russian
analytical
digest

THE RUSSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Putin and Russia's Crippled Media

By Robert W. Orttung and Christopher Walker, Washington, D.C.

Abstract

Putin's Kremlin uses media repression as an indispensable part of a strategy to prevent the emergence of credible opposition that could seriously challenge the current regime. This article reviews recent developments in the Russian media and explains key elements of this strategy. While television remains the most important instrument for the authorities' dominance of Russia's information space, the Kremlin is paying increasing attention to the Internet, given that medium's rapidly growing influence.

Systematic Repression, Marginalized Independent Media

Following his return to the Kremlin in May 2012, President Vladimir Putin has sought to tamp down Russia's growing opposition movement by applying even greater pressure on what remains of independent media in Russia. Online activism has been integral to the emergence of the protest movement and the Russian authorities have therefore devoted increasing attention to the Internet. Until now, the Kremlin's strategy of media management has relied chiefly on dominance of national television, which remains the medium on which most Russians depend for news and information. Given the track record of the Russian authorities on political expression and dissent over the past dozen years, the growing influence of the Internet as a tool for alternative discussion and political coordination suggests that the Kremlin will take a much more active posture to circumscribe unfettered online discussion. Such a development would fit into a broader strategy in which Putin has sought to eliminate or marginalize potential alternatives to his rule by manipulating elections, limiting the scope of civil society activity, restricting the independence of the judiciary and co-opting critical business interests. Media ownership by regime-friendly business concerns, including large oil and gas companies, is a key feature of Russia's current media architecture.

Today's state-controlled media does not provide serious or balanced reporting on events at the highest level of Russia's political system or offer a forum for the free and open debate of ideas. Instead, state media works to provide Russian viewers with an officially-approved version of what is happening in Russia and the world, while discrediting potential opposition voices or forces that are critical of the incumbent powers. A key element of this strategy is to provide a steady stream of high production value television entertainment that serves as a distraction to discourage citizens from becoming politically active. While the Internet offers alternative sources of information and is slowly emerging as a potential challenger to official media hegemony, it still has far to go before replacing television as the main source of information for most Russians.

On the major indices that track media openness and pluralism, Russia's media system performs exceptionally poorly. Reporters Without Borders, for instance, ranked Russia 148 in its 2013 list of 179 countries in terms of freedom of the press. It particularly criticized Russia for the crackdown on the political opposition and the failure of the authorities to vigorously pursue and bring to justice criminals who have murdered journalists. Freedom House ranks Russian media as "not free," indicating that basic safeguards and guarantees for journalists and media enterprises are absent. The state's dominant role in the Russian media is most visible in its exercise of control over national broadcast networks. Freedom House's 2012 report on media freedom observes that "the state owns, either directly or through proxies, all six national television networks, two national radio networks, two of the 14 national newspapers, more than 60 percent of the roughly 45,000 registered local newspapers and periodicals, and two national news agencies."[1] As a snapshot, Russia performs poorly in comparison to most other countries, but the analysis from these independent monitors also shows that over time Russia's level of media freedom has eroded sharply.

The end effect of the Kremlin's systematic repression of the country's media infrastructure is that the availability of independent, local language news and analysis of political relevance is as circumscribed today as at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Apart from limited radio programming, only some print media, much of which has limited audience reach, is able to tackle serious issues of politics, corruption and public affairs. Even in these cases, however, over the course of the Putin era widespread self-censorship has grown deep roots at news organizations. Today, print journalists and editors must increasingly rely on support from the state budget and routinely confront intimidation, lawsuits and other forms of harassment when they report on sensitive issues.

1   http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/russia

Television: Russia's Dominant News Medium

Although growing internet usage receives much of the attention in reports about Russian media space, television remains the most important medium through which Russians receive their news. The sanitizing of independent reporting from the airwaves during the Putin era has achieved a powerful, negative impact. Research done on television viewing habits in 1999 suggests that access to independent reporting had the effect of decreasing aggregate voting for the government party by nearly 9 percent and that viewers of such broadcasts were more likely to support opposition parties.[2]

Putin made gaining control over television a top priority upon taking power in 2000 and has invested considerable effort to gain dominance over television media. Given the digital divide between urban and rural areas in Russia, less connected rural populations depend more on state media and as a rule have much less access to independent sources of information than their urban counterparts, including from the Internet. For the television audience, the Russian authorities effectively have the power to make individuals with critical voices invisible. In place of opposition figures, activists and social critics, public-affairs shows feature a reliable set of Kremlin-approved commentators. This enables the regime to have a direct pipeline for rallying its political base.

News and information broadcasts on television are largely devoted to praising the regime and discrediting the opposition. However, there are signs that this policy is starting to wear thin with viewers. While Russian state television audiences are still robust, they are not as large as they were earlier in Putin's tenure. State-controlled television sources (Channel One, Rossiya, Kultura and local RTR stations) served as a primary source of information for 73 percent of the population in February 2012, down from 87 percent a year earlier.[3]

Televised criticism of the opposition has gained notoriety in recent months. Gazprom-owned NTV, for example, broadcast a savage attack on the opposition in the form of a documentary series entitled "Anatomy of a Protest."[4] The first episode, broadcast in the middle of March 2012, alleged that protest organizers paid participants to take to the streets and demand free and fair elections, as well as Putin's resignation. The broadcast inspired heated debate on the Russian part of the Internet and brought several hundred protesters out to the Ostankino television tower to denounce the regime's use of blatant propaganda. Anatomy of a Protest-2, broadcast on October 5, 2012, claimed that opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov and his colleagues Konstantin Lebedev and Leonid Razvozzhayev had conspired with Georgian lawmaker Givi Targamadze to plot terrorist attacks in Russia.[5] The broadcast led to a quick response by the law enforcement agencies. While Lebedev was already under arrest, the authorities used evidence from the broadcast to charge Udaltsov with preparing for mass riots in Moscow during the May 6 protests. On October 19 Russian agents apparently kidnapped Razvozzhayev in Kyiv, where he was talking to representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in an effort to obtain asylum. He was brought back to Russia, tortured, and forced to write a confession. He remains in custody in Siberia.

In the immediate aftermath of the December 2011 rallies, state-controlled television news broadcasts have initiated some efforts to present a more believable picture of what is going on in Russia in order to prevent more Russians from simply tuning them out. With large numbers of Russian citizens taking to the streets, the government-controlled networks began to report on opposition rallies rather than simply ignoring them as they had in the past. A major change also took place on September 15, 2012, when state television stations showed Alexey Navalny, one of the most prominent opposition leaders, who has made Russia's runaway corruption his point of focus. While other opposition leaders, such as Boris Nemtsov, had on occasion featured in the news broadcasts, Navalny until that time had not appeared before the television-viewing public.

Television broadcasts continue to exert a powerful effect on Russian public opinion, according to the Levada Center's Lev Gudkov. He observes, for example, that the government was able to build support for the law banning American adoptions of Russian orphans by airing programming that repeated the unseemly message that American parents who adopt Russian children torture and sexually abuse them. These programs have emphasized the tragic exceptions to the rule, but through this jaundiced reporting lead many television viewers to conclude, incorrectly, that Russian orphans routinely end up in tragic circumstances under the care of American parents.[6]

In order to silence one of its outspoken critics, TV host Vladimir Pozner, the Duma even threatened to pass a law banning individuals with joint Russian and foreign citizenship from appearing on the air if they insult the authorities. Pozner aroused the anger of the

2   Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, "Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia," American Economic Review 101 (December 2011): 3253–85.

3   Russians' Confidence in State TV Slipping, Moscow Times, April 5, 2012.

4   http://www.ntv.ru/video/peredacha/296996/

5   http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/347117/

6   http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/56510.html

parliamentarians by calling the State Duma foolish for adopting the law blocking American adoptions. Eventually Pozner apologized and the bill blocking him from appearing on Russian television was withdrawn at the end of January 2013. Supporters of the legislation in the Duma claimed that they would keep it on hold in case it was needed in the future.

In addition, many topics are simply off limits in the Russian media. One such issue is President Putin's health. Putin cancelled many of his appearances in the fall of 2012, but the Russian media presented only limited information about the reasons behind these cancellations.

A Role for Radio

Radio plays a large role in Russia's mediascape, especially given the large number of commuters stuck in the country's numerous traffic jams. Radio helps to balance the daily diet of infotainment provided by editorially-stunted television networks. Ekho Moskvy and other radio stations provide live coverage of opposition rallies and their commentators offer a variety of views.

Despite its current freedom, however, Ekho Moskvy's organizational autonomy and editorial independence has come under progressively more intense pressure. On March 29, 2012, the Ekho Moskvy Board of Directors removed Editor in Chief Aleksey Venediktov, First Deputy Editor in Chief Vladimir Varfolomeyev, and independent directors Yevgeniy Yasin and Aleksandr Makovskiy from the station's governing body. This action has ensured that it will be easier to remove Venediktov as editor if the Kremlin decided on such a course of action. Gazprom Media owns a controlling stake in the station.

Radio faces other problems. The restrictive law that forces NGOs accepting support from foreign sources to declare themselves "foreign agents" also included measures to restrict radio operations, in this case making it illegal for radio stations with more than 48 percent foreign ownership to be on the air. One effect of this legislation was to knock off the air the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Russian Service on local Russian AM stations that retransmitted the signal. This development occurred at about the same time RFE/RL management took the step of abruptly firing many of its Russian Service's seasoned journalists as part of a controversial restructuring plan that has caused considerable upheaval at the organization.

Growing Importance of the Internet

While the number of television viewers has been shrinking over time, the number of Internet users grew over the course of 2012, from 52 to 57 percent of the popu-

lation.[7] This increasing popularity of the web means that the authorities are starting to pay more attention to what is happening online and taking more active measures in response. The government now sees online activism as an authentic threat to its position, given the Internet's ability to help mobilize popular street protests. According to the human rights group Agora, the Russian authorities violated the freedom of the Internet 1,197 times in 2012, almost 2.5 as many times documented in 2011.[8]

Not only is the internet becoming more popular with Russian users, more people are using it as a source of news, rather than solely for purposes of entertainment. Currently, as much as 25 percent of the population use web resources to find out what is going on in their country and around the world. In some ways, the internet is even becoming more popular than television—on some days more people visit the Yandex news aggregator than watch state-controlled Channel One though television viewers still spend more time watching the station than they do on the Internet.

Given its steadily growing influence, the Internet has sparked deeper concern among Russia's leadership. On November 1, 2012, a new law came into effect that enables the state to filter the web. In particular, the new legislation ordered the Russian Federal Surveillance Service for Mass Media and Communications (Roskomnadzor) to create a blacklist of sites that could be blocked on Russian territory.[9] While the measure ostensibly targets child pornography and websites that encourage suicide and drug use, critics claim that it could be used by the authorities to censor targets other than those emphasized in the law, due the legislation's vague wording. Additionally, a court order is not required to shut down a website. By December 2012, Russia had blocked access to 640 web sites. If there is objectionable material on just one page, the entire site can be closed. The agency responsible said that it had already received more than 19,000 proposals for sites to be shut down by the end of 2012, so the number of closures is expected to grow. The government's drug control and consumer protection services have been particularly active in shuttering sites that they deem offensive.

Internet and Dish network satellite broadcaster Dozhd TV (http://tvrain.ru/) became an important source

7   Levada Center, "57% rossiyan pol'zuyutsya Internetom," November 12, 2012, http://www.levada.ru/12-11-2012/57-rossiyan -polzuyutsya-internetom.

8   http://openinform.ru/news/unfreedom/04.02.2013/27991/

9   Federal'nyj zakon ot 27 iyulya 2006 goda N 149-FZ "Ob informacii, informacionnyh tehnologiyah i zashchite informacii" (v red. Federal'nyh zakonov ot 27.07.2010 N 227-FZ, ot 06.04.2011 N 65-FZ, ot 21.07.2011 N 252-FZ, ot 28.07.2012 N 139-FZ), http://zapret-info.gov.ru/docs/149.pdf.

of information during the December 2011 protests because it was able to broadcast timely news reports from the scene. As an on-line television station, it offers an alternative set of news and opinions that contrast with those of the Kremlin-controlled television networks. One measure of its success is evident in the fact that the pro-Kremlin foundation, the Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research, has provided three year funding for the Kremlin-friendly Kontr-TV (http://kontr.tv/#!/), which has established an on-line alternative to Dozhd. This tactic of creating organizations to mimic those that are authentically independent fits with a larger pattern that has become visible over the Putin years.

Crackdown on Journalists

Russia is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists to work. Over the past 20 years, 341 reporters have been killed in the country, according to the Russian Journalist Union. Among recent cases, Anchorman Kazbek Gekkiev was killed on December 5, 2012 as he was leaving his studio in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria. Putin has called on the authorities to solve the crime, while local officials blame it on Islamist militants. On December 15, 2011, assassins killed Khadzhimurad Kamalov, the founder of the independent Dagestani newspaper *Chernovik.* The republican authorities became angry with the paper in 2008, when it reported that innocent people had died in a counterinsurgency operation. While the killings of journalists continue, so far there has been no resolution to the multitude of murders of journalists in recent years, including that of Anna Politkovskaya in 2006. Impunity is the standard.

Reporters also face extensive harassment in the course of carrying out their duties. After the May 6–9, 2012, street demonstrations in Moscow surrounding Putin's inauguration, the Russian authorities detained dozens of journalists covering the event. Additionally, on May 6 the websites of Kommersant, Ekho Moskvy, Bolshoi gorod, Dozhd' and slon.ru were subjected to distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks that made them inaccessible to readers who wanted to track information about the rallies as they were happening.

In a further effort to weaken the free media, Putin signed a new law that recriminalized libel.[10] This represented a sharp reversal, as Dmitry Medvedev had decriminalized libel only months before, in fall 2011. Potential fines in the new law were increased up to 5 million rubles ($153,000).

Conclusion: The Implications of Media Repression

Russian citizens enjoy access to a considerable diversity of information today, much more so than during the Soviet era. But this flood of information does not mean that ordinary Russian consumers of news have consistent access to meaningful coverage of policy and politics. For the authorities, blocking a candid discussion of what counts—news and information about policy making, budget decisions and the business interests of government—is paramount.

The media operating in Putin's Russia remain on a tight leash. The state has effective monopoly control over the most important medium, television, and prevents the airing of news and public affairs programming that could offer different political voices and policy options. While the Internet provides alternative information and opinions, it is increasingly coming under Kremlin scrutiny as the authorities try to limit its ability to facilitate collective action among the opposition.

As questions about the government's legitimacy grow, the authorities' media management will become even more crucial to the Russian leadership's ability to retain power. A decade-long strategy of undermining independent media has exacted a heavy toll on Russian citizens, however. The ongoing denial of authentically independent news media presents wider, negative implications for Russian society's ability to develop in a more transparent and democratically accountable direction.

About the Authors:
Robert W. Orttung is the assistant director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs.
Christopher Walker is the executive director of the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies and can be followed on Twitter @Walker_CT.

10 Federal'nyj zakon Rossijskoj Federacii ot 28 iyulya 2012 g. N 141-FZ "O vnesenii izmenenij v Ugolovnyj kodeks Rossijskoj Federacii i otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossijskoj Federacii" Rossiiskaya gazeta, August 1, 2012, http://www.rg.ru/2012/08/01/kleveta-dok.html.

ANALYSIS

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 crackdown 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'stvo)* 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"—openning 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 Straitjacket 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

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

ANALYSIS

Communicating with the Nation: Russian Politicians Online

By Natalia Moen-Larsen, Oslo, Norway

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 Zhirinovsky, 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
Natalia Moen-Larsen is a research assistant at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

Further reading
• Alexanyan, K. (ed.) (2009) Internet Blogs. *Russian Analytical Digest* 69. Available at http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-69.pdf.
• Alexanyan, K., V. Barash, B. Etling, R. Faris, U. Gasser, J. Kelly, J. Palfrey & H. Roberts (2012) *Exploring Russian Cyberspace: Digitally-Mediated Collective Action and the Networked Public Space.* Berkman Center Research Publication 2012-2.
• Deibert, R., J. Palfrey, R. Rohozinski & J. Zittrain (eds) (2010) *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace.* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
• Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication (2010) *Internet v Rossii: Sostoyanie, Tendencii i Perspektivi Razvitiya.* Available at http://www.fapmc.ru/magnoliaPublic/dms-static/7180131a-52db-4002-9408-e2403280a861.pdf. Accessed 4 October 2012.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (http://www.hist.uzh.ch/) and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University. It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.css.ethz.ch/rad), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

To subscribe or unsubscribe to the Russian Analytical Digest, please visit our web page at www.css.ethz.ch/rad

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen
Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to the interdisciplinary analysis of socialist and post-socialist developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The major focus is on the role of dissent, opposition and civil society in their historic, political, sociological and cultural dimensions.
With a unique archive on dissident culture under socialism and with an extensive collection of publications on Central and Eastern Europe, the Research Centre regularly hosts visiting scholars from all over the world.
One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular e-mail newsletters covering current developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich
The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a Swiss academic center of competence that specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international and Swiss security studies. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public. The CSS is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners. The Center's research focus is on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, area studies, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.
In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) in public policy degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS); offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students; and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.
The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Crisis and Risk Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University
The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies is home to a Master's program in European and Eurasian Studies, faculty members from political science, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, and other fields, visiting scholars from around the world, research associates, graduate student fellows, and a rich assortment of brown bag lunches, seminars, public lectures, and conferences.

The Institute of History at the University of Zurich
The University of Zurich, founded in 1833, is one of the leading research universities in Europe and offers the widest range of study courses in Switzerland. With some 24,000 students and 1,900 graduates every year, Zurich is also Switzerland's largest university. Within the Faculty of Arts, the Institute of History consists of currently 17 professors and employs around a 100 researchers, teaching assistants and administrative staff. Research and teaching relate to the period from late antiquity to contemporary history. The Institute offers its 2,600 students a Bachelor's and Master's Degree in general history and various specialized subjects, including a comprehensive Master's Program in Eastern European History. Since 2009, the Institute also offers a structured PhD-program. For further information, visit at http://www.hist.uzh.ch/

Resource Security Institute
The Resource Security Institute (RSI) is a non-profit organization devoted to improving understanding about global energy security, particularly as it relates to Eurasia. We do this through collaborating on the publication of electronic newsletters, articles, books and public presentations.