United by Inattention?
A Study of the Official Group of the Party United Russia on the Social Network Vkontakte

Förenade av ouppmärksamhet?
En studie av Enade Rysslands officiella grupp på det sociala nätverket Vkontakte

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Acknowledgement

This thesis was written during my scholarship period at Karlstad University, thanks to a Swedish Institute scholarship.
Abstract

This study analyzes the official Vkontakte group of United Russia during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. Parliamentary majorities of United Russia have been a pillar of the Russian political regime which, despite being undemocratic, is still characterized by considerable competition. Therefore, the study draws upon the two-way symmetrical model of public relations which is compatible with the catch-all character of the party and the horizontal, open-ended nature of social networks. According to the model, an organization wishing to build an attractive image should communicate with its publics in a two-way fashion and be ready to change in accordance with people’s preferences.

The method of content analysis is employed in the study in order to establish instances of two-way communication between the members of the group and its moderators. Special attention is paid to discussions regarding legislation since such conversations can clearly evidence that the party is ready to react to ordinary people’s interests and preferences. However, according to the findings of the study, the users’ messages seldom received feedback and almost all of their suggestions and questions regarding legislation were ignored.

Keywords: two-way communication, public relations, social networks, United Russia, Vkontakte.
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1. Introduction

Thanks to state subsidies to newspapers and publishers as well as to absolute control of the national mass media Russians were deemed to be the nation of readers during the Soviet era. After 1991 the situation changed dramatically: a privatization of media outlets and relative democratization created the nation of watchers. This change inevitably required new patterns of political communication. It is highly doubtful that Putin could win his first presidential election in March 2000 without positive coverage from one of national TV channels owned by the oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who recently died in London. In August 1999, when the first Russian president Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin as the prime-minister and called him his heir, this former KGB officer was an absolutely unknown political figure. It is also not surprising that one of the first steps of Putin’s strengthening of power was a crackdown on the popular channel NTV which belonged to the disloyal tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky.

Today, when around 41% (VCIOM, 2013) of Russians use the internet every day, it would be premature to talk about the nation of users. The relatively low internet penetration may be a reason why online activities of Russian political parties and other political actors have been insufficiently researched. The first two studies (Semetko and Krasnoboka, 2003; March, 2004) of some functional characteristics of websites of Russian parties were conducted almost ten years ago and, therefore, their results are already obsolete. Since then only one “updated” analysis has appeared, namely Oates’ (2012) article in which she compares the websites of the Russian Communists and the British Liberal Democrats. Therefore, this study tries to partially fill the gap in research on the broad issue of how Russian political parties communicate with users. Specifically, it addresses one constituting component of the gap, namely the question of how such communication occurs on social networks.

The primary focus of the study is on interactions between the Kremlin party of power United Russia (Единая Россия (Edinaya Rossiya); hereafter UR), which is de facto controlled by the president Putin and de jure headed by the prime-minister Medvedev, and the members of its official group on the largest Russian social network Vkontakte (hereafter VK; the address of the group: www.vk.com/edinrosru) during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. UR has also secured its presence on Facebook and Twitter which are gaining popularity among Russians. However, at the moment the party has more than 11500 participants in its VK group and only around 3700 members on Facebook. The Twitter account of UR can be read by more than 30000
followers, but the wall of its VK group provides more opportunities for multidirectional and multimedia-backed online discussions. The method of the study is content analysis.

Unfortunately, the problem of communication between Russian political parties and users of social networks has not received any attention in the literature. Only Yagodin (2012) and Toepfl’s (2012) works somewhat overlap with the focus of this study. However, both authors concentrate on LiveJournal blogs, but this service can be considered as only a prototype of modern social networks such as VK and Facebook. Moreover, they analyze interactions between individual politicians (not parties) and users: Yagodin researches the previous Russian president’s blog and Toepfl dissects interactions between users and several Russian governors. Therefore, it can be argued that this thesis addresses a certain “terra incognita”.

In the third chapter of the thesis it will be explicated that the relative stability of the today’s Russian political system is partially based on quite impressive electoral results of UR: after the elections in 2003; 2007 and 2011 the party received either a simple or a constitutional majority in the Russian parliament.) That is, one of its major goals has always been to win as many votes as possible. However, in contrast to the conventional conception of communication between parties and voters as a vertical process, the idea of unrestricted and horizontal communication between participants of social networks is inherent in their design. Fortunately, the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig, 1984; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; J. Grunig, L. Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995; Grunig, 2001) seems to reflect both the catch-all nature of UR and the design of social networks. Therefore, it is the major theoretical framework of the study. Organizational interests (winning votes in the case of UR) are of paramount importance to this theory of PR. Still, according to the model, an organization which wants to improve its image and reputation should not merely dump messages on consumers’ heads. Instead, it should participate in transparent and continuous communication with members of its publics in order to know about and incorporate their preferences and needs in its activities. And in his more recent article Grunig (2009) admits that social networks provide excellent opportunities for such communication. For a political party this argument means that it can secure electoral success when communicating with its potential users-voters in a two-way fashion in order to pay attention to their interests and opinions relating to its actions.

In other words, this thesis addresses the gap in research on communication between Russian political parties and users of social networks through considering these networks as a means of electoral competition which enable political actors to listen to (or feign attention to) and react to
ordinary people’s views. Nevertheless, after the aforementioned initial presentation of the two-way symmetrical model of PR it is necessary to introduce two caveats in order to prevent erroneous conclusions regarding the theoretical underpinning of the thesis. First, being purely descriptive, this study relies on the model only for data collection and analysis. It does not try to develop the model, empirically corroborate or refute it. (But, of course, its findings should appear useful for Russian practitioners working in the field of political public relations.) Second, this work cannot be considered as an example of research on online campaigning since it covers the VK group of UR not before elections (parliamentary or presidential ones). However, it is possible to consider the study through the notion of permanent campaign (e.g. Elmer, Langlois & McKelvey, 2012), according to which political actors have to fight for approval even in periods between elections. While for Western European parties this need stems from eroding allegiances and consequent unpredictable swings in public opinion (Kalnes, 2009), the Russian party of power has to be on the alert also because its popularity is a pillar of the political system existing in the country today.

The structure of the thesis is the following. First, a presentation of its research questions is given. It is followed by an explanation of why researching the online performance of United Russia is important, given the nature of the today’s Russian political system. The work continues with a review of studies of how Russian political parties and members of the current ruling elite use online platforms and communicate with users. Then a description of the major theoretical framework is provided. The methodological section outlines some peculiarities of the content analysis which was conducted to answer the research questions; it also explicated all the variables used in the study. After an analysis of the findings some directions for further research are indicated in the concluding discussion.
2. Research questions

In the theory chapter of the work it will be demonstrated that the two-way symmetrical model of public relations is a very broad approach. It encompasses motivations of PR specialists, their contacts with senior management figures, both communicative and physical activities of the organization as well as organizational strategies and tactics. Such broadness makes full-scale research on two-way symmetrical PR a rather complicated task which has to be realized on multiple levels (which also implies use of versatile methods). Furthermore, the model still does not have a formal definition which is a serious impediment to applied studies like this one. (Not only has its generality led to such a situation. The model is also quite fluid and has experienced some permutations during its development.)

Nevertheless, the very name of the approach enables to suppose that it has to be characterized by two-way communication between the organization and members of its publics. Not surprisingly, Grunig (2001) argues that dialogue lies in the core of the two-way symmetrical model of PR. Two-way communication can be defined as such communication in which participants receive reactions to each other’s messages, i.e. each other’s contributions to the process of communication. This work builds on this definition and, therefore, its primary aim is to establish instances of two-way communication between UR and the members of its official VK group.

However, the two-way symmetrical model of PR presupposes that interactions between the organization and members of its publics can lead to some changes in behavior of the organization or positions of its stakeholders. Such changes, arising from conversations and negotiations, enable to reach (albeit not inevitably) mutually satisfactory balances between interests of both the organization and members of its publics (Grunig, 2001). Therefore, two-way communication between UR and the participants of its VK group is necessary but insufficient evidence that the party uses its VK group to realize the two-way symmetrical model of PR (and not some other model) since presence of two-way communication does not automatically mean that the organization is willing to alter it strategies and tactics or can indeed alter them. But through which possible two-way discussions in the VK group can UR at least demonstrate its openness and attention to the users’ positions regarding the party’s activities which have impacts on the users, its readiness to explain controversial issues relating to these activities (in order to gain favor among the members of the group)? To put it simple, what messages posted by the moderators and users have the highest value for this study?
These questions raise the issue of contextual specificity (Adcock & Collier, 2001). It is a validity problem related to peculiarities of research contexts and it tends to arise when universal methodological instruments are used without any caution. One possible solution to the problem is to gather data from context-specific domains of observation (Adcock & Collier, 2001) which reflect some phenomenon in a more precise way. This solution was applied to this work. As a result, in the study special attention is paid to the issue of how UR and the members of its VK group discussed legislative initiatives during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013.

First, every political party working in parliament (even when it has rather curbed powers, as in the case of Duma, the Russian lower house) somehow influences policies and is responsible for their development. In other words, exerting impact on legislation is one of major functions of (most) political parties. Furthermore, it will not be an exaggeration to argue that in the eyes of ordinary people it is the most important activity of political parties (laws determine ordinary people’s lives). And since the two-way symmetrical model of PR presupposes that organizations should, and sometimes even have to, make adjustments to public interests and concerns in order to fulfill their functions, two-way communication regarding legislative initiatives seems to be that instrument which enables parties to listen to voters’ opinions on policies, formulate policies in a better way and even tweak or alter them in accordance with popular preferences. Hence presence (or absence) of reactions from UR to the users’ suggestions and questions relating to legislative initiatives, which the party can single-handedly cancel or approve thanks to its majority in Duma, is a much more conspicuous sign of (non-)adherence to two-way communication (and to the two-way symmetrical model of PR) than reactions to gratitude, curses, mere banter or any other forms of idle talks.

This argument leads to the following most important research question of this study:

1 The Russian parliament, the Federal Assembly (Federalnoye Sobraniye), is a bicameral institution which consists of State Duma (Gosudarstvennaya Duma) and the Federation Council (Sovet Federatsii), the upper house in which representatives from the federal regions work. Nevertheless, the Federation Council does not possess any political influence and acts as a “rubber stamp”.

2 Indeed, according to Burke’s classical formulation made in 1770, “Party is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed” (Burke as cited in Ware, 1996, p. 5).
1. How frequently did the moderators of the official Vkontakte group of United Russia react to suggestions and questions regarding legislation which the users made and asked in discussion threads under wall posts with information about pieces of legislation?  

Clearly, three steps are required to answer this question. First of all, the number of suggestions and questions regarding laws and decrees has to be determined. Second, it is necessary to find out how many of such ideas and queries relating to legislation received the moderators’ replies. Then both numbers have to be compared. Nevertheless the problem of versatility and diversity of “live” online communication turns distinguishing discrete suggestions, questions and answers to them into an arduous task, at least with the help of the quantitative method of content analysis based on the high standards of objectivity. As a result, not exact amounts of these items were established when answering the first question. The first step involved counting the number of times when single suggestions and questions or their sets appeared in the messages posted by the members of the group. And the second step was realized through counting the moderators’ single reactions to at least one suggestion or question presented in a user’s message. (A much more detailed explanation of these methodological problems of the study and the solutions to them will be given in the second section of the methodology chapter (see p. 47-51).)

Of course, the members of the VK group of UR could present their ideas about legislative initiatives in any of the discussion threads which appeared during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. However, the research question was based on the assumption that precisely because of their topics “legislative” wall posts can stimulate more active expression of thoughts related directly to legislative issues. Also, it is necessary to note that the question is important not only for determining the extent of (un)responsiveness of the Russian party of power in its VK group. Its other purpose is to define whether the VK group of UR is indeed a lively platform for talks about legislation or its logic should be described by an aptly Russian phrase “Sam durak!” («Сам дурак!»). This expression can be literally translated as “It is you who are the fool!” and it reflects discourtesy and irrelevance of many online forums, however pessimistic it may sound. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, if there are no relevant suggestions and

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3 In this study the moderators of the official VK group of UR were considered as representatives of the party since the UR does not have its own “personal” page in VK and, therefore, does not leave any messages in the group. Besides, it is necessary to remind that the analysis covered the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. However, this fact is not indicated in the wordings of this and the other questions in order not to complicate their perception by the reader.
queries at all, then there is no (or less) reason to blame the party for not listening to its actual and potential voters.

Despite the assumption used for the formulation of the most important research question, it is still necessary to demonstrate a more general picture of how actively the moderators of the VK group of UR communicated with its members. Indeed, it may be true that some wall posts not concerning legislation generated lively debates between the users and the moderators. Moreover, active discussions about non-legislative problems may have great value to the users and, therefore, may strengthen an “interactive” image of the group and a “responsive” image of the party itself. (This assumption looks especially plausible in the light of the perceived view of interactivity (Larsson, 2012), which will be outlined in the last section of the theory chapter).

For at least two reasons it is also important to know the number of the moderators’ messages in the discussion threads related to the wall posts with information about pieces of legislation. First, the members of the VK group of UR were not obliged to talk about laws in such discussion threads. They could discuss any topics there. Second, counting the number of the moderators’ messages in such threads should help to draw more warranted conclusions about the moderators’ willingness to provide the members of the group with feedback to their ideas and queries. Therefore, the second research question was formulated in the following way:

2. How actively did the moderators of the official Vkontakte group of United Russia participate in all sorts of discussion threads in the group?

In order to answer the question the ratio between all the comments posted by the members of the group and all the messages posted by the moderators was determined. Clearly, this indicator enables to make rather limited conclusions about two-way communication between the users and the moderators. Indeed, not in all of their utterances the members of the VK group of UR leave opinions or questions addressed to the party or the moderators, i.e. opinions and questions which should receive their replies. Furthermore, messages authored by the moderators do not necessarily represent talks with the users. Nevertheless, conspicuous prevalence of the users’ comments over the moderators’ utterances can evidence that, first, the moderators ignore some amount of the users’ opinions and, second, that they do not try to steer discussions, i.e. they allow participants to go off topic (since the party is not very interested in fruitful discussions with the people).
There are some special types of the moderators’ possible reactions which can be viewed as signs of their efforts to listen to the users, or at least of their attempts to convince people that they are heard by the party. These types of reactions are analyzed through the third research question:

3. How many times did the moderators of the official Vkontakte group of United Russia state interest in the users’ opinions regarding issues discussed in the group?

To put it simple, this question was developed to encompass messages where the moderators showed participants of discussion threads that all their utterances are important to the party (the moderators) and/or will be taken into consideration. Of course, such reactions from the moderators should please some users and even increase their self-esteem. But such messages address the users’ suggestions, opinions and questions in a very “lump” way without paying attention to details of personal positions. These messages demonstrate that the party allegedly listens to the participants of its VK group, although it does not want participate in pro-longed and sometimes tiresome conversations with every person. Therefore, the moderators’ statements that all opinions expressed by the users are important cannot be considered as “fully-fledged” instances of two-way communication: they are very crude and general reactions to the users’ messages.

The last research question of the study is beyond its primary aim since with its help it is only possible to analyze how the party used its VK group to collect information about the users’ views:

4. How many times were the users participating in the official Vkontakte group of United Russia asked to express their opinions regarding issues discussed in the group?

The question reflects two characteristics which were determined during the study: the number of messages where the moderators solicited the users’ opinions regarding certain issues and the number of online polls conducted in the group. With the help of polls and calls for the users to express and share views UR can demonstrate its intent to be more knowledgeable about ordinary people’s preferences. Still, these forms of communication with the members of the VK group of UR cannot be considered as two-way because they do not require any (immediate) reactions to
their views\textsuperscript{4}. Of course, through getting information regarding the users’ positions the party receives more incentives to accommodate certain grievances and interests (in order to become more appealing to the participants of the group or at least escape conflicts with them), explain its positions in a more understandable way, or even discuss this information in further two-way talks. Nevertheless, it is also possible for the party to use such data just to produce more efficient advertisements and press-releases to influence the users not through equal negotiations, but through vertical persuasion. This strategy, as it will be explained in the theory chapter, is inherent in the two-way \textit{asymmetrical} model of public relations (e.g. Grunig, 2001). Consequently, the fourth research question has to be considered from the vantage points of at least two, symmetrical and asymmetrical, models of PR.

It should have already become clear that this study does not try to explain why the Kremlin party of power communicated with the users in a certain fashion. It only provides a description of this fashion. It follows the inductive research strategy which has the aim “to establish limited generalizations about the distribution of, and patterns of association amongst, observed or measured characteristics of individuals and social phenomena”. (Blaikie, 2011, p. 83) It is important to note here that, contrary to popular belief, inductive research is often informed by some theory. In this particular case the two-way symmetrical model of PR informs the study, namely the majority of its variables. In contrast to the deductive approach, the inductive strategy does not seek causal explanations. Therefore, the latter can be realized through research questions not accompanied by hypotheses. Hypotheses, as Blaikie (2011.) argues, are not just expectations of what will be found. Instead, they are “tentative answers to “why” and, sometimes, “how” research questions” (Blaikie, 2011, p. 67) which are not asked in the work.

Finally, at the end of this presentation more details about the source of the data will be given. At the very beginning of this explication the following obvious question has to be asked: Why the website of UR was not chosen for the study? According to Svensson (2012), social media can be viewed as “online communication platforms where the social seems to refer to the possibility of users to influence and \textit{interact} with the content and each other in some way or another” (p. 184). In other words, the idea of unrestricted, unconstrained and open-ended communication is inherent in social networks such as VK and Facebook. The same cannot be stated about website forums where only certain topics can be discussed (such topics are usually classified and created

\footnote{4 Of course, it is possible to start a two-way conversation through asking users to share views. Still, such calls are neither reactions to some previous utterances nor guarantees that such reactions will be provided in the future. Therefore, it is rather problematic to consider them even as very tentative indicators of two-way communication.}
by moderators). So-called walls of social networks clearly convey their major function of discussion boards and invite users to participate through visible histories of conversations. However, the VK group of UR is much more populous than its group on Facebook and provides more opportunities for multi-directional communication than the party’s Twitter account.

Also, few words have to be said about the social network Vkontakte itself (Vkontakte is the full name of the network, VK is an abbreviation coming from its current web address). It was established in Saint Petersburg in 2008. The full name of the network can be translated from Russian as “in touch” or “in contact”. Later it became available in various languages (including English) and relocated to a shorter address – www.vk.com, which may viewed as a sign of more global plans of the service. Nevertheless, VK is popular mostly among Russian-speaking users: in 2012 the network had more than 140 million registered users, but 70% of them lived in Russia (RIA Novosti, 2012). Perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of the Russian social network is that it provides users with many opportunities for downloading and using multimedia content (this can be explained by the poor protection of intellectual property in the Russian Federation). However, in terms of communication between users VK is almost identical to other social networks, especially Facebook. It is possible to create any sort of groups on VK and exchange messages there in multi-directional ways.

This work concentrates on a quite long period of activities in the VK group of UR: 3 consecutive months, from January 10 through April 10, 2013 (The starting date of January 10 was picked up because of the very prolonged New Year and Christmas holidays in Russia which end on this day.) It was a “routine” period in Russian political life, which means that no national elections happened during this time. The next (scheduled) Duma election is supposed to take place in 2016, the next presidential elections – in 2018. Such a time span for the study was informed by some longitudinal studies which demonstrated that political actors become indeed active on social networks only when elections approach (Lappas, Kleftodimos, & Yannas, 2010; Karlsson, Clerwall, & Buskqvist, 2012; Klinger, 2013). In other words, active discussions between the Russian party of power – the moderators representing the party, if to be exact – and the members of its VK group become better litmus tests of adherence of the party to two-way communication and the two-way symmetrical model of PR only when such discussions are not directly affected by coming elections. Moreover, as it will be demonstrated at the end of the following chapter, for ruling parties in regimes like the Russian one permanent campaigning, including online interactions with potential voters, may appear to be even more pressing than for political actors in liberal democracies, however paradoxical it may sound.
And still, it would be an exaggeration to characterize these three months from Russian political life as peaceful and tranquil. During this period some controversial projects of laws were discussed or adopted. For instance, it was proposed to ban Russian officials from having foreign assets and bank accounts. Also the upcoming return to the mixed electoral system (proportional and majoritarian) was announced. Therefore, it was possible to expect lively conversations in the VK group of UR since its votes in Duma are decisive.
3. United Russia: an almighty party in a steady political system?

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, it aims to provide a clear explication of the current Russian political regime and the place of UR within it. This purpose is realized with the help of results of recent political science studies concerning Russian politics in general and Russian party politics in particular. It is argued that, contrary to popular views about the undemocratic nature of the Russian political system, the latter can also be characterized by a substantial amount of competition which may compel both state and non-state actors to vigorously tap internet channels of communication. Second, through this argument the value of studying online activities of UR is justified.

Even after the end of the Cold War and the consequent disappearance of sovietology (studies of the Soviet government), Russian politics is still attracting serious scholarly attention worldwide. Research devoted to Russian political processes appears in books and specialized journals, such as “East European Politics” and “Europe-Asia Studies” among others. The first explanation for such attention is that Russia can still demonstrate credible examples of governmental models to its neighbors in the Eurasian region (Hale, 2010) due to the country’s relatively successful economic development, new integrative projects (e.g. the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan), and some common post-Soviet legacies. Secondly, processes taking place in Russia do not fit easily established paradigms, they baffle researchers and raise the problem of conceptual validity again and again. For instance, Hale (2010) in order to stress some peculiarities of the current Russian regime and inadequacy of the democratization and classical authoritarianism approaches defines Russia as an electoral patronal polity. The regime is electoral one because elections, although rarely being absolutely free and fair, provide the major access to the state institutions, but these institutions are permeated and controlled by the pyramid of personal allegiances and loyalties with the president (patron) Putin on its top.

Russian political parties do not lack attention from political scientists as well. For many of them UR is also a puzzling case since it cannot be regarded as a fully-fledged party of power (for a comprehensive overview of the issue see Roberts (2012)). The problem is that UR is managed directly by the Kremlin. The majority of Russian ministers and heads of state corporations and monopolies are not members of the party, both Putin and the previous president Medvedev, who is the head of UR at the moment, underscore their ties with the party or stay aloof from it depending on swings in public opinion.
However, even not possessing “real” power UR still dominates parliamentary and party politics in Russia. After the 2011 Duma election the party received more than 50% of the seats. The other three parliamentary parties, however, are so far away from each other on the ideological continuum that they could not form any sort of a coalition. Furthermore, this step seemed to be impossible even in principle since all the three parties are not genuine opposition forces. Instead, they can be considered as sham political organizations either directly or indirectly controlled by the Kremlin (Oversloot & Verheul, 2006; Gel’man, 2008). Their survival is determined by financial aid and spoils from the state as well as by its coercive measures. Such a situation led some authors specializing in Russian politics to adopt classification tools based on the idea of the dominance of UR. For instance, White (2012) argues that a position of any Russian party should be determined according to its relations to the Kremlin and its party of power. Therefore, White distinguishes the following three groups: 1) The Kremlin-loyal parties. Two of the three already mentioned “opposition” Duma forces have characteristics of this group. 2) The semi-opposition parties. One of the most conspicuous representatives of the category is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii or just KPRF) is also presented in Duma. 3) Principal opposition parties.

The obvious dominance of UR can be analyzed as a logical consequence of that type of political regime existing at the moment in the country as well as a sign of those roles the party of power performs to maintain the entire political system. Russia is neither a democracy nor an example of classical authoritarianism. The current Russian political regime is a hybrid usually described as a case of electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2006) or competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Both perspectives indicate importance of political competition for the country’s political life. As Krastev (2012) notes: “No history of the Soviet Union treats its periodic elections as pivotal or even conspicuous events. By contrast, there seems to be no other way to tell the story of postcommunist Russia” (p. 34). Of course, fraud is inherent in elections taken in such polities as Russia. But in these “milder” versions of authoritarianism not all votes are stolen, opposition politicians are rarely killed or beaten. There are also fewer imprisoned journalists in Russia than in Turkey which is striving to join the European Union (Krastev, 2012). The fact that UR obtained less votes in 2011 (49.32%) than it did in 2007 (64.30%) should not be dismissed as well. In other words, incumbents can lose elections in competitive authoritarianisms or be ousted by post-election protests organized by opposition forces and backed by the international community. Therefore, the seemingly firm grip which the current Russian ruling elite has on power does not “exempt” it from being alert and competing for votes.
Apart from being a channel for determining popular preferences, elections in (semi-)authoritarian regimes can serve various functions such as international legitimation, cooptation of opposition politicians or provision of information about unpopular local leaders from a ruling party (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). However, in Krastev’s (2012) opinion, extraordinarily high percents earned by Putin, Medvedev and UR in elections during the first decade of 2000s were indispensable for the survival of the existing system. First, these results were signs of might which helped to eliminate any other alternatives in minds of Russians: people rarely cast votes for those who doomed to lose. It is also possible to suppose with full certitude that these overwhelming expressions of vox populi have been helping the Kremlin to use state resources (e.g. oil revenues) effectively for preventing formations of alternative centers of power (Reuter & Remington, 2009) since challengers have less chances to win over popular leaders and parties related to them. Second, the dominance of UR in Duma makes the message contained in the very name of the party sound credible: striking popular support is the best sign of national unity in the country consisting of 89 federal subjects, 21 of which are autonomous ethnic republics.

Like in other competitive authoritarianisms, the Russian “traditional” mass media, which are largely controlled by the state, have been contributing to the uneven electoral playing field (Levitsky & Way, 2010) in the country and to the consequent leading position of UR. But the internet, social networks in particular, may be creating serious challenges to the regime and its party of power. The 2011-2012 wave of post-election protests which erupted in Moscow after the allegedly rigged Duma election in December 2011 is the best evidence of this claim. Facebook and Twitter were used to disseminate information about electoral fraud (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2012). The internet was also crucial to organizers of the demonstrations. Perhaps the most creative example is Big White Circle (Bol’shoy Bely Krug) action in which thousands of Muscovites with white ribbons in their hands “encircled” the Kremlin: through special pages on social networks the protesters were told where to stand in this live chain. Also, in 2012 more than a hundred thousand citizens participated in the first Russian instance of online voting to elect leaders of the Coordination Council of the Opposition (Koordinatsionny Sovet Oppozitsii). Furthermore, alternative sources of information available on the web may have also been partly “responsible” for the fact that in December 2011 UR obtained less than 35% in 15 Russian regions.

Will the current Russian regime and its core party lose this “cyber” battle? And if they do, what will this defeat mean for the Russian political system? The first of these questions is reflected in the topic of this study since it tries to determine how UR is “waging war” in the particular social
network. Speaking about the second question it is necessary to note that this work does not support optimistic but too superficial views that free circulation of information in the internet automatically leads to popularity of opposition parties in semi-authoritarian states or that “online” revolutions can bring about democracy. The ongoing political turmoil in the countries of the so-called Arab spring demonstrates that regime breakdown does not equal democratic consolidation. Therefore, this work cannot be considered in the light of the internet and democratization framework. However, the dominant status of UR in the Russian parliament as well as the already described importance of its electoral performance to the overall stability of the regime provide a reasonable justification for the focus of this research. It is clear that ineffectiveness of online communication of UR when coupled with successful online activities of opposition forces may lower popular support for the Russian party of power. But again, whether such decrease in support can become a trigger for gradual democratization is a rather complicated issue beyond the scope of this particular work.

The exposition presented in this chapter also enables to provide one more argument why studying “routine”, i.e. taking place between elections, online activities of ruling parties/incumbents from semi-authoritarian polities may be a better strategy than concentrating on web activities during pre-election periods. Strong approval for the ruling party does not disappear overnight, nor do defectors from the dominating coalition calculate their plots right before a voting day since they have to be sure that the party loses on this day. Therefore, UR and other ruling parties in semi-authoritarian regimes should always remain popular, with the help of offline and online tools. Or to put another way, UR (and its puppeteers), however paradoxically it may sound, should care about permanent campaigning even more than parties in liberal democracies.
4. Previous research on political online communication in Russia

This thesis does not provide an analysis of how Russian social networks can fulfill their potential of liberation technologies (Diamond, 2010), that is, technologies which facilitate ousting autocrats or more gradual democratization. (For examples of such works see the report by Fossato, Lloyd, & Verkhovsky (2008) or the already mentioned study by Reuter and Szakonyi (2012)). UR is an established and parliamentary party; therefore, the literature review is devoted to English-language studies which concern online activities of key Russian political parties and officials. Special attention in this review is paid to the issue of online interactions between political actors and ordinary people.

In the introduction to the thesis it was already indicated that online resources of Russian political parties and other political actors, including their social networks groups and pages, have been insufficiently researched. While the relatively low internet penetration in Russia (especially during the 2000s) may be one possible explanation for this state of affairs, two other reasons should be mentioned: high volatility of Russian party politics until the middle of 2000s and Putin’s high popularity during the first decade of the new century. The first factor made objects for prospective studies “elusive”. The second fact may have diminished the necessity of researching possible relations between the new media and political actors: the regime may have seemed to be too hegemonic and stable to talk about serious power struggles during which competitors tend to employ all available means, including the new media.

Semetko and Krasnoboka (2003) were, perhaps, the first who analyzed websites of several Russian (as well as Ukrainian) political parties in January 2001. Their results corroborated the so-called relational normalization hypothesis (for a lucid explanation of three types of the normalization hypotheses see Schweitzer’s (2011) article). According to this hypothesis, political actors having more resources offline also dominate in the internet, that is, such actors usually have more online platforms with better designs and more functions. As Semetko and Krasnoboka (2003) note “… those in Parliament in both countries are more accessible, more up to date, more user friendly and more interactive” (p. 85). March (2004) conducted his analysis of websites of Russian political parties two years later, in 2003. He also described how the internet was used before the Duma election in 1999. Clearly, today both studies look obsolete and may be useful only for a historical overview (at least because some of the parties analyzed by Semetko, Krasboka and March just disappeared many years ago).
More recent research contributions to the problem of online communication of the today’s Russian political establishment appeared in September 2012 in one special issue of the journal “Europe-Asia Studies”. It was entitled “New Media in New Europe-Asia”. In the issue Oates (2012) presents a comparison of how the Russian Communist Party (KPRF) and the British Liberal Democrats were running their official websites at the beginning of 2010. She demonstrates that in the case of the Russian Communists, who are deemed to be successors of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the official website functioned as the major platform for informing supporters (its main task) and interacting with them. Unfortunately, Oates does not go into details while covering conversations on the forum on the website of KPRF. She provides only a rather superficial quantitative overview of its messages. In fact, her findings look predictable, if not banal, given the fact that KPRF is a literally dying party. It has support only within the “electoral ghetto” consisting of some pensioners having nostalgia for the USSR. Even now, in 2013, the party still does not have any official groups on any social networks.

What is more important in Oates’ article is her call to critically reassess the terms and approaches used for researching online communication. In particular she claims that most of them have either American or British origin and, therefore, cannot “travel” easily to Runet (the Russian internet). This call definitely resonates with the issue of contextual specificity outlined by Adcock and Collier (2001). Unfortunately, Oates dismisses her own recommendation and applies Gibson and Ward’s (2000) quite old instruments to compare the websites of KPRF and the Liberal Democrats. However, importance of her call is indeed significant. Therefore, the question of applicability of the major theoretical framework of this study to practices of Russian PR specialists is also presented in the thesis (see the section 5.3).

In another contribution to the special issue Yagodin (2012) provides an overview of the president Medvedev’s blog. The study covers the period from January 2009 until October 2010. Its results can be aptly summarized by Yagodin’s own words: “a blog without a blogger” (p. 1422). The president’s blog was absolutely non-interactive: users could not receive replies to their questions and opinions. Furthermore, Medvedev chose a video format for his online diary, but most videos in the blog were footages of his official meetings and tours. This means that his personal touch, which is something inherent in genuine online diaries, was absent.

Fortunately, Toepfl’s (2012) article is much more sophisticated than the previous two. This scholar analyzes how several Russian governors were running their blogs during the spring of 2010. (Many of them were almost forced to launch online diaries since the president Medvedev
did so in October 2008.) In particular, he is interested in how actively and through what kinds of discourses the governors were participating in online conversations with citizens. This thesis is also focused on the issue of interactions between ordinary people and the key Russian political party (the majority of the today’s Russian governors are its members). Therefore, Toepfl’s findings as well as his research motivations require a more detailed presentation.

For some governors running a blog was nothing more than an act of loyalty to the “up-to-date” president who was constantly talking about Russia’s modernization during his tenure (2008-2012) and who even had meetings with Steve Jobs and other entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley. For such regional leaders blogging became an alternative platform for spreading news about their good deeds. Comments in such blogs were either prohibited or never received any feedback.

The second category of governors’ blogs, efficient statesmen blogs, contained much more contacts between heads of federal subjects and users. For such online diaries it was quite common when the statesmen themselves authored posts and participated in direct message exchanges with ordinary people. However, the main aim of such exchanges, as Toepfl argues, was to increase effectiveness and efficiency of the state in the eyes of prospective voters. That is, the governors from this second category vigorously responded only to grievances and requests; they did not provide any information about their personal lives and rarely tried to use informal writing. In other words, the efficient statesmen blogs resembled “offline” reception rooms for citizens. It should be noted as well that a certain group of these officials eventually abandoned their online platforms due to influxes of messages. Others decided to keep blogs and created special sections for asking questions, which are now handled by their advisors.

The third type of online diaries belonged to the category of governors which Toepfl calls internetchiki (they should not be confused with infamous apparatchiki). A typical internetchik tried to discuss pressing issues of his region, did this in a rather informal manner and also shared his personal life with ordinary people. As a result, such governors spent much more time online. For instance, the governor of the Kirov region Nikita Belykh, who is also an active Twitter user now, posted restlessly in his blog. Some of his posts contained photos from his holidays and day-offs, e.g. pictures of him being sunburnt after spending a day on a beach.

While being primarily driven by the issue of how the internet can improve political representation and participation, Toepfl also argues that the two last categories of blogs, efficient statesmen’s and internetchiki’s blogs, can be effective tools for increasing perceived
responsiveness and legitimacy of regional officials. This work subscribes to this argument since the two-way symmetrical model of PR considers two-way communication as an effective instrument to gain favor among members of publics with which the organization deals. However, the current research concentrates on the particular party, not on specific individuals. Therefore, it seems more reasonable to stay within the “efficient statesmen” framework since it focuses on interactions regarding “substantial” issues (such as legislative ones).

Nevertheless, at the end of this chapter it is necessary to reiterate that communication between Russian political parties and users of social networks has not been researched in earnest yet. Moreover, it has never been analyzed through theories of public relations.
5. Theory

The two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig et. al., 1995; Grunig, 2001) is the major theoretical framework of this study. As it was demonstrated in the introduction to the thesis, the two reasons motivated the choice of this particular approach. First, the “flat” and horizontal design of social networks facilitate realization of the model (Grunig, 2009) since the latter presupposes continuous, equal and transparent contacts between the organization and members of its publics. Second, in the model the organizational self-interest is given the first place: it is a pragmatic approach, according to which equal, two-way communication with publics can bring certain benefits to the organization, such as a better image, stronger relations with partners, a lower risk of conflicts of interests, etc. Therefore, applying the two-way symmetrical model of PR enables to consider the VK group of UR as an instrument for gaining support among the participants of the group. And gaining popular support is a major goal of UR since it is a catch-all party, which electoral results have been a basis of the country’s current political regime.

The structure of the theoretical chapter is the following. First, the two-way symmetrical model is compared with the three other approaches to PR defined and developed by Grunig and his colleagues. This comparison is necessary since all the four ways of doing PR were theorized simultaneously and, therefore, they can be grasped only through juxtaposition with each other. Second, several critical positions on the two-way symmetrical model of PR are outlined in order to prevent its possible misinterpretations. Third, applicability of the approach to practices of Russian PR specialists is discussed. Specifically, it is stated that the model should be used not as a practical guide for PR routines, but as a normative etalon retaining its value in any country of the world.

Fourth, a very brief overview of the interrelated perspectives of relationship political marketing and relationships management is presented. Both perspectives stem from the two-way symmetrical model, significantly overlap with it and, therefore, can be considered as its developments. However, in the overview of the approaches it is argued that the results of this study can only be partially interpreted through their lenses since the approaches focus on specific dimensions of relationships between the organization and its publics (between UR and the participants of its VK group in this particular case). Clearly, the research questions of the study do not reflect this focus.
Finally, three theoretical perspectives on interactivity, which were outlined by Kiousis (2002), are described at the end of the chapter. The first, technologically driven, perspective provides a theoretical underpinning for this study’s interest in the use of online polls in the VK group of UR. The second approach which concentrates on perceptions of interactivity of media outlets points at an important limitation of the study. The third perspective with its focus on the process of interpersonal communication is somehow compatible with the major theoretical framework of the thesis. However, it is demonstrated that due to certain methodological issues and the ambiguity of the perspective itself it could not be realized (in full) in this work.

5.1. Two-way symmetrical model of public relations

In 1976 during his first attempt to delineate approaches to PR Grunig surveyed more than 216 PR specialists in the Washington-Baltimore area in the USA (Grunig et al., 1995). They were asked to tell how often they used certain professional instruments. It transpired that the practitioners could be divided into two groups. The first group, according to Grunig, relied on synchronic communication, that is, the key purpose for these specialists was to “synchronize” attitudes and behaviors of publics to obtain more profit (from higher demand). But for the managers from the second group it was more important “to negotiate state-of-affairs that benefits both organization and publics” (Grunig et al., 1995, p. 168). In contrast to the first orientation, the second approach was called diachronic communication.

In later works Grunig and his colleagues did not continue using the distinction between synchronic and diachronic communications, which is indeed more suitable for describing temporal characteristics. Instead, the four models of public relations were adopted: 1. press agentry/publicity; 2. public information; 3. two-way asymmetrical; 4. two-way symmetrical. Those adhering to the press agentry model do not care that much about ethics in their pursuit of media visibility. They strive to deliver as many messages as possible to publics and to persuade people into doing something (buying/voting). The first of the models seems to capture certain stereotypic views of PR. For instance, in Russia many people, perhaps even without knowing the meaning of the letters in the abbreviation PR itself, use the special verb “piarit’sya” for naming activities aimed at getting media fame. Obviously, the word is not supposed to mean something lofty and laudable. The same is true in relation to one more Russian neologism concerning people working in or with PR – “polittekhnolog”. Such specialists think not only about how to improve media coverage but also about overall strategies and tactics to attract such coverage. For instance, in the tumultuous 90s staging a fake assassination attempt was a classical ploy which
these specialists used in order to spread confidence in a political candidate’s honesty. The standard version in such instances was that candidates were fighters against the mafia and corrupted political opponents, who did not hesitate to resort to dirty means of competition. And although the creation of UR should be explained by an equilibrium between the Kremlin and the elites from the federal regions (Reuter and Remington, 2009), many still deem that (in)famous politteknolog Gleb Pavlovskiy masterminded the establishment of the party and its brand.

In comparison with the historically first way of doing PR, the public information model pays more attention to accuracy of information. Persuasion by any means is inappropriate. However, like the press agentry model it does not presuppose any feedback from publics. Their members are considered as passive recipients of (accurate) information. But even PR practitioners themselves are almost “deprived” of any creative roles: their key tasks involve writing press releases and sending them to the media. Anti-smoking campaigns, which are usually based on checked medical facts, are perhaps classical examples of this approach to public relations.

The two-way asymmetrical model is even less related to the initial conception of PR since it is largely based on the idea of feedback, but specialists working in accordance with the model value more frequent contacts with publics mainly because of their instrumental importance. Interactions are used to obtain more information about consumers or voters in order to make messages more effective. Therefore, the second name of the approach is scientific persuasion. Many online techniques applied on corporate and political websites fit it perfectly. For instance, customization of information flows may look as a demonstration of care about users; however, it also helps owners of websites to receive detailed information about individual preferences and employ it in future marketing campaigns. The same is true about many online polls.

The two-way symmetrical model makes one step forward and pays even more attention to interactions between organizations (e.g. corporations or political parties) and its publics. In this conception the term public finally becomes justifiable since, according to the approach, listening to and speaking with members of publics is valuable not only for crafting more effective (selling) messages. Contacts with different parties affected by activities of the organization are important for the latter because such contacts should help it to manage and even alter its strategies and tactics in a way which does not contradict interests of publics. Of course, members of publics can also alter their positions after negotiations with the organization. The model stresses the centrality of two-way communication (dialogue (Grunig, 2001)) between both sides: the organization and its environment. Such communication should enable them to learn about and
understand each other. In his more recent and applied interpretation of the two-way symmetrical approach, the model of strategic management of public relations, Grunig (2009) talks about communication programs which require that organizations sustain continuous interactions with their stakeholders. According to Grunig (2009), communication programs should be realized before and during making organizational decisions. Otherwise, neglect of stakeholders’ wants may generate certain problems. Stakeholders may actively raise issues important to them and accuse the organization of ignoring these issues or even aggravating them. In worst situations this leads to crises. Of course, the organization can mitigate consequences and extent of criticism and activism or even reach resolutions of disputes. However, such happy endings are much more possible when there is continuous communication between the organization and people crucial to its survival.

While (two-way) communication is certainly in the heart of the two-way symmetrical model, the latter, nevertheless, departs from the vision of PR as an activity which cannot be separated from journalism and the mass media. It can be argued that PR managers adhering to the approach act more like communication directors rather than communication technicians. (The distinction of these two possible roles of PR practitioners was established by Broom and Smith (1979).) Technicians represent traditional and more stereotypical views of the profession: they are responsible for writing press releases and maintaining contacts with journalists in order to deliver as many messages to publics as possible. This role is inherent in the first three Grunig’s conceptions of PR. And communication directors act as strategists responsible for monitoring environments of the organization and delivering interests and opinions of its publics to senior managers and vice versa. One of their possible sub-roles, communication facilitator, seems to represent “ideal” two-way symmetrical practices of PR: “They [communication facilitators] maintain two-way communication and facilitate exchange by removing barriers in relationships and by keeping channels of communication open. The goal is to provide both management and publics the information they need for making decisions of mutual interest” (Cutlip et al. as cited in Xifra, 2010, p. 173).

In other words, the two-way symmetrical model presupposes a broad understanding of management of public relations. It should relate not only to management of communication, which is the obvious and traditional meaning of the profession, but to all organizational strategies and tactics. Nevertheless, this research does not try to shed light on all aspects of practices of specialists responsible for the VK group of UR. This work concentrates only on one, overriding element of the two-way symmetrical model of PR without which it cannot be
imagined, namely on two-way communication. Such type of communication can be defined in the following way: communication during which participants receive reactions on each other messages, i.e. contributions to the process of communication.

5.2. Criticism of the model

The two-way symmetrical model cannot be called non-instrumental at least because it helps the organization to escape conflicts. Hence the two-way symmetrical model can be viewed in the light of what Heath (2001) names “cost reduction paradigm” of PR. The major tenet of the paradigm is that reducing amount of conflict situations (by meeting expectations of publics) should go first and can guarantee revenue generation, whereas the first three models of PR are more preoccupied with making profits immediately, through persuasive communication. However, as Grunig (2001) argues, persuasion, while not being a principal component of the two-way approach, is not something alien to it. The difference is that two-way symmetrical persuasive communication relies on genuine interests of all involved parties and does not employ prohibited psychological ruses. But collaboration is still the final goal (Grunig et al., 1995).

The combination of the seemingly incompatible components in one conception makes the latter somewhat vulnerable to certain misinterpretations. Not surprisingly, two intertwined strands of criticism of the two-way symmetrical approach stem from the same erroneous presuppositions about whose goals and purposes the model “defends”. Hence it is necessary to add more details to the previous discussion, they should enable to escape unnecessary misinterpretations as well as show one more time importance of two-way communication for gaining voters’ support.

The first critical strand comes from the field of applied public relations research: some scholars (e.g. Van der Meiden (1993)) from this camp accuse Grunig of pushing organizations to implementation of self-destructive practices of making needs of publics superior to the ultimate corporate purpose of gaining profit (gaining votes). However, Grunig (2001) argues that the two-way symmetrical approach is not about pure cooperation and full accommodation of various needs. If this was the case, then the approach would not be symmetrical: it would be biased towards those who deal with the organization. Instead, he claims that the model, just like the other more traditional views of PR, also focuses on organizational self-interests. It promotes dialogue precisely because it can help the organization to understand members of publics, incorporate their needs and grievances in its practices in order to improve organizational images and reputations and escape costly conflicts. Grunig adds that full, unconditional accommodation
is possible within his fourth conception of PR only in the form of tactical moves which should bring benefits in the future.

The second strand of criticism comes from those scholars who consider any forms of public relations as being “necessarily partisan and intrinsically undemocratic” (L’Etang as cited in Grunig, 2001, p. 16) or as an evil practice of brainwashing. From their point of view the two-way symmetrical approach is just another attempt to idealize and justify the profession, present it as a new liberal solution to conflicts and inequalities existing in any, especially capitalist and pluralist, society. However, Grunig (2001) claims that he has never considered his fourth approach to PR as a force capable of providing access to power and decisions to all social groups or as a tool to reach societal harmony. Moreover, he declines the idea, which is implicit in the views of critical scholars, that the two-way symmetrical model depicts corporations and its stakeholders as always willing to reach compromises in any situations. In his opinion, it is not the approaches to PR which should be accused of idealism, but some theories popular among critical scholars (such as Habermas’s idea of public sphere). Furthermore, the two-way symmetrical model, as Grunig (2001) claims, is not inevitably successful: some groups in the society may be highly reluctant to participate in any kinds of dialogue; furthermore, certain organizations may consider feedback and sharing of opinions as something unnecessary because of imbalances in power between them and their stakeholders. For instance, the Russian Communist Party may refuse to participate in certain consultations with the Kremlin or other parties because an instance of communication with “pro-capitalist” forces may be a priori viewed as a betrayal of the communist ideology by its core electorate. In its turn, from 2007 to 2011 United Russia could ignore any other political forces since it possessed the constitutional majority in Duma.

And now, when the necessary clarifications have been made, it seems reasonable to present a formal definition of the two-way symmetrical model of PR which will reflect its simultaneous attention to organizational goals and needs of people important to the organization. In the description of the research questions of this study it was already noted that such a formulation has not been developed yet. However, it seems that Strömback & Kiousis’s (2011) definition of political public relations provides a good proxy for it:

Political public relations is the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action,
seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (p. 8)

Although being definitely biased in favor of relationships management (the approach will be covered in the last section of the chapter), this definition captures the key principles of the two-way symmetrical model and applies them to the realm of politics. Clearly, Strömbäck & Kiousis use political terms to reiterate Grunig’s (2001) stance that profit is the overriding goal of any commercial organization. Winning votes is crucial to almost any party, especially for catch-all parties such as United Russia, especially when political competition is rising. In the very end even parties which want to defend or propagate some very concrete policies have to possess parliamentary seats in order to vote for such policies.

5.3. Two-way symmetrical model of PR as a normative theory for studying the Vkontakte group of United Russia

Do the four models of PR encompass all possible ways of doing PR? Can online communication in different countries of the world, specifically, in Russia, be studied with their help? The four models were created on the basis of the data from several Anglo-Saxon countries. Nevertheless, Grunig et al. (1995) recognize certain peculiarities in practices of PR managers around the world. Therefore, they describe two additional, albeit not fully-fledged, ways of doing PR: the personal influence and cultural translation models. The latter approach relates to the situation when PR specialists have to be “eyes and ears” of foreign senior managers who need “translations” of processes within and outside the organization.

The personal influence approach seems to be applicable to those countries where rational-legal discourse is underdeveloped and/or media organizations are closely connected with usually polarized political forces. In such circumstances PR practitioners have to nourish close ties with editors and journalists to ensure publications of their press releases. According to Xifra (2010), this is one of the most important responsibilities of PR departments of Spanish political parties. Taking into consideration the recent Russian political history, it will not be a mistake to suppose that the personal influence approach is also exercised by Russian specialists. However, even if the two-way symmetrical model of PR does not reflect prevailing mindsets and professional habits of Russian specialists working in the field of political communication, this does not automatically mean that it should be dropped. Grunig (2001) himself understands that the two-
way symmetrical model is quite idealistic and that its “pure” forms are not ubiquitous in routines of PR departments. Therefore, he calls to consider the model as a positive and as well as a normative theory. This work supports this call and, therefore, considers the two-way symmetrical approach, in particular, its overriding component of two-way communication, as a normative guide through which interactions between UR and the participants of its VK group can be evaluated. In other words, being an etalon, the two-way symmetrical model can “travel” to any national contexts.

This point should become more convincing through the following presentation of the strategic management/behavioral paradigm\(^5\) of public relations (Grunig, 2009). By using the first descriptor Grunig emphasizes a special importance of public relations to organizational management: through presentation of stakeholders’ opinions PR practitioners can shape corporate strategies and tactics. However, it is more interesting that he defines the paradigm as semi-postmodern. To ground his point of view Grunig refers to Hatch’s (1997) threefold classification of perspectives on organizations. (Hatch’s perspectives include the modernist, symbolic-interpretive and postmodern views.) It is semi-postmodern precisely because it prescribes listening to multiple “voices” coming from all publics with which the organization may deal. Clearly, this is an allusion to the postmodern attention to power inequalities and imbalances. However, the strategic management/behavioral paradigm holds the prefix “semi”. This is so because in the paradigm organizational purposes are paramount, although they have to be bridged with interests of people important to the organization. Therefore, Grunig (2009) argues that successful images, brands and reputations depend on quality of communication and relations between the organization and its publics. As a result, the second descriptor in the name of the paradigm should be considered not as an allusion to behaviorism, as one may think, but as an indicator of the key responsibility of PR practitioners – to balance behaviors of all subjects participating in the process of public relations. According to Grunig (2009), “the symbolic-interpretive paradigm devotes excessive attention to the role of communication and public relations in negotiating meaning and not enough attention to their role in negotiating the behaviour of both organisations and publics” (p.10).

While certainly adding some new details to the two-way symmetrical model of PR, the management/behavioral paradigm resembles some sort of tweaking, “cosmetic” rather than

\(^5\) Its opposite is the symbolic/interpretive paradigm which pertains to the first three models of PR, specifically, to the idea that media messages are crucial in reaching (symbolic) impact on consumers and voters.
substantial changes. However, in comparison with the four conceptions of PR, the two paradigms can be viewed as even more broad collections of generic principles not related to the research conducted in a limited number of (Anglo-Saxon) countries. Not surprisingly, Grunig (2009) calls his paradigms global. In other words, the principles of the global management/behavioral paradigm clearly point out that it is possible to use the two-way symmetrical model of PR as an etalon to assess communication between UR and the participants of its VK group.

5.4. Relationship political marketing and relationships management

Grunig (2001, 2009) explicitly states that one of the final goals of the two-way symmetrical model of PR is positive relations between the organization and its publics. Not surprisingly, Lilleker & Jackson (2011) deem that the principles of the two-way symmetrical PR inform the perspectives of relationship political marketing (e.g. Bannon, 2005) and relationships management (e.g. Ledingham, 2003).

Political marketing can be viewed as an application of ideas from (classical) corporate marketing to electoral campaigning (Strömbäck, Mitrook, & Kiousis, 2010; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Even when it is interpreted in more broad terms, namely as a means of gaining support within arenas other than the electoral one, it is still centered on the idea of domination and control. That is, within its internal arena parties should use marketing tools to achieve greater cohesion, within the parliamentary one – to build links, coalitions with other fractions, and within the media one – to obtain favorable coverage (Strömbäck et al., 2010). The idea of domination by any means lies in the core of the so-called transactional way of doing political marketing, according to which, voters “buy” goods proposed by political parties (policies, status, resources, etc.). Relationship political marketing, however, takes into consideration volatility of many electoral markets. Therefore, it centers on the problem of retention of “customers” (voters) (Bannon, 2005; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). The latter can be solved through building long-term and meaningful relations with them (Bannon, 2005).

Relationships management can be defined as “the ethical and efficient management of organization-public relationships, focused over time on common interests and shared goals in support of mutual understanding and mutual benefit” (Ledingham, 2003, p. 190). Obviously, this approach can be based only on two-way symmetrical communication, even despite the fact that Ledingham’s (2011) reminds its adherents not to forget about “real life” behaviors (e.g. special
events, open houses or walathons). The major difference between relationships management and political marketing is that the former is explicitly based on the win-win perspective: both voters and politicians should receive equal benefits from their contacts.

Clearly, continuous two-way discussions between UR and the members of its VK group may generate long-term and meaningful relationships between them, whereas using the group as just another platform for advertising the party’s good deeds may lead to the so-called reputational relationships (Grunig, 2009) based on very low involvement of the users, who only have to “believe in” some good reputation of the party. The findings of this study can help to understand which scenario is more characteristic of the VK group of UR. However, Ledingham (2003) argues that the relational perspective has already passed the stage of conceiving of PR as a management function for sustaining relationships. Therefore, in his opinion, true contributions to the theory and practice of relationships management – the same seems to be true for relationship political marketing – should investigate either more specific dimensions of organization-publics relationships or connections of such dimensions with other behaviors and attitudes. And such tasks are beyond the scope of this thesis, it is not informed by the theoretical emphasis of the relational perspective (to be exact, by Ledingham’s formulation of this emphasis). Moreover, Ledingham’s argument almost compels scholars working within the two perspectives to measure communicants’ perceptions and opinions. But this study employs the method of content analysis which is appropriate for revealing parameters of texts.

5.5. Theories of interactivity

“Driving the epistemological revolution in communication science is the interactivity of the new communication technologies”. (Rogers as cited in Jensen, 1998, p. 187). This claim certainly retains some validity even today. The term is widely used in works devoted to online political communication (e.g. Kalnes, 2009; Lilleker & Malagón, 2010; Lilleker, Pack, & Jackson, 2010; Cardenal, 2011; Schweitzer, 2011). Unfortunately, it is also true that interactivity is still “an underdefined concept. As a way of thinking about communication, it has high face validity, but only narrowly based explication, little consensus on meaning” (Rafaeli, 1988, p. 110). To put it simple, interactivity is a buzzword usually associated with the new media and feedback (Kiousis, 2002). However, the very popularity of the concept in media studies requires an explanation of how it relates to this work. Therefore, in this section three major approaches to interactivity are outlined. One of them focuses on the issues of continuity and coherence of online human-to-human communication. It is obvious that such characteristics are excellent indicators of two-way
communication between the moderators of the VK group of UR and its members. Nevertheless, the approach was not employed as the major theoretical framework because of some methodological reasons which are presented at the end of the section. Also, in this outline one serious limitation of the study is demonstrated as well as its difference from works concentrating on functional characteristics of websites of political parties.

While several other attempts to delineate different views of interactivity (Jensen, 1998; McMillan, 2002; Bucy, 2004) exist, Kiousis’s (2002) analysis seems to be the most comprehensive. According to Kiousis (2002):

Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and synchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). With regard to human users, it additionally refers to their ability to perceive the experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence (p. 372).

This rather unwieldy definition unites three different perspectives on interactivity. The first of these approaches is technologically driven. According to this tradition of thinking and research, interactivity should be understood as a function of hardware and software. Obviously, such understanding has its roots in cybernetics (Stromer-Galley, 2000) and computer science. It is based on the idea of control over technology (Jensen, 1998) which has to respond (provide feedback) to someone interacting with it. Larsson (2012) calls the approach the functional view. This name seems to reflect quite precisely the essence of studies in which presence of certain interactive features (e.g. chats, tweaking options) on websites is analyzed. (Clearly, results of such studies depend on definitions of interactive functions).

However, Chung (2008) argues that interactive media functions do not form one lump category and that they can be divided into at least four different types: medium, medium/human, human/medium and human interactive features. Medium features are present if the website contains videos and audios. Medium/human features is just another name for customization options which give the user opportunities to receive some specific information in a way convenient for them. Human/medium interactivity occurs when users send e-mails to editors or
answer questions of online polls, for instance. Finally, it is obvious that chats and message are created for human interactions.

VK users can communicate and share content almost without any restraints, the social network is a mega, “distilled” chat. But Chung’s typology does not go beyond the first approach to interactivity. As a result, it does not contain any directions for in-depth studying of online human interactions. Moreover, it seems that the presence of only one of the three other types of interactive media features in the VK group of United Russia can serve as an additional indicator of a certain importance of the users’ opinions to the party. First, multimedia files on web resources are not something extraordinary anymore on contemporary websites. Furthermore, it is rather questionable that the presence of versatile forms of information in the VK group of UR reflects the party’s interest in positions of the members of the group. Speaking about customization options (medium/human interactive features) it is, of course, possible to suppose that if the organization allows users to receive information on their demand, it somehow takes their (“technical”) needs into consideration. However, voters cannot express their thoughts regarding laws or pressing national issues through customization. Consequently, examination of the latter will not have any value in the context of this study. Moreover, it is the VK website itself, not its particular groups and pages, which provides users with opportunities for personalization of information flows. However, online polls, an example of human/medium features, are attached to some of wall posts in the VK group of UR. In the presentation of the research questions it was indicated that the use of online polls was analyzed in this study since through them the party can receive more information about the users’ views and preferences. However, it was also emphasized that it is not clear what this interest in the users’ positions means since data obtained with the help of online are useful for more persuasive, effective communication (the two-way asymmetrical model of PR) as well as for reacting to ordinary people’s positions (the two-way symmetrical model of PR). (Of course, it can also be argued that online polls are conducted in the VK group of UR for no reason, just for their own sake, because this feature is enabled by the social network website.)

The second approach dissected by Kiousis (2002) is centered on the perception dimension of interactivity (the perceived view of interactivity (Larsson, 2012)). To put it simple, researchers working in this direction study how users themselves assess interactivity of media resources. Perhaps the key advantage of this approach is that it transcends the implicit conviction of the functional view that users always want as many interactive features as possible. The counter-assumption of the perceived view is that even a seemingly small amount of interactive media
functions may suffice to satisfy personal expectations and needs. This position is perfectly reflected in Ha and James’ (1998) definition of interactivity as “the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate each other’s communications needs” (p. 461). The perceived view, in other words, “let” users decide and, therefore, it has certain connections with the more general uses and gratification theory. Consequently, the perceived view may also serve as a universal research orientation for studying interactive qualities of different media (Bucy, 2004) since each and every medium is consumed by people who are major sources of data in works on perceived interactivity.

For this particular study the argument means the following: regardless of any forms of the moderators’ activities, the members of the VK group of UR may feel more (or less) than comfortable with feedback they receive and overall communication settings of the group. It is a serious caution against taking the results of the study as a “final diagnosis”. To provide a more comprehensive picture the research should be complemented with the users’ opinions regarding the group and moderators’ work.

Finally, the third theoretical conception of interactivity analyzed by Kiousis (2002) is focused on the process of interpersonal communication (or the process view of interactivity (Larsson, 2012), or interactivity-as-process (Stromer-Galley, 2004)). For scholars working in this tradition interactivity is “not a characteristic of the medium. It is a … construct about communication” (Rafaeli, 1997). According to the process view, not all human-to-human conversations, either occurring online or offline, are interactive by default, as one may expect. This claim is based on Rafaeli’s (1988) theorizing. He proposes quite rigorous requirements for communication between people to be called interactive. In particular, using the criteria of responsiveness, continuity and coherence (of discussions) he distinguishes three levels of interactivity.

First, non-interactive and two-way communication represents situations when participants exchange messages without connecting each new message to what has been already said. To put it simple, persons address each other but speak about something interesting only to them. In the second type of situations quasi-interactive (or reactive) conversations occur when each new discreet part of some interaction (e.g. question – reply) has its internal sense but does not relate to the overall context of the interaction. Finally, full interactivity is in place when “in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions” (Rafaeli, 1988, p.
That is, fully interactive conversations (or their parts) have to be “wrapped” in some overarching context and connected to what have been said before.

Rafaeli’s views are certainly compatible with the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. They could be useful for indicating prolonged and “deep” instances of communication between UR (its moderators) and the participants of its VK group. However, the major problem with Rafaeli’s theory is its applicability to research. It seems that operationalization of full interactivity will lead to indicators based on rather subjective interpretation of data: are there any easily recognizable signals pointing out that a discussion about some topic is over and a new subject has been picked up? Besides, it is not clear how cases of full interactivity should be counted on social networks where anyone can easily interfere into ongoing conversations between two persons and where discussions under wall posts may be devoted to several topics simultaneously or may be abandoned and resumed at any point of time. Therefore, it is possible to argue that in order to reach higher reliability and replicability this study (specifically, when answering the first, most important research question) does not go beyond the reactive level of Rafaeli’s classification on which only relevant reactions to previous messages are analyzed.
6. Methodology

6.1. Method of data collection

The research questions of this study do not require in-depth, detailed descriptions of the conversations which occurred in the VK group of UR during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. Instead, they presuppose answers based on quite specific quantitative indicators. For instance, for answering the first research question it was necessary to count the moderators’ reactions to the users’ suggestion and questions regarding pieces of legislation. This means that qualitative methods suitable for more detailed dissection of texts (e.g. discourse analysis) would be groundless in the study. Therefore, the method of content analysis was chosen. The following definition of the method was adopted:

Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizibility, replicability and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented. (Neuendorf, 2002, p.10).

In other words, this summarizing and quantitative method aimed at receiving “a numerically based summary of a chosen message set” (Neuendorf, 2002, p.14) perfectly fits the research questions.

In order to reach higher objectivity and to make the research instrument more effective for further studies the content analysis was based on manifest coding. Manifest content can be defined as “elements that are physically present and countable” (Gray & Densten as cited in Neuendorf, 2002, p. 23), whereas latent content “cannot be measured directly but can be represented or measured by one or more indictors” (Hair et al. as cited in Neuendorf, 2002, p.

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6 Neuendorf’s (2002, p. 108-109) examples of hypotheses used in content analytic studies enable to conclude that she considers hypotheses not only as suppositions regarding why and how things happen (this is Blaikie’s (2011) position), but also as expectations regarding descriptive findings of a study. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reiterate that this thesis subscribes to Blakie’s views. Therefore, hypothesis testing (testing of explanations of why and how things happen) cannot be viewed as a necessary part of the scientific method. It is a necessary part of deductive studies which is usually realized with the help of hypotheses (Blaikie, 2011, p. 85-87), but this study is purely descriptive and follows the inductive strategy.
In other words, latent coding always involves subjective interpretation, but the latter certainly threatens reliability of findings. While some variables were based on automatic counting (e.g. the number of users’ comments), some others, of course, presupposed some subjective judgment (e.g. when analyzing suggestions relating to legislative initiatives). However, in order to reduce its amount quite elaborate instructions for coding were worked out.

The content analysis involved inspection of only textual data. That is, videos, audios, photos attached to some wall posts or comments as well as wall posts and comments without textual captions to videos, audios or web links were not coded. The decision to take only textual data into consideration was made in order not to complicate the analysis by additional variables for coding multimedia content. Moreover, a few wall posts left in the group during the period covered by the study had any videos or audios, and on photos attached to the wall posts the same party members (their faces) were usually depicted.

At the end of this section it is necessary to note that results of any content analysis cannot be used as a valid basis for making inferences about sources from which content emanates as well as about its recipients. Such conclusions require the integrative model of content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). It comprises content analytic studies and research on subjects dealing with content (e.g. surveys among users who read some messages). Therefore, the findings of this work cannot be considered as indicators of the participants’ (dis)satisfaction with communication taking place in the VK group of UR. The same is true in relation to the moderators of the group and other persons working with public relations strategies and tactics of the Russian party of power. Media materials produced by this group of people may not reflect their true normative orientations regarding public relations. In other words, they may support the two-way symmetrical model of PR but have to implement other models in real life due to certain circumstances. To reveal such mismatches studies like Xifra’s (2010) one, that is, based on data from sources of messages, should be conducted: in his research this scholar asked PR officers from several Spanish parties to assess a set of statements representing the principles of the four models of PR. This argument means that the findings of this research describe the communication behavior of the Russian party of power only in one particular social network and during the very concrete period of time.
6.2. Sampling

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was applied in the study. The convenience sample consisted of 241 wall posts and 194 discussion threads which corresponded to them (that is, 47 wall posts were not commented by the users). These wall posts and discussion threads appeared in the VK group of UR during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. The wall posts were authored by the VK group of UR itself since nobody else has the right to leave messages on its wall. This type of sampling was used due to the time and resource constraints of the study and three concrete reasons. First, it is highly possible that since its foundation in 2010 the group has changed many different moderators. This makes finding out messages which represented the party before January 2013 quite difficult. However, it is absolutely certain that the same four persons were moderators of the group during the period covered by the study. Second, it is possible to expect fewer comments and other activities from the earlier years when the internet penetration was even lower than it is now and when VK was only turning into the most popular Russian social network. In other words, if the research was based on probability sampling, it would be at risk of having certain time-specific biases in its findings. The last but not the least reason in favor of convenience sampling is that communication on any social networks groups is extremely versatile, its topics and structure are very changeable. Thus it was almost impossible to develop uniform and still valuable (in terms of analysis) variables for examination of textual information produced during such a huge time span as three years (2010-2013).

In the presentation of the research questions it was already mentioned that the moderators of the VK group of UR were considered as representatives of the party in this study. Unfortunately, it appeared that from the four moderators which were responsible for the VK group of UR during the analyzed period only Valeriya Bortnikova participated in conversations with the users. Therefore, only her messages were designated as a proxy for reactions of UR. Consequently, only her messages were analyzed to answer the research questions. From January 10 until April 10, 2013 she left 111 comments. To answer the third and the fourth research questions this pool of Bortnikova’s utterances was considered as a separate purposive sample since the questions required finding out the specific forms of content in the moderator’s messages. (The fourth question was also aimed at determining the number of online polls conducted in the VK group of UR, but to realize this aim it was necessary to look at the 241 wall posts.)

However, at the end of May 2013 the fifth moderator, Olesya Svirdyukova, appeared in the group.
It was also necessary to analyze the specific forms of content of Bortnikova’s messages – her reactions to suggestions and questions regarding legislation – in order to answer the first, most important research question of the study. However, for this question Bortnikova and the users’s messages in discussion threads were analyzed simultaneously. Therefore, purposive sampling was applied one more time. In particular, 40 discussion threads under 40 wall posts which mentioned legislative initiatives (each discussion thread corresponded to one wall post) were included in the sample. (In fact there were 48 wall posts which mentioned some pieces of legislation, but 8 of them did not receive any comments.) The selection was based on the already declared assumption that active exchanges of opinions regarding laws and decrees can be regarded as a telling sign of two-way communication between UR and the users and, consequently, the party’s adherence to the two-way symmetrical model of PR.

6.3. Issue of changeability of online communication

At the end of this general presentation of the method the vexed issue of changeability of online communication has to be addressed. Indeed, many users can post their messages simultaneously and very quickly. It means that materials from social networks quite often “defy” the procedure of content analysis since the latter requires “static” data. However, this study did not look at how swiftly the moderator Valeriya Bortnikova or the members of the VK group of UR added or altered wall posts and comments.

Of course, dismissing possible real-time changes in the discussion threads means that a certain amount of deleted messages from the participants is not covered by the study. But, first, even a brief look at conversations in the VK group of UR enables to conclude that comments expressing criticism (even through offensive language) in relation to the party are allowed. Therefore, it is quite safe to suppose that the study misses only a meager amount of messages which had been posted in the group and then disappeared from it. Second, Karlsson and Strömbäck’s (2010) concrete recommendations and procedures for “freezing” online data, unfortunately, seem to be unfeasible in the context of this work. For instance, they offer to use the special software WinHTTrack for saving information from websites in real time, but the program cannot download specific time periods of discussions from groups on social networks; besides, downloading the entire VK group of UR would require an enormous amount of time and free disk space. It was also possible to use old good manual techniques of screenshots or copy-pasting of unfolding discussions, but it would also lead to huge time loses.
One more problem, which has to be referred to within this section, is that online conversations may last (at least in theory) for very continuous periods of time. However, fortunately (or unfortunately), most commenters in the VK group of UR were active only during a few days. Thus, it was already possible to start data collection on April 14. At the end of April all the wall posts left in March and April were addressed one more time. It appeared that only 8 of the 110 readdressed wall posts received new comments: no more than 3 messages in each of the 8 cases. Therefore, it is possible to argue that almost no new messages will be added to any of the researched conversations. (Of course, there is still such a chance which puts certain limitations on the findings.)

6.4. Operationalization

6.4.1. Variables of the first stage of the study

The study consisted of two separate phases. During the first stage two aims were realized. First the materials for the second purposive sample were selected: the 40 discussions threads under the 40 wall posts which contained information about laws and decrees. Second, the data necessary for obtaining answers to the second, third and fourth research questions were collected. Two codebooks, which can be found in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2, were used during the first stage. In the rest of this section explanations of the variables contained in the codebooks are presented in accordance with their positions in the codebooks.

Values for the variable “Topic” (the first variable of the first codebook) were constructed through the grounded process of variable identification (Neuendorf, 2002). That is, they were indentified solely on the basis of the data itself. Therefore, they cannot be applied in studies of social networks pages of other political actors (either Russian or non-Russian). No doubts, this fact limits the generalizability of the findings. Four values for the variable were constructed: 1. announcement of an online interview; 2. presentation of a party member; 3. presentation of a city/town; 4. other. Wall posts representing the second and the third categories never contain any information about legislative initiatives. Therefore, sorting them out helped to limit that possible amount of materials for the second stage of the analysis.

The first category “announcement of an online interview” was separated from the “other” category because such online interviews can be viewed as possible instances of two-way communication between the party and ordinary people (users). Still, they cannot be considered as
instances of two-way communication between the party and the members of its VK group. These online sessions are conducted on the official website of the party; besides, there is no way to determine how many questions are usually asked by the participants of the VK group of UR. Therefore, this category did not play any important role in the study and provided only some additional information about a specific online tool used by UR. Finally, the category “other” represents all other possible topics which could be covered in the wall posts.

Through the variable “Information about a specific piece of legislation” those 40 wall posts which contained information about some concrete legislative initiatives were identified. Coding was conducted with the help of a rather rigid list of key words (indicated in the first codebook) which represented legislative initiatives issued either by Duma or by the Russian president (presidential decrees). The list was compiled to escape misinterpretations and reach higher reliability and replicability. Moreover, the key words from the list are clear signals for the users (especially for those not knowing peculiarities of the Russian legislative system) that a wall post is devoted to some policies for which Duma, the party, or the president are responsible. They can be considered as visible and understandable encouragements to talk about important issues pertaining to legislation and not something else. During the analysis of the variable it was not necessary to determine whether some piece of legislation was a major topic of a walpost. Only presence of information about concrete pieces of legislation was coded. If a title of a piece of legislation or a description of an issue which it addressed were not indicated in a wall post, then it was considered as not having information about concrete laws or decrees. This rule was based on the assumption that legislative processes or initiatives of general character cannot provide focal points for expressing opinions.

To clarify the presentation of this variable it seems reasonable to provide an example of a wall post mentioning a specific piece of legislation: “United Russia” will protect the citizens of the country from medicines of poor quality. MPs are going to propose a project of a law to Duma. It will tighten criminal and administrative responsibility for production, realization and keeping (for the purpose of further selling) of counterfeit medicines”. The original Russian version is depicted in Picture 6.4.1.1 (see the next page).

The rest of the variables included in the first codebook were aimed at answering the second and fourth research questions. The variables “Poll” and “Number of answers to the poll” were analyzed in the context of the fourth research question; they were used to find out how frequently UR asked the participants of its VK group to express their opinions with the help of
online voting. It was already indicated in the presentation of the fourth research question and the last section of the theory chapter (devoted to the three approaches to interactivity) that frequent online polls can help the party to get more information about the users’ opinions, attitudes and preferences. However, it is impossible to argue (without doubts) that such information is used by the party in order to make its policies more compatible with the users’ positions on certain issues. Online polls are very ambiguous indicators of the two-way symmetrical model of PR since they can also be employed for other purposes. For instance, with the help of online voting more persuasive advertisements, which exploit the users’ preferences, can be created. Of course, this tactic corresponds to the two-way asymmetrical model of PR. Furthermore, it is necessary to remind that online polls do not presuppose direct contacts between the organization and

Picture 6.4.1.1. Example of a wall post which mentions a specific piece of legislation
members of its publics. Therefore, they cannot be analyzed as instances of two-way communication.

The last two variables of the first codebook were used to determine the ratio between all the comments posted by the members of the group and all the messages posted by the moderators. This ratio is one of two indicators employed to answer the second research question about the moderators’ activity in the VK group of UR. The users’ activity was measured through the variable “Number of the users’ comments” and Bortnikova’s activity – through the variable “Number of the moderators’ comments”.

The variables included in the second codebook were constructed to characterize the 111 messages posted by the moderator Valeriya Bortnikova in the VK group of UR during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. The first variable of the codebook, “Length of the comment”, was based on the following assumption. Short messages may point out that Valeriya Bortnikova wanted to “finish” her interactions with the participants as soon as possible and was not eager to provide them with some more specific details, which are sometimes very important for understanding laws or any other complicated issues. The opposite assumption relates to long messages. Therefore, this variable was also measured in the context of the second research question, i.e. as an indicator of the moderators’ (in)activity in the group.

Through the second and the third variables of the second codebook, “Gratitude for discussions” and “Demonstration of attention to opinions” respectively, the third research question was answered. That is, through these indicators it was determined how many times Valeriya Bortnikova stated her (or the party’s) interest in the users opinions regarding all possible issues discussed in the group. While the sense of the variable “Gratitude for discussions” seems to be straightforward, it is necessary to explain the other indicator. It was constructed to code those messages in which Valeriya Bortnikova said that the users’ opinions will be taken into consideration or that these opinions are somehow important to the party, some party members, some its departments, affiliated organizations, etc. Such gratitude and demonstrations are not instances of “fully-fledged” two-way communication, but they can be considered as evidence that Valeriya Bortnikova at least sometimes looked through messages posted by the members of the group. (Nevertheless, presence of only such gratitude and demonstrations in moderators’ messages means that they do not try to analyze specific details of users’ comments and prefer to communicate with people in a rather formal and impersonal way.)
Finally, the variable “Soliciting opinions” was developed to find out how actively the moderator of the VK group of UR asked its participants to share their thoughts regarding issues presented in the wall posts. This variable, therefore, was measured for the fourth research question.

6.4.2. Variables of the second stage of the study

This part of the study addressed the first and the most important research question of the study:

How frequently did the moderators of the official Vkontakte group of United Russia react to suggestions and questions regarding legislation which the users made and asked in discussion threads under wall posts with information about pieces of legislation?

In the section regarding sampling it was already indicated that the 40 discussion threads under the 40 wall posts with information about legislative initiatives were analyzed in order to answer this question. This analysis was two-fold since it was focused on both the users’ suggestions and questions and Valeriya Bortnikova’s reactions to them. Each user’s comment with any of the following elements of content was designated as a unit of data collection for the second stage of the study:

- suggestions for a specific piece of legislation mentioned in a wall post;
- suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in a wall post;
- regulating measures which can be realized in some piece of legislation not specified by a user;
- questions about a specific piece of legislation presented in a wall post;
- questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in a wall post.

If any of such comments were found in a discussion thread, then Bortnikova’ comments, if they were posted in the thread, were coded as well. In order to distinguish comments which pertained to the laws and decrees mentioned in the 40 “legislative” wall posts from messages which were about some other policies it was obligatory for the coders to read articles and watch videos attached to the wall posts. Such articles and videos contained more information (e.g. specific regulating measures) about the legislative initiatives outlined in the wall posts. Each discussion thread was analyzed separately. Therefore, for each of the 40 cases such relation between comments and content of a wall post was established. Eleven variables were developed for the
second phase of the study. They were grouped in the third codebook which can be found in Appendix 3. The rest of the section is devoted to explications of these variables.

First of all, it was necessary to indicate and write down a name of a user who left a message with suggestions or questions. This variable (“User’s name”) was a convenient way to separate units of data collection. It was also employed in order to find out how many unique participants of the VK group of UR offered or asked something regarding legislative initiatives.

The variable “Suggestions for the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post” was aimed at indicating messages with only those suggestions which related directly to some concrete law or decree mentioned in a wall post. For reasons of convenience and clarity, all possible topics which such proposals may have touched upon (e.g. regulating measures, implementation of a law) were described in the codebook. However, only presence/absence of suggestions of this sort was coded (i.e. the indicator was “lump”) in order to reduce the element of subjective interpretation and reach higher intercoder reliability. The problem is that suggestions regarding legislation may address overlapping issues, objects, subjects and processes. As a result, possible confusions complicate attributing users’ suggestions to discrete topics. This argument was also applied when developing the variables “Suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post”, “Questions about the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post” and “Questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post”. (For the last two variables possible subtypes of the questions were outlined in the codebook.) Due to the same methodological reasons, exact numbers of suggestions and questions regarding legislation were not counted. It was necessary to detect their mere presence in the users’ messages. More specifically, the second stage of the content analysis was based on finding single suggestions and questions as well as their sets in the users’ messages.

The variable “Regulating measures which can be realized in legislation” was included in the third codebook for the following reasons. In some cases it was not possible to relate the users’ ideas about regulating measures to any pieces of legislation: either mentioned or not mentioned in the wall posts. For instance, one of the wall posts in the group described a new law, according to which social pensions for disabled children will be increased. Both the wall post and the article attached to it covered only the issue of financial support for this group of children (in the article more exact financial statistics were presented). However, in the discussion thread under the wall post some participants of the group suggested that it is also necessary to provide each disabled child with free medical care in specially allocated clinics and that it is necessary to
enforce parents deprived of parental rights to pay aliments to their disabled children. Without any doubt, both these suggestions can be realized in some laws, including the law outlined in the wall post itself. However, it is necessary to reiterate that the presentations of the law in the wall post and in the article did not go beyond the issue of financial support (social pensions). Therefore, it was possible to ignore such “irrelevant” users’ ideas or to develop a separate category for them. The second option was chosen.

Another reason for including this variable in the study was that the participants of the VK group of UR are not professional lawyers or politicians. They do not have to know all minute details of legislative documents. Therefore, it is more than normal that their suggestions sometimes get “off topic”. Nevertheless, it does not mean that such ideas can be easily ignored by the moderators of the group. They should explain to the users that some of their views do not have direct relation to topics of wall posts, react to especially promising “irrelevant” suggestions in a more detailed way, or at least thank the users for their ideas. Furthermore, they can also add more details to wall posts in order to prevent appearance of “unnecessary” messages. In other words, the moderators of the VK group of UR should react to (almost) all utterances with ideas how to improve the Russian legislation. This is the major precondition for communication between her and the participants of the group to be two-way.

This argument also underlay the variables “Suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post” and “Questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post”. Clearly, the moderators of the VK group of UR do not have to be competent about every piece of legislation. And UR is not responsible for every Russian law (at least because many of them had appeared before the establishment of the party). However, when suggestions and questions relating to laws and decrees not discussed in the group appear, the moderators should indicate that such comments are off topic. Or the moderators can even try to provide a user with information relating to his/her query if they really know something about an issue.

At the end of the presentation of the variables through which the users’ suggestions and questions regarding legislation were analyzed it is necessary to note that the study was not interested in finding out which of their types were more or less popular. Different types of the users’ ideas and queries were coded for the following reasons. First, to cover a larger group of messages to which the moderators could provide feedback (in order to participate in truly two-
way communication with the members of the group). Second, to reach higher intercoder reliability (for an explication of this issue see the next section of the chapter).

The rest of the variables (the variables 7-11) of the third codebook were used to analyze the moderator Valeriya Bortnikova’s replies to the users’ suggestions and questions. Three variables corresponding to the three aforementioned kinds of suggestions were created. These variables were quite general and encompassed all possible Bortnikova’s reactions to the participants’ suggestions. In other words, the study did not presuppose separate variables for evaluations, expressions of gratitude, specifying questions or other forms of Bortnikova’s reactions to the participants’ ideas about laws and decrees. This decision was taken due to the following methodological concern: it seems that opinions, evaluations, questions, etc. cannot be detected and separated through manifest coding employed in this study. This requires more qualitative methods.

Because of almost the same methodological concern only single Bortnikova’s reactions to at least one suggestion from a message were taken into consideration during the second stage of the research. However, the moderator’ reactions to the three different types of suggestions were coded separately. That is, length and complexity of possible discussions between the moderator and the participants of VK group of UR were not analyzed in the study. Earlier, during the discussion of Rafaeli’s (1988) approach to interactivity (see the last section of the theoretical chapter) it was noted that the changeable character of online communication complicates analysis of the latter. In particular, it is rather difficult to determine boundaries of communicative topics and subtopics in online discussions, especially trough quantitative research methods. Nevertheless, even single Bortnikova’s reactions to the majority of the users’ messages which had relevant suggestions can be considered as a proof that the moderator paid attention to the participants’ thoughts and tried to communicate with them in a two-way fashion. In the similar vein all possible Bortnikova’s reactions to the two aforementioned types of questions about pieces of legislation were analyzed. As in the case of the previous three variables, only her single replies to at least one question from a message were taken into consideration. (Bortnikova’s replies to the two different types of questions were coded separately.)

A short example should make the essence of the variables presented in this section more understandable. The example in Picture 6.4.2.1 features an excerpt from the discussion thread under the already presented wall post about tightening responsibility for producers of counterfeit medicines (see Picture 6.4.1.1 on p. 44). The user Максим Кабацкий (Максим Кабакский)
proposes to apply capital punishment to such perpetrators: “It is high time to introduce the death penalty for forgery of medicines, as it was during Gadaffi in Libya. And in general, the death penalty for pedophilia, high treason and terrorism”. His comment contains one suggestion about the specific law mentioned in the wall post and one regulating measure which can be realized in some other legislative document. He does not address the moderators or the party. Nevertheless, he received one response from the moderator Valeriya Bortnikova (Валерия Бортникова): “Maxim, in our country we have a moratorium on the death penalty. And I support its preservation”. In other words, this is an ideal case of two-way communication regarding legislative initiatives in the VK group of UR.

Picture 6.4.2.1. Example of two-way communication regarding a piece of legislation

6.4.3. Reliability

According to Neuendorf (2002):

Reliability is the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials. The notion relevant to content analysis is that a measure is not valuable if it can be conducted only once by one particular person. (p. 112)

In other words, the method of content analysis requires that at least two persons (coders) check a research instrument for its ability to produce objective results, otherwise a study should be considered as an expert analysis. Results of such checks have to be presented in the form of
intercoder reliability coefficients. Therefore, the second coder participated in the study in order to establish the level of reliability of its results. He was trained, but not informed about the purposes of the study in order to exclude potential biases, i.e. the so-called technique of blind coding (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 132) was applied. All the variables for which intercoder reliability was determined were based on nominal measurement. Therefore, for them the coefficient Cohen’s kappa, which also rules out intercoder agreement due chance, was calculated.

For testing the variable “Topic” 81 wall posts (almost 34% of the 241 wall posts) were selected through systematic random sampling⁸ (the skip interval = 2). Cohen’s kappa for the variables was 1, which means that perfect agreement was reached regarding this measure.

Before checking intercoder reliability for the variable “Information about a specific piece of legislation” 37 wall posts were excluded from the 241 messages. These 37 items were devoted to members of UR, Russian cities and towns, i.e. they did not concern legislation by default. Then the subsample of 68 wall posts was extracted through systematic random sampling (the skip interval = 2). Cohen’s kappa for the variable was 0.895, which is more than acceptable, given the fact that the standard threshold of reliability equals 0.8.

The other variables of the first codebook were not tested for intercoder reliability since they did not presuppose any subjective interpretation: the data for them was collected through obvious and sometimes even automatic indicators (such as the variable “Number of answers to the poll”). The same is true in relation to the variable “Length of the comment” from the second codebook. However, intercoder reliability was determined for the rest of the variables of this codebook: “Gratitude for discussions”, “Demonstration of attention to opinions” and “Soliciting opinions”. Given the fact the moderator of the VK group of UR Valeriya Bortnikova posted only 111 messages in the discussion threads analyzed by this study, it was decided to test the variables on the basis of all these messages. (Furthermore, it should be noted that the mean length of her utterances was only 16.44 words.) In each of the three cases Cohen’s kappa was 1. This unusual situation of perfect agreement can be explained by the simplicity of the variables themselves as well as by the fact that Bortnikova did not bother to thank the users (for their participation in discussions) and was not very interested in getting their opinions.

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⁸ As Neuendorf (2002) notes, there is no standard size of subsamples for determining intercoder reliability, although they usually include no less than 20% of researched materials.
While the first stage of the study was based on the quite clear variables, its second part involved much more subjective interpretation. Therefore, the first attempt to get reliable data about the users’ suggestions and questions about legislation failed. The reasons of this failure were implicitly mentioned in the previous section. The first version of the third codebook required measuring exact numbers of different suggestions and questions. Moreover, it did not distinguish between suggestions and questions which pertained and did not pertain to the laws and decrees presented in the wall posts. Therefore, the second version of the third codebook, which was explicated in the previous section, was developed in order to eliminate these sources of disagreement.

However, because of the paucity of data for the variables aimed at characterizing Bortnokova’s reactions intercoder reliability for them was not calculated. (This paucity will be demonstrated in the next chapter.) Only those variables of the codebook which related to the users’ messages with suggestions and questions were tested. Since it was necessary to compare the users’ comments from the same discussion thread with each other, the decision was made to test the variables on the basis of all the messages (988) which were posted by the users under the wall posts with information about specific pieces of legislation. It is clear that this decision made the tests of intercoder reliability more convincing because all the messages with the users’ ideas and questions about legislation were analyzed. Actually, two types of the tests were performed. In the first type Cohen’s kappa coefficients were based on the number of units of data collection defined during the process of coding (59 units of data collection: 55 defined by the author plus 4 more defined by the second coder). In the second type coefficients were based on the overall number of comments (988) from which units of data collection could be selected. Fortunately, the results appeared satisfactory except for one coefficient (calculated on the basis of the overall number of the users’ comments), which value was almost satisfactory. In the following list the results are presented in accordance with the types of the tests:

- “Suggestions for the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post” – 0.855; 0.907.
- “Suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post” – 1; 1 (only one message with such suggestion was found).
- “Regulating measures which can be realized in legislation” – 0.829; 0.886.
- “Questions about the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post” – 0.947; 0.989.

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9 The results of the author’s coding are reported in the next chapter.
• “Questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post” – 0.85; 0.799. (The low result is explained by the fact that only in three messages questions of this type were asked. Consequently, despite only one disagreement between the coders, this led to the very high proportion agreement, expected by chance (0.994)).

6.4.4. Validity

“Essentially, a valid measure is one that measures what it is supposed to measure” (Johnson & Reynolds, 2005, p. 161). In other words, valid measuring instruments can produce results which correspond to actual presence or amount of some concept at which they are aimed. In this work, validity of the measures was evaluated on the basis of subjective judgment. It means that face validity and content validity of the research instrument were analyzed.

The indicators which were developed for the second research question seems to be the most problematic in terms of face validity. To answer this question it was necessary, first, to compare the number of the users’ comments with the overall number of Bortnikova’s messages, second, to characterize her messages in terms of their length. It was already said that absence of Bortnikova’s reactions to each comment cannot be automatically equated with absence of two-way communication between her and the members of the group. It is highly doubtful that in all their messages the users asked important questions (addressed to Bortnikova or the party) or expressed certain positions on UR, its leaders or policies. Meanwhile, precisely such questions and opinions have to be taken into consideration by the party, if it wants to demonstrate that it cares about its voters’ interests, needs and positions. Nevertheless, an extreme gap between possible amounts of users’ comments and moderators’ messages can indeed evidence that moderators are not involved in conversations and that they ignore the bulk of users’ ideas, questions and opinions. Fortunately for the study, the ratio between the users’ and Bortnikova’s messages in the group was indeed impressive (4083/111). Moreover, the mean and median lengths of Bortnikova’s 111 messages were also very insignificant (16.44 and 10 respectively). This fact enables to consider the results obtained through the variable “Length of the comment” as a valid indicator of Bortnikova’s inactivity.

However, this study was primarily focused on the 40 discussion threads under the wall posts which contained information about specific laws and decrees. The indicators used for the analysis of these discussion threads raise the issue of content validity: two-way communication regarding legislative initiatives cannot be fully realized without party reactions to voters’ critical
(as well as positive) opinions regarding legislative initiatives. However, such opinions and reactions to them were not analyzed in the study due to its quantitative method. That is, revealing levels of criticism in messages require a more in-depth analysis of texts, which can be performed through qualitative methods. Still, the fact that Bortnikova almost never participated in the 40 discussions related to legislative initiatives enable to conclude that almost all of the users’ critical opinions, if there were any of them, could not receive any reactions from the moderator of the VK group of UR.

At the end of this section it is necessary to outline some “ideal”, i.e. empirical ways of demonstrating validity which can be applied to this study. First, construct validity of the measures which characterized the interactions regarding legislation could be accompanied by interviews with the users who made suggestions for some laws and/or asked questions about them. Through such interviews it seems to be possible to reveal whether the users felt neglected because of the inattention to their comments. However, the theoretical relations between the indicators used in the study and the users’ possible perceptions are uncertain (it was already demonstrated that perceptions of interactivity of some online environment can be generated by unpredictable factors). Therefore, any possible relations between the results of this study and results of the interviews with the members of the VK group of UR have to be considered with caution. Second, in order to reach triangulation of the findings this study can be complemented with more qualitative analyses of the discussion threads in the VK group of UR.
7. Results

This chapter provides an analysis of the results of the study. The analysis has two purposes. First, to define whether the two-way symmetrical model of PR was realized by UR through its VK group. Second, to demonstrate possible relations between the performance of UR in its VK group and future electoral results of the party.

The first research question was central to this study. Therefore, the results obtained through it should be presented at the very beginning of the chapter. It was already mentioned that the 40 discussions threads under the same number of wall posts, which contained information about pieces of legislation, were analyzed to answer the first research question. In these threads the participants of the group posted 988 comments, and in 55 of them the participants of the group made suggestions and asked questions regarding legislative initiatives. Due to the methodological reasons explained in the previous chapter it was only necessary to detect single suggestions and questions or their sets; exact numbers of suggestions and questions in the comments were not counted. It appeared that in the 55 messages 57 times single ideas and queries relating to legislation or sets of such ideas and queries were mentioned. The distribution of their types is given in Table 7.1 (see the next page).

However, the moderator of the VK group of UR Valeriya Bortnikova reacted to only two messages with suggestions and questions regarding laws and decrees. One of these reactions was already presented in Picture 6.4.2.1. Her second reply, however, was also addressed to the user Maxim Kabatskiy. He expressed his disagreement with the law, according to which governors of the Russian regions can be either appointed by the president or directly elected by the citizens. In particular, this user said that only the first option should be left (The comment in Russian: «Лучше оставить так, чтобы президент назначал их. Иначе может нечисть занять должность».) In her response Valeriya Bortnikova asked Maxim to read the text [of the article attached to the wall post] and said that the president will indeed appoint governors (The response in Russian: «Максим, так президент и будет, ты текст почитайте!»).

10 Not only Maxim Kabatskiy left more than one message with suggestions and questions. Seven other persons were also quite active – together they authored 19 comments. Still, none of these 7 members of the VK group of UR received feedback.
### Table 7.1. Types of the users’ suggestions and questions about legislative initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of suggestions and questions about legislation</th>
<th>Number of times when suggestions and questions were presented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for the pieces of legislation mentioned in the wall posts</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall posts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulating measures which can be realized in legislation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions about the pieces of legislation mentioned in the wall posts</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall posts</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>57</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is necessary to note here that, according to Table 7.1, only in 4 messages suggestions and questions regarding specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the 40 wall posts were found. This means that Bortnikova’s inattention to the absolute majority of the users’ messages cannot be explained by her incompetence. In other words, the users were talking about the issues which were outlined in the group itself, i.e. these issues had to be familiar to the moderator. In fact, even such “irrelevant” comments should receive some replies (e.g. they can be forwarded to more competent persons), if a moderator adheres to the principles of two-way communication.

Other important figures also point out that Valeriya Bortnikova did not demonstrate such adherence. The moderator of the VK group of UR commented on only 8 of the 40 wall posts with information about legislative initiatives. In these 8 discussion threads she posted only 18 messages\(^\text{11}\). Moreover, the moderator ignored 4 of the 6 “legislative” wall posts which were commented by the users more than 50 times. Finally, the mean length of Bortnikova’s 18 utterances was only 14.56 words, the median number was even lower – 11.50 words. It is highly

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\(^{11}\) Precisely because of this paucity of Bortnikova’s messages intercoder reliability coefficients for the variables 7-11 of the third codebook were not calculated. See the section about reliability.
doubtful that in such short messages it was possible for the moderator to clearly explain her (or the party’s) positions regarding laws and decrees or any other issues.

On the basis of the findings presented in the previous paragraph it is also possible to suppose that in the 40 discussion threads the absolute majority of the users’ critical opinions about legislative initiatives, if there were any of them, did not receive any reaction from Valeriya Bortnikova. (The users’ messages with such opinions were not coded during the study due to its quantitative method.) This means that the party did not want to participate in any forms of two-way communication regarding laws, which it can single-handedly develop or pass thanks to its majority in Duma. For this particular reason, the legislative power of UR, this study was so focused on the discussion threads under the wall posts which mentioned some pieces of legislations. It seems that through such discussion threads the users should have an opportunity to express their preferences and needs and, therefore, influence legislative activities of the party. And it was already showed in the theory chapter of the thesis that the two-way symmetrical model of PR presupposes that the organization can change its behavior after negotiations with members of its publics in order to reach a balance between their and its own interests. The fact that in the “special”, “legislative” discussion threads Valeriya Bortnikova did not discuss (in any way) the most important, legislative activities of UR with the members of its VK group means that the party did not even try to feign its interest in the users’ opinions regarding its activities. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that these opinions were taken into any consideration by the party. This argument already enables to conclude that during the period covered by the study the VK group was not used by UR for the realization of the two-way symmetrical model of PR. However, in order to support or refute this conclusion it is necessary to look at the answers to the second and the third research questions.

During the three months the participants of the VK group of UR left 4083 messages, including the 988 messages under the 40 wall posts which mentioned some pieces of legislation. However, it appeared that 47 (19.5%) of the analyzed wall posts (241) were ignored by the users. Moreover, the median number of comments was only 6. In other words, 50% of the wall posts were commented no more than 6 times. The mean number of comments was 16.49, but the standard deviation was quite high – 29.484. In other words, the users’ activity was not evenly distributed among the wall posts: the bulk of them “bored” the participants of the VK group of UR and only in some rare cases numbers of comments reached three-digit values. Around 40% of the wall posts received more than 10 comments. Only 23 (9.5% of the entire sample) of such relatively popular wall posts were commented more than 50 times (6 of such wall posts
contained information about laws). But only 7 of them generated quite lively discussions which consisted of more than 100 messages. The maximum number of comments was 242. This enormous attention was attracted by the wall post which informed that the Russian-US agreement on cooperation against drug trafficking and crime was annulled by the Russian government.

These figures do not enable to make definite conclusions about the extent of the users’ activity. If to divide the overall number of their reactions (4083) by the overall number of days during which they were expressed (90), it appears that the mean was not that high – 45.36 messages. Moreover, this study did not determine how many unique users participated in the conversations. Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the VK group of UR is a “quiet and calm” online environment. Therefore, its participants had reasons to expect feedback to their views, opinions and questions.

However, the number of Valeriya Bortnikova’s comments (18) in the discussion threads under the wall posts with information about legislative initiatives should have already provided a certain indication of the moderator’s overall inactivity, specifically, of her unwillingness to converse with the participants of the group. This indication is indeed proved by the following statistics. The moderator of the VK group of UR took part in only 40 conversations, including the already mentioned 8 discussion threads related to legislative initiatives. This figure equals 16.5% of the overall number of the wall posts and 20.6% of the wall posts with at least one user’s reaction (194 wall posts). In 23 of these 40 conversations the moderator left only one message, while the overall number of her comments was 111, including the abovementioned 18 comments. The distribution of Bortnikova’s messages among the wall posts is presented in Table 7.2 (see the next page).

Moreover, the mean length of all Bortnikova’s utterances was only 16.44 words with the standard deviation of 15.218. The median length was 10 words, i.e. the moderator was rather “taciturn” and did not type more than 10 words in 50% of her messages. It is highly doubtful that these figures prove Chekhov’s famous saying that brevity is a sister of talent. It is much more likely that Bortnikova was just unwilling to talk with the users. Instead of presenting her (or the party’s) positions in detailed ways she preferred very short answers in which it was not possible to provide a lot of useful information.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Bortnikova’s comments under a wall post</th>
<th>Wall posts with Bortnikova’s comments (frequency)</th>
<th>Wall posts with Bortnikova’s comments (percent of the overall number of the wall posts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.2. Distribution of the moderator Bortnikova’s messages among the wall posts

Bortnikova also ignored more than a half of the liveliest conversations in the group. In particular, she took part in 11 of the 23 discussions which consisted of more than 50 messages (it was already mentioned that 2 of these 11 discussions threads related to the wall posts with information about legislation). Furthermore, Bortnikova did not show up in the longest discussion thread (242 comments) under the wall post about the annulment of the Russian-US agreement on cooperation against drug trafficking and crime.

It also appeared that the moderator of the VK group of UR never expressed gratitude to the users for their participation in conversations or tried to demonstrate that discussants’ opinions are indeed important to her or the party. That is, Bortnikova did not even try to address the users’ messages in a “lump” way through stating her general interest in them (but without paying attention to specific details of the users’ positions).

The findings obtained through the second and third research questions lead to the conclusion that instances of two-way communication between the moderator and the participants of the VK group of UR were indeed very rare during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013. Clearly, Valeriya Bortnikova did not act as a communication facilitator between the party and the users.
Given the ratio between Bortnikova’s messages and the users’ comments (111/4083) and the absence of the moderator’s even general reactions (e.g. gratitude for discussions) to the participants’ contributions to the discussions threads, it is possible to conclude that the bulk of these contributions were simply disregarded by Valeriya Bortnikova and the other three moderators, who did not even bother to show in the group. (Furthermore, it appeared that one of them, Leyla Azartnaya (Лейла Азартная), last updated her VK page in February.) Of course, it is still possible to suppose that the majority of the users’ comments were instances of so-called “trolling” and/or were off topic. But it seems that the moderators of the official VK group of UR should have enough rights and capacity to make discussion threads civil and focused on specific issues. (In the similar vein it is possible to argue that the absence of the moderators’ replies to suggestions and questions relating to legislation should be explained by the insignificant numbers of such suggestions and questions. However, this fact could also stem from the “vicious circle of inattention”: the moderators’ general unwillingness to converse may have discouraged many users from formulating their ideas and queries. It is the moderators’ responsibility to create favorable communicative conditions which can embolden people to share their thoughts.)

The complete disregard for the users’ messages also provides a good background against which to analyze the findings relating to the fourth research question. It appeared that online polls were quite widespread in the group. They were attached to 31 wall posts (12.9%), 13 of which mentioned some pieces of legislation. The users’ participation in online voting was also quite high: they voted 8203 times. The mean and median numbers were 264.41 and 190 votes respectively. However, the standard deviation reached the enormous value of 329.609 because one of the polls received 1992 replies. In this poll the users were asked to provide their opinions about an initiative which should enable more young citizens (aged from 15 to 30) to become voluntary assistants to MPs working in the Russian State Duma and regional dumas.

Nevertheless, the fact that the moderators did not want to participate in dialogues with the members of the group and, specifically, did not react to their ideas about laws in the “legislative” discussion threads does not enable to consider the frequent use of online polls in the VK group of UR as a sign of the party’s interest in ordinary people’s views. Perhaps these polls were used to collect data for more attractive presentations of the party’s deeds and policies in the future, which is an element of the asymmetrical model of PR. Most likely, however, the polls were conducted in order to create some sort of illusion of interactivity. As Strommer-Galley (2000) demonstrates, this technique of using interactive media features to conceal absence of human-to-human communication is quite old and was used by some US politicians, who wanted to escape
direct online contacts with voters, more than a decade ago. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Valeriya Bortnikova asked the users to share their opinions on some issues presented in the wall posts only twice. In other words, the moderator just did not have a purpose to “pull” information from the participants of the group. Moreover, the majority of the polls had only 2 prearranged answers, but it is highly unlikely that the organization wishing to receive valuable data (or indeed paying attention to versatile positions of members of its publics) would conduct such crude “binary” polls.

However, in order to realize the first purpose of the analysis presented in this chapter – to define whether the two-way symmetrical model of PR was realized by UR through is VK group – it is necessary to return to the second and third research questions. The answers to them point out that two-way communication between Valeriya Bortnikova and the users was almost absent\textsuperscript{12}. More importantly, it also means that the bulk of all possible suggestions and questions regarding legislation – even those ideas and queries which were not presented under the 40 wall posts with information about legislative initiatives – were most likely ignored by the moderator. In other words, the findings obtained through the variables of the second and third research questions support the already made conclusion that the Russian party of power did not use its VK group to discuss its legislative activities with ordinary people. Therefore, the members of the group did not have any means to deliver their positions regarding laws and decrees to the party, which was absolutely indifferent to these positions. They could not have any impact on how UR was developing certain policies. Consequently, it can be argued with full certitude that during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013 UR did not use its VK group for the realization of the two-way symmetrical model of PR.

Instead, the performance of UR in its VK group should be described with the help of the public information model of PR. The majority of the 241 wall posts covered by the study repeated news and press releases from the official website of the party. That is, the VK group of UR functioned just as another platform to disseminate information about the Russian party of power and its

\footnote{12 Still, rare instances of two-way communication, of course, occurred in the VK group of UR. On the 9th of April 10 wall posts about Russian cities and towns appeared in the group. Of course, some of the users were disappointed that their native places were not posted and expressed their grievance. There was also a question about the sense of this “geographical” action. Surprisingly, Valeriya Bortnikova reacted to all these messages. Nevertheless, “frivolous” talks are not a proper indicator of how the party of power, which possesses the parliamentary majority, cares about its voters’ opinions, needs and interests.}
members. The users had an opportunity to receive a great deal of allegedly accurate facts, but their reactions to these facts did not have any value for the moderators of the group.

Of course, it will not be a mistake to suppose that PR specialists of the party could monitor the group and collect some data about the users-voters’ preferences, needs, grievances, etc. Besides, quite often the members of the group were invited to ask questions or express their opinions during special online interviews with representatives of the party: 23 wall posts (9.5%) contained announcements of such online sessions. Anyway, the interviews were not conducted in the VK group itself. Therefore, their frequent organization on the website of the party only points out that this particular platform is used for two-way communication, not the VK group of UR. (Still, prearranged interviews can be conducted in a non-transparent way since editors can select “appropriate” questions.). More importantly, the two-way symmetrical model of PR is based on dialogue (Grunig, 2009). Two-way communication is a necessary component of the model. This means that in order to realize the model through the VK group of UR it is not enough to study the users’ opinions and take them into consideration when working out or passing legislative initiatives. The party has to inform the members of the group that their views and needs serve as a basis for legislative activities. It has to explain its decisions, react to criticism and further suggestions, and negotiate compromises. It has to be open to comments of the participants of the group.

Still, after the presentation of these quite definite conclusions it is necessary to remind about the two most conspicuous limitations of the study. First, its results pertain to the very limited period of time and only one social network. It may appear that on its other online platforms UR is more active and open when communicating with ordinary people. Furthermore, the two-way symmetrical model of PR may be realized by the party only during special periods, e.g. elections or crises.

Second, this study did not presuppose any interviews with the members of the VK group of UR. However, according to the perceived view of interactivity (Larsson, 2012), which was outlined in the last section of the theory chapter of the work, users tend to have their own, idiosyncratic criteria for evaluating interactivity of media environments. It is possible that the presence of many multimedia materials in the group (photos, videos), the frequent conduct of online polls, and the very fact that it is possible to criticize the party of power in its own group make the users to believe that the latter is indeed an interactive environment and UR is open to criticism and wants to know their opinions.
According to Grunig (2001), the two-way symmetrical model of PR is not about pure accommodation of interests of groups with which the organization deals. It is about gaining support among these groups through negotiating solutions which satisfy both the organization and its publics. To put it simple, realization of the model should generate certain benefits for the organization, and the opposite is true about non-realization of the model. Therefore, in the introduction to the thesis it was argued that the findings of the study can be considered through the notion of permanent campaign (Elmer et al., 2012) since the performance of the Russian party of power in its VK group in between elections may have certain consequences for its popular support. For this reason the second purpose of the analysis presented in this chapter is to demonstrate possible relations between the performance of UR in its VK group and the party’s future electoral results. In what follows this purpose will be realized. However, two remarks have to be made before proceeding further. First, electoral behavior is a rather complicated and unpredictable topic. Therefore, any thoughts and conclusions which will be presented below have to be viewed as tentative speculations. Second, such speculations are based on the findings pertaining to the three months. Still, it may be the case that communication between the moderators and the users of the VK group of UR has already changed its character and become more two-way.

So, what are those possible relations between the party’s unresponsiveness to the members of its VK group and their electoral behavior? If to stay within the limits of the two-way symmetrical approach to PR (and not to pay attention to the limitation which the perceived view of interactivity imposes on the findings of the study) the answer seems to be quite obvious. The disregard for the users’ opinions may make them skeptical about the party’s ability to represent and promote their interests. This disregard, in other words, may become a serious factor against casting a vote for UR. Of course, some of the participants of the VK group of UR certainly feel quite comfortable about the low-involvement reputational relations (Grunig, 2009) the party builds with them through the dissemination of information about its good deeds (i.e. through such materials a positive reputation of the party is being created in the users’ minds). However, such relations seem to be rather unstable and easily changeable. Clearly, they are based on ad hoc persuasion activities and do not foster long-term loyalties to the party. Therefore, any serious crises related to UR, successful actions or persuasion campaigns of its competitors may put an end to such relations and deprive UR of its supporters.

One possible counter-argument to these conclusions is that the VK group of UR is too small (it had no more than 11500 members during the analyzed period) to have any serious electoral
impact. Nevertheless, much more people can just visit and study the group without becoming its members (or by receiving this status for a short time). The lack of opportunities for two-way communication with the moderators of the group may certainly disenchant such accidental surfers and spur them to choose VK groups (and political programs) of other parties where they can be heard. (Perhaps for this particular reason the group could not attract a more considerable number of participants during its three years of existence.) This scenario looks quite likely, given the fact that some Russian opposition parties are very active on the web. It was already mentioned that the wave of post-election protests in Russia, in which hundreds of thousands of Muscovites took part, was largely organized through social networks. Not surprisingly, that one of the leaders of the Russian non-parliamentary opposition Alexey Navalny is himself a prominent blogger who is well-known for his network projects aimed at revealing corruption crimes committed by state officials. This means that the VK group of UR cannot provide an alternative for some people (especially, young and educated city dwellers) who are likely consider web resources of the non-parliamentary opposition as more open and horizontal media environments, environments to which they are accustomed. Most likely, for such people the VK group of UR looks as just another fad, but not as a sign of commitment to equal and transparent online communication with ordinary people. Clearly, the growing internet penetration in Russia will make the party’s one-way and vertical strategy in its VK group even more disadvantageous in electoral terms.

Another position on possible electoral consequences of the performance of UR in its VK group seems to a bit be more positive for the Russian party of power. This position is based on the assumption that social networks groups of political parties does not have only one function, namely the function of being forums for two-way communication. Such groups can also become “fan” communities where staunch supporters of political parties gather together. It may be the case that many members of the VK group of UR strongly support the Russian party of power (or just its leaders) and, therefore, they participate in the group either to publicly demonstrate their political allegiance (at least to VK friends) or to receive more information about the favorite party. For such “fans”, who already have the clear political position, it may be unimportant whether the moderators of the group communicate with them – being a member of the group has the ultimate importance for them. Nevertheless, through the public information model of public relations UR can attract only a small fraction of users who already made their political choice. That is, the VK group of UR cannot foster loyalties of people whose views are unstable and who want to have a real impact on political actors. In other words, having a “fan” VK group is also a doubtful strategy for gaining large numbers of votes.
The suppositions presented in the previous paragraph also point to at least one possible explanation of the almost complete absence of two-way communication in the VK group of UR. Grunig (2009) argues that organizations usually do not communicate in a two-way fashion with members of its publics when they have a very limited or no importance to organizations. Indeed, PR specialists of UR can treat the members of its VK group (and its other social networks groups) as a community of staunch supporters who are ready to consume any information about the party and are not that interested in equal interactions with it. Besides, ordinary people not united by some ideology or goal cannot be compared to an interest group capable of raising and lobbying serious issues. Nevertheless, it was also demonstrated in the thesis that providing reactions to ordinary users’ views, however shallow and irrelevant they may be, gives UR a good opportunity to become more popular, especially taking into consideration the rising internet penetration and some successful online activities of the party’s competitors. And there is no doubt that the biggest party in Russia has enough resources to hire and educate enough PR specialists and moderators who will be able to encourage more active expression of opinions in the party’s social networks groups and who will be ready to reply to these opinions.
8. Concluding discussion

The results of this study are fairly straightforward. During the analyzed three months instances of two-way communication between the members of the official VK group of UR and its moderator Valeriya Bortnikova were quite rare. More importantly, the users’ suggestions and questions regarding legislation almost never received feedback from the moderator. This enables to conclude that at least during the period of January 10 – April 10, 2013 the two-way symmetrical model of PR was not realized with the help of the group. However, this study cannot significantly reduce the huge gap in research on the issue of how Russian political parties communicate with users of social networks. On the basis of its results it is impossible to argue that such communication does not occur at all or that the two-way symmetrical model of PR is not applicable to online activities of Russian parties. Therefore, in the concluding discussion some possible directions for future research on the issue are demonstrated. They are discussed through the perspective of the two-way symmetrical model of PR.

First of all, it seems reasonable to address the limitations of this work. In particular, it is necessary to dissect interactions between moderators of the group and its participants during other time periods. These additional measurements will help to decide whether the pattern of one-way communication and the public information model of PR have been characterizing the group from its establishment until now. More importantly, they will enable to understand whether periods just before elections generate more instances of two-way communication in the group or whether, on the contrary, during such periods the group turns into just another channel for advertisements and other panegyrics devoted to the party and its leaders. The last national elections in Russia were held in December 2011 (parliamentary) and March 2012 (presidential). While it is possible to reach the materials which were posted and discussed in the group before these elections, it is still necessary to note that there is a certain risk that many comments may have been deleted by the then moderators of the group because election campaigns tend to make PR specialists working for political actors quite sensitive to critical messages (Strommer-Galley, 2000). And of course, studies of the same focus have to be devoted to the online platforms of UR on such social networks as Facebook and Twitter in order to obtain a full picture of how the party communicates with ordinary users.

It was argued several times in the thesis that, according to the perceived view of interactivity (Larsson, 2012), users may not appreciate two-way communication when evaluating interactive qualities of media environments. Besides, it was hypothesized that many of the members of the
VK group of UR may be “fans” of the party, its staunch supporters for whom being a member of the group is more important than any meaningful interactions with UR. Therefore, it is, of course, necessary to establish whether presence/absence of two-way communication somehow influences the users’ overall perception of the party and its VK group, their electoral and political preferences. Without conducting interviews, surveys or focus groups among the participants of the group it will not be possible to realize these aims. However, it is also obvious that during such studies the vexed issues of getting and reaching a representative sample of users will emerge. Furthermore, it seems that such studies can yield valuable results only when users in a sample really take part in conversations unfolding in the group or at least often read them. (Only for users of this kind the group is an important source of information and/or an opportunity to share and exchange opinions. Therefore, only such users can provide reasonable and grounded assessments of the group and the party’s performance in it.). This will complicate the process of sampling even further.

Finally, interviews with the moderators of the VK group of UR and other persons responsible for online platforms of the party will certainly complement this study. Their answers should enable to understand which of the four models of PR they really adhere to and why they deal with the users’ comments in certain ways. Still, there is a great risk that these persons will present only “appropriate”, insincere answers in order to demonstrate their (allegedly) great interest in ordinary people’s views.

Second, it is necessary to keep in mind that UR is the biggest Russian party which has its offices in every region of the country. Some of these regional offices have their own pages on VK and other social networks. Therefore, it will be very intriguing to compare their groups and pages with the “central” platforms of the party. It may appear that local representatives of UR prefer equal online interactions with ordinary people because these representatives are closer to local citizens, know their everyday problems and ready to react to them, just like the effective statesmen in Toepfl’s (2012) study. Furthermore, it is quite likely that high political competition in some Russian regions also encourage UR representatives to be more active and open when communicating online. There are many other possible factors (e.g. internet penetration or socio-economic development) which may influence the online performance of the regional offices of UR. Therefore, it is necessary conduct a study which will encompass all their pages and groups on social networks in order to establish correlations between certain regional characteristics and those patterns of online communication which the offices demonstrate.
Third, the political party is not an impersonal institution. Any party is developed by its members. Consequently, it is more than necessary to look at how individuals working in the party behave on their pages on social networks. Of course, special attention should be paid to the MPs representing the party in Duma because these MPs can discuss important issues with users and take their interests into consideration when voting in the parliament. As in the case of the regional offices of UR, it will be interesting to determine what factors (e.g. gender, education, tenures in Duma, etc.) influence MPs’ online interactions with ordinary people. Nevertheless, the problem of the third direction for further research is that it will be quite difficult to analyze how the party’s MPs who communicate actively with people on social networks incorporate and indeed promote users’ opinions when working on some important policies. It seems that interviews with such members of the party will provide only a very general picture regarding possible positions of users’ preferences in their decision-making (which is certainly complicated by an enormous number of factors).

Fourth, UR is, of course, not the only party in Russia. Therefore its performance on social networks has to be compared with its parliamentary and non-parliamentary competitors. A special attention should be devoted to the second group, namely the People’s Freedom Party (Partiya Narodnoy Svobody or just PARNAS) which is perhaps the most well-known and institutionalized non-parliamentary oppositions force. (In the third chapter of the thesis it was demonstrated that the parliamentary rivals of UR are not very independent in their decisions and, therefore, do not have real chances (at least right now) to challenge the Russian party of power.) Even despite not having seats in Duma, the party, working in coalition with other groups, managed to mount the 2011-2012 post-election protests in Moscow, which were attended by tens of thousands of people. It was already noted that the new media were actively employed during the protests. Was this employment based on two-way communication between the party, other political players, activists and ordinary people? By what type of communication can the VK group of PARNAS and its leaders’ blogs and social networks pages be characterized today? How does the party allow the users to influence its programs and goals? And if the two-way symmetrical model of PR is indeed realized by this political actor, is this realization generating higher popular support of the party, and among which social groups? After obtaining answers to these questions it will be possible to draw more definite conclusions whether (non-)realization of the two-way symmetrical model of PR through VK and other social networks can indeed determine electoral positions of the major Russian political forces.
References


APPENDIX 1

Coder’s Name:

Unit of data collection for the variables 1-6: Textual component of each wall post in the VK group of UR.

- Questions of online polls contained in some wall posts have to be considered as constituting parts of their textual components.
- Content of online resources to which web links within the wall posts lead has to be ignored.
- Content of videos or audios attached to the wall posts has to be ignored.
- Wall posts presented in the form of videos, photos, audios without any textual captions and/or descriptions have to be ignored.
- Wall posts in the form of mere links to some online resources have to be ignored.

1) Date: Indicate the date when the wall post was made in the format “Day Month Time”: e.g., 24 March 10:15.

2) Topic: Indicate what forms the core meaning of the wall post, in other words, what it is about.

1. Announcement of an online interview: The wall post informs that a party member, who may be an MP, will be answering questions from ordinary people. The wall post indicates time of the online interview as well as major issues and questions which will be covered during the online session. The wall post ends with a call to ask questions through a special link to the official website of the party.

2. Presentation of a party member: The wall post is fully devoted to some member of the party. It indicates their position in the party and their professional occupation. It always has a link to the official party website where an interview with/more information about the party member can be found. The wall post may contain a detailed story of his/her personal, professional life and/or career in the party.

Important cues for coding: Sets of photos of some party members are always located under wall posts of this type. Also, these wall posts usually have the following phrase at their

3. Presentation of a city/town: The wall post describes a Russian city or town. The wall post does not contain any information about activities of the party; however, it may have links to websites of regional party offices located in the city/town to which the wall post is devoted.

Important cues for coding: Sets of pictures of cities/towns are always located under wall posts of this kind. They often have videos as well.

4. Other: The residual category. The wall post relates to all other possible topics except for those indicated above.

The variable 3 has to be analyzed if only the wall post has been coded as “Other” or “Announcement of an online interview” on the variable “Topic”.

3) Information about a specific piece of legislation: Indicate whether the wall post contains some information about a specific piece of legislation. It is not necessary to determine whether the wall post has some specific piece of legislation as its major topic. It is necessary to determine whether the wall post at least says something about such a piece of legislation.

1. Contains information about specific legislation: First, the wall post has at least one of the following words and collocations (in any form) which point out that some piece of legislation is actually mentioned in the wall post:
   Законопроект/Проект закона. Законодательная инициатива. Законодательная мера. Закон. (Президентский) указ. Поправка. Реформа. (Lit.: Project of a law. Legislative initiative. Legislative measure. Law. (Presidential) decree. Amendment. Reform.)

   Second, the wall post features at least one element from the following list:
   • the title of the piece of legislation;
   • (if there is no title) a description of those issues which the piece of legislation addresses;
   • some details about particular measures it presupposes.

2. Does not contain information about specific legislation: The wall post is not characterized by the first “necessary” attribute pointing out that the wall post mentions some piece of legislation.
and/or not characterized by the second “sufficient” attribute pointing out that the wall post is about some specific piece of legislation.

4) Poll: Indicate whether an online poll, i.e. a question with prearranged options for answers, is attached to the wall post.

1. Contains a poll
2. Does not contain a poll

The variable 5 is analyzed if only the wall post has a poll.

5) Number of answers to the poll: Indicate the overall number of answers the poll under the wall post has received due to the moment of coding. This number is presented right under the poll.

6) Number of the users’ comments: Indicate the overall number of comments which the wall post has received due to the moment of coding. In VK only three last comments are visible. If there are more than 3 comments, then users’ contribution preceding last three ones are “concealed” by a special button. On these buttons overall numbers of comments are presented. (After pressing this button all comments become visible.)

Unit of data collection for the variable 7: Discussion thread under each wall post in the VK group of UR.

7) Number of the moderators’ comments: Count how many comments the moderators of the group have left in the discussion thread under the wall post by the moment of coding.
APPENDIX 2

Coder’s name:

Wall post number:

Unit of data collection: Each comment left by the moderators in the discussion threads under the wall posts in the VK group of United Russia.

- Content of online resources to which web links within the comments lead has to be ignored.
- Content of videos or audios attached to the comments has to be ignored.
- Comments presented in the form of videos, photos, audios without any textual captions and/or descriptions have to be ignored.
- Comments in the form of mere links to some online resources have to be ignored.

1) Length of the comment: Count how many words the moderator’s comment contains. Counting has to be made automatically with the help of Office Word.

2) Gratitude for discussions: Indicate whether in the comment the moderator expresses gratitude to users for their participation in the discussion. Such gratitude has to be addressed not to a particular user but to all participants of the discussion under the wall post.

1. Contains gratitude for discussions
2. Does not contain gratitude for discussions

3) Demonstration of attention to opinions: Indicate whether in the comment the moderator says that users’ opinions will be taken into consideration or that these opinions are somehow important to the party, some party members, some its departments, affiliated organizations, or herself/himself. The moderator has to address not a particular user but all participants of the discussion under the wall post.

1. Contains demonstration of attention to opinions
2. Does not contain demonstration of attention to opinions
4) Soliciting opinions: Indicate whether in the comment the moderator asks users (in any form) to share their views and positions about the issue(s) described in the wall post, including opinions about questions of polls which may be attached to the wall posts. Such soliciting has to be addressed not to a particular user but to all participants of the discussion.

1. Contains soliciting opinions
2. Does not contain soliciting opinions
APPENDIX 3

Coder’s name:

Wall post number:

Unit of data collection for the variables 1-6: Each user’s comment which contains one of the following elements of content:

- suggestions for a specific piece of legislation mentioned in a wall post;
- suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in a wall post;
- regulating measures which can be realized in some piece of legislation not specified by a user;
- questions about a specific piece of legislation presented in a wall post;
- questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in a wall post.

Units of data collection have to be selected from the users’ messages posted under the wall posts which contained information about specific pieces of legislation.

- Content of online resources to which web links within the comments lead has to be ignored.
- Content of videos or audios attached to the comments has to be ignored.
- Comments presented in the form of videos, photos, audios without any textual captions and/or descriptions have to be ignored.
- Comments in the form of mere links to some online resources have to be ignored.

Before starting coding read an article relating to the wall post. Almost each wall post in the official VK group of United Russia has a web link to the official website of the party or other official online resources of the party\(^\text{13}\). Such articles can be reached through these links. If the wall post does not have any links to articles on the official party website/other official resources but it is accompanied by a video, then watch the video. If the wall post contains both a link and a video, then read information on the website/other official resources and watch the video.

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\(^\text{13}\) The list of the official party online resources: er.ru (website); twitter.com/er_novosti (Twitter account); er-ru.livejournal.com (LiveJournal account); facebook.com/groups/er.official (Facebook group).
1) **User’s name:** Write down the name of the user who authored the comment.

2) **Suggestions for the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post:** Indicate whether in his/her comment the user formulates at least one idea about how the specific piece of legislation presented in the wall post should be changed or improved.

1) **Contains suggestions for the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post:**

Suggestions have to pertain to the specific piece of legislation (its description presented in the wall post, in the article on some official party online resource and/or in the video under the wall post (if it was attached to the wall post)).

Suggestions may have one of the following forms:

- **Procedure suggestions:** The user suggests organizational, legislative procedures through which the piece of legislation should/should not be altered, developed, cancelled, adopted and/or particular persons and/or institutions (e.g. MPs, trade unions) who should/should not participate in such processes.

- **Regulating measures suggestions:** The user suggests changes in the measures presupposed by the piece of legislation and/or which measures should/should not be included in/excluded from it.

- **Sphere of regulation suggestions:** The user suggests changes regarding which subjects, objects, activities and processes should/should not or be covered by the piece of legislation.

- **Implementation suggestions:** The user proposes which state institutions, officials or other institutions should/should not be responsible for implementation of the piece of legislation and/or how they should/should not implement it.

- **Cancellation suggestions:** The user suggests that the piece of legislation should be cancelled (or its development, discussions about it should be abandoned).
- Substitute suggestions: The user suggests some regulating measures to deal with the issue(s) which completely contradict the measures presupposed by the piece of legislation. The user may or may not indicate that he/she suggests a new law/decree to regulate the issue.

- Other suggestions: Any other possible suggestions which pertain to the piece of legislation (its description presented in the wall post, in the article on some official party online resource and/or in the video under the wall post (if it was attached to the wall post)).

**Important rules for coding the category:**

a) Suggestions may be concrete as well as of general character.

b) Suggestions may be addressed to the entire party, some of its members, some other users, the moderators of the VK group of UR or may not have any specific addressee.

c) The user’s suggestions reiterating proposals which had been made by some other users before have to be taken into consideration. Consequently, messages containing such proposals have to be coded as having suggestions relating to the piece of legislation.

d) If the user starts presenting his/her suggestion in one message and continues in another one(s), then only the first message, i.e. containing the beginning of the suggestion, from the set has to be analyzed, provided that in the other messages of the set no new suggestions were made.

2) **Does not contain suggestions for the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post:**

The comment does not have any types of suggestions presented above. Or it is possible to apply one of the following coding rules to the comment:

e) If the user’s suggestion repeats or paraphrases some information which was already presented in the wall post, the video below it (if it was attached to the wall post) or on some official party online resources, then such suggestion has to be ignored. Consequently, if the user does not make any other “original” suggestions in his/her message, then the comment has to be coded as not having any suggestions relating to the piece of legislation.
f) If the user only repeats, paraphrases or make minute additions to some suggestion he/she had already indicated, then it has to be ignored. Consequently, if the user does not make any other new suggestions in his/her message, then the comment has to be coded as not having any suggestions relating to the piece of legislation.

g) If suggestions or their presentations (e.g. arguments in their support) have some overt gender, racist, religious, nationalist prejudices which cannot be realized and tolerated in a civilized society, then such suggestions have to be ignored. Consequently, if the message features only such ideas, then it has to be coded as not having suggestions relating to the piece of legislation. Example: During a discussion about an initiative regulating elections of governors someone makes only one suggestion that it is necessary to prohibit women (or e.g. Muslims, ethnic Belarusians) from being Russian governors.

h) If suggestions or their presentations have some elements of extremism, then such suggestions have to be ignored. Extremist suggestions are calls to kill and/or to inflict physical violence on (some group of) people. Example: calls to kill ministers, policemen, etc.

i) If suggestions or their presentations are unrealistic, then such suggestions have to be ignored. Unrealistic suggestions refer to something which cannot be realized due to the currently known physical laws or they refer to some unnatural forces. Example: calls to let God or aliens participate in development of some piece of legislation.

3) Suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post: Indicate whether in his/her comment the user formulates at least one idea about how some specific piece of legislation not mentioned in the wall post should be changed or improved.

1) Contains suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post:

Suggestions have to bear no direct relation to the descriptions of the specific piece of legislation which the wall post, the article on some official party online resource and/or the video under the wall post (if it was attached to the wall post) contain. A degree of possible closeness between the specific piece of legislation presented in the wall post and some other legislation addressed by the user is unimportant for coding. However, in his/her suggestions the user has to name some concrete piece of legislation for which he/she makes suggestions.
Suggestions may have one of the forms presented in the guidelines for the variable 2: procedure suggestions; regulating measures suggestions; sphere of regulation suggestions; implementation suggestions; cancellation suggestions; substitute suggestions; other suggestions (any other possible suggestions which may pertain to some legislation).

Important rules for coding the category: The rules a, b), c) and d) from the guidelines for the variable 2 have to be applied for coding the current variable as well.

2) Does not contain suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post:

The comment does not have any types of suggestions presented above. Or it is possible to apply the rules f), g), h) and i) from the guidelines for the variable 2 to the comment.

4) Regulating measures which can be realized in legislation: Indicate whether in his/her comment the user suggests at least one measure which have the potential to be realized in some official regulating (legislative) document not specified by the user.

1) Contains suggestions for regulating measures which can be realized in legislation.

Suggestions have to bear no direct relation to the descriptions of the specific piece of legislation which the wall post, the article on some official party online resource and/or the video under the wall post (if it was attached to the wall post) contain. A degree of possible closeness between the specific piece of legislation presented in the wall post and regulating measures suggested by the user is unimportant for coding. However, in the user’s suggestion titles of concrete pieces of legislation have to be absent.

Important rules for coding the category: The rules a, b), c) and d) from the guidelines for the variable 2 have to be applied for coding the current variable as well.

2) Does not contain suggestions for regulating measures which can be realized in legislation:

The user does not suggest some regulating measures which have the potential to be realized in some piece of legislation or other governmental document. Or it is possible to apply the rules f), g), h) and i) from the guidelines for the variable 2 to the comment.
5) **Questions about the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post**: Indicate whether in his/her comment the user asks at least one question about the specific piece of legislation presented in the wall post:

1) **Contains questions about the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post**:

Questions have to pertain to the specific piece of legislation (its description presented in the wall post, in the article on some official party online resource and/or in the video under the wall post (if it was attached to the wall post)).

Questions may have one of the following forms:

- **Procedure questions**: The user asks about through which or what kind of organizational, legislative procedures the piece of legislation will be altered, developed, cancelled, adopted and/or who, what institutions (e.g. particular MPs, trade unions) will participate in these processes.

- **Regulating measures questions**: The user asks about regulation measures presupposed by the piece of legislation.

- **Sphere of regulation questions**: The user asks about which subjects, objects, activities and processes will be covered by the piece of legislation.

- **Implementation proposals**: The user asks which state institutions, officials or other institutions will be responsible for implementation of the piece of legislation and/or how they will implement it.

- **Time questions**: The user asks when the piece of legislation will be developed, adopted, put in practice.

- **Information seeking questions**: The user asks to provide him/her with more information about the piece of legislation (e.g. its full text).

- **Opinion seeking questions**: The user asks to provide him/her with the party opinions about the piece of legislation. The user may ask to provide him/her with official or personal...
opinions belonging to the entire party, some of its members, departments or the moderators of the VK group of UR.

- Other questions: Any other questions pertaining to the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post.

Important rules for coding the category: The rules a, b), c) and d) from the guidelines for the variable 2 have to be applied for coding the current variable as well.

2) Does not contain questions about the piece of legislation:

The comment does not have any types of questions presented above. Or it is possible to apply the rules f), g), h) and i) from the guidelines for the variable 2 to the comment.

6) Questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post: Indicate whether in his/her comment the user asks at least one question about some specific piece of legislation not presented in the wall post:

1) Contains questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post:

In his/her questions the user has to name some concrete piece of legislation to which the questions pertain.

Questions may have one of the forms presented in the guidelines for the variable 5: procedure questions; regulating measures questions; sphere of regulation questions; implementation proposals; time questions; information seeking questions; opinion seeking questions; other questions.

Important rules for coding the category: The rules a, b), c) and d) from the guidelines for the variable 2 have to be applied for coding the current variable as well.

2) Does not contain questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post:
The comment does not have any types of questions presented above. Or it is possible to apply the rules f), g), h) and i) from the guidelines for the variable 2 to the comment.

**Unit of data collection for the variables 7-11:** The moderators’ messages in discussion threads under each wall post which contained information about specific pieces of legislation.

**7) Reactions to suggestions for the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post:** Indicate whether the moderators of the VK group of UR provide at least one reaction to at least one such suggestion made by the user in his/her message.

1) **Reactions are provided:** In at least one of their messages in the discussion thread the moderators react to at least one suggestion of this type.

**Important rules for coding the category:**

j) The moderators’ reactions have to be taken into consideration only when they are addressed to the user who made the suggestion(s) or to a group of users, including the author of the suggestion. *(NOTE: In VK thanks to the function “reply” most comments in discussions start with names of users to whom they are addressed.)*

k) The moderators’ reactions may have any form: opinions, evaluations, specifying questions, gratitude, etc. Furthermore, opinions and evaluations may reflect the moderators’ own positions, official or unofficial positions of the party, its members or positions belonging to any other person or organization.

2) **Reactions are not provided:** The messages left by the moderators in the discussion thread contain no reactions (of any form) to the user’s suggestions of this particular type.

**8) Reactions to suggestions for specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post:** Indicate whether the moderators of the VK group of UR provide at least one reaction to at least one such suggestion made by the user in his/her message.

1) **Reactions are provided.**

2) **Reactions are not provided.**
See the coding rules for the variable 7.

9) **Reactions to regulating measures which can be realized in legislation:** Indicate whether the moderators of the VK group of UR provide at least one reaction to at least one such suggestion made by the user in his/her message.

1) *Reactions are provided.*
2) *Reactions are not provided.*

See the coding rules for the variable 7.

10) **Reactions to questions about the piece of legislation mentioned in the wall post:** Indicate whether the moderators of the VK group of UR reply in any form to at least one such question asked by the user in his/her message.

1) *Reactions are provided.*
2) *Reactions are not provided.*

See the coding rules for the variable 7. *Reactions, of course, may be presented in the form of answers to the user’s questions.*

11) **Reactions to questions about specific pieces of legislation not mentioned in the wall post:** Indicate whether the moderators of the VK group of UR reply in any form to at least one such question asked by the user in his/her message.

1) *Reactions are provided.*
2) *Reactions are not provided.*

See the coding rules for the variable 7.