of Egypt, certain groups previously branched under the umbrella term "civil society" contribute to the 'privatization of repression.' She writes, "…the very organisations [sic] that have been engaged in a struggle for democracy with the state are contributing to the harassment of other elements of civil society with whom they disagree on the form of society and state they want".[92]

This element of harassment distinguishes uncivil groups from traditional civil society groups. Eschewing traditional discourse and rhetoric, uncivil society groups use intimidation, coercion, and violence in an attempt to silence voices advocating for a democratic state or rule of law. Vadim Volkov describes these groups as "violent entrepreneurs." Such entrepreneurs consist of organized crime syndicates and security personnel acting outside of their formal professions who rival the state in providing protection, as well as exerting violent influence.[93] The existence of such groups points to a "fragmentation" of state resources and ultimately underlines the state's loss on the monopoly of the use of force.[94]

[92] Rahman, Maha Abdel. "The politics of 'uncivil'society in Egypt." *Review of African Political Economy* 29, no. 91 (2002): 21-35.25.

[93] Volkov, Vadim. "Violent Entrepreneurship in Post-Communist Russia." *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 5 (1999): 741-754.

[94] For illumination on this concept, see Max Weber's *Politics as a Vocation*.

How can illiberal[95] groups use ICTs to their advantage? One notable advantage is the expanded ability for recruitment.[96] Most recruitment tactics used by insurgency groups involve personal networks of current members, but they have slowly begun to use digital tools as well.[97] The Chechen insurgency also used digital media as a tool for recruitment and mobilization. Sites such as Kavkazcenter.com and Qoqaz.com used the Internet to distribute information on jihad as well as instructions for planning attacks and establishing mujahedeen's elsewhere.[98]

ICTs also expand the potential audience for information for groups.[99] Indeed, the broad scope and penetration of ICT's allows virtually anyone with an Internet connection to access resources dispersed by illiberal groups. The pro-insurgency website kavkazcenter.com regularly uses its platform to publish uncorroborated stories on the regime of Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov. For example, in 2009 the website published an article accusing Kadyrov of having a political "hit list" that was published online. No sources were provided for this information.[100] Kavkazcenter.com also published articles accusing Russian forces of operating a children's "concentration camp" during the second Chechen War. However, the website provided no evidence to support

[95] For stylistic purposes, I alternate between the terms uncivil society and illiberal groups. The term illiberal does not itself refer to a liberal versus conservative divide, but rather anti-democratic, illegitimate, prejudicial, and radical forces operating in the North Caucasus.

[96] Thompson, Robin L. "Radicalization and the use of social media."

[97] Spaiser, Viktoria. "Exploitation of Information and Communication Technologies by Insurgents: A Study on Al-Qaeda, Chechen Rebels, and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)." M.A. in Conflict, Security, and Development, King's College London, 2008.

[98] Ibid., 22.

[99] Ibid., 21.

[100] "Death Squad Stalks Exiled Chechens." Kavkaz Center, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2009/01/25/10504.shtml.

this claim.[101] Additionally, the website included features illustrating photos and videos of insurgents attacking Russian soldiers and waging war with local security forces.

During the second Chechen war in 1999-2000, the Chechen insurgency used sites such as kavkazcenter.com and qoqaz.com to spread information, gain legitimacy, and detract support from the Russian government. Indeed, as Russian media coverage on the war was generally biased against rebel forces, the insurgency's coverage of the war provided a broader perspective for viewers from the international community. Thomas notes that this tactic allowed the insurgency to gain support.[102] In one instance, Spaiser notes: "In May 2000 for instance Chechen rebels claimed to have shot down a Russian SU-24 jet fighter-bomber. Russian officials attempted to discredit the story, but the rebels posted photographs on their website showing fighters with parts of the plane's wreckage."[103]

Currently, insurgent groups are using ICTs to discredit information provided by local authorities. Predominantly, the Caucasian Emirate is using YouTube to upload videos refuting evidence on the deaths of important regional insurgency leaders. Russian authorities, in 2012, reported on the death of Dzhamaleyl Mutaliyev, an insurgent leader in Ingushetia.[104] Later, in 2013, Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov declared that Doku

[101] Thomas, Timothy. "Manipulating the Mass Consciousness: Russian & Chechen "Information War" Tactics in the Second Chechen-Russian Conflict." U.S. Army, accessed December 8, 2013, http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/chechiw.htm.

[102] Ibid

[103] Spaiser, Viktoria. "Exploitation of Information and Communication Technologies" 22.

[104] "Militant Leader Reported Killed in Ingushetia." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, accessed December 31, 2013, http://www.rferl.org/content/militant_leader_killed_in_ingushetia/24467968.html.

Umarov,[105] the head of the Caucasian Emirate, had been killed. Hours after Kadyrov's statement, Umarov uploaded a video of himself to YouTube. In Umarov's video speech, he also refutes claims on the death of Dzhamaleyl Mutaliyev.[106]

As ICTs can unite marginalized populations in the case of the Circassians, it can also be used as a tool to repress and marginalize civic-minded individuals. Kavkazcenter is used by the insurgency to discredit as well as intimidate moderate Islamic leaders domestically and abroad. A 2009 posting on the website decreed that moderate leader-in-exile Akhamd Zakayev had been sentenced to death by an Islamic court and declared an international fatwa against him.[107] Such use of ICTs demonstrates their potential for intimidating moderate leaders into silence. In Chechnya, the pro-insurgency website Kavkazcenter.com developed a "wanted list" of soldiers and local politicians who had purportedly gone against the insurgency during the second Chechen War. The purpose of the list was to specifically name local enemies of Islam in an attempt to silence dissent as well as promote violence against those identified.

Insurgency groups in Dagestan have also demonstrated a significant online presence. The website vdagestan.com contains a multitude of articles and videos detailing the activities of the rogue group against the state. One particular portion of the site entitled "*Vragi Islama*" (enemies of Islam) encourages visitors to send information

[105] During the time of this writing Doku Umarov has reportedly died or been killed. It is currently unclear as to whether Umarov's death was due to the operations of Russian security forces.The Caucasian Emirate has since appointed a new leader.

[106] "New Umarov Video Uploaded After Kadyrov Says He is 'Long Dead'." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, accessed December 31, 2013, http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus-report-umarov-video-kadyrov/25205942.html.

[107] "Šariatskij Sud Vynes Rešenie Po Delu Zakaeva." Kavkaz Center, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.kavkazcenter.info/russ/content/2009/08/25/67586.shtml.

(names, addresses, etc…) of purported enemies of Islam to be published on the site.[108] Like Kavkazcenter.com, Vdagestan.com is officially banned throughout Russia, but can still be accessed with relative ease.

Videos on islamdin.com, the official website of the Kabardino-Balkarian insurgency, show militants, weapons in hand, claiming responsibility for local attacks against security personnel and civilians. Other articles on the site take credit for the destruction of hotspots that sell alcohol, such as nightclubs and liquor stores.[109] [110] Most notably, the group admits, in videos hosted by the site, to the assassinations of prominent moderate civil society leaders in the republic.

Insurgency groups are no longer limiting their attacks to local security forces. In 2013, the Islamic insurgency began expanding its activities to include cyberwarfare against the Russian state. The shift in tactics appears to be retaliation for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.[111] A group calling itself "Anonymous Caucasus"[112] posted a video to YouTube decrying the Sochi Olympics, noting the site's historical value for Islamic resistance against the Russian state. Anonymous Caucasus vowed to continue its attacks

[108] "Vragi Islama." Vdagestan, accessed December 8, 2013, http://vdagestan.com/vragiislama.djihad.

[109] "North Caucasus Insurgency Admits Killing Circassian Ethnographer." Radio Free Europe, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.rferl.org/content/north_caucasus_insurgents_ethnographer_murder/2272112.html.

[110] "PRESS-RELIZ Komandovanija Mudžahidov Ob''edinennogo Vilajjata KBK. Imarat Kavkaz." Islamdin.com, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.islamdin.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=929:2010-10-01-01-12-44&catid=2:kavkaz&Itemid=3.

[111] "Message from Caucasus Anonymous on Operation Pay Back for Sochi 2014 to Russian Government." Kavkaz Center, accessed January 23, 2014,http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2013/12/30/18723.shtml.

[112] The moniker "Anonymous" is itself a reference to the eponymous hacker collective operating in North America and Western Europe. The group operating in the North Caucasus has adopted tactics similar to the actual "Anonymous" group, such as Guy Fawkes masks and cyber attacks on official websites. So far, the author has found no definitive link between the two groups.

against Russian authorities.[113] Earlier in the year, Anonymous Caucasus was responsible for several *DDoS* attacks on two prominent Russian banking websites, rendering them temporarily disabled to users.[114] The group's illegitimate activities have continued even after the 2014 Winter Olympics drew to a close. In March 2014 the group temporarily disabled the websites of the Russian presidency and the central bank. Anonymous Caucasus took to its Facebook page to claim responsibility for the attacks.[115][116]

Conversely, the Kabardino-Balkarian extremists are not only targeting state officials or buildings, but moderate civil society leaders as well. In 2010 members of local insurgent groups shot moderate Islamic leader Aslan Tsipinov outside of his home. Tsipinov drew the ire of the Islamic extremists of Kabardino-Balkaria by invoking historical customs and rituals of the Circassians while simultaneously downplaying the role of Islam in modern Circassian identity. The Kabardino-Balkarian Emir Zakaria took to islamdin.com to proclaim his group's role in the killing, as well as decry other "hypocrites, idolaters, and necromancers."[117]

ICTs have provided uncivil society in the North Caucasus another medium through which to intimidate journalists and civil society members. Extremist members utilize Internet forums and comment sections of online news articles to threaten

[113] "After Latest Bombing, Assessing Security Threat to Sochi Winter Olympics." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, accessed January 23, 2014,http://www.rferl.org/content/terrorism-olympics-russia-sochi/25215761.html.

[114] "'Anonymous Caucasus' Hacks Bank of Russia Domain." E-Money, accessed January 23, 2014, http://blog.e-money.com/anonymous-caucasus-hacks-bank-of-russia-domain/.

[115] "Hackers Down Russian Presidential Site in 'Powerful Cyber-Attack'." Russia Today, accessed March 20, 2014, http://rt.com/news/kremlin-site-attack-hackers-790/.

[116] Gallagher, Sean. "Kremlin Gets DDoS'd by Anonymous Caucasus." Ars Technica, accessed March 20, 2014, http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2014/03/kremlin-gets-ddosd-by-anonymous-caucasus/.

[117] "North Caucasus Insurgency Admits Killing Circassian Ethnographer."

journalists. Often, journalists are accused of colluding with state bureaus to create pro-regime propaganda critical of insurgent or nationalist groups. Illiberal groups use ICTs to harass and intimidate these moderate voices. For example, one journalist in the republic of Dagestan was sent a barrage of threatening text messages before being shot.[118] Nadira Isayeva, another Dagestani journalist, was also singled-out and targeted. A sexually-explicit phone conversation, purportedly between Isayeva and her husband, spread virally across the web, destroying the reporter's reputation and forcing her into exile in the United States.[119][120] Tactics such as these discourage moderate reporting voices in the North Caucasus and can ultimately blacklist local news organizations.

Insurgency groups have also used the web as a tool for the acquisition of funds and aid. As Conway points out, the site Qoqaz.net (mentioned earlier) set up donation links to the Benevolence International Foundation, a non-profit organization purportedly established to aid the victims of international conflict. Instead, the group filtered money to the bank accounts of Chechen rebel groups, as well as other designated terrorist organizations across the globe. Over $700,000 was raised for the groups through these means.[121] [122] Kavkazcenter.com also has a donation tool set up for potential contributors.

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[118] "Critical Reporter Murdered in Russia's Dagestan." Committee to Protect Journalists, accessed January 23, 2014,http://cpj.org/2013/07/critical-russian-reporter-murdered-in-dagestan.php.

[119] Nemtsova, Anna. "Inside the Minds of Russia's Black Widows." The Daily Beast, accessed March 20, 2014, http://www.thedailybeast.com/witw/articles/2013/08/26/a-mother-s-despair-chechen-and-dagestani-mothers-radicalize-after-losing-sons-and-husbands-to-war-with-russia.html.

[120] Nemtsova, Anna. "Is the Successor to the KGB Targeting the Russian Oppositon?" The Daily Beast, accessed March 20, 2014, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/01/22/is-the-successor-to-the-kgb-targeting-the-russian-opposition.html.

[121] Conway, Maura. "Terrorism and the Internet: New Media—New Threat?." *Parliamentary Affairs* 59, no. 2 (2006): 283-298.

[122] *U.S. Treasury Designates Two Individuals with Ties to Al Qaida, UBL Former BIF Leader and Al-Qaida Associate Named Under E.O. 13224*: U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2004.

However, instead of directly donating through the site via bank account transactions such as Paypal, the site offers a form to contact the site's owners; such a tactic would allow greater discretion for donors and make it more difficult to directly trace funding sources.

The Islamic insurgency is not the sole source of intimidation and violent acts in the North Caucasus. Regional conflicts between insurgency and state security forces have sparked reactionary movements from nationalist and splinter groups. These groups seek to employ attacks against suspected members of local insurgency groups, as well as their family members in retaliation for previous instances of violence against local security forces. In a video from 2011 since removed by YouTube for violating its terms and agreements, a group known only as "Chornye Yastreby" [123] (The Black Hawks) uploaded content decrying the Wahhabi influence in Kabardino-Balkaria. Dressed in entirely in black with faces and voices obscured, the group criticized the Islamic insurgency in Kabardino-Balkaria and vowed retribution for the deaths of civilians.[124] A later video from the group went viral in the Caucasus; it showed a man, again dressed entirely in black, holding a rifle and threatening specific insurgent leaders by name.[125] Several attacks on the families of suspected militants have occurred; the Black Hawks have claimed responsibility for such violent acts.[126]

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[123] This is not to be confused with the different vigilante "Chornye Yastreby" group purportedly operating in Moscow. For more information on this group see http://ria.ru/incidents/20090904/183672211.html.

[124] "In Kabardino-Balkaria, 'Black Hawks' Threaten with Revenge on Militants." Caucasian Knot, accessed December 8, 2013, http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/16287/.

[125] Parfitt, Tom. "Blood Relations." Foreign Policy, accessed December 8, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/18/blood_relations.

[126] Ibid.

Speculation exists that the Black Hawks are merely a front for the local branch of the FSB. Indeed, this veiled identity could supposedly allow local officials to carry out indiscriminate attacks not otherwise sanctioned by the law, and aid in the maintenance of stability in the region. However, a counter-argument can be made against such a notion. Namely, the FSB has rarely needed an excuse to exercise its power extra-judicially, since many local attacks have purportedly been carried out under the auspices of local security forces.

Uncivil society groups in Russia have used ICTs to put pressures upon both civil society groups and the state. The Islamic insurgency comprises the majority of actors in this grouping, although many security personnel acting outside of state capacity contribute as well. These pressures, however, are undemocratic in nature and often involve coercion and intimidation in practice. ICTs have allowed these groups a larger voice and sphere of influence that extends beyond the North Caucasus. Importantly, these groups have also adopted Western imagery and tactics (in the case of Anonymous Caucasus) in combating civil society and state online media resources.

Conclusion

The preponderance of ICTs has led to their diverse use among a wide array of actors. In the North Caucasus, civil society utilizes new media formats to unite diaspora populations, draw attention to past and current instances of Russian atrocity, and as a means to protect local human rights advocates. The Russian state uses these new technologies to suppress dissent as well as garner support for local politicians. Finally, uncivil society in the area uses social media to wage information warfare, discredit the

state security and information apparatuses, and finally to intimidate moderate civil society leaders

Many of the effects of social media have yet to be determined. For instance, in 2007, after the announcement of the 2014 Winter Olympics being held in Sochi, Circassian groups universally demanded its cancellation and recognition of the Circassian genocide in the 19th century. The advent of a new Circassian nationalism has fueled inter-ethnic tensions within the North Caucasus. Grebennikov claims that Circassian elites are using this newfound sense of ethnic identity (cultivated by these online communities) to consolidate power, and is ultimately a source of instability in the North Caucasus.[127] Indeed, nationalist issues raised by social media could eventually lead to further instances of conflict in the already troubled region. Like the cases in Tunisia and Egypt, social media may not be a sufficient condition for instability, but could provide the necessary condition to hasten ethnic grievances.

My research lends itself to a broader discussion on the impact of globalization. Namely, the goal of this work has been to dispel some of the naivety surrounding the increases in available technology around the globe. ICTs are neither a panacea for dictatorships, nor a death knell for civil society under authoritarian leaders, but rather tools to aid in global communication and the dispersal of information. For better or worse, any kind of group or government can utilize these technologies to illuminate or subvert.

This work opens up several important areas of research for not only the region, but cross-nationally as well. First, to what degree have ICTs penetrated the region compared with the rest of Russia? As ICTs continue to proliferate throughout the region,

[127] Grebennikov, Marat. "Is Leviathan Back?

what effects will they have for stability? Will demands for democratic consolidation increase as Internet use in the area rises? Does the Russian state have proper incentive to give Internet access to the peoples of the Northern Caucasus? Do ICTs, in their current state in Russia, more closely benefit the state or non-state groups?

Second, what determines the frequency of social media use by Russian officials? As noted earlier, most regional Russian politicians have some sort of presence on social media platforms. However, some choose to post more content than others. Are certain Russian politicians more likely to take an active role on social media than others? For example, why is Ramzan Kadyrov, the president of Chechnya, more prominent on social media than Rashid Temrezov, president of Karachay-Cherkessia? Additionally, do social, economic, or political conditions of the respective republics determine the content of these posts?

Third, where else do researchers notice a similar dynamic between the state, civil, and uncivil groups? Are the relationships outlined in this work generalizable to regions outside of the post-Soviet sphere? Do weak states in general evince this trend in their peripheral regions?

Ultimately, the study of ICTs in Russia warrants further examination. However, this work demonstrates the futility of ascribing a primary utility to the proliferation of ICTs. Indeed, the effects of new communication technologies are multi-faceted, complex, and variable when introduced to populations with such diverse political and social agendas; they cannot simply be placed upon a spectrum of positive and negative effect. No one set of actors uses them more effectively than others. Like the printing press before them, ICTs have had enormous effects on political and social realms. It is the job

of social scientists to identify, measure, and expound upon these effects, as well as their causal mechanisms, to better explain methods of interactions between groups in authoritarian regimes.

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