Europe-Asia Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceas20

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To cite this article: Boris Gladarev & Markku Lonkila (2012): The Role of Social Networking Sites in Civic Activism in Russia and Finland, Europe-Asia Studies, 64:8, 1375-1394

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.712272

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The Role of Social Networking Sites in Civic Activism in Russia and Finland

BORIS GLADAREV & MARKKU LONKILA

Abstract

This essay compares the role of the social networking sites, Facebook in Finland and Vkontakte in Russia, in organising civic activism. It is based on data collected about two successful campaigns mobilised by local residents against urban building projects in St Petersburg and Helsinki in 2009. Though in both cities these sites were important channels for transmitting information and organising and coordinating the campaigns, their role was clearly limited in terms of impartial, democratic discussion of the issue of common concern: the sites were rather used to build and reinforce emerging collective identities and to create consensus within the movement. In contrast to the situation in Helsinki, Vkontakte also had a central role in creating and maintaining ties between formerly isolated campaigns against building projects elsewhere in St Petersburg, thereby helping to build a ‘network of grassroots resistance’ in the city.

This essay compares the role of social networking sites (SNS), namely Facebook in Finland and Vkontakte (In Contact) in Russia, in civic activism. It draws on the data collected about two movements organised by local dwellers against new building projects at Komendantskii Prospekt 40 (KP40) in the Primorskii district of St Petersburg, and in the Kumpula district of Helsinki, in 2009. Both campaigns used social network sites in their actions and, most importantly, both managed to stop the building projects. In particular, the campaign by the dwellers at KP40 was one of the very few recent successful actions against building developers in St Petersburg and has thus served as an example for several similar movements in the city.

The data come from a detailed examination of the relevant segments of Finnish Facebook and Russian Vkontakte that were created by users to support these campaigns. Our examination of these social media sites aims to find out first, how and to what extent they function as particular kinds of public spheres offering an arena for debate and discussion of issues of common concern, and second, what their role has been in practical organising of the movement, notably in recruiting followers.

We thank Jeremy Morris, Natalia Rulyova, Vlad Strukov, Tuomas Ylää-Anttila, the anonymous reviewer of Europe-Asia Studies and the members of the Helsinki Research Group for Political Sociology seminar for useful comments on the essay. The research has been supported by the Academy of Finland.

EUROPE-ASIA STUDIES
Vol. 64, No. 8, October 2012, 1375–1394
ISSN 0966-8136 print; ISSN 1465-3427 online/12/081375-20 © 2012 University of Glasgow
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.712272
coordinating action and creating and maintaining networks between actors. In
addition, we utilise thematic interviews with local activists (conducted in 2010, two in
Helsinki and eight in St Petersburg, each lasting on average 1.5 hours), of which one
interview in each city focused especially on the use of social networking sites in
organising the local protests; as well as data from media debates concerning the
campaigns in the two cities; and the personal experiences of the Finnish campaign of
one of the authors. All our informants were assured anonymity.

The next two sections briefly review existing scholarship of the relationship between
social networking sites and social movements, describe the emergence of the local
movements and depict the nature of the campaigns against the building projects in the
two cities. The two subsequent sections investigate the role of social networking sites
in these campaigns. In both of these sections we will first briefly describe how the local
dwellers’ action group sites—Vkontakte in St Petersburg and Facebook in Helsinki—
fit into the overall repertoire of online and offline actions conducted by the local
inhabitants. Then we will describe how these sites were founded and what their
practical organisation and structure was like. Finally, based on examination of the
sites, we will address two aspects of civic activism: the kind of debates that took place
on the sites concerning the various campaign-related issues, and how the sites were
used for practical organisation and mobilisation of the campaigns.

Social networking sites and civic activism

Studies of the role of social networking sites in civic activism

Although the role of information and communications technology (ICT) and the
internet in political and civic activism has been the subject of a vast body of research
literature, this literature has produced somewhat heterogeneous findings. This state of
affairs is partly due to the dynamic and continuously changing nature of ICT. In
addition, ICT and the internet consist of a great number of various technologies
(Häyhtö 2008; Breindl 2010). Consequently, addressing the relationship of the
internet to collective action runs the risk of lumping together very different
applications with diverse uses and functions. In order to avoid these pitfalls, our
analysis focuses on V kontakte and Facebook, two specific social networking sites, and
on their use by two local social movements in Russia and Finland. We believe that
analysing empirical data of particular social networking sites at close range, instead of
addressing ‘the internet’ in general, will strengthen the analytical power of our text.

Moreover, the huge and growing popularity of both Facebook and V kontakte
renders them interesting objects of analysis in their own right. Facebook, for example,
reached 500 million users in July 2010 which made it one of the most popular internet
applications worldwide (Wauters 2010). The global hegemony of Facebook conceals,

1For ICT and civic activism, see for example, van de Donk et al. (2004), McCaughey and Ayers
(2003), Dahlgren (2005), Breindl (2010) and Oates et al. (2006). For a recent review of this literature,
see Baumgartner and Morris (2010, pp. 25–26). For the Russian internet see Schmidt et al. (2006),
Lonkila (2008), Fossato and Lloyd (2008), Goroshko and Zhigalina (2008) and Etling et al. (2010), as
well as publications in Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media
however, important exceptions. In addition to China, Japan, South Korea and Brazil, the Russian Federation is one of the few countries where Facebook is not the leading SNS but is clearly in second place, with one million users, in comparison with its local rivals (Barnett 2010; Sweeney 2010). The most popular Russian social networking sites are Vkontakte and odnoklassniki.ru, of which the former claimed in August 2010 to have over 86 million registered users. Vkontakte was also an obvious choice for one of the activists and our key informant at KP40, who founded the Vkontakte group for the movement. Despite the popularity of social networking sites, until recently relatively few studies have explicitly addressed their role in promoting activism (Langlois et al. 2009; Bortree & Seltzer 2009; Smith et al. 2009; Baumgartner & Morris 2010; Smuts 2010; Zhang et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 2011), and these studies have produced mixed results. Smuts (2010, pp. 80–86), who investigated the role of Facebook during the 2008 presidential campaign in the USA, concludes, for example, that it both facilitated the formation of public opinion and included new participants in the political process. However, Baumgartner and Morris (2010, p. 24), who studied the relationship between the use of social networking websites and political engagement of young adults during the early stages of the 2008 presidential primary season, found that despite the promise of these sites to increase political interest and participation ‘among a chronically disengaged cohort’, there was little evidence to suggest that the sites had facilitated significantly greater political knowledge, engagement or participation. Rather, their analysis proposes that many young adults used the sites to look for information that conformed to their pre-existing political opinions and they were no more inclined to participate in politics than are users of other media (Baumgartner & Morris 2010, pp. 24–25). Further, Neumayer and Raffl (2008) argue that social software has the potential to promote grassroots activism, political inclusion and community building but note that local and global inequalities may constrain this potential. Johnson et al. (2011) discovered that social networking sites predicted offline and online political activities but did not boost intention to vote. Finally, Zhang et al. (2010) examined, among other things, reliance on social media and social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook and MySpace in ‘civic’ and ‘political’ participation. By civic participation they referred to activities that addressed community concerns through non-governmental or non-electoral means, such as working on a community project, whereas political participation denoted activities aiming to influence the selection of elected officials or to develop or

2Due to huge commercial interests, the user statistics should be interpreted with care. According to one study in May 2010, 31% of Russian internet users visited Vkontakte daily while the corresponding figure for odnoklassniki.ru was 21%, and Facebook was 1% (Reiting populyarnosti 2010). Vkontakte seems thus to be the clear leader of the two, particularly in north-western Russia. For studies on Vkontakte, see Khveshchanka and Suter (2010) and Suleymanova (2009).

3Danah Boyd’s bibliography on social network sites is comprised of 338 book chapters and articles (available at: http://www.danah.org/researchBibs/sns.php, accessed 13 August 2010), of which only slightly more than 1% of the 338 chapters and articles related to contentious action.

4However, one clear finding concerning civic involvement on social network sites and blogs in the USA is that it is the domain of young people. Smith et al. (2009) found in their 2008 survey that the respondents under 35 years of age represented 28% of all respondents, but made up 72% of those who made political use of social networking sites.
implement public policy. The authors found that reliance on social networking sites was positively related to civic participation but not to political participation.

These findings suggest that more research is needed to spell out the actual impact of social networking sites on enhancing civic activism and participation. On the one hand, these sites seem to be quick and easy means to bring up and debate issues of common concern and to mobilise joint action, even on the global scale (Neumayer & Raffl 2008). On the other hand, the ease of participation has raised questions about the depth of the commitment of ‘cyberactivists’. Moreover, both linguistic barriers and social, political and global inequalities cast doubt on the image of the internet as a homogeneous global space where everyone can be connected with everyone regardless of the constraints of physical space (Rohozinski 1999; Lonkila 2008). Finally, though social networking sites may have the potential to enhance activism, other uses are actually much more popular. As Danah Boyd has commented (2008, pp. 114–15), on social networking sites ‘exchanging gossip is far more common than voting’.

Many of the studies reviewed above draw from survey data and seek to establish causal, law-like relationships between SNS use and political engagement, often in relation to election results in the USA. Though important, they tell us little about the processes through which these sites benefit emerging grassroots level social movements in real life, which is the aim of the current study. When analysing actual examples of social media, such as Facebook and Vkontakte, one has to take into account that they not only imply a particular view of sociability but also constrain and mould interaction in specific ways. Facebook, for example, has been built upon the idea of a personal network formed around each Facebook user who may be linked both to other users as well as to other nodes in and outside the system. Mejias (2010) remarks that this ‘nodocentrism’ and the ‘privatised sociality’ may have contradictory effects: for example, the increased user freedom to navigate in the social networking sites is conditioned by the corporate determination of how to develop the system, and the diversity of voices is countered by the homogenisation of platforms.

Social networking sites as arenas and tools for social movements

Our theoretical approach draws on the discussions regarding the public sphere and social movements, which we consider as mutually constitutive: movements are, on the one hand, dependent on the public sphere to further their causes and win supporters; on the other, they are also central actors in bringing new issues to public discussion. This intrinsic connection is emphasised by, among other authors, Tuomas Ylä-Anttila (2005), according to whom social movements played a central role in the very formation of the national public spheres:

Not only have social movements contributed to the processes where issues are raised to the public agenda, but the very ideas and institutions of public debate have evolved in the course of political conflicts and through collective action in social movements. (Ylä-Anttila 2005, p. 425)

In terms of our actual empirical data, the social networking sites founded by the movement activists in Russia and Finland may be considered as particular kinds of public spheres where people could debate issues of common concern. In addition, these
sites were also important in terms of actually organising and mobilising the movements. Therefore, we define these two aspects, or in fact functions, by using the metaphors of arenas and tools for civic activism. The public sphere function considers the social networking sites as arenas for debating the goals and strategies of joint action, whereas the organising function emphasises the role of these sites as tools for mobilising emerging social movements. In terms of the first function, the preconditions for an ideal Habermasian public debate should disregard the status of discussants, address issues of common concern, and by definition should not exclude any person.\(^5\) In our empirical analysis we focus on the first point by asking to what extent debates in the social networking sites in the two cities strove to reach consensus based on the best arguments instead of social status and to what extent they were conducted free of domination.

Research suggests, however, that in real situations, and particularly in internet debates, the abovementioned ideal preconditions rarely exist. Dahlgren (2005, pp. 156–57) remarks on how the procedures of open discussion may result in ‘rationalist bias’. This bias neglects, for example, affective, poetic, humorous and ironic modes of communication, and downplays the power relations built in to the communicative situations. Moreover, it forgets that in cases of extra-parliamentary politics the political discussion may, instead of consensus, strive for political mobilisation and building of collective identity. Many of these ‘biases’ were indeed detected in our study of the debates conducted in Vkontakte and Facebook.

The second function focuses on the role of Vkontakte in St Petersburg and Facebook in Helsinki in organising the movement; in other words, in recruiting followers, coordinating activities and building networks, both within the movement and between the movement and the outside world. Though related and sometimes overlapping with the public sphere aspect of social networking sites, in the remaining part of the essay these organising functions will be distinguished analytically from the public debating about the aims and strategies of the movement. This two-fold division structures the empirical analysis of the sections investigating the role of Vkontakte and Facebook in organising protests in St Petersburg and Helsinki.


campaigns against building projects in St Petersburg and Helsinki

‘No to the building of a new block of flats in the park at Komendantskii Prospekt 40’

The St Petersburg dwellers’ campaign dates back to 2004 when the city administration granted permission to the Russian building company Severnyi Gorod (SG, Northern City) to build a new block of flats in a small park already surrounded by several massive blocks of flats at the corner of Komendantskii Prospekt and Shavrova Street in the Primorskii city district.

This provoked strong and consistent resistance amongst local dwellers against uplotnitel’naya zastroika (fill-in construction),\(^6\) which turned into open conflicts in

\(^5\)For the ongoing debate on the Habermasian view of the public sphere see, for example, Calhoun (1992) and Smuts (2010).

\(^6\)The term ‘uplotnitel’naya zastroika’ refers to the practice of constructing new buildings in old quarters with already existing infrastructure, which is profitable but may lead to the overburdening and
2007, 2008 and 2009. This resistance—including physical confrontations between the builders and residents who were blocking the building machinery’s access to the park—led to the failure of the two first attempts to start building at KP40. However, SG took the case to court and got permission to continue building on 27 March 2009.

The last and most violent phase of the conflict began at nine o’clock in the morning on 1 October 2009, when SG launched a military-style operation at KP40 in order to build a fence around the park and restart building. A total of 33 lorries loaded with concrete fence-plates drove to the small park from different directions, unloaded the plates, and the builders started to erect the fence. They were guarded by the staff of a private security company who kept the furious dwellers from stopping the operation. Once the fence was completed, the builders started cutting the trees, which had been planted by the local residents at their own initiative and cost.

The same evening the angry residents decided to establish a round-the-clock guard in the park. They also came up with the idea of naming the emerging movement Komendantskii Pyatachok (Komendant’s Plot) after Nevskii pyatachok—a piece of land on the banks of the Neva river which had been heroically defended by the Red Army against Nazi invasion. The dwellers broke the lock on the fence gate, entered the park area, and decided that four women would stay in the park overnight in order to prevent the company from continuing construction. At four o’clock in the morning, the private guards started to remove the women from the area, but their yelling woke up nearby dwellers who started phoning the media, politicians and the police. A crowd gathered at the park, and media attention and politicians forced the company to suspend construction.

This invasion started a month-long campaign, during which the dwellers continued the round-the-clock guard in the park and contacted local and national politicians, city administration, online and offline media and various NGOs. Their action repertoire combined Soviet-era forms of resistance—such as writing zhaloby (complaints) and organising a subbotnik (a Soviet-era tradition of voluntary work in which good citizens were expected to participate) to plant new trees in place of the ones cut down by the builder—with the most modern forms of protest such as creating an action group in Vkontakte.

The movement at KP40 was supported by several NGOs and social movements in the city, such as Dvizhenie Grazhdanskich Inityativ (DGI, Movement of Citizens’ Initiatives), the ecological expert organisation EKOM, Zelenaya Volna (Green Wave) and the movements Doloi Uplotnitel’nuyu Zastroiku (Down with Fill-in Construction) and Zhivoi Gorod (Living City). The local Communists (Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiiskoi Federatsiya) and Just Russia (Spravedlivaya Rossiya) politicians also started to intervene and the mass media—including the media allegedly under the influence of the city administration—turned against SG. Vice-governor Alexander Vakhmistrov interrupted construction and finally, on 3 November 2010, Governor Valentina Matvienko announced the cancellation of the building permit and ordered the fence to be removed.

break-up of the old infrastructure. The new buildings are often erected very close to the ones constructed earlier and the construction often breaks technical and ecological standards. This practice became especially popular in St Petersburg in the 1990s and 2000s.
'No to the new street in Kumpula valley'

In April 2009, 500–1,000 dwellers gathered in the green valley of the Helsinki city district Kumpula to protest against the city board’s decision to build a new road through one of the biggest parks and recreation areas in eastern Helsinki. This event, called Laakson valtaus (the Occupation of the Valley), received a lot of publicity in the local and national media and was mobilised through, among other means, interaction on Facebook. City politicians and national and local media were invited to the occupation of the valley, and it was professionally hosted by two women activists, both residents of Kumpula, who during the demonstration interviewed the city government members in public in a humorous and non-confrontational manner. The new road was for a bus line that was meant to improve the public traffic connections between the Helsinki University Campus of Natural Sciences and the neighbouring Institute of Arts and Design with the Helsinki University of Technology. The project was supported by the leadership of the University and the Department of Meteorology at the Kumpula campus, and resisted by, among others, the inhabitants of the Kumpula city district.

When the news of the street construction plan reached the local residents, a meeting was held by the inhabitants in Kylätila (Village Space), an apartment rented to the local Village Space Association. This NGO was run by dwellers and it organised several activities in Kumpula, such as a children’s day care club, art and hobby groups, and the yearly Village Carnival which each spring turned the whole city district into a huge music festival.

In addition to the Occupation of the Valley, the Kumpula campaign contained, much as at KP40, a wide action repertoire: the dwellers contacted and lobbied local politicians and media and city administration, proposed alternative routes for the planned bus line and wrote complaints. Because of the dwellers’ resistance and growing publicity, the construction plan for the new street was interrupted by the decision of the city government on 14 April 2009.

The role of Vkontakte in organising protests in St Petersburg

This and the following section will describe in detail the role of the Finnish segment of Facebook and the Russian Vkontakte in organising campaigns in the two cities. The first subsection describes briefly the overlapping forms of online and offline activism, the history of the founding and the structure of the local movements’ websites. The second subsection investigates the nature of the debate conducted on these websites—in other words, the ‘public sphere function’ of the sites. The third subsection focuses on three aspects of the websites’ roles in organising the campaigns, namely mobilising, coordinating and networking the movement.

Founding and structure of the Vkontakte website

During the campaign at KP40, online and offline actions were combined in ways which question the division between the ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds. In addition to and overlapping with the face-to-face gatherings and informal discussions in the courtyard or staircase, and over the phone, the local dwellers wrote hundreds of conventional
letters to every possible authority including the presidential and city administration
and local and national politicians, reminiscent of the Soviet-era tradition of writing
official complaints. Simultaneously ‘computer-savvy’ activists searched for information
at the city administration websites, information portals and news websites,
sending emails and posting updates in Vkontakte about the events of the ongoing
battle in the park.

The Vkontakte group *Net stroitel'stvo doma v skverе na Komendantskom prospekte*
(No to the Building of a Block of Flats in the Park at KP40) was founded at the
beginning of the third and most severe wave of conflict in October 2009 by Galina, a
local resident in her thirties who had been involved in the campaign from the outset.
As an experienced user, she decided to found a group for the dwellers’ movement on
Vkontakte after having received an anxious phone call from a friend who witnessed
the cutting of the trees in the park through her apartment window. While establishing
the group Galina found out about an already existing Vkontakte group in defence of
the park. She contacted the founders and the two groups were joined.

Prior to and simultaneously with the Vkontakte group, the events at KP40 had been
discussed in local media and on websites, such as the local e-newspaper *Fontanka* and
the website called *Little One* founded for communication among St Petersburg
parents. As a mother of small children, Galina had participated in the discussions on
the Little One site and informed the other discussants of KP40’s newly established
Vkontakte group.

In August 2010, another group focusing on the events at KP40 was also involved in
Vkontakte. The group *Spasem skver vmeste!* (Let Us Save the Park Together!) had
244 participants and its photo archive documented the invasion of SG at KP40.
However, the founder of the group did not disclose any personal information about
himself, and at a closer glance the group wall does not contain debate relevant to the
movement but is rather filled with spam messages. Hence, in this essay we focus on the
group ‘No to the Building of a Block of Flats in the Park at KP40’ founded by a local
activist whom we interviewed in May 2010 (see subsequent sections of this essay).

On 22 August 2010, the Vkontakte group still contained 89 of the original
participants who had numbered around 100. In addition to Galina, there were two other
organisers, one of whom was also an activist in Movement of Citizens’ Initiatives (DGI),
which played an important role in supporting, advising and enabling networking among
the dwellers during the entire campaign. In addition, the group’s Vkontakte website
contained permanent links to four ‘friendly groups’ within Vkontakte. Three of these
links connected the campaign at KP40 with similar ones in Lopukhinskii Park, the
park on Ivan Fomin Street, and with a group protecting the historical heritage of St
Petersburg. The photo archive of the website comprised several photos of the struggle
against the builders and private guards in the park and two video clips from the local TV
news about the new bill concerning green areas of the city. The discussion on the group

11 The URLs of these groups are http://vkontakte.ru/club15902308, http://vkontakte.ru/club8731757
and http://vkontakte.ru/club3924910, respectively; sites accessed 17 December 2011.
wall contained 94 postings. The first of them, dated 3 October 2009, informed the user of the founding of the Vkontakte group Za sokhranenie istoricheskogo naslediia Pitera (For the Conservation of the Historical Heritage of Piter).\(^{12}\) Among the other postings were, for example, children’s drawings of the park, announcements of meetings, supporting voices by activists from other similar groups and references to the media debate concerning KP40. The last relevant posting on the group wall, from 29 June 2010, reminded readers about the ongoing campaign against the construction in Lopukhinskii Park which was, similarly to KP40, a target for a Northern City building project. The discussion forum of the group contained 10 thematic ‘threads’ which will be dealt with at the end of the next subsection.

The public sphere function: informing and debating

In both the cities, the SNS sites were used, in addition to other online and offline means, to inform activists about the issues relevant to the campaign. The founder of the St Petersburg Vkontakte group emphasised the role of the internet in general to get quick access to information and news and transmit them to other activists:

> We monitored the sites of the city parliament (zakonodat’el’noe sobranie), ecological organisation EKOM and our St Petersburg internet publication Fontanka.ru where information is being published about these kinds of issues. The same with television: we managed to watch all broadcasts immediately.\(^{13}\)

Her words were confirmed by scrutiny of the Vkontakte group wall and discussion forums which, for example, were used to refer to the traditional and internet media news about the campaign in real time:

> Just a while ago on the Fifth Channel, the programme ‘Peterburg hour’ showed how the private guards of the building company are carrying tents and people out of the park . . .\(^{14}\)

> There are very useful comments on the Fontanka blog/46613.html on Komendantskii Prospekt 40, go and read it! We have to start a blog.\(^{15}\)

In addition to reporting on the mass media coverage to the group members, the Vkontakte wall also informed readers about the acts and decisions of the construction company, city administration or other relevant actors in the conflict, including the stand taken by the ‘environmental prosecution authority’ (prirodookhrannaya prokuratora) in St Petersburg:

> The environmental prosecution authority of St Petersburg is against the building in the park. The employees of this monitoring organ reacted to the scandalous events which have emerged


\(^{13}\)Author’s interview with Galina, May 2010.


around the park at Komendantskii Prospekt. Its representatives visited yesterday [the park in
the] Primorskii city district to find out on the spot if the cutting of the trees was legal . . . 16

Finally, on 15 October the site contained a cheerful posting:

Watch the news!!! 20 minutes ago Matvienko cancelled the (building) permission. 17

Despite the good news, the suspicious activists continued the round-the-clock guard in
the area until the fence was finally torn down on 4 November 2009.

The postings above are illustrative of the links between (the increasingly converging)
traditional and new media: relevant information found in traditional media was
brought to the attention of the movement through Vkontakte. Conversely, the local
journalists in traditional media could use Vkontakte as a source of information for
their own work provided that they registered as members. 18

The debate conducted at the Vkontakte site was nevertheless far from an ideal
Habermasian debate where all viewpoints are reflected upon and given equal
attention. Since the Vkontakte group was established at the height of the violent
conflict, the local dwellers had neither time for nor interest in this kind of debate.
Threatened by the common ‘enemy’, very few critical voices were raised and the
discussion was rather aiming at building and strengthening the collective identity of
the emerging movement. As often in web discussion forums, the tone of a lone
disagreeing voice was more provocative than argumentative:

. . . People, you and your ‘meetings’ are ridiculous. Don’t you have other things to do? There
is no doubt that they will build [in the park]. And they’ll be right. Why should the park be
populated by homeless people drinking cheap wine? . . . 19

This provocation caused furious replies and threats of exclusion from the forum. The
strength of the reaction is probably explained by a combination of the rude tone of the
posting, the violent nature of the conflict, suspicions of the postings having been ‘paid
for’ by the construction company, as well as the anonymous nature of internet
communication in general.

The movement’s Vkontakte discussion forum was divided into 10 discussion
‘threads’. They included, among other things, expression of support for the dwellers’
campaign by DGI activists; organising the round-the-clock guard in the garden;
informing about similar conflicts on Prospekt Koroleva, Lopukhinskii Park and Ivan
Fomin Street; a posting about Matvienko’s decision to cancel the building permission;
and information about the new bill proposal concerning the green areas of the city. As
is evident, these threads were mostly about informing or mobilising, not about rational

18However, the closed architecture of Vkontakte constrains the public of the activist. Unlike in
LiveJournal, for example, Vkontakte pages cannot be accessed by non-members and are not indexed
by the Russian search engines such as Yandex (private communication with Philip Torchinsky, St
Petersburg, May 2010).
debate striving for consensus. The number of the discussants was also limited to the most active local activists. Closest to ideal Habermasian debate, and also attended by a greater number of discussants, were the two threads where the renovation of the park was being discussed after the victorious battle.

Mobilising and coordinating action

Prior to the conflict, many of the residents in the massive block of flats consisting of between 500 and 1,000 apartments hardly knew each other. It was the heat of the struggle that brought the dwellers together, also creating long-lasting ties of friendship. In addition to all other means (telephone, face-to-face contacts), Vkontakte had a central role in organising the campaign. It was used, for example, to organise taking turns in the round-the-clock guard in the park, to which a separate discussion thread was devoted on the Vkontakte site:

Dear neighbours!!!
I would like to draw your attention to a topic which is important for all, that is, the guarding of the park. Our most important task is to hang on, not to give up, not to leave the park! In this group there are basically young people, could you please replace the grandmothers! They are on duty day and night and God forbid what might happen. Enrol for the duty, come to the tent!!! Or phone me at [telephone number provided].

The site was similarly used to encourage dwellers to join various meetings and events organised by the movement, such as the one designed to create pressure on the city administration:

Today 12 October a new meeting will be arranged at 18 because tomorrow the government of St Petersburg will discuss the issue of the building at the ‘Komendant’s plot’. The city councillors said that the people must declare their wish to have a PARK instead of a BLOCK OF FLATS in this place. All you who are free from fear and prejudices, COME!

The word ‘fear’ illustrates vividly how Russian civic activists have to take into account the very real fear of being physically assaulted. The threshold for engaging in this kind of high-risk activism is therefore very likely more elevated than, say, in Finland, and to step over this threshold, the support from and close ties with other activists were very important. Vkontakte was an important avenue in building and maintaining these ties, as the following subsection will reveal.

Creating networks

It is one of the basic findings of social movement research that recruiting and mobilising often happen along the lines of already existing structures and networks (Diani & McAdam 2003). Though the initial group of activists indeed included four

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families of Afghanistan war veterans—some of the blocks of flats at KP40 were allocated for these veterans—it was rather the conflict and the ensuing campaign itself which enlarged the movement and created new ties between the activists, as in the case of Galina and her neighbour Irina:

We did not know each other [before the campaign]. We lived in this house for 20 years and did not know anyone . . . but now we became friends, as did our kids, and we go to the gym together . . .. We all got to know each other, young and old. 22

In addition to creating and maintaining ties among the local dwellers and activists, Vkontakte helped to build ties between similar, but formerly unconnected local campaigns in various parts of the city. The first way to create these connections was to post a request for help and solidarity on the wall of another movement, such as the request by the KP40 group founder ‘to support flash-mob action on the Mariinskii yard’ 23 or the following posting by a dweller from the neighbouring Ivan Fomin Street sent to the KP40 wall:

Dear neighbours! We have similar situation. Our beloved park at Ivan Fomin and Prospekt Prosveshcheniya is being threatened by builders. Share your experience with us!!!! Let us not concede our favourite places of recreation to arbitrariness. Thank you in advance! 24

These and other similar postings illustrate the exceptional role of the campaign at KP40 as one of the first successful attempts by the dwellers to stop ‘fill-in construction projects’ in the city. 25 KP40 therefore had exemplary value for the activists of the later campaigns, such as the one at Ivan Fomin Street cited above or the one at Lopukhinskii Park, whose activists also posted a message at the KP40 Vkontakte site.

The second way to build connections between KP40 and other campaigns was to create a permanent hyperlink to another campaign on KP40’s Vkontakte website under the title ‘friendly groups’. A Vkontakte user interested in locating similar campaigns in the city could then easily move from one group site to another following the hyperlinks of this emerging virtual network of resistance. A quick search in Vkontakte and other internet portals and local media revealed the existence of dozens of such campaigns in other city districts of St Petersburg. This network created unexpected new connections both online and offline between otherwise unconnected activists:

... people came to us from organisations which we did not even know existed. Suddenly one evening when we were conducting the round-the-clock guard in the tent, young people from some organisation showed up. I do not even know if they were from ‘Green Wave’ or some other organisation. They were about thirty youngsters, around 18–20 years of age, who told us that they knew our history, and wanted to help us with the guarding of the park. And they

22 Author’s interview with Galina, May 2010.
25 In addition to the persistent resistance by the movement, there were certainly other factors working in favour of the dwellers, such as the tensions between SG and the city administration. In this essay our focus is, however, on the campaign.
were sitting with us in the tent during the nights... they learned about us on the internet, but I did not see them ever in Vkontakte. Most probably they found out about us through Fontanka.ru... who they were, I don’t know to this day. We did not even get to know each other well. In this way the internet is interesting: you will meet unknown people who learned about you on the net!

Finally, individual activists could simply join as members of the other protest groups in Vkontakte in order to support and keep track of the unfolding of similar events elsewhere. Galina, for example, was still following the evolution of the conflict at Ivan Fomin Street after the campaign at KP40 was over:

Our contact with them [Ivan Fomin] kind of faded, but I still belong to their group [in Vkontakte]... We write on their wall, and we may exchange phone numbers: they phone or I phone them, we will exchange the news.

In all, Galina’s own personal development testifies to the gradual widening of her range of interests which were originally only focused on the defence of her ‘own’ park. Prior to the campaign at KP40 she had been ‘afraid to get involved’ in public protests and only did so because ‘they started building in front of our window’. Now, with the help of her Vkontakte network, she was actively keeping in touch with and supporting activists involved in similar struggles in other parts of the city.

The role of Facebook in organising action in Helsinki

As in St Petersburg, the Helsinki activists combined online and offline means in their campaign. They contacted media, lobbied the city administration and politicians, recruited followers and kept in touch with fellow activists through face-to-face meetings, via mobile phones, on social networking sites and through email distribution lists.

The fact that the activists of the small village-like city district Kumpula knew each other beforehand and could rely on the existing resources of the Village Space Association as well as of the Kumpula Society, another local NGO, made communicating and organising resistance much easier. Our informant Anna, a Finnish woman in her thirties, who was an employee of the Village Space Association, had, for example, three different email distribution lists at her disposal. The first was used for keeping in touch with the core activist group of the movement. The second one—compiled beforehand for the use of the Village Space Association—contained the email addresses of 350–400 Kumpula dwellers, while the third was comprised of roughly 100 email addresses of various media outlets. Among these media contacts were Helsingin Sanomat (News of Helsinki), the biggest national and Scandinavian daily, all other Helsinki area newspapers and journals, the newspapers of all Finnish political parties, and the news desks of all the TV channels with the personal email addresses of the key media contacts.

26 Author’s interview with Galina, May 2010.
27 Author’s interview with Galina, May 2010.
28 Author’s interview with Galina, May 2010.
addresses of their journalists. Thus, any important news about the movement could reach all relevant national and local media in an instant.

As in St Petersburg, Finnish activists wrote letters and complaints to the city administration. Compared to the hundreds of letters written by individual Russian dwellers, the Finnish complaints in the form of conventional letters were fewer, addressed only to the responsible official city organs, and officially undersigned by the local Kumpula Society. However, the dwellers were also encouraged to send personal emails to the city board and city planning board members, whose addresses were published on Facebook. As in St Petersburg, the Facebook site *Ei katua Kumpulan laaksoon* (No to the Street in Kumpula Valley) and the event *Laakson valtaus* (Occupation of the Valley) were founded after a worried phone call from a friend of our key informant Anna, who had found out about the building plans and suggested that something had to be done. Since the friend had small children and little time at her disposal, Anna founded the group on a Thursday. Over the weekend the number of participants exceeded 600 people, and it reached over 2,500 people at the height of the campaign. As at KP40, the Finnish Facebook website was used to, among other things, organise and coordinate practical tasks, such as distributing paper flyer ads for the Occupation of the Valley. On 22 August 2010, the group still consisted of 1,985 members.

While the photos at KP40’s Vkontakte website were mostly of the violent scenes of demolishing the park and of the confrontations between the dwellers and the builders, the Finnish Facebook group, on the contrary, contained idyllic pictures of the park and the valley during all seasons. The photos from the Occupation of the Valley demonstration pictured smiling people and families with small children having a nice time in the park. There were no policemen or displays of any kind of violence or confrontation to be seen. The group’s Facebook site contained seven permanent links. In addition to the two links to newspaper articles about the campaign, they included a link to a personal blog titled *Laakson henki* (Spirit of the Valley) founded in defence of the valley by one of the activists;²⁹ to a Facebook site in defence of the neighbouring Vallila valley; to an exhibition of the Helsinki City museum with historical pictures of the Kumpula valley; and to another Facebook site defending a part of the central park in Helsinki.

The first posting on the group wall is from Thursday, 29 January 2009, when the dwellers had just learned of the building plans. The decisive city board meeting on the issue was to be held the following Monday, and the first postings, in addition to expressing their support for the movement in general, also encouraged people to write directly to the city board members and vice-members. The postings on the wall informed readers about the media debate concerning the campaign, discussed alternative options for the planned bus line, and coordinated and mobilised individual activities.

*The public sphere function: informing and debating*

As in St Petersburg, the Finnish activists were feeding relevant information ‘from outside’ the movement (for example from the media, the city administration and

politicians) into a Facebook site. One local dweller published a long email she had received from a Green League politician and member of the city board. The politician regretted that the reporting of the city board session’s voting about the street project in the media was too short and laconic and gave a detailed account of the voting and stances of various parties. Another local dweller was exceptionally active in informing about the unfolding of the events and had posted altogether dozens of messages on the Facebook site. Often these postings contained a reference to his Spirit of the Valley blog. Thus, the Facebook group, among other things, helped dwellers to closely follow the processing of the case in the city administration and political apparatus. This was greatly aided by the close personal ties between some Kumpula activists and local politicians.

As in St Petersburg, much of the debate in the Finnish Facebook group focused on arguments against the building project, with only a few dissenting voices being raised. The one who did was much more argumentative than his provocative Russian counterpart presented above in this essay.

Though I like the area of the Kumpula botanical garden and the Kumpula mansion, I don’t really understand … how a street meant precisely for public traffic will cause such a strong protest. You just cannot develop Helsinki with a NIMBY mentality dictated by the dwellers living in [picturesque and expensive detached] wooden houses … if you want to create a functioning and modern city for all dwellers. The street for public traffic would benefit the locals, the work commuters, the university staff and students.

The reference to the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) mentality may be illustrative of the difference between Finnish and Russian political culture and deserves to be dealt with in more detail. In organising the Occupation of the Valley the activists took pains to distinguish the campaign from NIMBY movements—in other words from the forms of activism which would only defend the residents’ narrow, local interests. In the Finnish political culture, a NIMBY label attached to a movement could be used as a powerful rhetorical weapon against the movement, whereas in St Petersburg the label was used in neither SNS nor the media debate about the campaign. Thus, in Helsinki the NIMBY accusation was also taken seriously and replied to by one of the Kumpula activists:

This isn’t a Nimby project at all. You will realise this if you just analyse the issue a bit more closely. First, dropping the building project [in Kumpula] would not relocate the problem to another city district as it typically would in Nimby protests. The building project would not

30Generalisation based on two cases can naturally be indicative only. The differences observed may be due to differences between the cases—e.g. targeting the protest against the city administration in Helsinki but against a private construction company in St Petersburg, the socio-economic composition of the inhabitants of the two city districts, and the very nature of the parks (a large and traditional recreation area in Helsinki compared to a small park created by the dwellers themselves only recently). All these factors cannot be dealt with in this essay. On the other hand, the two cases also shared important similarities. Both were mobilised in 2009 by the local inhabitants against building construction projects threatening their neighbourhood. They used all means at their disposal to stop these projects and, as our analysis suggests, the repertoire of their actions were in many ways similar.
make any sense, even if it were implemented in some other part of the city. I will deal with the Nimby problems more closely in my blog.31

Except for the NIMBY debate in Helsinki, the SNS groups in the two cities contained little discussion concerning the tactics and strategies of the movement. This was probably due to the public status of the groups’ websites which could be scrutinised at any time by adversaries. Therefore, it is plausible to think that many of the tactics and strategies were rather discussed in face-to-face meetings, phone calls or email exchanges between the dwellers.

The organising function: mobilising, coordinating, networking

Mobilising and coordinating action

Though the Kumpula activists founded—in addition to the action group’s website—a separate Facebook ‘event site’ for the Occupation of the Valley32 the original group site was also used for mobilising and coordinating action. Local dwellers were, for example, recruited to distribute paper flyers in the city district, and they reminded members of the group about the ‘Occupation’ through the site:

Please remember the Occupation of the Valley action on Tuesday, 10 March, between five and six o’clock. We have invited leadership of the University and the Department of Meteorology, the members of the city board and city planning board, the chairmen of all parties at the city council and media. There will be some news broadcasting prior to the event at least in a few radio programs and in the Helsinki News on Sunday. Bring with you your own signs and banners: ‘For the valley’ and ‘No to the street in Kumpula Valley’. See you on the barricades! P.S. If someone wants to distribute flyers on Monday directly to the people e.g. in the Arabia shopping mall, please contact me!33

Moreover, people were encouraged to write emails to the city board members in order to create political pressure. In the city board and city planning board the street project divided the parties, of which the Leftist Union and Green League were against the construction. Particularly for the Green League this was a natural stand given that the Kumpula area was probably the greenest Helsinki city district in terms of its dwellers’ voting in municipal elections.

It is great that this group has grown so fast! Will you all also write to the city board members until Monday morning? If you don’t have time for a long and well-argued message, even a few lines will do. The main thing is to send a lot of mail since the politician is afraid of the movement of the masses 😄. And to repeat: all the email addresses of the city board members and their deputy members will be found here.34

31Posted on 14 February 2009.
32We did not separately analyse this event.
33Posted on 6 March 2009.
34Posted on 1 February 2009.
Even a small percentage of the 2,000 group members could thus generate reasonable pressure on the politicians by email. One of the authors of this essay, for example, sent a personal email to all city board members, many of whom replied within a few days.

Creating networks

Unlike in St Petersburg, in Helsinki there were few efforts to use the Facebook group to create links with other similar campaigns (though such links could have certainly been created otherwise). One of them was the Facebook group consisting of the proponents of the neighbouring Vallila valley. In addition, one of the discussants took up a similar conflict in Tampere, one of the biggest Finnish cities located 100 miles north of Helsinki:

Hi, would it be useful in this campaign to hear from the experiences of others who have formerly had similar experiences? In Tampere, for example, they managed to protect a local quarter of [idyllic, detached] wooden houses but it required years of persistent work. There are certainly still a lot of means which have not been used. This fb-page is also a brilliant idea.35

As a whole, however, it was clear that creating connections with other groups in similar situations through social networking sites was not as important in Helsinki as in St Petersburg. This was not because of the lack of conflicts in Helsinki: one of the Finnish website discussants noted that similar conflicts between city planners and local dwellers were ongoing constantly in other parts of the city. Rather, the Finnish activists could both utilise a less restrictive media environment and lean on the already existing network of city district associations through which their board members were invited to participate in the Occupation of the Valley and support the Kumpula campaign.

Conclusions

The role of social networking sites in protest movements in St Petersburg and Helsinki was similar in many respects. Though in both cities these sites were important channels for transmitting information and organising and coordinating the campaigns, their role was clearly limited in terms of impartial, democratic discussion of the issue of common concern. The sites were rather used to build and reinforce the emerging collective identity and to create consensus within the movement than to encourage Habermasian public debate. This does not, however, prove the ultimate unsuitability of SNSs as ‘new public spheres’ (Smuts 2010). Mobilising for an ongoing conflict in general leaves little room for differing voices, and this tendency is even more underlined under the conditions of high-risk activism, such as in our Russian case. When confronting physical violence, discussion is destined to remain secondary. Therefore, our comparative analysis rather suggests further research on these sites under different conditions.

35Posted on 2 February 2009.
Regardless of the nature of the debate on the sites, mere involvement in it may have lasting effects. Research suggests that interpersonal discussion about politics leads to an increase in political involvement and empowerment (Zhang et al. 2010, pp. 78–79). Though we do not have follow-up data for the discussants on the Russian and Finnish sites, the personal history of our Russian key informant Galina showed how participating in the campaign and the creation, maintenance and debate of the Vkontakte page evoked a continued interest in civic activism which exceeded the narrow confines of her own neighbourhood. This observation was confirmed by another of our respondents—an activist of the Movement of Citizens’ Initiatives (DGI)—according to whom each civic campaign, regardless of its outcome, pushes one or two persons towards activism.

A clear difference between the two cities emerged in the comparison of the role of SNSs in creating networks both within the movement and between the similar campaigns elsewhere in the city. Unlike in Helsinki, the campaign at KP40 was not mainly built on already existing civil society structures or social ties in the neighbourhood, but rather created these ties. Even though the movement participants were living in the same block of flats around the park, many did not know their neighbours prior to the campaign. Though the strength of the emerging ties was probably in large part due to the actual experiences of the hours spent in the round-the-clock guard in the tent during the cold October nights, in the creation and maintenance of these ties Vkontakte seem to have had an essential role.

Also in contrast to the situation in Helsinki, Vkontakte had a central role in creating and maintaining external ties or ‘bridges’ between formerly isolated campaigns against building projects elsewhere in St Petersburg. These bridges consisted first, of permanent links between ‘friendly groups’ created by the movements’ website administrators; second, of the membership of activists in two or more contentious groups simultaneously; and third, of the personal friendship ties made through Vkontakte between two activists from different groups.

The strength of these personal bridges between campaigns may well be related to the experience of the threat of violence, which was probably the most striking difference for the outside observer between the Russian and Finnish cases. When joining the movement at KP40, the local dwellers in St Petersburg, unlike those in Helsinki, had to take into account the very concrete risk of being exposed to physical violence. While this was not a factor conducive to mass recruitment, those who joined were highly devoted to the common and concrete cause of defending their own neighbourhood and park.

The importance of the personal bridges in Vkontakte might have to do with the sharing of this feeling of devotion and risking one’s physical integrity. In addition it may also be related to the implicit modelling of sociability in Facebook and Vkontakte around the notion of the personal network. This notion describes social life as a web of relations anchored around a focal person (ego) and containing different types of network members (alters) such as family, kin, friends and colleagues. This way of looking at social life fits especially well in post-Soviet Russian daily life, where personal networks play a particularly important role (Lonkila 2011).

We propose that the nature of these networks—indeed, probably the nature of the social tie itself—may be different in the two countries. The duties and obligations of
Vkontakte ‘friends’ in Russia and Facebook ‘friends’ in Finland may differ and consequently the personal ‘bridges’ connecting various campaigns through these ties of friendship might support a different amount of weight and prove vital for the emerging Russian civil society.

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