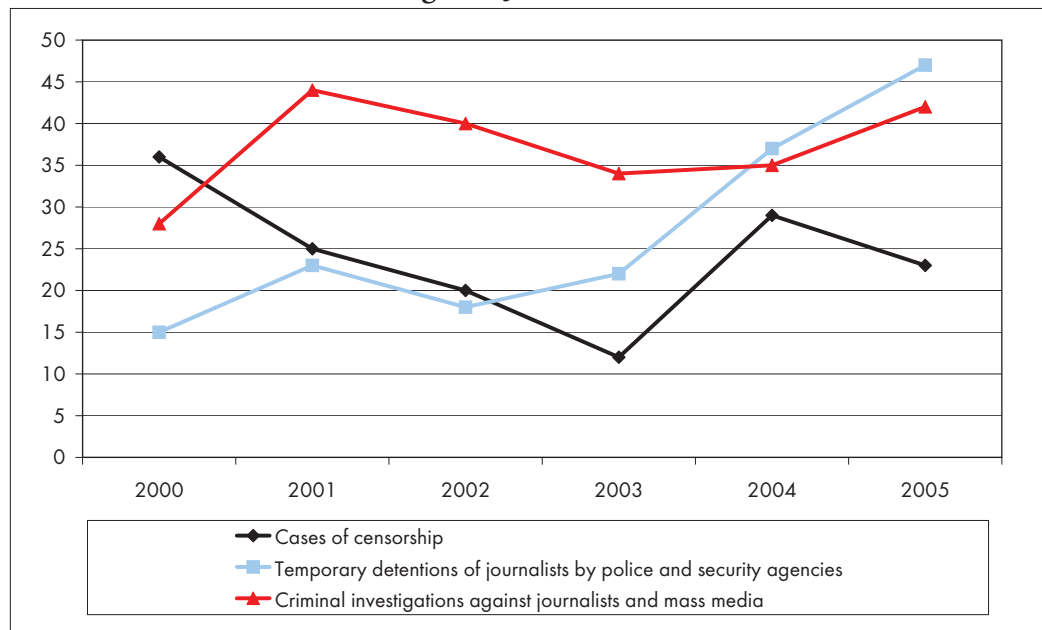


Other Official Measures Taken against Journalists and the Media 2000 – 2005



Analysis

Russian Internet Remains an Island of Free Speech and Civil Society

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Summary

With freedom of the press under pressure in the traditional media, the poorly developed party system, and the authorities' desire to block street demonstrations and other public acts, the Internet remains a small island of political freedom and freedom of speech and self-expression. Now the authorities are thinking about how to exert their control over this sphere of Russian life. In part, they are justifiably worried about the growth of extremist tendencies among Internet users and the fact that radicals are actively using the Internet for propagandizing their ideas and attracting new supporters.

The Internet as a Form of Mass Media and Business

Seven percent of Russia's adults use the Internet every day, according to ROMIR Monitoring. Over the course of a month, 22 percent of Russians over the age of 16 access the information superhighway. Over the last three years, these figures have doubled.

Somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 people visit the sites of political parties and movements everyday, according to the Rambler search engine site. These sites provide alternative information since the main television broadcasters devote 90 percent of their political news coverage to the activities of the authorities and their United Russia party.

News sites and Internet media play an important role on the Russian Internet. For example, gazeta.ru positions itself as a newspaper on the Internet: it has analytical articles, interviews and all the usual features of a typical newspaper. The site lenta.ru special-

izes in reprinting reports from new agencies and other sources. Newsru.com, the former site of NTV, focuses on posting numerous photographs.

Internet sites that have developed a strong reputation in the virtual world are now moving off-line. For example, the business news agency Rosbizneskonsalting (RBK, www.rbc.ru) and the portal Rambler have launched their own television stations. Additionally, RBK is producing a daily business newspaper, a relatively expensive project. The most expensive Russian Internet project is considered to be the Yandex.ru portal, with a capitalization of approximately \$1 billion. Yandex has yet to start investing in off-line projects.

The Internet is the only sphere of the Russian media where opposition-minded oligarchs, pushed from the political sphere by President Putin, have managed to maintain their position. Boris Berezovsky, currently based in London, owns the analytical site Grani.ru. Vladimir Gusinsky, now living in Israel, owns

newsru.com and several Israeli Russian-language sites, which are also read in Russia. Gazeta.ru is considered to be close to Leonid Nevzlin, one of the partners of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is currently sitting in a Siberian jail. Nevzlin is hiding from the Russian authorities in Israel.

Oligarchs loyal to Putin have not been active in the Internet and have not expressed an interest in news sites. However, they have been involved in providing Internet access to customers and Internet television.

Successor to Samizdat and the Soviet Kitchen

The Russian Internet today is performing the functions of the institutions of democratic society, which are sorely lacking “off-line.” These functions include those of civil society as well as the media. While most of the population remains indifferent, politicians and human rights defenders have found shelter in blogs and Internet forums, where they exchange opinions on current events and find allies and opponents.

“Politics is not leaving for the Internet, it has been chased there,” according to Yabloko press spokesman Aleksei Naval’nyi, who keeps his own blog.

“The Internet is becoming stronger and more influential. Nevertheless, it does not represent all social groups, but just the most advanced part of the population,” according to Dmitry Oreshkin, the head of the Merkator Group. Maksim Kononenko, a blogger and Internet-journalist with close ties to the Kremlin, claims that all political discussion in contemporary Russia today takes place on the Internet and particularly in blogs. He points out, however, that the Internet is still a poor tool for introducing ideas to the masses. He claims that one can influence the opinions of 2 percent of the voters through the Internet, and these people are mainly located in the capital cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Some have compared today’s blogs to the Soviet kitchen. In the former USSR, it was impossible to discuss political issues in the media or public gatherings, so the intelligentsia addressed these problems at home, effectively underground. Now those times are returning. Others have compared blogs to the political and literary salons held in Petersburg and Moscow at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Current blogs represent views across the entire political spectrum: liberals, Putin supporters, nationalists and leftists. However, there is little constructive interaction between them, a reflection perhaps of the lack of a Russian tradition for political dialogue. Typically, discussion of an important issue quickly turns into a stream of insults and denunciations that one is a stooge for the Kremlin, fallen oligarchs, America, or the global Zionist conspiracy, depending on the lean-

ings of the accuser.

One obvious difference between today’s blogs and the Soviet kitchen conversations is that the kitchen conversations were conducted at a much higher level. Another difference is that the blogs and Internet forums are a network of kitchens. Sociologists have pointed out that the blogs and specialized Internet forums have produced an unforeseen effect. Isolated radicals, whether leftist, nationalist, or ecological, have begun to actively find each other. Earlier they were alone or had to recruit new members among their friends, using traditional, rarely effective methods of agitation, that were easily detected by the police. Now, through the Internet, they can find ideologically like-minded individuals who are ready to act.

For example, the August 21 bomb blast at the Cherkizov market in Moscow, which killed 10 illegal migrants from Asia and wounded an additional 40, was prepared by nationalists who met each other on the Internet. All three organizers were students at prestigious Moscow universities, including one who was training in chemistry. They used their knowledge to make the explosives, which were the equivalent of 1.5 kilograms of TNT. The chemist found the plans for the bomb on the Internet.

Vladimir Lenin once called the party press an “agitator and organizer,” arguing that a newspaper could become an organizing center for a party. Thanks to the appearance of blogs, there are now youth democratic movements such as *Oborona*, *Da!*, and *Ya dumayu*. The young opponents of Putin who organized these groups found people who think the same way through their blogs. Organizers have used blogs to turn out crowds for a variety of oppositional public demonstrations: supporting Private Andrei Sychev and against Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov; against the persecution of Russian citizens of Georgian nationality; backing the leftist march of the Anticapitalism organization (held October 1) and facilitating the right’s “Russian March” (November 4).

Another interesting initiative is “Debaty” - once a month members of this group meet in a Moscow club to discuss a current political topic. Usually, the participants in the discussion, the jury, and members of the audience are all bloggers. Members of the jury are the authors of blogs with 1,000 “friends” (readers).

From time to time, blogs replace the traditional media, which is either heavily censored or simply not timely enough. Bloggers who live next to events become witnesses, or even participants, much faster than journalists. (A similar process is taking place in the west, as in the case of blogs about New Orleans or soldiers fighting in Iraq or Israel.) In Russia the most famous case when blogs began to function like the media was the ethnic conflict in the city of Kondopoga at

the end of August. The first reports and photographs about this event appeared in the blogs of citizens of this city and on the Internet forum of the city's web site. Expert observers claim that in this case the blogs are functioning like the traditional Soviet samizdat, the underground and self-published editions of forbidden literature.

The Death of "Live Journal"

The most popular site for blogs in Russia is livejournal.com because of its user-friendly interface and, as an American company, the fact that it does not fall under Russian control. Russians call the site "Zhivoy zhurnal" and it is much more popular than Russian blog sites, such as diary.ru, liveinternet.ru, and the section for blogs on mail.ru.

There are more than 300,000 Russian blogs registered at livejournal.com, about half of all the blogs in Russia. As the founder of the site Brad Fitzpatrick explained during a trip to Moscow, in the US, the main users of the site are teenagers and young people. He was surprised that in Russia the site is popular among adults, many of whom are famous far beyond the confines of the Internet. Livejournal bloggers include the writers Sergei Lukyanenko and Viktor Shenderovich, politicians Nikita Belykh, Valeriya Novodvorskaya and Irina Khakamada, many members of the State Duma, Institute of Globalization Studies Director Mikhail Delyagin, and others. Sometimes people have to delete their blogs when they receive an official position.

In October scandal rocked Russia's livejournal community when the company sold the rights to service the Cyrillic segment of the site, which affects Russia, Bulgaria, and Mongolia. Now the Cyrillic livejournal will be used for commercial purposes by Sup, a company established by the oligarch Aleksandr Mamut and Andrew Paulson, a Russian businessman of American background.

The owners invited Anton Nosik, a well known Russian Internet entrepreneur and blogger who has created many Russian and Israeli news sites, to head the new company. He announced that he will create a special Russian Abuse Team that will stop any legal violations on the livejournal.com site. He will particularly crack down on extremist propaganda.

This announcement was viewed as a threat to impose censorship. Nosik is famous for his consistent liberalism and opposition to the nationalist and pro-Kremlin camps. For example, during the Israeli-Lebanese conflict he, in contrast to many bloggers who sympathized with Lebanon, defended Israel where he lived for many years.

Several nationalist bloggers have already removed their diaries from livejournal.com in a sign of protest.

Their fears are understandable because there is already an example of the American Abuse Team intervening: Last year at one point it closed dozens of nationalist journals for posting material against NATO.

Many observers have pointed out that if it is deprived of its typical freedom of speech (including for radicals), livejournal.com will lose its value, many bloggers will leave, and Mamut and Paulson will lose their money. The famous Russian fantasy writer Sergei Lukyanenko (blogger doctor_livsy on livejournal.com) argued that "if the new owners make the conditions for using livejournal.com worse, either in terms of service, fees, or censorship, the Russian sector of livejournal will die. And it will be resurrected in a new form in a new place. Livejournal is its users, not the server, programs, or the political views of specific people." Thus livejournal.com is risking losing its popularity in Russia.

The Kremlin Comes to the Internet

Last year the Kremlin realized the importance of the Internet for influencing young people and the middle class working in offices and located "on-line" most of the time. Accordingly, they set up Internet media loyal to the Kremlin, above all the newspaper Vzglyad (vz.ru), Expert-online (expert.ru), and several others. There are also new sites for young people, designed especially as counterpropaganda against young oppositionists, particularly yoki.ru.

Pro-Kremlin youth groups Nashi, Rossiya molodaya and Molodaya gvardiya have set up their own sites. Against this background, the site of Molodaya gvardiya, the youth wing of United Russia, stands out. In addressing the opposition, it does not avoid using slang and curse words. Additionally, activists in this group received instructions from their leaders to set up Internet diaries and actively participate in blogs where only oppositionists participated before.

Additionally, the authorities have increased the pressure of censorship and the law enforcement agencies on the Internet. The first scandals took place this year. Earlier, the authorities did not know how to deal with the Internet. The bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies had little access to the Internet and little understanding of what was happening there. In the special services, there was no subdivision to deal with it.

The situation changed during the "cartoon scandal" at the beginning of the year, when cartoons insulting Islam were published in Denmark and other countries, provoking violent protests in Muslim countries. The Russian authorities, traditionally fearing Muslim unrest, adopted a strict policy of blocking any publication which could be seen as insulting the religious feelings of Muslims.

For example, at the request of the FSB in St. Petersburg, a provider closed one of the humorist sites that had republished the Danish cartoons. Additionally, the FSB asked the caricature site caricatura.ru and the news site Pravda.ru to remove the cartoons from their pages. Pravda.ru agreed to the FSB's request, but in a act of protest, did not work for two days. The editors of caricatura.ru, in contrast, answered the FSB that they would only remove the caricatures following a court order. Nothing happened as a result.

The news site gazeta.ru received a warning from the Federal Service for Oversight in Observing Legislation in the Sphere of Mass Communications and Preserving the Cultural Heritage (Rosokhrankultura) for publishing the cartoons. According to Russian media law, a publication that receives two warnings is deprived of its license and must stop publishing. Additionally, Rosokhrankultura appealed to the court to close an Altai site, Bankfaks, because a user posted material insulting Muslims on one of the forums of the site. The Altai court declined the motion.

Over the course of the year, the authorities' interest in the Internet has not dropped. In Kaliningrad a local journalist posted on his blog on Livejournal.com an article about corruption among the police leadership. The newspaper where this journalist works refused to publish the article. A scandal ensued when the police tried to find the journalist and force him to remove the material. The police even interrogated several journalists from other publications, however, they were not able to identify the author of the scandalous material.

In October, the Ivanovo city court fined Vladimir Rakhmankov, the editor of the Kursiv site, 20,000 rubles for insulting President Putin by calling him the "phallic symbol of Russia." In an article under that name, Rakhmankov described Putin's annual address to the parliament in which Putin sought to solve Russia's demographic problem by increasing the birthrate. One day after the article appeared, the Ivanovo Oblast procurator filed a case against Rakhmankov for insulting a representative of the authorities, a violation of article 319 in the criminal code. The authorities confiscated the computers from the Kursiv editorial offices and the site stopped working.

During Russia's political row with Georgia, the Yekaterinburg Internet service provider Garanthost.ru

stopped providing services to clients from Georgia at its own initiative. Immediately, several Russian providers announced that they were ready to provide services to these clients free.

In the most recent scandal, in Novosibirsk a court case has begun against Taras Zelenyak, a business man of Ukrainian descent. He posted a message to a Ukrainian forum insulting ethnic Russians while arguing that Ukrainians were their superiors. One of the readers of the forum complained to Zelenyak's internet service provider, Pervaya milya, which in turn passed the material on to the Novosibirsk FSB. The fact that Zelenyak had posted the message to a Ukrainian server did not stop the Russian police.

In recent times, various people have called for preparing clear rules for the Internet sphere which would regulate what is permitted there. Members of the State Duma are currently preparing a bill that would make placing material on an Internet site the same as publishing it in the media. If such a law is approved, the criminal and administrative codes would apply to the Internet and any critical remark there could be defined as an insult or slander.

On October 26, the leadership of the Interior Ministry and General Procurator, under the guise of fighting extremism, appealed to the upper chamber Federation Council to hold the owner of Internet sites legally responsible for the information posted on their sites. Deputy General Procurator Viktor Grin told the senators that "there is an extreme need to develop legislative norms, making it possible to block the activity of Internet sites propagandizing terrorism and violent extremism."

Human rights defenders are also concerned about the unregulated situation in the Internet. Aleksandr Brod, director of the Moscow Bureau of Human Rights, agrees that amendments to the law on extremism aimed at combating the Internet sites of extremists is necessary. "This is not censorship or the violation of democratic norms, but guaranteeing the security and unity of Russia." He pointed to the sites set up by organizers of the November 4 Russian March, which contained information about the event. "These sites include radical nationalist materials and we must think about regulating them." According to his data, there are more than 800 nationalist sites on the Russian Internet.

Translated from the Russian by Robert Ortung

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Further reading:

Henrike Schmidt, Georg Butwilowski, Katy Teubener, "From Club to Mass Medium? The Russian Internet as a Place of Intellectual Debate and Political Commitment", pp. 9-15, *kultura* 1/2005

http://www.forschungsstelle-osteuropa.de/con/images/stories/pdf/kultura/kultura_1_EN.pdf