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Russia's New Media Paradox

By Maxim Trudolyubov

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When I was a student in Moscow in the late 1980s, open debate raged in the press and in public about the nature of state and society in the Soviet Union. A dramatic upheaval soon followed: the Communist system collapsed and the Soviet Union broke apart. Twenty years later, Russia is again in a situation of profound political and social malaise, but the tightly controlled press has largely avoided questions about large-scale reform. The Internet, however, has begun to show promise as a platform for challenging the status quo. Can Russia's bloggers and online news sites start a transformation similar to the one that took place in the Soviet Union two decades ago?

Marina Litvinovich, a Russian civic activist and popular blogger, observes that social media have taken on a crucial part in driving protests against injustice. "I once organized a 400-strong picketing of the Russian Ministry of Defense by posting a single entry on my blog," Litvinovich says. She had urged readers to express indignation over an outrageous case of what we call "dedovschina," abuse of young conscripts by older soldiers. (A young soldier had been hideously crippled after a month's service, his legs and testicles amputated.)

Her assessment seems justified. When the head of one of Moscow's police precincts killed two people and injured seven others in a drunken shooting spree recently, everyone feared that the authorities would respond in the usual way by ignoring it or meting out a token punishment. But when bloggers devoted extensive attention to the incident—some posted pictures and stills from surveillance videos, complete with calls for officials to step down and accusations of criminal behavior by the police—the government was forced to respond. In the end, Moscow's police chief was fired, along with the head of the police precinct; and the policeman charged with the killing is currently on trial.

Last year, an Internet campaign precipitated the release of Svetlana Bakhmina, a mother who gave birth in prison to her third child, while serving a controversial sentence associated with the Yukos affair, in which the Yukos oil company was expropriated by the state and its controlling shareholder, Mikhail Khordokovsky, thrown in jail on much-disputed charges of fraud. In another case, a journalist and blogger from the Khakassia region prevented local officials from covering up a giant accident at the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric power station, in which seventy-five were killed.

Still, enthusiasm about the Internet as a means for driving political activism must be tempered by reality. Overall, Russia has a sizable blogosphere, with 890,000 active bloggers—small by comparison to the US's seven million but a magnitude larger than Iran's 60,000. Yet only a tiny fraction of this activity is devoted to politics or public affairs. Just 9 percent of Russia's 140 million people use the Internet as a source of news and information, according to the Levada Center, an independent polling and sociological research organization. (In Moscow, the figure is higher, at 30 percent, though still far from a majority.)

While the most popular online social network, V Kontakte (In Touch), a Facebook clone, has 16 million members, there is very little political discussion to be found there. Moreover, online news reporting and commentary means nothing to the 85 percent of Russians who rely on the largely state-controlled television to stay informed. They have never heard of the leading political bloggers in Russia, or of the campaigns that bloggers consider successful. And rarely have Internet investigations and exposés brought people into the streets: a petition to release Svetlana Bakhmina drew almost 100,000 signatures online; but most demonstrations attract only a few hundred, sometimes a few thousand, people.

Internet activists claim that what matters is who responds, not how many. Most Russians who follow political reporting and debate online are urban elites, the politically engaged, and journalists who work for the independent pressnewspapers such as Vedomosti and Novaya Gazeta, the radio program Echo of Moscow, and Newsweek Russia magazine. Moreover, most of this attention is focused on a single Internet forum: livejournal.com, a site that combines social networking with political blogs and commentary. (By contrast, bloggers in the United States and other parts of the world, such as the Middle East, use "open blogs" for public opinion writing while conducting their social networking activities on separate platforms, such as Facebook.) Although only a few thousand are related to politics, LiveJournal now has about 500,000 active blogs and generates about 11 million hits from Russian users each month. The site is owned by Sup Fabrik, a new media company co-owned by Alexander Mamut, a Russian investor, and Alisher Usmanov, a Kremlin-connected oligarch.

When issues and concerns raised by popular bloggers on LiveJournal migrate to independent print media and occasionally to the wider press, as for example in the case of the Sayano-Shushenkaya power station accident they can incite the authorities to action. But the concentration of Internet activists in a single virtual community makes them particularly vulnerable to government intrusion.

Government-affiliated news organizations have diluted the influence of independent blogs by supporting and promoting pro-government bloggers on the same forum. (One of the most active pro-Kremlin bloggers is leteha.livejournal.com.) President Dmitry Medvedev, who keeps his own blog, and other top government officials have also been able to closely monitor the development of independent newsgathering and opinion by looking at LiveJournal, and law enforcement agencies can easily identify and pursue bloggers they consider undesirable. They have been helped by a new article of the criminal code that prohibits "inciting hatred towards a social group," a law that Russian courts have used to punish those who publish criticism about the police (a "social group") with sentences of up to two years in prison. Such cases usually go to regional courts outside of Moscow. In late January, a police officer named Alexei Dymovsky was arrested after posting on the Internet a series of video testimonials revealing corruption in the Russian Interior Ministry.

Moreover, Web-based social networks like V Kontakte have made the work of the secret police much easier. A quick survey of the "friends" listed on a political activist's Facebook page can identify large numbers of people the police may want to surveil; and information-gathering by the government aided by private data-mining companies is rapidly becoming

more sophisticated. The implications of such surveillance have already been made clear in other countries. In Belarus, for example, the authorities have used information gathered on the Internet to identify and disrupt activist groups. "Not only did they quickly show up at [social] events and detain participants but they also took photos," writes Evgeny Morozov, a fellow at Georgetown University, in his recent article in Prospect, "How Dictators Watch Us on the Web." "These were used to identify troublemakers, many of whom were then interrogated by the KGB, threatened with suspension from university or worse." As a result, most students were reluctant to take part in demonstrations.

I once believed that new media would spur a revival of open debate in Russia. But the political awakening that rocked my country in the 1980s is unlikely to repeat itself today; in addition to being ripe for government interference, blogs and online news sites lack the social and political influence of traditional news organizations. During Perestroika, the press in the Soviet Union became an alternate seat of power, doing much to change the system. But journalists and commentators in those years benefited from a unique set of circumstances. Popular newspapers and magazines were given new status and independence under Mikhail Gorbachev, and reformist publications like Moscow News and Ogonyok reached millions of people and were considered required reading.

The era of required reading in Russia is over. Today, hundreds of online resources compete for attention, many of them oriented more toward consumers or social goings on than politics. The most popular political blogs barely reach an audience of 100,000; online audiences are for the most part atomized into small niche groups that rarely interact. This does not mean that we should give up on the Internet. It is an increasingly important tool for the exchange of facts and ideas. But in societies whose news and information sources are restricted by the state, blogs and other forms of online journalism will not transform the system until they are able to connect with and give force to broader popular movements for reform.