

## Analysis

# The Web That Failed: How the Russian State Co-opted a Growing Internet Opposition Movement

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## Abstract

Barack Obama's presidential campaign demonstrated how sophisticated on-line strategies can mobilize a broad offline electorate. Many optimists had hoped that the Internet would similarly energize people living under authoritarian governments to come together for the sake of advancing democratic reforms. That outcome has not been achieved in Russia so far. A case study of Svoboda Vybora, an association of automobilists that effectively used on-line organizing techniques, demonstrates how the authorities can neutralize potentially powerful opposition movements through the use of subtle co-optation.

## Obama on-line

With fresh memories of the November US presidential election, American and European commentators have been writing in amazement and awe about a political campaign that, in the words of the *New York Times* "has rewritten the rules on how to reach voters, raise money, organize supporters, manage the news media, track and mould public opinion, and wage – and withstand – political attacks, including many carried by blogs that did not exist four years ago."

According to accounts of the Internet strategies used by the two US presidential candidates, it is clear that President-elect Barack Obama's campaign first and foremost has been extremely successful at motivating and mobilizing Internet users, particularly bloggers, to play a volunteer role that has enabled them to participate actively online, through Obama's social networking site, [MyBarackObama.com](http://MyBarackObama.com) and offline, helping to make possible the impressive November 4<sup>th</sup> election turnout in favor of the Democratic Party candidate.

In the words of Mark McKinnon, a senior adviser to President Bush's campaigns in 2000 and 2004, the Obama campaign's use of the Internet allowed for the electoral paradigm to be "turned upside down" truly becoming "bottom up instead of top down." This grassroots strategy worked well in the framework of a campaign centered on "Change" and "Yes, We Can" messages and energized the more active section of the electorate, while also managing to inspire many young people, who are often considered indifferent to political messages, to vote for the first time.

Although television remained the most prominent source of campaign information for the electorate, polls indicate that 49 percent of 18–29 year olds and 37 percent of 30–49 year olds turned to the Internet for political information. Data published immediately after the

vote showed that 66 percent of 18–29 years old, 53 percent of 30–44 years old and 49 percent of 45–59 years old, as well as a remarkable 69 percent of first time voters, voted for Obama.

Unlike Obama, Republican candidate John McCain chose to run an Internet campaign with a traditional top-down approach. Researchers at the Columbia School of Journalism found that McCain's campaign used blogs profusely and often helped to raise their visibility, but only "as an echo chamber for channeling mostly anti-Obama attacks into the mainstream media, in order to create an impression of grassroots on-line support."

## The Internet and Autocracy in Russia

Perhaps imagining this kind of experience, conventional wisdom has long asserted that the Internet would play a major role in opening up authoritarian societies because the regimes would be unable, or unwilling, to quarantine their societies from the vast resources of the Web. Ultimately, the hope has been that the right grassroots strategies applied to the Internet would lead to the extensive volunteer mobilization that we have observed in Obama's electoral campaign.

But the picture is more varied than expected, particularly since political cultures and societal factors have a strong impact. Recent research on the political influence and practice of the Russian Internet, conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, reveals a hard fact about the Russian Internet world, a fact that unfortunately is often ignored in the generally optimistic accounts of the Net's unique features: While political and citizens' groups seeking to operate independently have started to use the Internet, they have so far failed to establish a strong, attractive and accessible web presence, develop a democratic in-

ternal structure that fosters self-regulation, and reduce the risk that the state will ultimately manipulate and co-opt their movement.

Russia is a particular case of free media suppression because the authorities do not achieve their goals through overt censorship or police raids. They only partially rely on legislation and state registration requirements. For the most part, democratic groups seeking to utilize the Russian Internet are outmaneuvered and outspent by the authorities and their allies. The activists are rendered at best only partly effective by their limited public and political skills, difficulty in fostering productive discussion among themselves, and inability to overcome the widespread lack of trust among users.

As part of a larger research project, my colleagues and I studied the online activities of the Svoboda Vybora (Free Choice) motorists' movement at the height of the Russian parliamentary and presidential electoral season from September 2007 to January 2008. Svoboda Vybora provides material for a particularly interesting case study because it was a true grassroots movement with enormous potential for mobilization, based entirely on Internet communication.

### The Free Choice Motorists' Movement

Svoboda Vybora was created as a reaction to a proposed government ban on all right-hand-drive cars in early 2005. Many Russians drive such vehicles, typically imported as used cars from Japan, because they are relatively inexpensive and more reliable than domestic models. The motorists' movement "started with a spontaneous, geographically and demographically broad-based challenge to a specific policy initiative of the Russian government. But over time the challenge broadened in scope, calling into question the policy-making legitimacy of the authorities," as former Moscow Carnegie Centre expert Sam Greene noted.

Following a series of successful protest actions in 2005–2006, when thousands of motorists invaded the streets of Moscow and other cities, Svoboda Vybora evolved into one of the country's largest grassroots organizations, tackling issues well beyond the right to drive on the "wrong" side of the car. It became a genuine social movement.

The Reuters Institute research team selected Svoboda Vybora for its study also because it is genuinely Russian and financially self-sufficient, inoculating it from accusations that it takes money from Western sources, Russian oligarchs or Kremlin authorities and is therefore dependent on their guidance.

### Taking to the Web

The organization set up a website (<http://www.19may.ru/index.php?page=about>) to coincide with its first action on May 19, 2005, when motorists protested in Moscow and 48 Russian regions, to the astonishment of an unprepared police force. Since its inception the movement has used the Internet as a platform for information, logistics and mobilization. The website is at the core of Svoboda Vybora's activity and its public presence: the organization exists entirely on the Internet. It has no offices, although it has active regional chapters, whose members meet in forums hosted on the website.

The website of Svoboda Vybora has a news section, complemented by a number of forums on issues proposed both by the movement's leader Vyacheslav Lysakov and by organization members. These forums are its most interesting feature: through them, Lysakov said in an interview with researchers, he very quickly established a network of regional volunteers.

There were nine active chapters (Moscow, Moscow region, Samara, Kaliningrad, Tyumen, Chelyabinsk, Krasnodar, Yakutia, Magadan) at the time of the research. Volunteers participated in discussions on a regular basis, and more or less active members of the organization could also be found in 32 other regions. Twenty-eight regional chapters had their own forums. The movement was registered as a Russian non-commercial organization in April 2006, following the government's adoption of new regulations on NGO activities.

The forums, strictly moderated by Lysakov and by two other moderators, had some 8,000 registered users and 2–3 times more guests who did not write, but read actively, at the time of research. Members of the movement did not generally use blogs to enhance the impact of their activity and attract new supporters.

Unlike many other non-governmental organizations, Svoboda Vybora has enjoyed steady and positive mainstream media coverage since 2005, thanks to the efficiency of the movement's leader. The website [www.19may.ru](http://www.19may.ru) occupied the second place in terms of popularity in the Yandex.ru Cars and Legislation section during research monitoring. The website was the fifth most popular in the same category in another much-used Russian portal: [Mail.ru](http://Mail.ru).

### Going from Online to Offline Action

In 2005 and 2006, Svoboda Vybora mobilized enough support to conduct some half dozen successful protests and three successful actions, including one aimed at

preventing price increases for gasoline and one for the transport tax.

One action in particular had great resonance in Russia and contributed to the consolidation of Svoboda Vybora. On August 7, 2005, Altai Governor Mikhail Yevdokimov was killed in a car accident. His government car, travelling at high speed according to official instructions, collided with another car, then ran off the road and hit a tree. Yevdokimov's driver and bodyguard died along with him. The driver of the car that collided with the governor's, Oleg Scherbinsky, was convicted of breaking traffic laws with fatal results and sentenced to four years in a penal colony.

Following Scherbinsky's conviction, Svoboda Vybora organized motorist protests and demonstrations all over Russia on February 12, 2006. A month later, on March 23, 2006, Scherbinsky's conviction was overturned and he was released.

This action helped to consolidate trust in the image of the organization as a dynamic defender of the rights of drivers against the arrogance of the authorities, represented in this case by Yevdokimov's government Mercedes. The issue is extremely important for drivers in Russian cities. Bureaucrats at all levels, as well as rich and well-connected individuals, routinely block roads, cause traffic jams, and provoke fatal accidents, but only seldom face prosecution. In contrast, corrupt traffic officers frequently stop and harass regular drivers.

### **Moving from Protests to Providing Advice**

Following that action, however, Svoboda Vybora's activity changed radically. An in-depth interview with Lysakov and daily monitoring of discussions taking place on the forums of the organization's websites during the period October – December 2007 showed that while the forums continued to stimulate dialogue among members and played an important civil society and educational role (for instance with an active campaign in support of the use of safety belts for drivers and passengers, as well as of children's seats) the potential to cultivate political conversations, create political alliances and ultimately support mobilization had sharply decreased – largely as a result of the highly personalized structure of the organization around its leader.

What had happened?

Lysakov told researchers that he coordinated an Advisory Council in charge of steering the organization. However, he said he did not feel obliged to report all his activities to the members of the council and ask their permission before starting new initiatives, particularly concerning public relations strategies. Lysakov's

habit of acting on his own, before or even without discussing with the organization's council the nature and implications of his public outreach for the movement, gave the authorities an opportunity to co-opt him – and thereby ultimately defuse the protest and civic potential of Svoboda Vybora.

The actions of 2005/2006 had attracted the authorities' attention. In April 2006 State Duma deputies first asked Lysakov to consult with them about transportation issues. Then they requested that he create an expert group to provide more formal advice.

Lysakov told researchers that he and seven of his closest associates helped the lower house of Parliament draft transportation legislation in 2007. He described this development as a "qualitative metamorphosis" – in which the organization switched its focus "from protesting against government actions to working with the government from the inside." He said that his cooperation with the Duma was proof of the authorities' willingness to submit to a degree of civil control.

Indeed, the Russian lower house's legislative initiatives on transportation have profited from Svoboda Vybora's expert advice, definitely a positive development. However, these consultative activities coincided with a notable decrease in the number of protests organized by Svoboda Vybora. The last such action took place in May 2006.

From May 2006 to January 2008, when the research ended, "Svoboda Vybora" did not organize any protest actions. Members of the movement repeatedly voiced their concern about the organization's inactivity in forum discussions, especially when high-profile violations of the Highway Code by government cars caused deaths or otherwise harmed motorists.

### **State Co-optation**

In the case of Svoboda Vybora and its leader, the authorities seem to have implemented a very simple and effective co-optation strategy, aimed at drawing on the expertise, network and trust potential of the movement, while at the same time neutralizing its protest potential, or at least putting it under a certain degree of control. The high level of personalization in the movement's leadership significantly simplified the task.

This outcome does not mean that the organization has become ineffective. Among the useful social initiatives it recently organized is a round-table discussion on car safety. Lysakov said that more than 1,000 children die every year in car accidents in Russia, and 25,000 suffer various concussions in accidents, due to the lack of regulations requiring children to wear seat-

belts. The general presentation of the website is, however, presently misleading, since it still emphasizes the protest activity of the movement.

Sociologist Boris Dubin says that “the hopes of those who expect civil society activities in Russia to increase and have a significant impact on the offline world seem quite naïve. Since the Internet is essentially a horizontal communication network, a corresponding vertical network of existing institutes, whose functions are sometimes obstructed, but whose existence is nonetheless respected by society and by the political leadership, is needed for the creation of ideas that can translate into offline activity and mobilization.”

Svoboda Vybora’s story is an important one at this stage in Russia’s political development. The Internet is, as is often attested, the least controllable of media because of the power to communicate and link up that it puts in the hands of anyone with access to a computer attached to a network and a modicum of expertise. However, it *is* being controlled – not by an army of censors and watchers, as in China – but by a political culture which has as yet not produced a stable basis for competing parties, and a central political authority with strong popular support which is capable of blocking oppositionist messages and is careful to do so.

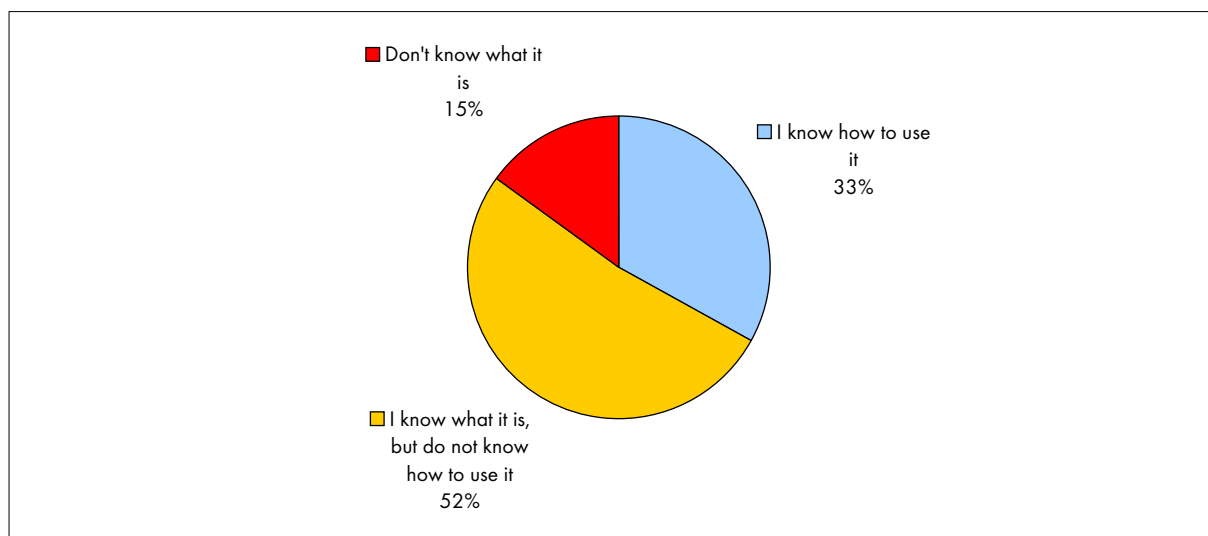
*About the author*

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*Recommended Reading*

Floriana Fossato and John Lloyd with Alexander Verkhovsky, *The Web that Failed: How opposition politics and independent initiatives are failing on the internet in Russia*, Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2008, <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publications/the-web-that-failed.html>.

**Do You Know What the Internet Is, and Can You Use It? (November 2007)**



Source: representative poll of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Center, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008071701.html>