

WIKI-DEMOCRATS

Olga Kryshтанovskya



OLGA KRYSHТАNOVSKYA is a Russian sociologist and a doctor of sociology. She heads the Department for the Study of Elites at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences

Unfolding right before our very own eyes, we see the revival of direct democracy, which seemed to have been forgotten for several centuries. Direct democracy vanished when the situation appeared whereby it became no longer possible to rally people together in a single public space. The demand for representative democracy turned out to be a technical one. It is still needed, of course, and there is no doubt that it will continue to exist. The preservation and development of such traditional forms of democracy as parliamentary democracy, for instance, remain important tasks. However, the most interesting processes are now taking place in a different area. Currently, there are about 50 million people who use the Internet in Russia, and our country is the world's third-largest in terms of the number of people participating in social networks. This new type of connectedness creates unique opportunities for citizens who are interested in influencing the political process.

While we do not yet see these processes as something that is totally understood within society, it is apparent that their practical applicability is

growing. For instance, directly on the respective website, the new Mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, gave people the opportunity to make their suggestions with regard to improving traffic in the city. As well, with respect to the investigation of the brutal beating of Oleg Kashin — it seems to me that this is the first time that there has been an appeal from the prosecution to the public for assistance. The prime minister and the president now openly communicate with the public before taking certain decisions. People are asking questions and there are constantly various polls being conducted on the Internet. A multitude of small tools have also appeared, allowing the more active part of the population to influence the political process and decision-making.

This partly means that we are currently witnessing the appearance of a new elite. The leadership prototype is now changing. In the past, a party leader would have to travel around the country, shake hands with thousands of people, make speeches at meetings, etc.; however, the situation is now different, whereby the leaders of many parties have increasingly come to resemble virtual figures. We are seeing the emergence of new influential leaders who no one had previously ever encountered, such as Alexei Navalny and other bloggers, who have thousands if not millions of supporters. Alexei Navalny received the majority of votes cast in an Internet-based poll about who people would like to see as the new mayor of Moscow. He received tens of thousands of votes. Such leaders do not have a presence on TV and they are also not physically present at public events.

The processes that are driving this virtual society still have yet to be fully comprehended. However, it is already possible to assume that such **virtual leaders or leaders of the online community will become a bridge that will bring together the people and the establishment or the acting elite.** We can say that this is also some sort of representative democracy. But the essence of the Internet is such that virtually anyone

can become such a leader. I call this phenomenon 'wiki-democracy' because the motto of the wiki-movement existing in Russia is 'Whoever wants it can do it'. In order to become a leader, you do not need connections or money — you need nothing other than personal qualities and charisma. Actually, activity becomes the quality that is most in demand for the formation of this new elite.

An online society is being formed. Roughly speaking, we have 100 million active citizens that are establishing multiple horizontal links between themselves. The entire country is no longer built along a power vertical (for instance, from an ordinary individual to the president in the Kremlin), but rather is seeing the formation of multiple horizontal links.

Political problems essentially result from the duality realm of 'friends — foes' to the level of daily life, where specific issues have to be resolved. The political field becomes differentiated. It is not the interaction between the elites and the society that gains in complexity, but politics itself because it becomes differentiated into millions of small tasks. This is certainly a path to improvement because such a system provides for a more stable life. The countries that are characterised by having 'old democracies' are actually following a stable general route regardless of who comes into power — whether they are conservatives or pro-labour groups, democrats or republicans. This is not about a revolution in the way that we imagine it: the Whites will be hanging on the poles if the Reds end up winning. There's no terrible drama about elections. **The situation that we had in Yeltsin's times, when elections were full of drama, is virtually impossible today.** Society is no longer subject to such a dichotomy. Politics is no longer an alternative between 'this or that' — it has since become much more complex due to the emergence of the 'online society', a fact that heralds great improvements. ■

Exclusively for Yaroslavl initiative