Low Civility and High Incivility in Russian Online Deliberation

A Case of Political Talk in Vkontakte Social Network[1]

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One of the most studied fields in deliberative research is (in)civility in Internet-based political discussions on issues of common concern. Uncivil behaviour demonstrated by participants in online communication has various forms and negative effects on the process and outcomes of e-deliberation as well as on deliberators' reactions and attitudes, which have been predominantly investigated in Western democracies. However, this issue has been poorly covered in the countries with less stable democratic traditions and values. This paper explores speech culture with a focus on civility and incivility in Russian political conversations conducted on Russian social media. The authors analyse mass-scale web political discussions on a polarising issue of the court sentence of the politician Alexei Navalny (2021), taking one of the most popular Russian social networks VKontakte. For this study, scholars use discourse analysis based on the works on deliberative democracy proposed by J. Habermas (1996). They conclude that Russian political speech regarding Navalny's sentence and conducted on the VKontakte social media platform can be characterised by a great extent of uncivil speech unbalanced by a low extent of civil speech. The conversations are not oriented towards mutual recognition or reaching a consensus, as participants are often distracted from the main issue being discussed, and turn to interpersonal topics instead.

Introduction

Democratic deliberation stands for the multiplicity and availability of views and interests which are extremely significant, especially in complex and pluralistic societies marked by deep differences and disagreements (Scudder, 2020). Despite some conflicts that can appear unsolvable among citizens, much attention should be given to the respectful and polite attitude of participants, their opinions and the way they express them, including equal opportunities for its expression as well. Nowadays, e-deliberation which may be defined as "an online deliberation process that uses the Internet to sense public opinion on one or more specific issues, to enable and enhance discussion among citizens, and to shape consent among citizens" (Fitsilis, 2022) is one of the most discussed forms of political Internet communication studied by scholars from all over the world. Apparently, online political discussions may contain constructive ideas, deeply reasoned positions of citizens, convincing examples from practice, expert's references and combinations of opposing points of view (Coleman, 2018); however, there may be some problems regarding (in)civility and hate speech.

The deliberative theory argues that political conversations should be civil, polite and respectful towards deliberators and their positions (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2007). However, some empirical studies refute this normative claim pointing out that not all online comments of participants contribute to achieving this ideal (Bodrunova et al. 2021; Filatova & Volkovskii, 2021b; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2022). Moreover, exogenous shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic may disrupt politeness norms and lead to real negative consequences both for participants and observers of the Internet-based deliberative process.

Considering the ambivalence of the (in)civility issue in theory and practice as well as the destructive impact of Covid-19 on civility norms, it has become more relevant to address the research of (un)civil speech patterns in political online discussions on acute societal issues. In this paper, we analyse civility and incivility in Russian public deliberation conducted on Russian social media. To this end, we refer to Internet-based conversations on the issue of the politician Alexei Navalny's court sentence (2021). While this verdict has received little scholarly attention in Russia, it has been one of the most actively debated and certainly polarised topics in the Russian public sphere. Our sampling is represented by four discussions on the VKontakte social network on the pages of four politically polarised Russian media outlets. For our research, we employ the methodology of discourse analysis developed by Yuri Misnikov (2011) based on the works of Jürgen Habermas concerning deliberative democracy.

Research question: How can Russian political discussions on the VKontakte pages of Russian media outlets regarding the court sentence of Navalny be characterised in terms of (un)civil criteria?

Hypothesis: Russian political discussions about Navalny's court sentence conducted on the VKontakte pages of Russian media outlets can be described as having a high level of incivility unbalanced by a low extent of civility.

Research on online deliberation

Over the last two decades, the body of literature on e-deliberation has grown rapidly. Nevertheless, there are still many open questions regarding the relation between such relevant components of online deliberation as design, the communication processes and the outcomes that need to be clarified in normative (finding an ideal), descriptive (investigating empirical nature) and prescriptive ways (how things can be altered in order to achieve progress) (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009). D. Friess and C. Eliders (2015) distinguished three main directions on online deliberation research which we briefly outline.

a) Institutional input ("design") – the institutional design that sheds light on the preconditions of deliberation, enables and fosters it. For example, it may include institutional arrangements (e.g. participatory budgeting), platforms (e.g. government-run platform) and socio-political elements (e.g. internet access rate and social strata).

b) Productive outcome ("results") – the expected results of deliberation, their internal (e.g. new knowledge and experience, change of positions and preferences) and external effects (e.g. policy metamorphoses).

c) Communicative throughput ("process") – the communication processes through which individuals participate and its quality, ways how consensus can be built and reached democratically.

From the literature, it can be observed that a plethora of political investigations is devoted to studying places, forums and institutions where citizens can consciously come together to participate in political decision-making, design of deliberation, its format, quality and potential in the joint development of public policy by citizens and authorities, all of which comprise various modes of communicating online (Filatova et al. 2019; Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Santana, 2014; Stiegler & De Jong, 2015; Zhang et al., 2013), deliberative quality of civil political talk in social networks, features of social media and their impact on online deliberative process between citizens (Bodrunova, 2021; Choi, 2014; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Savin, 2019; Stroud et al., 2015).

Research on (in)civility in deliberative studies

One of the most studied fields in deliberative research, which refers to the research direction of communicative throughput, is (in)civility in online political conversations on issues of common concern. Civility presupposes a respect for and affirmation of all individuals and viewpoints, even in the face of differences and contention (Stroud et al., 2015; Stryker et al., 2016). However, this term still lacks conceptual clarity and a clear

definition across disciplines, as it has been investigated by scholars from political theory, philosophy, communication, sociology and other fields. Some scholars link civility to politeness, etiquette, or good manners (Laden, 2019), some compare it to forgiveness (Stuckey & O'Rourke, 2014), others to respect (Reiheld, 2013; Rood, 2014). One point on which the literature agrees is that politeness or mutual respect is a necessary, and for some, sufficient part of any definition of civility (Mutz, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Ng & Detenber, 2005; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). However, the meaning of mutual respect and politeness may vary depending on cultural and social norms and contexts, which makes it more complicated to define civility. In addition, norms of politeness may vary in their degree of formality as well (Bonotti & Zech, 2021). There are also concerns that an overemphasis on politeness might inhibit the free flow of ideas in political conversation, resulting in a very polite, restrained and barely human discourse (Papacharissi, 2004).

The fast dissemination and impact of incivility has become a significant concern for both scholars and citizens (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Coe et al., 2011). The definition of incivility has the same problem with conceptualisation as civility does. Although there is a plethora of considerable variations among investigators, determining incivility is still questionable. Incivility can be defined as a set of behaviours that threaten democracy, public discourse (Papacharissi, 2004; Vollhardt et al., 2007), and that frequently includes intimidation, disrespectful speech, hostility and hate speech. Indeed, these days, uncivil behaviour is commonly perceived as a threat to the democratic quality of public discourse (Miller & Vaccari, 2020), including to the integrity and rationality of online discussions (Badjatiya et al., 2017). Additionally, incivility can be simply considered as lacking respect for others and their ideas.

Bonotti and Zech (2021) detected three main manifestations of incivility: a) a failure to comply with norms of politeness; b) moral incivility involving speech or behaviour that fails to respect other citizens, their personal freedom, individual rights and equality opportunities; and c) justificatory incivility which fails to comply with the Rawlsian duty of civility. Bonotti and Zech (2021) have identified four main concerns caused by the pandemic of Covid-19 to people's ability to behave politely: a) it has become complicated for people to determine norms of politeness and behave appropriately in more problematic circumstances; b) the function of civility has been eroded by Covid-19; c) achieving social cooperation or mitigating conflicts has become more difficult as acts of politeness could seem unclear or misunderstood; d) the collapse of politeness norms has been exploited by both citizens and politicians in a negative way that has made communication more impolite and uncivil.

Online deliberation scholars have examined the implications of civil and uncivil online political discourse. Much research concentrates on incivility and its negative influence. For example, previous research has shown that exposure to online incivility increases a release of negative emotions (Gervais, 2017; Masullo et al. 2021), hostile cognitions (Rösner et al. 2016) and perceptions of polarisation (Kim & Park, 2019). It also fosters the likelihood of expressing further uncivil reactions (Chen & Lu, 2017; Rösner & Krämer, 2016), discourages users from taking part in networked discussions (Han & Brazeal, 2015; Ordoñez & Nekmat, 2019), and becomes a key marker of strong

opinion polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014; Bodrunova & Blekanov, 2021), which intensifies political hostility among citizens. Incivility may be perceived as a source of moral panic anxieties (Critcher, 2008). As a result, individuals try to find and use different strategies to regulate and prevent the negative effects of toxic speech because they take responsibility for their digital choices (Syvertsen, 2020). Although uncivil comments that unnecessarily disrespect, label and attack others derail the focus of a discussion and undermine citizen engagement (McClurg, 2006), differences are inherent in politics and are not necessarily harmful to the democratic process. To the extent that citizens exchange views in a civil, reasoned manner, online political comments may promote a sense of civility and motivate political participation (Bodrunova et al. 2021). Research, indeed, suggests that reason-based opinion exchanges online can facilitate deliberation and active political engagement (Han & Brazeal, 2015; Hwang, 2014).

We may observe that the concepts of civility and incivility are elusive and hard to define, thus, there are problems with the conceptualisation and operationalisation of these terms for empirical research and for the analysis of forms of communicative behaviour in online discussions on polarising issues. In our paper, civility characterises the qualitative nature of political discourse. It is understood as demonstrating a tolerant attitude towards other participants in a discussion, their positions, and/or the subject of discussion. Consequently, incivility means an intolerant attitude towards participants, their positions, and/or the subject of discussion.

Research data: A case of the court verdict to Alexei Navalny

On 2 February 2021, hearings on the case of Alexei Navalny were held in the Simonovsky Court of Moscow. During the meeting, the issue of replacing the suspended sentence with a real one was considered. As a result, the accused must spend 2 years and 8 months in a general regime colony. That news gave rise to many discussions on social media about justice and injustice of the decision, critical statements in the direction of both Navalny and Russian authorities. As the figure of Navalny is very controversial in Russian socio-political discourse, it is no surprise to encounter plenty of toxic and hate speech in online discussions about his case.

For analysis, we selected online discussions on the topic of the court verdict of Navalny on VKontakte social network pages of leading Russian media, dividing them by political affiliation: independent (Rain, or *Dozhd,* and *Meduza,* both recognised as foreign agent entities by the Russian authorities by September 2022), pro-state *(Channel One, Komsomolskaya Pravda [KP.RU])*. The posts with news about the court decision and user comments were released from 2 February to 4 February 2021. A total of 1,065 comments were analysed. Table 1 presents online discussions on four selected online platforms in terms of their source, its political affiliation, article title, material, date and time of the post, number of likes, reposts, comments. All data was collected between 10 March and 15 March 2021. Only comments left in the period from 2 February to 4 February 2021 were taken into account.

Online discussions were chosen based on three factors. Firstly, the discussions corresponded to the topic stated – the court verdict of Navalny. Secondly, discussions were conducted by ordinary citizens on various media platforms. The discussions were moderated, and comments were deleted by administrators of online media groups whose loyalty to government structures varied, but the discussions were in no way initiated or led by the authorities. Two discussions were taken from each media outlet, for a total number of eight discussions. The quantity was limited, since not all media groups contained discussions of 100 comments on the verdict in Navalny's case. Therefore, each media source was represented by an equal number of discussions, and all selected online discussions contained at least 100 comments. At the preliminary study stage, such a threshold was set for data collection, since it allowed us to calculate parameters based on the aggregate of 100% (1 comment – 1%).

The discussion's materials were collected using parsing and uploaded to Excel spreadsheets. When encoding discussions, the following data was entered into the Excel spreadsheet: author ID, link to the author, author's first and last name, author's gender, link to the author's image, link to the comment, date and time of the comment, comment text and number of likes to the comment.

Table 1: List of online discussions on VKontakte media pages

Sources	Rain (Dozhd)	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU
Media type	Independent		Pro-state	
Article title, material	The suspended sentence was replaced with a real one for Navalny. Taking into account the time spent under house arrest, Navalny will spend two years and eight months in the colony.	Will Navalny's sentence be replaced with a real one? We follow what is happening in the court and around it.	The Moscow City Court sentenced Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison and a fine of 500,000 rubles.	The court sentenced Alexei Navalny to 3.5 years in prison in a general regime colony.
Post time	02.02.2021 (20:46)	02.02.2021 (18:34)	04.02.2021 (14:03)	02.02.2021 (21:24)
No. of likes	499	154	116	177
No. of reposts	152	71	33	41
No. of comments	602	155	160	148

Source: Compiled by the author.

Research method

There is a great variety of methods and approaches used in deliberative studies. Four main groups of research methods in deliberative democracy are distinguished (Ercan et al., 2022): theorising (formal models, grounded normative theory, etc.), measuring (discourse quality index, online deliberation matrix, social network analysis, experimental and survey methods, etc.), exploring (ethnography, frame analysis, case study, etc.), and enacting (deliberative policy analysis, deliberative camp, etc.). In our research, we employ a method of discourse analysis developed by Yu. Misnikov and described in his PhD thesis (2011) and other works (Misnikov, 2010; 2012). We refer to the "Deliberative Standard to Assess Discourse Quality", which introduces seven thematically different discursive parameters corresponding to specific research issues to guide the process of encoding Internet discussion messages: a) participatory equality and posting activism; b) civility; c) validity claim-making and consensual practices; d) intent of speech acts; e) discursive interactivity and dialogism; f) argumentation; g) thematic diversity.

Analysing and understanding the content of Internet-based discussions is an extremely difficult technical and substantive task. A considerable aspect of selected methodological approach is that it allows us to analyse online discourse and the quality of discussions from the perspective of political communications and media studies, not only linguistics. Unlike linguistic methods of text processing and analysis (Natural Language Processing), discourse analysis is aimed at the semantic understanding of discourse and its parts, and not only analysis at the level of words, or their combinations into sentences. It helps identify specific discursive features of public opinion formation through conversations, which is primarily socio-political and communication practice, not linguistic. Understanding the process of emergence and change of people's opinions cannot be achieved by only using linguistically oriented methods of text analysis.

The current method of discourse analysis has been already empirically tested in our previous research (Filatova & Volkovskii, 2020; Filatova & Volkovskii, 2021a) dedicated to studying such parameters of deliberative quality in online conversations as participatory equality, posting activism, civility, argumentation, interactivity and dialogism. We appeal to Misnikov's methodological vision as he managed to translate the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (specifically his theory of discourse ethics) into a workable empirical framework which allows to study real-life online discourse in Russia. The scholar emphasises the relevance of analysing discussion threads in their entirety, not random message samples, which aids to comprehend the discourse's internal logic and event-sensitivity (Misnikov, 2011: 88). For instance, critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodologically emphasises individually produced media messages. It is less suited to addressing multi-message discourse. One more critical point regarding CDA is its strong ideological orientation, since it aims at showing socio-political inequalities and power domination (Van Dijk, 1997: 22) which is not appropriate for investigating digital citizens' communications, where a traditional notion of power is much less significant and needs more conceptualising efforts. Unlike CDA, this investigation is not a linguistic study in the traditional sense of mass media communications, and therefore it does not employ the full range of research instruments available with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

for receiving and interpreting empirical data. Due to the large number of messages, it is difficult in practice to apply SLF to the analysis of the semantic and grammatical relations between sentences and clauses on the discussion threads (Misnikov, 2011: 88).

In our study, we concentrate on such a deliberative parameter as civility. Misnikov presents an easy vision of how (un)civil patterns tracked in political discussions can be discovered and interpreted in the Russian context, which helps researchers identify the particularities of Russian civil discourse. Misnikov unites all these characteristics and calls it civility, however, there are some traits of speech culture which refer to incivility. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish civil positions from uncivil ones. In addition, Misnikov includes on/off-topic analysis in the category of civility because it behaves as a specific characteristic of Russian discussions in terms of communication culture. There is also evidence that some investigators analyse this as a separate aspect (Stromer-Galley, 2007). In our opinion, civility, incivility and on/off-topic refer to speech culture, but it is worth differentiating their analyses for a better understanding and interpretation of discussion's characteristics.

We analysed civility, incivility and off-topic patterns in political online talks on the subject of Navalny's court sentence, according to the following positions:

a) posts are directly addressed to other participants with a mention of name or personal appeal, but at the same time they do not relate to the topic or issues, i.e. they are personalised (this category includes only phrases or sentences indicating interpersonal characteristics and any other communication [including neutral])

b) posts mentioning the name of a participant, but rude and offensive in relation to him/her, his/her nationality, religion, ideology, etc. (including sarcasm)

c) posts mentioning the name of a participant, but in a rude and offensive manner in relation to the subject of discussion

d) polite and respectful posts in relation to a person with a mention of his/her name (may contain irony, humour, sarcasm in a positive way)

e) posts that do not mention the name of a participant, but rude and offensive in relation to him/her, his/her nationality, religion, ideology, etc. (including gross sarcasm)

f) posts that do not mention the name of a participant, but rude and offensive in relation to the subject of discussion

g) polite and respectful posts towards a person without mentioning his/her name (may contain irony, humour, sarcasm in a positive way)

Results

The overall percentage of civil, uncivil and off-topic patterns was 49.1% (see Table 2), but some comments could contain several positions, most often only one position or none at all. According to general figures, an obvious tendency characterising Russian speech culture was the predominance of off-topic comments that were personal in nature or that addressed a topic other than the main issue to discuss (39.25%). Impolite and rude attitudes both towards participants and the subject of discussion strongly prevailed over polite ones, especially an insensitive attitude towards other participants in the discussion.

This pattern indicated substantial obstacles to conducting a constructive dialogue, as a deliberative criterion of respect towards deliberators and their views was violated. The total percentage of uncivil attitude towards participants was 5.58%. This was calculated by adding the percentage of posts with and without mentioning a name, on topic, but rude in relation to the participant (9.4%, 6.4%, 3.8%, 2.7%,) and dividing by four (as we analysed the comments of four discussions). The general percentage of uncivil attitude towards the subject of discussion was 4.1%. It was calculated in a similar way: posts with and without a name, on topic, but rude in relation to the subject of discussion (2.5%, 2.6%, 4.4%, 6.7%) were taken. Such patterns characterised the Russian culture of communication in networked discussions as low, immature, intolerant and focused on off-topic conversation.

Referring to the specific discussions and media outlets, it can be seen that the highest percentage of posts of a personal and abstract nature (50%) as well as those taking a rude, offensive attitude towards participants (9.4%) were posted in the discussion on Rain's page. The highest percentage of coarse communicative culture in relation to the topic or subject of discussion was explored in the discussion on Komsomolskaya Pravda page (6.7%). Comparing discussions conducted on the pages of independent and pro-state media in terms of on/off-topic and (in)civility, we pointed out the highest rates of posts of personal and abstract character in the discussions on pages of independent media (45.95% versus 32.55% for pro-state media). As for the coarse culture of communication in relation to participants, the pattern was the same, ranking 7.9% for independent media versus 3.25% in pro-state sites. Meanwhile, the largest indicator of rude communication culture in relation to the subject of discussion was demonstrated in the discussions of pro-state media webpages (5.55 % versus 2.55% at independent media). Despite an increase in media studies covering the issues of (in)civility in networked discussions, there is not much known on how the political stance of media affects the quality of deliberation, comprising (un)civil user behaviour. Most research in this field focuses on Western deliberative practices, while there is a lack of such studies for countries with less democratic values.

Table 2: Analysis of speech culture in Russian online discussions (results in percentage)

	Independent		Pro-state		
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU	Overall data
Thematically empty posts that mention a participant name's, only interpersonal communication	50	41.9	42.8	22.3	39.25
Posts that mention a participant's name, discussion on topic, but rude towards a participant	9.1	4.5	2.5	2	4.53

	Independent		Pro-state		
	Rain	Meduza	Channel One	KP.RU	Overall data
Posts that mention a participant's name, discussion on topic, but rude towards the subject of discussion	0.7	0.7	3.1	2	1.63
Posts that mention a participant's name, discussion on topic in a polite way	0	0	0	0.7	0.18
Posts that do not mention a participant's name, with discussion on topic, but rude towards a participant	0.3	1.9	1.3	0.7	1.1
Posts that do not mention a participant's name, with discussion on topic, but rude towards the subject of discussion	1.8	1.9	1.3	4.7	2.43
Posts that do not mention a participant's name, with discussion on topic in a polite way	0	0	0	0	0
Total % of incivility towards a participant	9.4	6.4	3.8	2.7	5.58
Total % of incivility towards the subject of discussion	2.5	2.6	4.4	6.7	4.1
Total % of speech culture patterns	61.9	50.9	51	32.4	49.1

Source: Compiled by the author.

Conclusions and further venues for studies of (in)civility

Our analysis allowed us to obtain an answer for our research question and confirm our hypothesis. Russian political conversations on Navalny's sentence conducted on the VKontakte pages of Russian media outlets of various political nature can be characterised by a high level of incivility which is unbalanced by a low level of civility. The prevalence of rude and uncivil posts in relation to participants and the subject of discussion over polite ones, especially in relation to a participant, negatively affected the overall picture of civil dialogue and its deliberative quality. In addition, most of the posts in web discussions on the topic of Alexei Navalny's court sentence were not on the topic of discussion. Instead, they were full of interpersonal motives and abstractions not correlating with the main issue of discussion. This pattern impedes achieving mutual recognition and social cooperation in the process of public deliberation.

While analysing the comments of discussions in terms of civil and uncivil features of political speech, we could observe some devastating effects caused by the impolite and intolerant communicative behaviour of citizens. The issue of online hate speech is currently one of the most relevant in research agendas (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021;

Gagliardone, 2014; Zhang & Luo, 2018), especially if it is studied in the crisis conditions like the Covid-19 pandemic (Bonotti & Zech, 2021). In correlation with this issue, it becomes significant to study potential solutions offered by governmental bodies or citizenry that can mitigate the negative effects of incivility.

In our analysis, we observed that incivility fuelled commenting activity among citizens in Russian online discussions, especially when their opinions were strongly polarised and could not be expressed in a rational way due to the ideological disagreement. The correlation between affective political polarisation and hate speech should be researched in Russian deliberative practices more attentively (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Boxell et al. 2020; Druckman et al. 2019; Mason, 2013). One more direction is research on the quality of argumentation in (un)civil comments. In our study, uncivil comments seem to be less persuasive as many of them contained an emotional aspect that lowered their level of rationality. This finding motivates us to pursue a new research project in which we can investigate the correlation between (in)civility and justification or (dis)agreement (Rossini & Maia, 2020).

Due to various interpretations of (in)civility, there can be complexities relating to the methodological approach. For example, the methodology employed in our research does not provide an understanding of differences between incivility and impoliteness, however, some researchers differentiate between these concepts (Stromer–Galley, 2007; Savin, 2019; Bodrunova, 2021). Misnikov did not develop an approach for analysing impoliteness. Therefore, his methodology can be improved in the future as we will study the field of (in)civility in a broader perspective by considering different methodological approaches and how to conceptualise and operationalise it.

Over the last two years, Russian political science has been enriched with solid theoretical overviews on deliberative democracy theory and its problems. The conceptual and normative questions regarding deliberative democracy and political deliberation have been raised from positions of political philosophy (Linde, 2022; Savin, 2023). However, more empirical evidence is required as it will help ensure that the normative analysis and proposals for policy making or decision taking obtained from it are not grounded in empirically flawed assumptions. This aspect also refers to (in)civility studies. Otherwise, it will be almost impossible to solve the issues of conceptual nuance and flawed measurements.

The basis of deliberation is a civil society. In order to raise the level of civil and respectful speech culture in Russian political discussions, we need to explore the impact of such potential factors as the institutional settings of platforms, specifics of deliberative process, personal characteristics of citizenry and their behaviours in online environments. In our view, citizens' education, literacy, ability to navigate in media space and to keep themselves informed as well as follow the norms of morality and ethics are core criteria which strongly influence civility. By increasing the levels of competence and education of people, there will be more opportunities for genuine civil dialogue based on respect and tolerance towards participants, their opinions and arguments.

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