

Communicating with the Nation: Russian Politicians Online

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Abstract

Russia has the largest Internet market in Europe, and Internet use is increasing rapidly. The use of social media has become a valuable tool for the opposition movement; while incumbent political figures have a rapidly expanding online presence. The former president of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, has actively utilized the Internet for political purposes, and promoted its use among other state officials and politicians in Russia. This article explores Internet use among the Russian political elite in general, and examines Medvedev's official weblog in particular. By looking at the function of user comments on the blog, the author assesses communication between the authorities and the people. The article concludes with a prognosis as to the future of this new form of political communication under President Putin, who succeeded Dmitri Medvedev in May 2012.

Policy-Making in Russia

The Russian state is often envisioned as centralized, with power concentrated around the institution of the presidency and the position of the prime minister. However, Russian policy-making also involves a wider cast of characters whose roles need to be explored, so it is important to look for interaction between power and the people. Even when this communication is choreographed and controlled, it may nonetheless contribute to policy-making. Through his Kremlin blog, the former president, Dmitry Medvedev, had the opportunity to communicate his message(s) to millions of Russians—and millions of Russians could leave their comments and directly communicate with him. Ideally, these comments and the input of the broader public should have some influence on decision-making, at least serving to alert the authorities to trends and currents. In light of recent developments in Russia, including public and political unrest following the 2011/12 election cycle, the importance of the Internet in issues such as these seem set to increase.

Russia has Europe's largest Internet market in terms of the number of users—due to the country's large population, but also to the growing popularity of the Internet and the number of people with online access. Internet penetration in Russia is increasing rapidly. The greatest rise is in the number of daily users, indicating that the Internet is becoming both accessible and indispensable at the workplace, in educational facilities and at home. In 2011, the Russian Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication forecast that by 2014, 71 percent of Russians aged 18 and over will have regular Internet access. This prognosis contradicts the view of the Internet as an elite medium dominated by or restricted to urban and educated users, and supports the idea that the ambition of the state is to have more ordinary Russians online. Russia has also developed its own cyberspace, RuNet, which extends to other countries in the

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). RuNet is a linguistically and culturally distinct cyberspace, with its own popular web portals, social network sites and e-mail services; it is now among the world's fastest-growing Internet spheres.

The use of social networks like blogs is popular among RuNet users. By the end of 2010, more than 19 million Russians a month visited blog platforms, with the most popular listed as LiveJournal.com—a blog site with around 14.4 million users per month and 2.1 million visitors daily. In July 2012, there were more than 55 million blogs on RuNet. However, only 10 percent of these are updated at least once a month and can therefore be considered active. LiveJournal.com has both the most active bloggers in linking and the highest number of active blogs on RuNet.

Political Use of the Internet

In recent years, the watchdog function of the Russian Internet has been strong. Opposition figures like Aleksei Navalny and others have used their social network accounts to expose corruption and other power abuses by state officials. Additionally, the Internet has proven an important tool for organizing and coordinating political protests and other actions since the December 2011 parliamentary elections. This development may in time lead the regime to take firmer control, but as yet there are few signs of stricter Internet censorship being instigated in Russia. On the other hand Russian cyberspace is frequently subjected to "cyber-attacks," which can incapacitate online web communities for days on end. These attacks usually target opposition websites at critical times, particularly in conjunction with elections or public demonstrations, and are a key strategy for controlling online speech in Russia. In addition a new law ostensibly aimed at protecting children from information "dangerous for their health and development" came into force in November 2012. This law authorizes the

blocking of websites if they carry “unlawful” content. This recent development indicates a stricter regulation of the Internet in Russia in the future. Nevertheless, for now the Internet in Russia is both accessible and has remained relatively free of filtering.

This does not mean that the Internet is purely a tool for critical voices and individuals wanting to oppose the official discourse. Various political actors and state officials—among them Dmitry Medvedev, Dmitry Rogozin, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Sergey Mironov, Dmitry Gudkov—have become very active online, mostly through blogs on LiveJournal.com and other sites. These blogs can be seen as a private political sphere, where individual politicians can lead discussions on topics they are interested in, enhancing the idea of open and authentic communication and thus strengthening the level of voter trust.

Since the launch of his article “Forward, Russia!” in 2009, Dmitry Medvedev has been synonymous with attempts at “modernizing” Russia. He has been a leading force in promoting Internet use among state officials and politicians, and was awarded the title “RuNet Blogger of the year” in 2011. His online presence can in many ways be seen as part of the political elite’s attempt to expand its influence over the electorate through direct communication—a form of political advertising and marketing. On the other hand, this web-presence may be seen as a way of combating potential threats through effective counter-information—a means of exerting greater control over digital space. Political blogging is a largely understudied topic, but one highly important for understanding Russian political communication.

Communication on Dmitry Medvedev’s Video Blog

On 7 October 2008, Dmitry Medvedev made his first video blog entry on blog.kremlin.ru; exactly one year later his blog was connected to LiveJournal. While admitting that he is not the actual author behind his blog videos, Medvedev has explained he personally controls their content. By connecting to Russia’s most active blog platform, Medvedev sought to expand his audience and reach more of the electorate. As of July 2012, the blog contained 224 short video clips, some 2 to 14 minutes in duration. However, the Internet is a dynamic medium, and the number of blog entries has been growing steadily, as the blog is updated often.

It is possible to access Medvedev’s messages in written text through a link under each video, while a link to the right of every video entry invites the visitor to leave a comment. Users have two ways to leave a comment on the blog—through the link next to any of Medvedev’s videos, or through a link to sixty different topics which

one can comment on directly. Perhaps the blogosphere can be seen as a place of free speech as well as uncensored discussion. But what happens with the notions of free speech and the mixture of public and private when the blogger is Russia’s most public figure of all—the president himself?

Although blogs may be used as an arena where people can share information and communicate as equals, that is not really the case with Medvedev’s blog. It provides users with carefully edited clips of the current Prime Minister, which can, through the comments left by viewers, inform the authorities of the attitudes and opinions of the population. The blog also gives readers a potentially edited version of public opinion, thereby projecting a particular version of reality.

In order to leave a comment on the blog, the individual must be a registered user; this increases the possibility of tracing the user and may in turn contribute to self-censorship. Additionally, there are several rules relating to grammar and respect for the Russian language etc., in practice giving the administrators ample opportunity to remove unwanted comments. There is also tentative evidence that such removal is practised extensively. As of 29 June 2012, the blog on Medvedev’s official website had 149,000 active users, 33,000 of whom had left comments; altogether, more than 155,500 thousand comments were published on the site. The blog as such is accessible to everyone, and the videos and comments can be viewed without registration: registration is required only in order to leave a comment. However, a pertinent question—and one that would seem to indicate widespread removal of comments—is why 116,000 visitors would register their user profiles if they had no intention of leaving comments.

In order to assess the communication between the people and power on Medvedev’s blog, the author analysed a sample of 456 comments left by users and 20 video blog entries. The data cover the period March 2008–March 2011, when Medvedev was head of state. In-depth analysis has shown a generally weak connection between the discourse in Medvedev’s videos and user comments, which is not indicative of well-functioning two-way communication. Blog visitors appeared to be using the blog as a mailbox through which to contact Medvedev, rather than an arena of communication where users first listened to what the president was saying and then commented on it.

This conclusion is further underlined by the fact that only 82 comments were posted in connection with a specific video blog entry, whereas the remaining 374 were posted directly in the comments section. On the other hand, in the data sample there was one example of two-way communication that might have had an effect in

life outside the virtual world: one particular law—Federal Law N 343-FZ “On Mandatory Social Insurance in the case of Temporary Disability and in the case of Maternity Leave,” was revised after considerable negative blog-site response. This indicates that although signs of two-way communication are weak in the sample, they are not totally lacking. Viewers’ comments were indeed being read and noted; further, it shows that the blog, and the Internet as a whole, are at least to some extent used to access public opinion, even resulting in changes to appease the electorate.

The Future Under Putin

Dmitry Medvedev was a tech-savvy president with a passion for discussing modernization, as well as for using products made by Apple. What will happen to Internet communication now that Vladimir Putin has reclaimed the Russian presidency? Putin has always been ambivalent towards the Internet, even though in 2006 he became the first Russian leader to interact directly with an Internet audience, answering questions during an event organized by the Russian Internet company Yandex. Later in 2010, at a meeting of the State Council, he appeared to discredit the Net, declaring that it was a known fact that pornography accounts for 50 percent of all material found online. Then, in his campaign article

“Russia and the Changing World” from the 2012 presidential campaign, Putin wrote of the Internet as an effective tool for promoting domestic and international policy.

So far, Putin has refrained from opening his own video blog for communicating with the general public, nor are there any indications that this is something he will do in the immediate future. Being a modern blogger was so much a part of Medvedev’s political image that it might be considered a negative step for Putin to engage actively with the Internet in the same way as the previous president. For his part, Medvedev has remained an important figure among the Russian political elite, now as prime minister, and the number of government-backed Internet initiatives is growing steadily. Medvedev’s blog is still active on LiveJournal and on the prime minister’s official webpage premier.gov.ru. The rapid growth of the Internet in Russia indicates that this new communication tool has come to stay and should be taken seriously. Medvedev’s initiatives—the Development Program for e-Democracy, the Open Government Project and the Russia Without Fools Project—show that it is.

The effects of this state-led communication call for further analysis. We need studies examining the degree of change in policies that affect issues raised in the blogosphere in order to assess if the discourse that dominates

the virtual world has any relevance in the real world.

About the Author

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Further reading

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