

Open Government Partnership in a Regime that Is Not Free?

By Irina Busygina, Moscow, and Mikhail Filippov, Binghamton, U.S.

Abstract

In Russia, ranked as a “consolidated authoritarian regime” by Freedom House since 2008, the public has access to new information and communication technologies, and an ever-growing number of largely unrestricted internet resources and social networks, while the government provides support for international projects like the Open Government Partnership. This poses a puzzle, the answer to which might be of value in a broader context than Russia alone. In a non-democracy, why not suppress communication technology and networks? Our argument is that while a non-democratic government might face significant costs and risks due to the free flow of information, clever use of the same communication channels might gain it tangible political and economic benefits. Analysts should take into account that there are costs and benefits for the state in changing relations with its citizens and each decision carries the risk of backlash. Moreover, the Russian political incumbents have to present a proper image of their country to foreign investors if they hope to encourage an inflow of capital.

Defying Expectations

One expects, by default, that non-democratic regimes would at best merely tolerate, and most likely actively restrict and suppress, the use of new information and communication technologies and social networks within their borders. Yet in Russia, ranked as a “consolidated authoritarian regime” since 2008,¹ contrary to such expectations, we observe the launch of projects like Open Government. This poses a puzzle, which has implications for countries far beyond Russia. Why would a non-democracy choose not to suppress communication technologies and networks? We argue that while a non-democratic government might suffer significant costs due to the free flow of information, clever use of the same communication channels might gain it tangible political and economic benefits. The cost-benefit analysis done in the context of a specific polity determines the government’s strategy vis-à-vis its openness to communication technologies.

First, there are costs and benefits in changing relations with the citizens and any decision carries inherent risks. How do new information and communication technologies (ICTs) influence the relationship between the state and citizens in Russia? The evidence points in contradictory directions. New technologies dramatically decentralize the process, and reduce the costs, of obtaining and spreading information—something the state strictly controlled in the past. Thanks to smart-phones and social networks like Facebook, Twitter, or the blogging platform Livejournal, individuals and small groups have sufficient technical means to coordinate sizeable popular reaction in response to new information about the actions of the government in a quick and efficient manner. Thus, in just three days, between December 18

and 21, 2012, organizers gathered over 100,000 signatures for an on-line petition against the bill to ban U.S. citizens from adopting orphans in Russia.

Second, it is also true that the Russian state is becoming increasingly adept in using the new information and communication technologies to its own advantage. As technology changes, so does the way the state uses it to manipulate public opinion and promote its own legitimacy. Such widespread concerns were confirmed by hard evidence in February 2012, when hackers publicized the contents of e-mail accounts documenting payments by the Kremlin-sponsored youth organization “Nashi” to numerous (including some high-profile) bloggers, who posted information intended to portray Vladimir Putin in a positive light while discrediting opposition activists and media.²

Despite their democratic potential, new technologies allow the state to monitor its citizens better, collecting more detailed information about those who oppose it. Only computer scientists and IT experts can describe how exactly, and to what extent, this can be done nowadays; our only comment here is that this uncomfortable subject should not be ignored when discussing non-democratic regimes.

Finally, new technologies offer the benign benefits of improved governance as they provide a low cost way to increase the quality of public goods and government services. With new technologies, any government can better monitor its bureaucracies, police, traffic inspectors, health care providers, and manage many other areas of public policy. Besides the domestic usefulness of improved governance, such improvements send a positive signal to foreign investors. Good governance and

1 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2012/russia>

2 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/07/putin-hacked-emails-russian-nashi>

high transparency imply low transaction costs for businesses and a stable investment climate. Projects dedicated to providing “Open Government” serve as commitment devices to maintaining high standards both in governance and in transparency. The Kremlin’s dilemma might be typical for non-democratic regimes: the logic of its domestic political game requires isolation, but sustaining power requires the wealth generated by participation in globalization.³

As Bueno de Mesquita and Downs argue, “to remain secure, [incumbents] must raise the costs of political coordination among the opposition without also raising the costs of economic coordination too dramatically, so as not to stymie the economic growth and threaten the stability of the regime itself.”⁴ For Russian leaders, this argument means well-defined limits on the willingness to promote new information and communication technologies: the incumbents want to disable *strategic coordination* by the opposition in order to ensure their own political survival. Thus we could expect restrictions on technologies usable for social mobilization. Yet the use of new technologies by individual citizens to communicate “directly” with the state would not pose any danger to the regime, just the opposite. Imagine, that instead of bothering to organize and mobilize—either on the streets or in cyberspace, individuals can submit their requests or appeals on appropriate official web sites, so user-friendly that even their internet addresses are in Cyrillic! More generally, we expect the state to restrict political opportunities created by the new technologies while promoting their technocratic implications for increasing administrative efficiency.

Managing the Tradeoff between Free Information at Home and Seeking Capital Abroad

These contradictory tendencies were increasingly manifest in Russia following the wave of mass protests in December 2011. Repeatedly, the state attempted to impose tougher controls on the internet and to create judicial and technological means for quickly shutting it down in an emergency. Yet, at the same time, the state sought to broaden the use of the new technologies in government for the sake of technocratic benefits.

Recent events show how Russia is working to crack-down on the democratizing aspects of the internet while simultaneously using it to improve the regime’s durability. In July 2012, the Russian parliament unanimously

approved the bill to establish a federal “NO List” website which requires Internet providers to immediately remove any listed websites or else be shut down within 24 hours in an action that does not require a court order. The law mandates that Internet providers must install equipment and software which would make it possible for the regime to switch on comprehensive censorship at a moment’s notice. The technology is similar to that used by China’s Communist Party to block sites.⁵ The law was one of several restrictive bills pushed through the Duma in 2012, including legislation that dramatically raised fines for protesting in public, made libel a criminal offense, imposed restrictions on information “refuting family values,” and forced foreign-funded NGOs to register as “foreign agents.”⁶

In December 2012, at the UN World Conference on International Telecommunications in Dubai, Russia proposed changing the founding principles on which the Web operates to recognize “the sovereign right ... to regulate the national Internet segment.”⁷ Other countries protested and the initiative ultimately failed.

Meanwhile, at approximately the same time that the Dubai Conference was taking place, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev announced that Russia was going to join the Open Government Partnership (OGP),⁸ a multilateral initiative uniting the U.S. and over 50 other countries. OGP promises to revolutionize the public sector based on recent technological developments, and the US is looking for it to enable governments to promote transparency, empower citizens and civil society, expose corruption, and generally strengthen democratic governance.⁹

Implementing Open Government in a Closed Regime

Initially Russia’s response to the Open Government project was with its own Big Government (*Bol’shoe Pravitel’sтво*) project, proposed by President Medvedev and launched in mid-October 2011 by the Public Committee of the President’s Supporters. In addition to being the latest step in an on-going campaign to increase the government’s legitimacy in the eyes of the people, the Big Government initiative sent the message that the Russian

3 Wallander, C. 2007. Russian transimperialism and its implications, *The Washington Quarterly*, 30, 2, 107–122.

4 Bueno de Mesquita, B. and Downs, G. W. 2005. Development and democracy. *Foreign Affairs* 84 (5), 77–86.

5 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/growing-russian-internet-power-both-a-boon-and-worry-to-kremlin-a-849125.html>

6 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/reuvencohen/2012/11/01/russia-passes-far-reaching-internet-censorship-law-targeting-bloggers-journalists/>

7 <http://files.wcitleaks.org/public/S12-WCIT12-C-0027!R1!MSW-E.pdf>

8 <http://rt.com/politics/medvedev-open-government-join-042/>

9 <http://www.state.gov/j/ogp/index.htm>. Formally, the Open Government Partnership was launched by 8 governments—Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States—on September 20, 2011.

government would increase its efficiency by inviting non-government experts to provide advice to public officials.

In October 2011 then President Medvedev announced a related Open Government (OG) initiative, that, according to his conception, would open channels between executive branch officials and party activists, experts and all possible institutions of civil society in Russia. He defined the sphere of OG activity to be extremely wide: ranging from public services and the development of competition and entrepreneurship to sport and tourism. Medvedev's first meetings with dozens of experts addressed civil service reform, anti-corruption policy and the development of competition in Russia.

In general, Russia's federal executive saw OG as a tool which could provide transparency at all levels and branches of state authority, encourage free information exchanges between state and civil society, improve the quality and availability of public services through civic control over state authorities, and—finally—share responsibility for decisions between the executive branch and civil society. The key prerequisite of the OG concept is the idea that the authorities should react to the demands of civil society. OG (through its main institutions like expert councils, independent public councils within the executive branch, ombudsmen, business associations, and NGOs) provides expertise in the form of recommendations to executive branch officials. The results of this expert advice and recommendations are publicly discussed. Thus, the executive branch uses OG as a way to search for better solutions than it can generate on its own. Moreover, by adopting an OG system, the executive branch sends society a signal that it is ready to make the quality of its work the subject of a social contract.

In August 2012, Medvedev (now as prime minister) officially appointed 200 “permanent experts” to the Open Government to provide feedback on major government initiatives. In December 2012, Medvedev told the participants of the international conference on Open Government (Skolkovo, December 12–13, 2012), that some ideas proposed by those experts had already been put into practice at the federal and regional levels. “I believe that such a system of communication is the main result of our work,” he noted.¹⁰ This statement by Medvedev was consistent with *Forbes'* observation that, “outside of the website, the main working mechanisms of Open Government in Russia are working groups and expert councils.”

When the Open Government website was launched, the authorities claimed that it would allow each Rus-

sian citizen (or at least its 60 million internet users) to participate in government.¹¹ The data on the actual effectiveness of the project are somewhat contradictory. Though the site claims to have had more than 2 million visitors, the dominant Russian search engine, Yandex, recorded only 10,659 searches for “*otkrytoe pravitel'stvo*” (open government) in December 2012. In comparison, it recorded 175,349 searches for “Naval'nyj” (opposition blogger Alexey Navalny) during the same period. All of Russia's regions were required in 2012 to design regional and local mini-versions of Open Government under the label “Open Region”—opening websites and enlisting local experts. By December 2012, Open Region projects were on-line in 18 regions and 4 municipalities. However, *Yandex* recorded only 2,528 searches for “*otkrytyj region*” (open region) in December 2012.

While Medvedev emphasized the role of experts in providing better governance, Putin expressed the desire to redirect the attention of internet users away from high politics to issues of daily life at the local level. As Putin explained in one of his pre-election manifestos: “Presently, our citizens have access to all information on political debates in the parliament, on world markets, and on the marriages and divorces of Hollywood celebrities But most people want information that is relevant for them: on their homes, nearby areas, neighboring parks, schools, or their municipalities.”¹²

Of course, there are hopes that Russia's membership in the Open Government Partnership and her numerous Open Region projects will give Russian citizens new instruments to influence the development of the state. But observers are skeptical. In the words of Georgii Bovt, in Russia “the Open Government is not meant to aid the dialogue between the authorities and the people. It provides for a dialogue of a limited number of experts with the government. ... In effect, the Open Government is the second Public Chamber. It cannot replace an effective parliament or, most importantly, an effective judicial system, which we clearly do not possess... It can only produce individual technocratic amendments to various bureaucratic procedures.”¹³

Conclusion

In a globalizing world, where transnational capital mobility increased dramatically, accompanied by the unprecedented availability of information about the economic and political conditions within each country, governments that want a strong economy are forced to

10 <http://rt.com/politics/medvedev-open-government-join-042/>

11 <http://rt.com/politics/russia-unveils-e-government-initiative-959/>

12 <http://rt.com/politics/official-word/putin-article-evolving-democracy-551/>

13 <http://valdaiclub.com/authors/22202.html>

be disciplined and improve governance. The *New York Times* columnist, Thomas Friedman, tells a story of the Electronic Herd of global investors putting sovereign nations in a Golden Straitjacket:

“When your country recognizes ... the rules of the free market in today’s global economy, and decides to abide by them, it puts on what I call the Golden Strait Jacket. ... Those countries that put on the Golden Strait-jacket and keep it on are rewarded by the herd with investment capital. Those that don’t put it on are disciplined by the herd—either by the herd avoiding or withdrawing its money from that country. ... In the end, it [the herd] always responds to good governance and good economic management”¹⁴.

Friedman identifies as the key problem for Russian economic development the gap between the expectations of the global investors and the prevailing practices of Russian governance. The government-proclaimed desire to promote technological innovation and boost economic growth in Russia implies the need for the

state to provide the right stimuli and guarantees for investors. For entrepreneurs and investors, the Russian state in its current form is inefficient, ridden with corruption, lacking accountability, and generally unpredictable. Many see as problematic its ability to credibly commit to respect property rights and to sustain the stability of the rules guiding and regulating business practices within the country.

Embracing new communication technologies to improve governance and transparency may just well be the means for a country to signal its commitment to good business practices and a favorable business environment. A generation ago, Southeast Asian regimes found that empowering independent central banks could credibly signal that they could be trusted with long-term foreign direct investments. Emphasizing communication technologies may be a less direct, but comparably effective, contemporary way to send the same message for today’s non-democratic regimes.

About the Authors

Irina Busygina is Professor at the Department of Comparative Politics of Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Russia.

Mikhail Filippov is Professor at the State University of New York, Binghamton, US

Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) project “Modernizing the Russian North: Politics and Practice, 2011–2013,” funded by the Norwegian Research Council (project number 209365/H30).

14 Thomas L. Friedman (1999) *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, pp.86–88.