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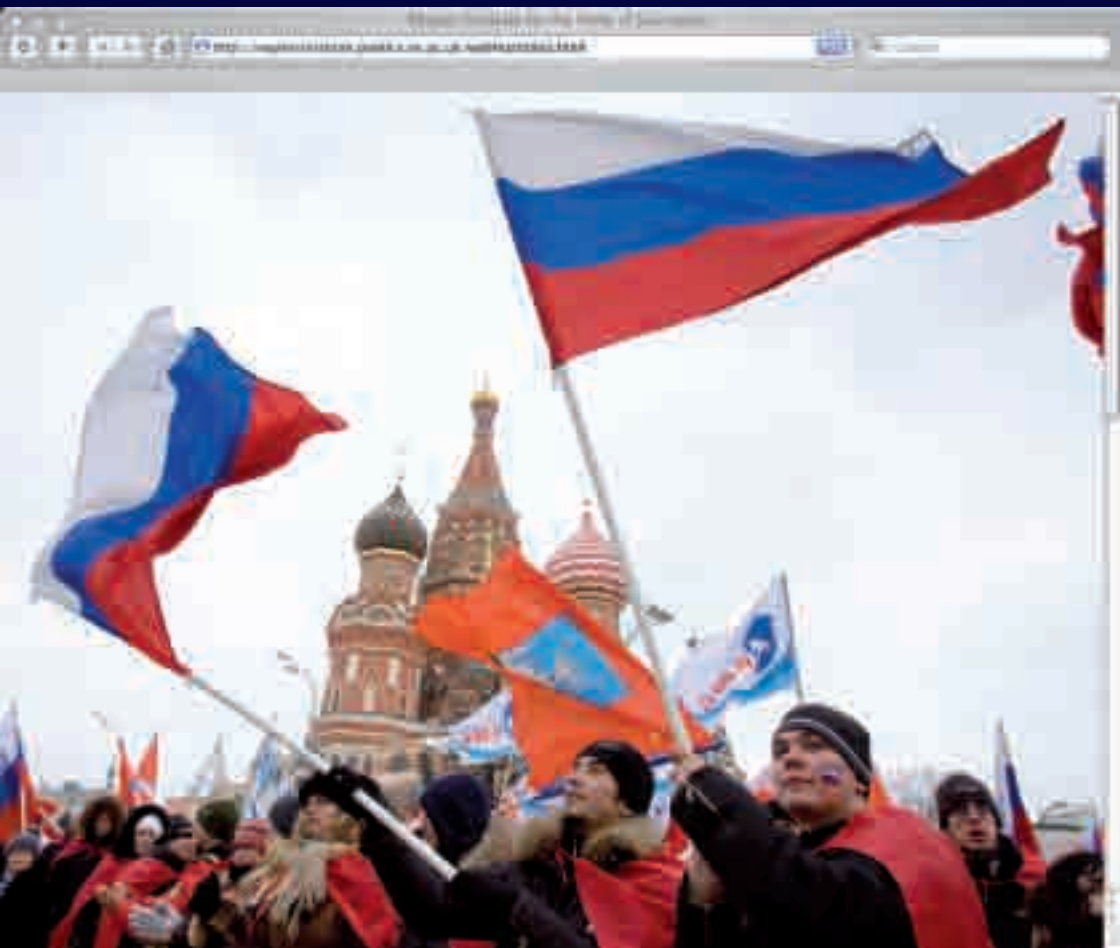
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CHALLENGES

The Web that Failed

How opposition politics and independent initiatives are failing on the internet in Russia

**Florian Fossato and John Lloyd
with Alexander Verkhovsky**



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Contents

Figures and tables	v
Introduction	1
1. Technological Optimism	5
2. The Internet in Russia	11
3. Case Study 1: The Russian Ethno-Nationalists	19
4. Case Study 2: The Liberal Opposition	29
5. Case Study 3: Free Choice	41
Conclusion	51
Bibliography	59
Acknowledgements	61

Figures and tables

Table 2.1. Internet use in Russia	12
Figure 2.1. Internet use in selected countries	13

Two appendices to this report – on its methodology, and on the statistical analysis used – can be found on the Reuters Institute website
<<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/webthatfailed.html>>

Introduction

Most of the news media in Russia are now strongly pro-regime, as a matter of state policy. They are not wholly state controlled: nor have they reverted to the wooden conformity of the Soviet era. But the often chaotic liberty they enjoyed in the decade from the late 1980s to the late 1990s has been replaced by media whose diversity, curiosity and investigative capacity are tightly limited, while the leading commentators, both print and broadcast, are strongly pro-regime in most of their basic policies.

Yet as the Russian media were closing, there developed, globally, a medium which was seen as an antidote to state dominance. The internet has come to be seen as a liberator, a tool whose possession, or ability to access, allows individuals, opposition parties and NGOs to escape the control the state can exercise over TV and radio channels, and the press. This report is a first attempt to gauge how far that is true in Russia.

We have used as our main examples three sites – a nationalist grouping, a liberal grouping and a citizens' initiative – and a relatively restricted time period, that is, the few months before the 2008 presidential election. This allows us to make a preliminary judgement of how far the internet was fulfilling the liberation that is usually defined as its promise, and provides a basis for and a key to a wider study of the Russian media scene.

There are more than 300,000 non-commercial organisations identified by Russia's Public Chamber as existing and active in Russia, most of which have internet sites: a major study of these would reveal much about civil society in Russia today. In addition, Russians can freely access foreign websites – though few of these are in Russian – and can and do take part in social sites, such as MySpace for example. But this activity is largely confined to a small group, often composed of those conversant in a foreign language, usually English. What we wish to provide is a succinct and

preliminary appreciation of the nature of the Russian-produced internet, one which could give a glimpse into the way it works, how far it reaches out to its audience and how much effect it is likely to have.

Thus we selected three networks with a varied internet presence, representing different aspects of civil society, of grassroots and youth activity. Our expectation was that, in a pre-electoral period, these networks would be particularly active – the more so in the absence of regular and objective coverage of the fields in which their activities lay by the state-controlled mainstream Russian media, particularly television.

Another important goal of this pilot project was to test methodologies that would allow further, deeper research for the study of content on the Russian internet, in order to start understanding whether and how power dynamics offline influence developments online. We intend to use the methodology tested on this project, a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, for a future, larger study that we hope will allow us to research other aspects of online activity in Russia.

The theory of the internet as a social and political tool assumes a number of different sorts of liberation. One is liberation from state control, as bloggers – even in societies which seek to censor their output, like China – evade control and publish material the authorities wish to suppress. Another is liberation from the capture of the means of communication by large corporations – even if the limits they impose are wide, they are nevertheless limits. Still another liberation is from limited sources, as the expansion of the net's resources of information brings vast libraries of knowledge and information to domestic screens, giving each *netizen* the potential for endless enquiry, scholarship and self-improvement. Liberation is defined, above all, as a personal liberation – from the limits set by states, by corporations, by the inaccessibility of information and knowledge. Liberation is defined as serving the potential and ability of each individual, allowing the free trade of views, information and commodities.

Our initial, and most important, result indicates that the liberation promise may be limited in Russia. The why and the how of that we seek to tell and show in this essay. First, however, we should set a little context.

The Russia of the latter years of the first decade of the third millennium is one which has recovered some of the power and pride of its high Soviet period. Above all its leadership, with the support of the majority of its people, has sought with success to characterize as shameful, and to put behind it, the immediate post-Soviet period of the 1990s, the 'Yeltsin years', seeing it as a time where a weakened, ill-led and carelessly complaisant state bowed to the designs of the West – in its defence and strategic posture,

in its economic policies and in its political and social organisation. Former President, now Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union ‘the greatest geopolitical disaster of the (20th) century’ – a high claim to make of a century so rich in geopolitical disasters, including in his own country’s Soviet period, but one which clearly resonates with his fellow Russians.

Much of that growth in confidence and assertiveness is based on very strong growth in the economy, which is putting Russia back among the stronger economies of the world. Shrinking through most of the 1990s, the Russian economy has since the early 2000s been growing at 7 per cent annually, a rate it seems likely to be able to sustain. In the eight years to 2006, the Russian economy grew by more than 50 per cent, poverty was halved and personal income grew by over 60 per cent. This relatively rapid improvement in the conditions of almost all Russians – most of whom had been fearful of their living standards, even their lives, in the economic decline of the 1990s – has meant that the administration’s view of Russia, its future and itself, is widely accepted and celebrated.

For most Western observers, this change has been seen as one which may be good for the Russians’ material lives, but is bad for their democratic rights – and even more, those of their neighbours. The scholar and writer Timothy Garton Ash writes that ‘although formally an electoral democracy, the Russian federation has currently strong authoritarian tendencies, and is attempting to recreate a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus’.¹ The geopolitical analyst Robert Kagan writes that

Since the mid 1990s, the nascent democratic transformation in Russia has given way to what may best be described as a ‘czarist’ political system, in which all important decisions are taken by one man and his powerful coterie. Vladimir Putin and his coterie speak of ‘democracy’, but they define the term much as the Chinese do.²

The extent of this control of the media is not total: Edward Lucas, in a book harshly critical of the expanding authority and authoritarianism of the Russian regime and of the West for doing too little to oppose it, notes that dissident newspapers (such as *Novaya Gazeta*) can be bought, an oppositionist radio station (Ekho Moskhvy) is on the air and a sometimes feisty TV station (Ren TV) broadcasts – both in Moscow and in the regions.

¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: How a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of our Time* (London: Penguin: 2004), 213.

² Robert Kagan, *The Return of History* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008).

Above all, 'the Internet remains largely uncensored for any Russian with the time to browse it'.³ But the media are controlled as much as the regime wishes: 'by 2004, Mr. Putin had the media and business under his thumb'.

This is not a portrait of North Korea – nor even of Cuba. Those who wish to live in opposition to the regime can express that opposition in a number of forms: they will not benefit by it, but nor will they, in the main, obviously suffer for it (though some of its toughest critics, as journalist Anna Politkovskaya and former KGB officer turned critic Alexander Litvinenko, have been murdered). To be sure, the people's and the government's wills have been brought into close alignment; for those who refuse such a prospect, there are other places to go. One of these places is – or, so it is widely believed, should be – the web.

³ Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 55–6.

1. Technological Optimism

As communist rule crumbled in Central and Eastern Europe, US President Ronald Reagan told an audience in London's Guildhall in June 1989 that 'technology will make it increasingly difficult for the state to control the information its people receive ... the Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip'.⁴ It was a thought which lasted: Reagan's successor but one, Bill Clinton, said in a March 2000 speech at Johns Hopkins University that China's efforts to stifle the net 'is sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall', while US Secretary of State Colin Powell said in January 2001⁵ that 'the rise of democracy and the power of the information revolution combine to leverage each other'.

This optimism was in part inspired by observation of the effect that (pre-net) media had in the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Communist Party. To put it at its most modest – the increasing amount of information from a variety of media, such as the BBC World Service, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a trickle of Western newspapers and magazines, travellers' tales, pop music, films, plays and even elements of the Soviet state and Party media, were a factor in the undermining of the CPSU's assertion of the superiority of Soviet civilisation and the living standards it provided, even before Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost was introduced in the late 1980. From that, it was easy to move to the view that a rapidly growing medium, much more difficult to block and offering countless links round the globe, would have an even more powerful effect.

Many observers and scholars of Russia essentially agreed with Reagan – believing that the growth of internet and digital communication and

⁴ 'Reagan Gets a Red Carpet from British', *New York Times* (14 June 1989).

⁵ Confirmation hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (17 Jan. 2001).

information networks would produce an increasingly democratised civil society. Even as disillusion and scepticism over Russia's political developments deepened, analysts linked hopes for possible future fundamental change in the dynamics of power and influence across a number of political, economic and social dimensions with the rapid growth of access to telecommunication technologies, the internet in particular.

Former director of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, Andrew Kuchins, summarising the discussion of a number of influential American experts on possible scenarios for Russia up to 2017 in a report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies,⁶ released in December 2007, emphasized the possible role of the internet for social mobilisation:

*Civil society, mass media and the capacity and motivation for independent social mobilization can also be important drivers of Russia's political system in the next decade. These factors all played major roles in the revolutionary period of the late 1980s and earlier 1990s. The Putin government has systematically sought, with considerable success, to control and intimidate these factors, but this could change. The rapid growth of access to telecommunications technologies, first and foremost the Internet, could empower greater independence among all these factors. Currently about 20 percent of the Russian population uses the Internet regularly, and this marks a nearly seven-fold increase since 2000. Russian is also the fastest growing language used over the Internet in this period. Cell phone ownership is now close to 100 percent, and this could also facilitate social mobilization.*⁷

Thomas Graham, one of the most influential of Russian experts, a former diplomat in Russia and one of the draftees of the CSIS report, went further:

Communications and information technology for the first time holds the opportunity of rapidly overcoming the vast differences that have acted as a barrier to the formation of horizontal ties and truly national movements outside of government control. The same technology also provides access to the outside world, which the

⁶ CSIS Report, *Alternative Futures for Russia to 2017* (Washington, DC, Dec. 2007), <http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,4237/>.

⁷ Ibid. 19.

government cannot drastically limit without jeopardizing the country's economic growth. It is certainly thinkable that at some point in the next decade the Russian government could face a severe crisis, and social forces organized by these new technologies could compel a significant change in how the country is governed.⁸

Youth groups clearly play a distinct role among social forces, as they increasingly express the need to create alternatives, and have the potential to do so using new internet and communication technologies. The British scholar Luke March, commenting on the general belief that young people especially take to the internet more readily and rapidly than their elders, saw young, internet-empowered Russians as the carriers of change:

People are talking about the importance of a change in generation in Russia, with those educated and working under Soviet rule beginning to leave the scene. Younger people coming into the political scene are entering with no real memory of the Soviet political system ... Internet and communication technologies play a role, with a growing number of political blogs and over 20 per cent of the population having access to the internet. This is increasing very fast.⁹

And the US scholar Robert Ortung, in an overview of Russian blogs ahead of Russia's December 2007 parliamentary elections, wrote: 'Russian blogs reach the most dynamic members of the youth generation. Members of civil society have utilized them to mobilise activists who support a number of ideologies, including liberal opposition groups and nationalists.'¹⁰

All of these judgements rest on a belief that the increasing penetration of telecommunication technologies and the growth of their use in Russia will allow Russian social forces to organise, to create strong horizontal ties and to empower themselves, in order to join in a debate on the country's governance, culture and society – and in doing so, strengthen civil society.

In time, this view may prove to be right. Even now, the net hosts two efficient current affairs sites – <newsru.com> and <grani.ru> – which carry generally reliable and often critical information and comment, sponsored by two exiled oligarchs, Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky respectively,

⁸ Ibid. 45.

⁹ Luke March, talk delivered in June 2007 at the Centre for Research into Post-Soviet Economies, <<http://www.crce.org.uk/publications/political-opposition/>>.

¹⁰ Robert Ortung, 'Russian Blogs: Tool for Opposition and State', *Russian Analytical Digest* 28/1 (2 Oct. 2007), <<http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=39831>>.

both of which are highly critical of the current administration. But internet activity by political groupings and civil society groups, outside the governing power networks, is little developed. The findings of our pilot research project on the political influence and practice of the Russian internet suggests that the internet route is technically open, but is not much taken – or where taken, does not lead to new territories of political and self-expression. The story which is beginning to be revealed is of the use of the net by political and citizens' groups, who seek to operate independently: but it also suggests the inability of these groups so far to establish a strong, attractive and accessible presence. In part this is inexperience in the techniques of public presentation. In part it is because the political groups who stand in some form of opposition to the Russian presidency and the parties which support it are typically riven with internal dissent, and with personality struggles which sap their energy, subjecting them to splits and factionalisation.

But in larger part it is because independent groups, overtly political or not, operate in a sphere where co-option into the power structure is an ever-present temptation, and where the vastly greater resources available to the Kremlin-friendly sites and their much more assured use of market-friendly strategies ensure that the 'dissidents' or 'marginals', though permitted a continuing existence, are swamped by a higher level of net expertise.

Our research indicates that the Russian authorities are developing what Marcus Alexander¹¹ – in a challenge to 'the assumption that the proliferation of Internet technology in transition countries such as Russia will lead to an increase in freedom of speech and further democratization' – calls a 'third way between the obvious control of censorship on the one hand, and laissez faire on the other ... as a transitional government enters competition for maintenance and propagation of its image and power among its population.' And in a recent paper, completed after our research became known, Sarah Oates of Glasgow University's Department of Politics argues¹² directly that

we have focused too much on the universal qualities of the Internet rather than on the political context in which the Internet is deployed ... it is not so much about whether the Internet is available, but how citizens perceive the value of the use of the Internet that would appear to be the critical impetus for change.

¹¹ Marcus Alexander, 'Internet and Democratization: The Development of Russian Internet Policy', *Demokratizatsiya* (Fall 2004).

¹² Sarah Oates, 'Comrades Online', paper at 'Politics 2.0', an international conference at Royal Holloway, University of London (17–18 Apr. 2008).

Locating the internet within the ambit of Russian media, Oates says that, in the glasnost period (1987–91) and after,

*diversity of media did develop, yet the idea of media as 'objective' and 'balanced' has never been widely adopted. All segments of Russian society, from politicians to the public to the journalists themselves, perceive the mass media as a political player rather than a watchdog that can provide a check on political power.*¹³

The story we are examining with this project is an important one at this stage in Russia's development. The internet is, as is often attested, the least controllable of media – because of the power to communicate and link up which it puts in the hands of anyone with access to a computer attached to a network and a modicum of expertise. However, it is now 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.

Russian defiance of the 'logic of the net' is not, of course, unique. In China, more overtly authoritarian than Russia, the authorities 'have adopted two main strategies: filtering material and the promotion of self-censorship through regulation, policing and punitive action ... regulations make clear that potentially "subversive" comments – including those promoting Taiwanese independence or highlighting Falung Gong practices – will not be tolerated.'¹⁴ At the same time, China uses the same 'swamping' techniques as Russia, drawing on much greater resources and command of expertise to launch sites which emphasise – and deliver – new services, 'which help to increase citizen satisfaction with the government and perhaps to provide a form of legitimacy that somewhat replaces the representative process ... such efforts will also help to strengthen state capacity from within, (while) propaganda organs are benefiting from Internet use, helping the government to reach a new, younger audience.'¹⁵

But China is a one-party state, with a Communist Party prepared to censor and block sites and even imprison web activists to protect forbidden areas. Russian web users and bloggers are far more free. The issue here is: how are they restricted, and how much of that stems from their own actions or inactions?

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2003).

¹⁵ Ibid.

2. The Internet in Russia

Over the last 15 years, the internet and digital communication and information networks have spread in Russia at remarkable speed, especially from 2004. As of December 2007, according to the Public Opinion Foundation, 26 per cent of the population, or 29.4 million Russians, used the internet at least once in the autumn of 2007 (five years before, the figure was only 8 per cent of the population).

Internet usage varies significantly from region to region, according to a study released at the end of December by Russia's main Internet search portal, Yandex, together with FOM, TSN and other sociological research centres.¹⁶ The number of domain-names on RuNet grew by 66 per cent in 2007, reaching one million – though the report also notes that only one in five of the dot.RU domains is located outside of Moscow. Internet usage in Moscow reaches 57 per cent and the level of participation in the blogosphere is 11 times that of other regions, the average regional internet penetration being 23 per cent. While 40 per cent of those in other Russian cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants can access the internet, in small cities and rural areas the figure is still below 20 per cent.

Penetration, on a steady upwards curve since 2002, slowed for the first time in 2007. Natalya Tkacheva, head of internet research at COMCON Media and Market Research (one of Russia's more accurate internet measurement services, together with FOM and Romir) told our project¹⁷ that the growth of the internet was very fast in the first three quarters of 2007, but a certain slow down has been noticeable in the summer, especially in the regions. She attributes technical and economic reasons for this: the

¹⁶ <http://download.yandex.ru/company/yandex_on_region_internet_winter_2007.pdf> and <<http://gtmarket.ru/news/state/2007/12/25/1543>>.

¹⁷ Interviewed with Tkacheva (26 Sept. 2007).

level of fixed telephone line penetration across Russia is only 67 per cent, and though mobile telephone penetration is higher, the market is limited because the technology needed to use internet with mobile telephones is still too expensive for the average regional user.

During the last:	6 months		3 months		1 month		1 week		1 day	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
Autumn 2002	8	8.7	7	7.6	6	6.5	4	4.6	2	2.1
Winter 2002/3	9	9.6	8	8.7	7	7.7	5	5.5	3	2.8
Spring 2003	10	11.5	9	10.5	8	8.9	6	6.4	3	3.2
Summer 2003	11	12.1	10	10.8	8	9.0	6	6.1	3	3.0
Autumn 2003	12	13.1	10	11.6	9	9.9	6	6.9	3	3.2
Winter 2003/4	13	14.6	12	13.3	10	11.6	7	8.2	3	3.8
Spring 2004	14	14.9	12	13.7	11	12.0	8	8.5	4	3.3
Summer 2004	15	16.9	14	15.5	12	13.4	9	9.5	5	5.0
Autumn 2004	16	17.3	14	15.7	12	13.7	9	10.1	5	5.5
Winter 2004/5	16	17.6	15	16.0	13	14.2	9	10.3	5	5.2
Spring 2005	17	18.9	16	17.5	14	15.5	10	11.0	5	5.7
Summer 2005	19	20.9	17	18.9	15	16.1	10	11.2	5	5.9
Autumn 2005	20	21.7	18	19.7	16	17.5	12	12.9	6	6.8
Winter 2005/6	21	23.8	20	22.2	18	20.1	13	15.1	7	8.0
Spring 2006	21	24.3	20	22.7	18	20.6	14	15.6	7	8.5
Summer 2006	23	26.0	21	24.2	19	21.4	14	16.0	8	9.1
Autumn 2006	23	26.3	21	24.4	19	21.9	15	17.0	8	9.5
Winter 2006/7	25	28.0	23	26.3	21	23.9	16	18.4	9	10.1
Spring 2007	25	28.7	24	27.0	22	24.8	17	19.6	10	11.2
Summer 2007	24	26.8	22	24.9	20	22.4	15	17.1	9	10.0
Autumn 2007	26	29.4	25	28.1	23	26.1	18	21.0	10	11.9
Summer–Autumn variation	2	2.6	3	3.2	3	3.7	3	3.9	1	1.9

Source: FOM <<http://www.fom.ru/projects/23.htm>>.

Table 2.1. Internet use in Russia: proportion of those who have recently used the internet at least once (% and no. of millions)

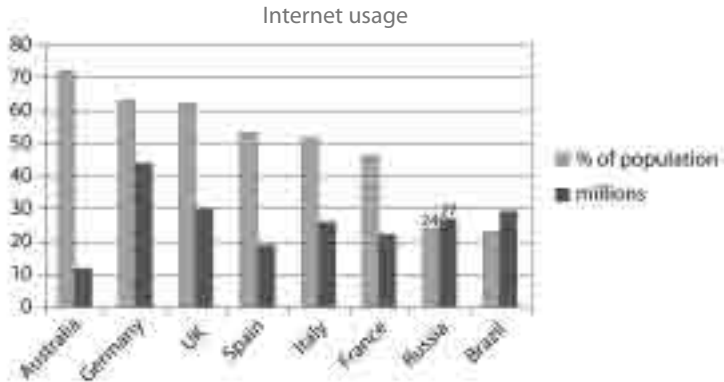


Figure 2.1. Internet use in selected countries (*source: FOM, summer 2007*)

Advertising, the main sustenance for the media, has also been growing remarkably rapidly - particularly in the internet sector. Data published by the Association of Communication Agencies (AKAR) show that advertising spending in 2006 amounted to \$5.03 billion, or 29 per cent more than the previous year. TV accounted for 63.6 per cent of the total (\$3.2 billion, up 36 per cent from the previous year, while the greatest growth (67 per cent) was recorded in the internet sector (though from a low point). Internet marketing specialists predict that the online advertisement market may easily reach \$1 billion by 2011, a development likely to have an impact on the way internet professionals see their work and their relationship with the authorities.

User preferences on RuNet

As mentioned in the Introduction, this project does not intend to provide an indepth picture of Russia's growing internet scene. It is however useful to provide a schematic picture. If interest in political news and civil and advocacy issues is generally low on Russia's internet, what are the driving subjects for users when they surf the internet and choose to interact

through forums and blogs? According to the most popular search platforms, Yandex and Rambler, the clear leaders are websites, blogs, communities and forums dealing with the following issues:

- sport, particularly football;
- relations of various kind – private life issues;
- photo;
- video – cinema;
- music;
- entertainment – travel;
- computers – IT;
- anecdotes;
- news.¹⁸

Leaders of RuNet

According to a *Vedomosti* report (26 Dec. 2007), 75 per cent of Russian-language blogs are hosted on five platforms:

- LiveInternet.ru (nearly one million users, but many accounts are ‘dormant’);
- Livejournal.com (more than 600,000 users, has more ‘active’ users than LiveInternet);
- <http://blogs.mail.ru> (more than 400,000 users);
- Diary.ru (more than 100,00 users);
- Loveplanet.ru (some 60,000 users).

Some 7,000 blogs are created every day in the Russian blogosphere. Russia’s main internet platform, Yandex, said that in April 2008 that there were 3.8 million blogs in the Russian blogosphere. There were 112.8 million blogs worldwide as of January 2008 (<<http://technocratimedia.com>>).

LiveJournal, the most popular blogging platform and social network in Russia, and one of the first blogging sites in the USA, is the more ‘mature’ host – both because it was the first to appear in Russia, and in terms of users’ age: average 25 years old compared with 19 on LiveInternet and 20 on Diary.ru. LiveJournal leads in terms of activity of its subscribers. Some 40 per cent of the accounts it hosts are used regularly, while no more than 20 per cent of the accounts on LiveInternet are active.

The Cyrillic-using section of LiveJournal was sold in October 2006 to a Russian start-up, SUP-Fabrik, created earlier that year. The deal, conducted

¹⁸ In Oct. 2006 some 13% of the Russian population read the news on the internet. A year earlier 10% of Russians read the news online. Readers are interested in current affairs, including a large amount of sensationalist and largely unchecked stories, sports and culture. *Source:* Yandex.

as a licence agreement, caused alarm among control-concerned users because the main investor behind SUP, businessman Alexander Mamut, is close to the Kremlin. Mamut was SUP's main shareholder until June 2008. SUP says on its webpage that it sets itself 'the goal of building a portfolio of Moscow-based high-traffic-generating projects from which to expand worldwide'. The main office is in Moscow and in 2008 the company opened an office in San Francisco. Since 2006 SUP's main projects have been www.LiveJournal.com, originally run under licence in Russia before being acquired outright in December 2007, and Chempionat.ru, one of the most popular online-only sports news sites in Russia. SUP also owns +SOL, an online media sales house and Victory S.A., a full-service online advertising agency.

In June 2008 SUP and Kommersant Publishing House, one of Russia's better known media businesses (currently owned by another Kremlin-connected businessman, Alisher Usmanov) formed an online partnership. Kommersant acquired a significant equity stake in SUP. As part of the agreement SUP acquired the news website Gazeta.ru from Kommersant.

Legal and regulatory aspects

Despite much speculation on the state's desire to control the internet, by and large the Russian government has maintained a policy of restraint towards internet regulation. Russia's new President, Dmitry Medvedev, reaffirmed after his election in 2008 earlier pledges to develop civil and economic freedoms, saying that freedom, including freedom of expression, should be at the core of Russian politics. After his election, Medvedev blocked attempts to control the internet and stopped a bill that had passed its first reading in the State Duma (parliament's lower chamber) in April, aimed at closing down media outlets on libel grounds.

Other attempts at control have also so far been blocked. In January 2008 the Committee on Information Policy of the Federation Council (parliament's upper chamber) discussed a bill addressing the issue of administrative regulation of content within the Russian segment of the internet. Some experts present at the discussion, including Mikhail Fedotov (who drafted Russia's post-Soviet Media Law in 1991) and internet expert Anton Nossik, dismissed the attempt, saying that the proposed bill was trying to cover too many issues and ultimately remained unfocused.

The internet community has welcomed these developments, saying that Medvedev is committed to the line initiated by his predecessor. Nossik, for instance, maintains that former President Vladimir Putin at the start of his first term in office (2000) said that there would be no censorship of the internet, and the internet is still largely unregulated in Russia because of Putin's – and now of Medvedev's – lack of support for regulation. Another plausible explanation is the opposition of the powerful telecoms lobby to a measure that might damage the development of the fast-expanding and very profitable IT and communications industry.

Some moves initiated by security agencies have, however, been successful. A government decree requires all telecoms companies and internet service providers (ISPs) to allow the Federal Security Service (FSB) unrestricted monitoring of all communications: phone calls, text messages and email. Telecoms and ISPs are also required to install, at their own expense, equipment allowing the FSB to monitor communications at any time without the knowledge of the provider and user. The decree is related to the System of Operational and Investigative Measures, SORM-2, a programme introduced in 1998 to allow the FSB to monitor the internet. The programme originally included these provisions but not in compulsory form.

Some internet users are concerned that these developments may lead to a form of preventive censorship enacted by internet service providers. According to this view, ISPs, worried about the future of their businesses, could be willing to screen content in websites and blogs and block 'offensive' material, in order to avoid punitive measures enforced by security authorities which could possibly hit their activities (as well as those of websites and bloggers).

The internet community was unpleasantly surprised in July 2008 when a court in the Northern Russian city of Syktyvkar (Komi Republic) handed 22-year-old blogger Savva Terentyev a one-year suspended prison sentence for a post he made in February 2007 in a LiveJournal blog, saying that police officers should be 'periodically set on fire' in city squares. The blogger was found guilty of inciting hatred toward the police. Terentyev's lawyers said the comment was private, not public, therefore not covered by Russian legislation. Prosecutors, failing to appreciate that it was the private comment of a blogger posted in the blog of another blogger, said the offence was an extremist act because Terentyev targeted law enforcement officials.

Similar cases, however, have been the exception rather than the norm in Russia so far and are generally seen by internet users as independent initiatives by regional security officials seeking revenge against organisations and bloggers targeting them. Nevertheless, an unpleasant feeling of vulnerability is spreading among bloggers and advocacy groups active in the Russian internet.

3. Case Study 1:

The Russian Ethno-Nationalists

Introduction

Two of the case studies we chose come from opposing sides of the political spectrum: the ethno-nationalists on the one hand and the pro-Western liberals on the other. The third is an NGO – one, moreover, that was Russian both in its creation and in its development (some Russian NGOs are dependent on outside assistance for their existence). Among the largest drivers of an active, oppositional and alert net culture are political organisations and NGOs, the line between them growing more difficult to define as both take on aspects of the other. There are a large number of political parties in Russia: and the number of NGOs has been growing strongly. The Russian daily *Vedomosti*, quoting data provided by the country's Public Chamber, said that at the end of December 2007 there were 354,405 non-commercial organisations in Russia, acting mainly in the fields of education, culture, health and in the social sector.¹⁹ The Public Chamber estimates that some 60 per cent of Russians would like to be involved in social and charitable activities (though very few actually are). According to research conducted jointly by Russia's High School of Economics and the 'Social Agreement' Institute, only 7 per cent of Russians are actively involved in the work of non-commercial organisations, compared to 43 per cent in France and 35 per cent in the US.

¹⁹ *Vedomosti* (26 Dec. 2007), editorial 'Pravo Tret'yego'.

The daily highlighted a number of fiscal and other regulatory barriers hindering the activities of non-commercial organisations in Russia and also – more importantly for the purpose of our research – quoted an opinion poll conducted in 2007 by the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) saying that most Russians don't trust the work of non-commercial organisations. According to FOM, 45 to 52 per cent of Russians are not sure whether non-commercial organisations truly defend citizens' rights and are independent from the state and/or businesses.

The Public Chamber, however, also recorded that, in 2007, there was a noticeable growth in informal social activity across the country, focusing on the active support of citizens for the actions of grassroots groups that are not registered, but campaign vigorously for people's rights – such as, for example, the rights of those who had lost money invested in 'phantom' construction companies which collected payments (in a legal form of co-investment) from flat buyers but never built the houses; or to press for the law to be used against construction companies which, with the complicity of local authorities, receive the right to demolish existing buildings and facilities, often with recognized historical or architectural value, to build elite real estate at their place. These groups usually have only 20–30 activists, but thousands of people participate in their protest actions. *Vedomosti* concluded that grassroots organisations of this kind are likely to grow more in the future and may become the real 'third sector' in Russia.

Most Russian non-commercial organisations have internet sites, often interactive, with lively forums. They increasingly use blogging platforms to create communities promoting their cause and attracting supporters. These trends could give a substantial boost to civil society in the coming years.

The three networks we selected have a varied internet presence, representing different aspects of civil society, of grassroots and youth activity. Our expectation was that, in a pre-electoral period, these networks would be particularly active – the more so in the absence of regular and objective coverage of the fields in which their activities lay by the state-controlled mainstream Russian media, particularly television.

Our goal was to test to what extent these three organisations/networks are effectively using the growth in the access and use of internet resources for the following goals:

- (a) to cultivate political conversations;
- (b) to support the establishment of alliances;
- (c) to encourage mobilisation;
- (d) to stimulate cross-cultural, political and social dialogue.

The Russian ethno-nationalists

Russian nationalism was supposed to have been quashed by Soviet communism – both because the Soviet Union was presented as a free association of many different peoples, and because communism was presented as having global applicability. In fact, though excesses were slapped down where they were seen as containing the potential for independent growth, a kind of ersatz nationalism, shorn of the tsarism and the orthodoxy which had defined Russian-ness before the 1917 revolution, was encouraged, if with specifically Soviet features. Stalin, a Georgian, went furthest, explicitly enshrining Russia as the ‘big brother’ of the Union: but under his (all Slav) successors, the USSR was promoted actively as a national entity, and loyalty to the flag, the anthem, the state and the sacred symbols and figures was vigorously promoted.

The Putin administrations have followed this line, as they followed so much of what was Soviet – but were free to do so more overtly. The Orthodox Church, restored under Gorbachev and encouraged under Yeltsin, took centre stage under a President who pronounced himself a long-time believer and who would remark that he had saved his personal crucifix from a burning building. The youth movement, Nashi, devoted to Putin, took a name redolent for Russians of the nation: *nashi* (ours), is habitually used by Russians to define what they feel to be Russian (and to define what they feel to be not). The past war in Chechnya, and the present tensions with Georgia, have made the Russian version of ‘black’ – the darker skinned people of the Caucasus – easy subjects of prejudice in Russia; provocations from the Balts have concentrated Russian wrath on the three tiny states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – especially the first. Many of the themes of nationalist thinkers through the ages surface in speeches and remarks by Russia’s leaders.

Contemporary Russian leaders have, like the Soviets, sought to at once borrow, and distinguish themselves, from those they would define as more extreme nationalists. Thus a range of more or less extreme nationalist groups occupy an ambiguous position in the Russian political scene. No longer banned or jailed as in Soviet times – indeed, at times seeing their leaders rewarded with government posts, and seats in the Duma – they are nevertheless kept, generally, away from the catch-all parties and ideology with which the regime seeks to occupy all of the political space. These nationalist groups are thus likely candidates to be seeking a wider resonance in society, and spreading their own particular brand of national fervour, while distinguishing it from that of the administration and its supporting parties.

One of the leaders among these groups is the Movement against Illegal Immigration (known by its Russian acronym DPNI), founded in the summer of 2002 after an anti-Armenian pogrom in Kransoarmeisk, near Moscow. The DPNI demands that illegal immigrants be deported, and carries out aggressive propaganda against all migrants from the south or the east, irrespective of their citizenship. The DPNI is not an organisation *per se*, but an umbrella structure for a variety of different groups, many of which are radical youth groups not averse to street violence against ‘enemies of the nation.’ At the same time, when the popularity of DPNI peaked in 2006, a number of members of the State Duma joined the movement, including Andrei Savelyev, one of the leaders of the Rodina (Motherland) party. Another important figure was the DPNI leader Alexander Belov (Potkin), who had a background in the oldest post-Soviet nationalist organisation, the National Patriotic Front (NPF) ‘Pamyat’.

In 2006, other nationalists gave new life to an existing formation, the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO), led by the veteran nationalist politician, Dmitry Rogozin. He was previously one of the most important leaders of the Rodina party: in 2005, during the campaign for the election of the Moscow Duma, Rodina became widely known for an aggressively nationalistic electoral video clip – it showed Rogozin confronting immigrants, followed by a slogan ‘Let’s clean our city of the garbage!’ – which led to its elimination from the ballot.

In October 2007, Rogozin’s appointment as Russian representative to NATO was announced: President Putin signed the decree appointing him to this post in January 2008 – a clear sign that Russia was to be represented by someone which would be personally outraged by any NATO trespasses on the Russian sphere of influence. Immediately, his public criticism of the Kremlin diminished (it had never been of the most aggressive). This co-option of critics into the structure is a tactic widely and successfully used by the Putin administrations: it is one which sets a kind of model for their ‘co-option’ of the net itself.

In the 2007 parliamentary elections, a nationalist bloc – Great Russia – was formed, and its registration as an official party was sought. Had it been so, the nationalists would have had the chance to repeat their electoral success of 2003, when the newly founded Rodina bloc obtained nearly 9 per cent of the vote. But the Central Electoral Commission ruled out Great Russia’s participation. Political commentators said it was clear that the Kremlin (which had been seen as behind the creation of Rodina) did not this time need the presence of unruly nationalists for pre-electoral manipulation – thus disappointing the hopes of the many who had hoped that the top-level

connections of Rogozin, Savelyev and other nationalist leaders would have been enough to guarantee a swift registration. Once again, the official ban would seem likely to encourage the nationalists to have recourse to an active and aggressive web presence, to compensate in some measure for their absence from the hustings.

DPNI, with many other participants in the Great Russia project, has been linked to the Russian March, the main annual event of Russian nationalists, which took place on 4 November 2007, with marches in at least 23 regions (in 2006 the march took place in 15 regions). In Moscow and in the overwhelming majority of the other cities the authorities did not interfere with the march. However in Moscow nationalists were ordered to march in areas where very few people would take notice, except for police forces and journalists. Reports from the march were the main news of the day for internet publications – a focus not repeated on other mass media, particularly federal television.

Thus the public profile, the at least temporary popularity of a relatively extreme movement, the activism and organisation of public protests and marches, the attention paid to the nationalists by both Russian and foreign news media and the blocking of electoral roads to representation, would seem to speak to a movement actively interested in extending its influence and membership. Kept out of the established channels for democratic participation, it would seem natural to turn to the net as a way of putting out propaganda, and above all mobilising its members for protests marches and demonstrations. But, at best, its internet presence is patchy: most of all, it speaks to the committed.

The extent of internet activity of the nationalist leaders and organisations varies, but it is nowhere large. Andrei Savelyev, a Duma deputy until December 2007, is probably the most net-savvy: he is active on RuNet, has numerous posts on web-based mass media and maintains a personal site and a blog²⁰ on LiveJournal. Both Dmitry Rogozin and Alexander Belov give interviews and publish comments, but do not participate in internet activities directly: instead, their opinions are presented – and links maintained – by their allies and aides. Yuri Popov, another prominent nationalist leader and ideologue, is barely represented on RuNet: nationalist sites only occasionally publish his articles and online statements.

Most coordination and mobilisation of Great Russia supporters has been carried out in traditional ways – face-to-face meetings, telephone calls and print-based propaganda: there is nothing here approaching the

²⁰ <<http://savliiy.livejournal.com>>

mobilisation of Western NGOs and protest organisations, let alone the vast reach and money-raising potential of US political sites such as MoveOn.org. Some websites have been established and remain active – including the websites of Rodina-KRO,²¹ DPNI,²² as well as blogs and internet communities linked to the Russian March project.²³

The interaction of internet resources reflects, to a considerable extent, the real relationship of these groups within the organisations. The KRO site initially represented the Great Russia party in the internet space: the site's home page bore the party banner, solicited visitors to join the organisation online and provided information on the Great Russia party project. DPNI sites, meanwhile, provided propaganda and information support. After the Great Russia site was opened, the Rodina-KRO site was used mainly as a back-up (the site has been dormant since December). The DPNI site is the oldest and most popular among these resources. Redesigned in January 2007, it became more informative and more efficient in announcing events and publishing relevant information. The site also has a video section, 'DPNI-TV', which carries information and propagandist video clips, often posted on YouTube, RuTube and similar sites.

The gatekeeper of DPNI's internet projects is the nationalist activist Fyodor Veryovkin. In an interview, he explained that both the website and the blogs linked to DPNI have an exclusively propagandist function. He said that DPNI has limited resources, especially financial resources, to support its propaganda activities. Veryovkin said only three paid people maintain the movement's website: much depends on the charismatic character of the leaders of the movement. Within these constraints, the result of DPNI's propaganda activities can be, in a limited way, effective.

In fact, the DPNI forum became one of the main online discussion platforms for the nationalists. During our monitoring period, visitors to the site were directed to two main issues – the 'Russian March', and the December 2007 parliamentary elections. The 'Russian March' was given its own section on the DPNI website: before the event, discussions focussed mainly on practical issues – how to better mobilise sympathisers, how the campaign should be conducted, which kind of material should be disseminated through the internet. The result, however, was limited. Different sources said that only between 2,500 and a maximum of 3,000 nationalists marched on 4 November in Moscow, where the main 'Russian March' took place. Other marches took place in a number of Russian cities,

²¹ <<http://www.rodina.ru/>> and <<http://www.kro.su/>>

²² <<http://www.dpni.org>>

²³ For instance <http://community.livejournal.com/4_november>.

but participation in these was even lower. In fact, the most active net discussions of the March were after the event. Impressions of participants and their reports were posted online, together with pictures, videos, links to media coverage available on the internet.

The parliamentary election, on the other hand, stimulated an active debate in its run-up among DPNI forum participants. The main focus concerned tactics – should nationalists vote or not? Forum participants generally agreed that the electoral exercise was unfair and carried out in an illegal manner. The same questions were discussed simultaneously online by participants to liberal opposition forums. Nationalist sympathizers borrowed for their posts caricatures and other graphic materials that were disseminated by liberal bloggers: the main difference, of course, was in the comments. For example, nationalist bloggers were solicited to participate in an online liberal boycott initiative, ‘I shall not vote!’, with their own propaganda materials. Most participants cut and pasted caricatures from the liberal website <www.polit.ru> and added nationalist-oriented comments.

This example was a rare cross-over. Despite their potential, both Great Russia and the liberal, *Drugaya Rossiya* networks (see next section) represent a rather closed circle. Their information is self-referential to a degree: while the information migrates from one site to another and is duplicated in blogs, there are few attempts to take discussion beyond the boundaries of the circle of already existing supporters, to increase dissemination through dialogue or to publish articles by political opponents. Representatives of Great Russia agree in theory to the conduct of a meaningful dialogue on the net with representatives of the opposite political camps: but there is no such dialogue in practice.

Official nationalist political groups are much less active in blogs than other nationalist activists (such as their neo-Nazi opponents and some of DPNI's peers from the Russian March organizing committee). Nevertheless DPNI and KRO have some active bloggers in LiveJournal, such as ‘Tor’ (V. Kralin), A. Savelyev, E. Valyaev. There are also LiveJournal communities, mostly used to duplicate information from the sites rather than to conduct internal discussions. The blogger Tor is something of an exception, both to the nationalists’ presence on the net and to the trends in Russian net activism as a whole. One of the veterans of RuNet and of the Russian section of LiveJournal, he is an active and well-known internet user – and this bolsters his authority among other users of the LiveJournal platform. Tor has gained his non-political popularity using his skills of effective propagandist, to the point where his popularity is greater on the net than even well-known political figures. He writes almost daily, posting several

comments on different issues, not limited to political events. His blog, in turn, hosts a lively polemic on a wide variety of questions and he participates enthusiastically in the discussion. The politician Andrei Savelyev is more typical. He writes less often, duplicates articles previously posted on his website and regularly assumes the role of arbiter rather than activist in discussions. As a result discussions in his blog are less active and his web popularity cannot be compared with that of Tor.

As we saw, the 'Russian March' is considered the joint undertaking of all Russian nationalists groups. But it divides nationalists at least as much as it unites them: and we can see here another instance of the inability of technology to moderate or dilute lasting and deep social and political attitudes and behaviour. The internet brings together those who are already disposed to come together: it can and does exacerbate divisions in a political context such as post-Soviet Russia, where independent activity remains fragmented, distrustful, with little ability or even will to reach out to the uncommitted. In practice, the nationalists groups cannot reach a consensus on their most important annual symbol: first, because of personal conflicts between the leaders, and second, the fear of the most moderate leaders of being compromised by more radical groups. Thus on 4 November several nationalist marches were carried out by different groups in Moscow. While the main march was organised by 'Great Russia' and DPNI, various fractions of the 'Union of Russian People', supporters of Sergey Baburin's 'National Union' and several Orthodox groups marched separately. And though some neo-Nazi groups – such as the 'National Socialist Society', the most antagonistic to the organizing committee, and the openly neo-Nazi 'Slavic Union' (whose Russian abbreviation, SS, deliberately coincides with the German abbreviation for *Schutzstaffeln*) – were granted places on the 'Great Russia' march, the activists of the 'National Socialist Society' dispersed before the speeches in which they were not allowed to participate. This meant that there were no more than 1,000 persons at the end of the march.

Overall, nationalists, together with all politicians considered disloyal by the Kremlin, were marginalised during the campaign. The Party of Russian Patriots obtained a meagre 1 per cent of the vote – a result comparable to the fate of the liberal and centre left parties, such as Grigory Yavlinsky's 'Yabloko' party and the 'Union of Right Forces'. The Russian nationalist movement experienced the same degree of marginalisation as democratic formations.

None of this, momentous for the nationalists, seemed to stir much 'out-reach' activity. Weak pre-electoral activity (notwithstanding online discussion) was clearly linked with the acknowledgement of the feeble electoral chances

of the party list. The nationalists simply did not want to seriously popularise their cause, even at a time of heightened political awareness and mobilisation, beyond their own circles. Their critique of the government, of the dominant parties in the Duma and of course of the hated liberals is strong, even violent; they appeal to a strain in Russian society and culture which can at times be very powerful and which finds expression in different ways across the political and social spectrum. A well-planned internet presence could do much to promulgate these views and launch propaganda campaigns across a much broader spectrum. But their world remains self-enclosed.

4. Case Study 2:

The Liberal Opposition

Liberals did very well out of post-Soviet Russia: indeed, even as it was unravelling under Mikhail Gorbachev, they were rewarded with influence and power. The economist Grigory Yavlinsky, who wrote a report called *500 Days* advocating crash marketisation of the Soviet Union, was made a deputy Russian prime minister in 1990 (though his programme was never implemented). The first independent Russian government formed by Boris Yeltsin after the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 had the economic (and political) liberal Yegor Gaidar as the acting Prime Minister, with others such as Anatoly Chubais, who oversaw privatisation, and Andrei Kozyrev, the Foreign Minister.

That period did not last long. Gaidar himself was never confirmed by the Duma, and he was replaced at the end of 1992 by the more statist Victor Chernomyrdin. From then on, liberals – or ‘pro-Westerners’ – steadily lost what traction they had on Russian politics, though some did well in business. Reduced to small parliamentary parties in Yeltsin’s period of office, they lost representation entirely in Putin’s time: their low standing a result in part of official discrimination and manipulation, in larger part because they were seen, and encouraged to be seen, as those who had visited misery on the Russian people in the 1990s. The two main forces – Yavlinsky’s ‘Yabloko’ and the liberal Union of Right Forces (SPS in the Russian acronym) which contained Gaidar and Chubais – have been chronically unable to unite: and beside them, new parties or coalitions have formed which have remained distant from either.

The major new force ahead of the elections in 2007 was Drugaya Rossiya (Another Russia), an umbrella coalition which organized opponents of President Putin across a huge ideological spectrum. The coalition brought together representatives from a variety of political and human rights movements, as well as individual citizens: it included both left and liberal opposition figures, from former world chess champion and United Civil Front leader Garry Kasparov to the far-right/left National Bolshevik Party's radical leader Eduard Limonov and representatives of the far-left movement Vanguard of Red Youth. The former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov was, for a while, a leader of this coalition. He did not take part in the second congress of the alliance in July 2007, but a loose cooperation agreement was supposed to have remained in place, at least until the December parliamentary election. After this research was completed, Kasyanov – who had announced that he would be a presidential candidate in the March elections – was disqualified. The central election commission ruled that some 13 per cent of the required 2 million signatures in support of his candidacy were invalid.

Drugaya Rossiya was formed in July 2006, during the G8 Summit. Yabloko and SPS boycotted the event at which the new group was announced because of the participation in it of what they consider to be nationalist and extremist groups – such as the National Bolsheviks. Despite this setback, in September 2006 Drugaya Rossiya was declared a 'national forum', open to all those who opposed Kremlin policies. The previous year Garry Kasparov had concluded the press conference announcing the creation of his United Civic Front by stating that 'The primary goal of the . . . opposition is to dismantle the currently existing system and create a free political floor on which free elections can be held in 2007–2008.'

One of the main strategies chosen to achieve that goal has been street protest. On 16 December 2006 the first joint political rally – the so-called 'Dissenters' March' – took place in Moscow. In March 2007, another such march was held in St Petersburg, another in April in Moscow and the last before the December vote, in Moscow and in several other cities, at the end of November 2007.

The rallies have been the largest opposition demonstrations in Russia of recent years – yet have never attracted more than 4,000 people. At every protest action demonstrators were outnumbered by riot police forces, usually brought from other regions. Each time scores of demonstrators were beaten by police with truncheons, and detained – Russian and foreign journalists covering the events were involved, as well as passersby.

Rallies which have taken place in other Russian cities have also provoked a harsh response from the authorities. Garry Kasparov was jailed for five days following the November 2007 march. Most Russians, with the exception of those who witnessed the protests, know little about these events, because state-controlled television channels showed only brief pictures of the protests, using 'provocations' and other negative terms to describe them.

The internet has thus been the main place where coverage of the demonstrations has taken place. Traditional internet newswires and magazines²⁴ have covered the demonstrations, as well as the websites of Radio Echo Moskvy²⁵ and of Radio Free Europe.²⁶ The websites linked to Drugaya Rossiya, promoting its activities and aiding mobilisation,²⁷ served as information and logistic tools and provided quotes from movement leaders that journalists could use. However, the most dynamic coverage of the protests each time was provided by bloggers, who took pictures and posted them on their blogs, loaded on YouTube and RuTube video materials testifying to the disproportionate police reactions to the demonstrations and discussed the issue on their blogs and in communities mainly located on the LiveJournal platform.²⁸

This presence is among the most active of any of the websites we examined in Russia. Drugaya Rossiya involved well-known names, a wide range of open internet resources and could make use of the harsh reaction of the authorities to the protests it organised to mobilise groups of people, especially the youth, via the internet. Superficially, it would seem to point to a well-organised, relatively well resourced, active organisation or network of organisations capable of reaching out to the wider Russian society and, indeed, abroad.

However, our monitoring in October, November and December 2007 showed that the result of its internet activity has been negligible in terms of network-construction, creativity and management – similar to the nationalists' networks. In an indepth interview in September, the coordinator of its internet activity, Marina Litvinovich, acknowledged serious structural mistakes since the group's inception which made serious mobilisation, particularly among internet users in the 18–35 age group, unrealistic.

²⁴ <www.gazeta.ru>, <www.lenta.ru>, <www.newsru.com>, <www.ej.ru>.

²⁵ <<http://www.echo.msk.ru>>.

²⁶ <www.rferl.org> and <<http://www.svobodanews.ru>>.

²⁷ In particular <<http://www.kasparov.ru>>, <<http://www.namarsh.ru>>, <<http://www.rufront.ru>>.

²⁸ For instance <http://community.livejournal.com/namarsh_ru/> <http://community.livejournal.com/ru_opposition>, <http://community.livejournal.com/ru_nazbol/>, <http://community.livejournal.com/nbp_video>, <http://community.livejournal.com/ru_pora>.

Other such interviews with a number of Russian internet and political experts confirmed much of Litvinovich's analysis in highlighting the major miscalculations made when Drugaya Rossiya started its internet activity. Activists and observers often both blame the undoubtedly massive intimidation and manipulation counter-measures displayed by the authorities to defuse its protest and mobilisation potential, but the explanations actually go well beyond, and are deeper than, these.

In an analysis of the Russian opposition before the parliamentary elections, published in October 2007,²⁹ British scholar Andrew Wilson said of it that

wild cards like Other Russia (Garry Kasparov's United Civic Front and Mikhail Kasyanov's National Democratic party), or for the matter Dmitry Rogozin's Great Russia and Eduard Limonov's National Bolsheviks, will make even less of an impact in the streets (than Yabloko or SBS), if their parties cannot even take part in the vote.

While noting the 'increasing' Kremlin ability to manipulate 'alternative' political technologies like the internet and flash mobs assembled via texting, Wilson particularly emphasised that the potential of the liberal opposition to make an impact was effectively limited by their inability to learn three basic lessons from the Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004.

The first lesson is the necessity of real unity. The second lesson is the 'need to reinvent' one's image 'and not just by rebranding'. Wilson said that 'the old-style Russian opposition has been putting the cart before the horse, hoping that the mere idea of previous colour revolutions would revivify them and their fortunes, rather than the other way around'. Third and no less important, the oppositionists should 'not take money from disreputable or discredited sponsors'. Wilson added that in the Ukrainian case this lesson was learnt only retrospectively. However, in Russia

the idea that Mikhail Kasyanov (whose nickname when Prime Minister was 'Misha two per cent', a reference to his alleged fondness for bribes) was a 'Russian Yushchenko' or even a 'Russian Tymoshenko' (leaders of the Ukrainian Orange revolution, subsequently president and prime minister respectively) was ludicrous. Every rumor of a link with the exiled Boris Berezovsky has been a gift to the Kremlin media.

²⁹ Andrew Wilson, 'Does Russia Still Have an Opposition?', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 28/1 (2 Oct. 2007), <www.res.ethz.ch>.

All these lessons were clearly not learnt by people in charge of internet resources linked to Drugaya Rossiya. Unity is both dramatically and very publicly lacking amongst liberal opposition leaders: divisions were quite evident on the main websites and blogs of well-known figures. The image projected is far from representing anything new.

Furthermore, in the opinion of all the internet experts our project consulted, their internet presence lacks positive messages. As one of the experts we interviewed put it, opinions are 'very polarized' and no dialogue is taking place. Those linked to Drugaya Rossiya who are 'dissenters' and who participated in the Dissenters' Marches include very diverse groups of individuals, often with no common values. What they share is a lack of trust in the state authorities: as in the Soviet era of the 1970s, it comes down to a question of *us* against *them*. It is clear that nationalist groups around the Great Russian initiative are more at ease with such a discourse and can exploit it better for their purposes, especially when 'us against them' means we Russians against these foreigners – producing a warm feeling that *we* should unite for a good cause against those who are threatening our community, country, friends and families. In the case of Drugaya Rossiya, however, 'there is no such polarisation possible: the *we* have no obvious or present link to the majority of the Russian people'.³⁰

Commenting on this, Sam Greene of the Carnegie Foundation (which maintains a substantial presence in Moscow) said that

*Drugaya Rossiya seems quite autistic, unable to link to the individual and his problems. People tend to prefer those movements which they feel provide a service, and are pro-active: this gives the movements legitimacy. Drugaya Rossiya is definitely not perceived as a service – rather the opposite. Many members of the public feel that they should do something to help Drugaya Rossiya and its representatives – a view which does not encourage confidence in its political project. Great Russia, by contrast, does at times provide advice on issues of common interest.*³¹

'In terms of image and self-presentation,' agreed a third expert, 'those close to Drugaya Rossiya tend to present the group and its members only as victims of the regime. This tendency can be very disturbing for readers who are not existing committed supporters of the network.'³² The same expert noted

³⁰ Interview with Sergei Kuznetsov (Sept. 2007).

³¹ Interview with Sam Greene (Sept. 2007).

³² Interview with Ekaterina Parkhomenko (Sept. 2007).

with disappointment the inability of all the networks we researched to join forces and take advantage of issues of common interest for their respective supporters. 'All these organizations focus too much on their own issues to understand and care about what happens around their own network, in civil society. This is why civil society in turn does not care about them.'³³

The appointment of Marina Litvinovich as coordinator of the group's internet presence is also seen generally as a mistake – because she has an 'internet history' which makes her distrusted by those who might feel attracted to Drugaya Rossiya. Litvinovich was the editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-connected <www.Strana.ru>: during the presidential election of 2004, she was one of the coordinators of internet activity at the Effective Policy Foundation (FEP) run by Kremlin-connected political technologist and ideologist Gleb Pavlovsky, one of the main centres in Russia for the implementation of pro-government political projects. Many internet users didn't believe that Litvinovich could switch camp: they assumed either that she was simply accepting a well-paid assignment from the Foundation to create a bogus opposition, or that she was a cynical internet political technologist selling her services to a range of Kremlin enemies, including the US government and exiled oligarchs, to manipulate users. None of these conjectures, of course, advanced trust in the internet presence of Drugaya Rossiya or helped mobilisation.

Internet expert Sergei Kuznetsov, a firm supporter of civil society strengthening in Russia through the internet, told our researchers that

the 1990s saw the peak of political manoeuvres. In each case, as soon as it became clear who was behind any manipulation, everyone quickly lost interest, because in Russia the level of cynicism is higher than in many other places. Lack of trust is in general also very high. This is why many people didn't care to participate in various Dissenters' Marches. The technologies used and the very people involved – Litvinovich, who used to work for FEP and Pavlovsky before – deterred them. The kind of thing being said about Drugaya Rossiya's – 'these people are up for sale, look where they were in the past' – kills all possibility of dialogue for most average users.

Kuznetsov says that when an event or discussion 'creates so many postings that one has the feeling of seeing a fire of discussion (including positive and negative comments) expanding, then we are seeing a potentially

³³ Interview with EP (Sept. 2007).

successful project developing. This happens when a posting is emotional, articulated and manages to touch sensitive points, so that people are compelled to react.' On the internet, he said, where 'personalities are all important, and where information moves all the time, one can initiate activity, but it is more difficult to orchestrate motivation and meaningful comments'. Drugaya Rossia, says Kuznetsov, 'has virtually no potential to develop in a positive way as it is, because its very basis was faulty'.

Our monitoring confirmed most of these observations, as well as the experts' summary of the reason behind the lack of trust for the internet resources coordinated by Litvinovich. The question concerning Litvinovich's past activities for the FEP emerged regularly in blog discussions, and her calm self-defence was not enough to fight off the comments of cynical users and former FEP colleagues active in blogs, who were only too happy to exploit the confusion among Drugaya Rossiya sympathisers to enhance distrust.

Other experts pointed to the lack of open discussions on the websites and blogs supportive of Drugaya Rossiya, and said this was one of the main reasons why mobilisation has not been promoted. Galina Timchenko, the editor-in-chief of online newswire <lenta.ru> said she tends to ask journalists to use them merely as 'sources of quotes'. She found these websites, like those linked with the nationalists of Great Russia 'declarative, and propagandistic. It is clear that they are not interested in objectivity and that they are not mass media. The lack of discussion, even on a major event like the Beslan school massacre, is a problem.'³⁴

The nationalist networks, Timchenko thinks, are more dynamic, more structured. 'It is clear that the nationalists have a better division of roles, with people prepared to take place in actions and marches, but they clearly can count also on people who are articulate and put forward their message in a quite powerful way.'

Julia Minder, head of internet resources at Rambler, Russia's second portal after Yandex, agreed with Timchenko. Mobilisation, they both noted, depends very much on audience.

Those who already support a movement, its network, don't need a real effort from organisations. The real question is: how to attract others? Blogs are at the moment the answer, but the issue is how to find a leading blogger who wants to meet people on the internet several hours per day. Leading bloggers need to be entertaining.'

³⁴ Interview with Galina Timchenko (Sept. 2007).

For Drugaya Rossiya, she concluded, 'the potential is there but more often than not it is not used.'

During her interview with our researchers,³⁵ Marina Litvinovich said mobilisation was the first goal of Drugaya Rossiya's internet presence. She noted that the movement tries to respond to the demand for what she described as 'quasi-carnival events' from individuals who want to assert their rights and at the same time have fun, but do not show any particular inclination for political activism. For these people – mainly youths who are active internet users – taking part in demonstrations and other activities is not a political action, more an expression of social concern.

Litvinovich coordinates the activity of several sites. She said that seven people work on <www.kasparov.ru> and <www.theotherrussia.org> (in English) – these serving an agenda-setting and information and propagandistic function. <www.namarsh.ru> is the main resource for marches and other protest activities. The site announces actions and serves as the main agitation centre of the movement.

The sites contain information that can be used by Russian and Western journalists reporting on the activities of Drugaya Rossiya. Litvinovich said that the websites offer news different from mainstream coverage and do not try to 'sell' them directly by attempting to place them in publications. 'Journalists, other people do that, quoting our website as a source and this is an effective method', she said.

Litvinovich coordinates personally the website focusing on the Beslan tragedy, <www.pravdabeslana.ru>. The website serves mainly as an archive of the investigation of the series of events which began when, on 1 September 2004, a group of armed men took more than 1,200 schoolchildren and adults hostage at a school in the town of Beslan, North Ossetia, an autonomous republic in the Northern Caucasus. On the third day of the standoff, a chaotic gun battle broke out between the hostage-takers and Russian security forces: 334 civilians were killed, including 186 children, and hundreds more were wounded. The website includes video materials of the tragedy which were not allowed on YouTube.

Among the established internet journals which Drugaya Rossiya considers important for its activities are <www.lenta.ru> and <www.newsru.com>, because they regularly make use of materials on offer on the movement's websites. Their popularity supports the movement's dissemination goals, as these two sites are frequently used as sources by other Russian media.

³⁵ Interview with Marina Litvinovich (Sept. 2007).

Litvinovich's blog on LiveJournal <<http://abstract2001.livejournal.com/>> has a wide friendship list (more than 3,000) but the ratings we recorded using Yandex statistic tools didn't place her among the leaders of the blogosphere. In her opinion only LiveJournal serves 'adequately' as a serious communication tool. Other major Russian-language platforms like LiveInternet are in her opinion 'useless'.

As of September 2007 Litvinovich felt she could count on some 150 activists supporting her, providing direct feedback, including from the regions. She acknowledged, however, that this was 'not an organised process.' During the interview Litvinovich repeatedly said that a structure and a strategy should have been in place long ago and that it had been wrong to count on the spontaneous initiative of single people, 'because pressure can be put on people in various ways.' She acknowledged that the website <kasparov.ru> was not well structured and/or user-friendly, that it was not appealing and would be improved. 'We should have created a more structured network since inception', she said. 'One with a hierarchy, with a real structure, one including newspapers.' Some 20 printing houses have refused to work with Drugaya Rossiya, fearing a negative reaction from the authorities, she said. Throughout the interview, Litvinovich lamented a lack of resources, in particular competent people able to devote time freely and funds.

In spite of both a negative attitude and negative experiences, Litvinovich believes that working on the internet is 'the only possible way' for the future. However, she added that experience gained in the last year indicated that 'dialogue on political issues is not really a possibility through the internet. Dialogue, and internet activism techniques such as "flash mobs" [when spontaneous crowds summoned up via the internet assemble to perform a quick action of protest and then leave] carried out individually through blogs can be much more effective than websites devoted to the creation of a dialogue.'

On the other hand, she said that forums on sympathetic websites (for instance <www.ej.ru>) have proved ineffective: provocateurs emerge instantly and any possibility of a real dialogue is obstructed. The last observation was corroborated during our monitoring.

Litvinovich's observation on flash mobs adds to Kuznetsov's observation that these 'are usually a youth and/or a cultural expression, but in Russia they acquire added political value. The messages are very clear and are not absurd at all. There is always an underlying civil-society goal. At the moment they are not taken as a political act, but they could become one at some stage.'

Litvinovich said that the aggressive response of the authorities before and during marches had deterred many 'theoretical' supporters of Drugaya Rossiya. She said that

in many regions meeting places were refused, in other regions there have been intimidations and arrests when the organisation was trying to carry out pre-electoral primaries and marches, despite the fact that it was clear that the Central Electoral Commission would not have granted Drugaya Rossiya registration ahead of the December parliamentary elections. One understands that there is a certain degree of risk involved and taking this risk is not an easy choice. Marches per se are not too dangerous. There are other actions that carry a greater degree of real danger and usually only National Bolshevik party activists are willing to take the risk. It is an individual choice.

Some of the most emotional posting in websites, blogs and communities of the network were recorded after a 22-year-old activist of the National Bolshevik party and supporter of Drugaya Rossiya Yury Chervochkin, died in a hospital on 10 December of injuries that his friends and colleagues say he sustained when attacked by police. Chervochkin was beaten by four assailants on 22 November in the town of Serpukhov, about 100 km south of Moscow. He was found later that evening unconscious outside his apartment building in Serpukhov. Drugaya Rossiya activists said Chervochkin had been involved in promoting the 24 November Dissenters' March in central Moscow around the time of the attack.

Activists said Chervochkin made a phone call to news editors of <kasparov.ru> about half an hour before the attack, saying he was being followed by four people whom he recognised as being linked to police officers who specialise in fighting organised crime. Reports and discussions on this case were particularly heated in the community blogs.³⁶

Asked to identify what she would have liked to change in her strategies, Litvinovich said she would need: (a) six quiet months to prepare people; (b) video materials on the internet becoming more influential than television in Russia; (c) time to travel to the regions and find active local bloggers/new authors; (d) a good agency able to recruit experienced people.

³⁶ <http://community.livejournal.com/namarsh_ru/> and <http://community.livejournal.com/ru_nazbol/>.

On cooperation with other groups, Litvinovich seemed rather confused. On the one side she said she wanted 'to see many social groups working together'. On the other side, asked to comment on cooperation with the motorist grassroots movement Svoboda Vybora (see next section), she said that 'that was a nice idea, but many problems emerged with the leadership'. She noted that the problems in question involved technical issues, as well as a 'generational gap'. (The leader of Svoboda Vybora is some 20 years older than she is.)

Following the December parliamentary election, the death of activist Chervochkin and Kasparov's decision not to register himself as a candidate for the March 2008 presidential election, Drugaya Rossiya seems to be moving officially towards stressing human rights – a position many of its supporters had subscribed to since inception. On 26 December, the organisation launched a website titled Chronicle of Persecution,³⁷ on which it plans to post information about persecution of dissidents. Litvinovich's blog and the LiveJournal community Namarsh³⁸ carry mostly the same kind of information and discussion.

Meanwhile the leaders of the liberal opposition emphasise that work on the internet should be intensified and improved. The daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported on 27 December that Union of Right Forces leader Nikita Belykh, speaking at a party meeting, said that the use of information technologies should be developed more actively, particularly the internet. The daily quoted Belykh, who has a personal blog on LiveJournal, <<http://belyh.livejournal.com/>>, as saying that 'For us, this is an obvious point of growth and the main means of communication. We must all learn to transform the significant but virtual support on the web into real and tangible support of citizens.'

Some experts interviewed by our researchers noted that social networks on the internet could have a huge potential for future development in Russia.³⁹ This could bring interesting and new developments, but the experts we interviewed said that it seems unlikely that networks like Drugaya Rossiya and Great Russia will be able to take advantage of this opportunity quickly and effectively. Networks linked to the authorities are, for the present, more dynamic, and enjoy many more resources.

³⁷ <<http://hroniki.info/>>.

³⁸ <http://community.livejournal.com/namarsh_ru/>.

³⁹ At the moment the most popular networks of this kind are <www.odnoklassniki.ru>, <www.moikrug.ru> and <www.vkontakte.ru>. Other platforms are likely to appear in 2008, linking blogs, emails and forums.

5. Case Study 3: Free Choice

Svoboda Vybora (Free Choice) was created as a reaction to a proposed government ban on all right-hand-drive cars in early 2005 (a very large number of cars are imported, usually second-hand, from Japan through such eastern ports as Vladivostok: Japanese cars, like British ones, are right-hand drive). As Sam Greene wrote, 'it 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.'⁴⁰

It evolved into one of the country's largest grassroots organisations, tackling issues well beyond the right to drive on the 'wrong' side of the car: it became a genuine social movement. Not all the organisation's followers accepted this – its leader told our researchers that he had been subject to considerable criticism among driver forums' users when he started introducing political themes, and had thus decided to create a separate section in the website devoted to political issues. But many did, seeing in the broadened agenda an outlet for a series of frustrations and grievances, as well as specific policy proposals.

Our project selected Svoboda Vybora for research as an example of successful grassroots internet activity. The movement is genuinely Russian and financially self-sufficient, making it thus difficult to compromise with accusations of taking money from Western sources, former Russian oligarchs or Kremlin authorities. The organisation's website⁴¹ proudly states that

⁴⁰ Sam Greene, PhD Dissertation at LSE, 2007, unpublished, 'Road Rage' chapter.

⁴¹ <<http://www.19may.ru/index.php?page=about>>.

Nobody ordered the creation of our organisation. People independently decided to join forces together and create it. In this sense Svoboda Vybora differs decisively from many other public organisations: we genuinely defend the goals and the rights of those who created us: the people of Russia. We are the people.

Since its inception, Svoboda Vybora has used the internet as a platform for information, logistics and mobilisation. More than for the other organisations we studied, the website is at the core of Svoboda Vybora's activity and its public presence: the organisation exists entirely on the internet and has no offices.

Its first public action took place on 19 May 2005. It created the momentum for the rise of the organisation and was the result of four days' work carried out entirely on internet forums by Vyacheslav Lysakov, who was thereafter recognised as the movement's leader. Drivers from 48 Russian regions supported the protest against the government banning of all right-hand-drive cars. The main protest took place in Moscow, where thousands of vehicles met and drove toward government buildings, to the astonishment of an unprepared police force. The action was remarkable, as it took place as a wave from Vladivostok in the Far East to the enclave of Kaliningrad. Lysakov had asked drivers to show an orange sign as a symbol of unity (and also to remind the authorities of Ukraine's Orange Revolution.) Many drivers disagreed, said Lysakov, but he claimed that about half accepted.

The website <19may.ru> was the natural extension of this action, providing information on the organisation and its initiatives. According to Lysakov, the action prompted government officials to take part in forum debates, while Kremlin officials expressed interest in meeting the organisation's leadership.

The website has a news section, complemented by a number of forums on issues proposed both by Lysakov and by organisation members. These forums are its most interesting feature: through them, Lysakov said, he very quickly established a network of regional volunteers, with whose help he drafted a number of social and economic demands. Lysakov is trying to attract funds to allow the organisation to have its own cable television channel and its own content managers. The website currently has a photo section, but not a video section.

There are currently nine active chapters (Moscow, Moscow region, Samara, Kaliningrad, Tyumen, Chelyabinsk, Krasnodar, Yakutia, Magadan) where volunteers participate in discussions on a regular basis, and more

or less active members of the organisation are also to be found in 32 other regions. Twenty-eight regional chapters have their own forums. Of these, only 11 were actively used by members during our monitoring period (Moscow and Moscow region, Yakutia, Magadan, Samara, Tyumen, Chelyabinsk, Kaliningrad, Krasnodar, Rostov-on-Don and Nizhny Novgorod). Regional chapters deal with local problems. Moscow analyses issues highlighted by regional chapters and works out a common strategy. The movement was registered as a Russian non-commercial organisation in April 2006, following new regulations on NGO activities.

The forums are strictly moderated by Lysakov (nicknamed Moskvich, the name referring both to Lysakov as a 'Moskvich', or Muscovite – and to a Moscow-made saloon car) and by two other moderators. Members and supporters actively contribute to daily discussions with comments, proposals and reports of activity in their region. The forums have some 8,000 registered users and two to three times more guests who do not write, but read actively. Members of the movement do not generally use blogs to enhance the impact of their activity and attract new supporters.

The mainstream media coverage of Svoboda Vybor a has been steady and positive since its first impressive action on 19 May 2005, thanks to the efficiency of the movement's leader. The website <www.19may.ru> occupied the second place in terms of popularity in the Yandex.ru Cars and Legislation section during our monitoring. The website was the fifth most popular in the same category in another much-used Russian portal: <Mail.ru>.

More, the actions undertaken by the organisation were both high-profile, dramatic and highly popular. In 2005 and 2006, Svoboda Vybor a mobilised enough support to conduct some half-dozen successful protests, three successful actions, including one aimed at preventing rises in the price of petrol and one on transport tax.

Another of these actions had particular resonance in Russia and contributed greatly to the consolidation of Svoboda Vybor a. On 7 August 2005 Altai Governor Mikhail Yevdokimov was killed in a car accident. His government car, travelling at high speed according to official instructions (usually between 150 and 180 km/h), 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. Scherbinsky's conviction was followed by motorists' protests and demonstrations organised by Svoboda Vybor a all over Russia on 12 February 2006. A month later, on 23 March 2006, Scherbinsky's conviction was overturned and he was released. This action

contributed to consolidating trust around the image of the organisation as a dynamic defender of the rights of drivers against the arrogance of the authorities, represented in this case by Yevdokimov's government Mercedes.

From the beginning of its activity till the end of 2006, the potential of this organisation was high in each of its four core activities: the cultivation of political conversations; supporting the establishment of alliances; encouraging mobilisation; and stimulating cross-cultural, political and social dialogue. This was both because of its independent and dynamic grassroots nature, and the lack of any financial help from sources seen as compromised.

But that changed. The information gleaned from an indepth interview with Lysakov in September 2007, and from the daily monitoring of discussions taking place on the forums of the organisation's websites in October, November and December 2007, showed that while the forums continued to stimulate dialogue among members and carried 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 mobilisation had sharply decreased – largely as a result of the highly personalised structure of the organisation around its leader.

The communications and public relations work of Svoboda Vybora takes place entirely in Moscow, with Lysakov himself fully in charge of communications, while also fulfilling the role of coordinator of an advisory council in charge of steering the organisation. However, he admitted during the interview that he does not feel obliged to report everything he does to all the members of the council – and he certainly does not ask their permission before starting new initiatives, particularly concerning public relations strategies.

Lysakov's habit of acting solo, before or even without discussing with the organisation's council the possible implications for the movement, opened up the space for the authorities' successful implementation of measures aimed at co-opting him – and thereby ultimately defusing the protest and civic potential of Svoboda Vybora. The lack of a structured democracy within Svoboda Vybora – itself an indication of the shallowness of the traditions of non-state organisations and their uncertainty as to how best to maintain themselves in what is, for Russia, a wholly new space still regarded with suspicion, and closely monitored, by the authorities – rendered it vulnerable to this co-option. An interview with Moscow Carnegie centre expert Sam Greene (who has studied Svoboda Vybora for his doctoral dissertation on civil society in Russia) corroborated our conclusion. Greene

said that Lysakov currently does not seem to have the mobilisation ability that he used to have in 2005 and 2006.

The actions of 2005/6 had attracted the authorities' attention. In April 2006 the State Duma committee on constitutional law, then chaired by United Russia deputy Vladimir Pligin, held hearings on 'Responsibility for administrative violations in the field of transport'. Lysakov told our researchers in September that he was impressed by Pligin's 'sound and responsible stand' on issues touching directly on the activities of Svoboda Vybora. After Lysakov published an article in *Novaya Gazeta* at the beginning of 2007 Pligin and other influential State Duma deputies asked him initially to consult and then to create an expert group to advise Duma members on transport issues.

Lysakov explained to our researchers in September that he accepted the proposal because, first, he believes that it is worth seeing whether cooperation is possible with all political forces, despite the fact that his personal preferences are not with United Russia, but with more liberally oriented groups, and second, as he put it, 'there are normal people also among United Russia deputies, otherwise they would not have solicited my advice'. He said he and seven of his closest associates helped the lower house of Parliament in drafting legislation on transport in 2007. From March until July 2007, Lysakov and his 10-member expert group prepared 12 amendments to legislation which would directly affect drivers' rights: he said he thought further cooperation was likely with legislators after the December 2007 parliamentary election.

Lysakov described this development as a 'quality metamorphosis' – when the organisation switched its focus 'from protest against government actions to work with the government from the inside'. He claimed that his cooperation with the Duma was proof of the authorities' willingness to be submitted to a degree of civil control.

However, these developments coincided with a notable decrease in the protests organised by Svoboda Vybora. The last such action took place in May 2006, when the organisation's protest triggered a directive decreasing the number of government cars allowed to use flashing lights and acoustic signals. As new legislation affecting drivers' rights was being discussed earlier in 2007, Lysakov made public the positions of his organisation in a number of articles published by leading Russian daily newspapers (including *Kommersant* and a bi-monthly opinion piece that he publishes in *Vedomosti*). He said in the articles that if the new legislation was published without taking into account the amendments proposed by his expert group, Svoboda Vybora would organise massive actions that would possibly disrupt the

election campaign. But since many amendments proposed by his expert group *were* eventually taken into account, protest actions were unnecessary.

Between May 2006 and January 2008, when our project ended, Svodoba Vybora did not organise any protest action. Members of the movement have repeatedly voiced their concern in forum discussions, especially when high-profile violations of the highway code by government cars have caused deaths and discrimination against motorists.

Our monitoring of the website coincided with the last such case. In December 2007 Lysakov's assistant and active forum moderator Esper (Andrei Mukhortikov) posted an item concerning a car accident in September involving the Chairman of Russia's Supreme Court, Vyacheslav Lebedev. One of the police cars (a Mercedes) in Lebedev's motorcade, travelling at the officially mandated high speed, collided with a Zhiguli with a couple and another passenger on board. One passenger in the Zhiguli died as a result a few days later and the driver, Natalya Trufanova, was seriously wounded. A second passenger was also wounded.⁴²

The forum posting noted that police were trying to blame Trufanova for the accident. The posting said that her family was struggling to survive the death of the father, the serious physical condition of the mother, and had problems paying the high legal expenses for a lawyer defending Trufanova. The driver was under threat from possible accusations under Article 264/2 of the criminal code, which carried the possible penalties of a five-year jail sentence and paying for the damages incurred by the Mercedes if found guilty.

On 29 September, following an active forum discussion, Esper posted an online opinion poll, asking members of the organisation to vote on the necessity of a nationwide action in support of Trufanova.⁴³ In the poll, 24 per cent of members who had followed the initial thread said they would participate and help organise the action in their respective regions. A further 66 per cent said they would participate, but did not offer to help with organisation and logistics. Only 9 per cent said no action was needed. We monitored this case with particular attention, because it shows a number of important changes in the operational style of Svoboda Vybora and of its leader since 2005/6. The case shows striking similarities with the Scherbinsky case.

Lysakov, who is extremely disciplined in reporting his activities, contacts and public statements in the media, asked in this case for time to understand

⁴² <<http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=9994>>.

⁴³ <<http://www.19may.ru/forum/showthread.php?t=9563>>.

what had actually happened. <19may.ru> opened a new forum, called 'Witnesses wanted', aimed at collecting witness evidence and at raising awareness on the growing number of these cases.

Then, at the beginning of October, dismissing the idea that a protest action would actually help, he wrote letters to then-Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov and to Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev. In the letters Lysakov highlighted concerns on the growing number of killings of pedestrians by escorted cars, and asked Zubkov and Nurgaliev to take legislative measures increasing the responsibility of drivers of government cars. Lysakov said he would wait for an answer to the letters in order to establish if protest actions were again needed.

He duly reported these letters, his meetings with Duma deputies supporting his requests and of his radio and media interventions raising awareness on the issue to forum participants – with the result that, for some time, they stopped their requests for protest actions. In November, when forum members, noticing that nothing significant had happened, renewed their requests, Lysakov reported new contacts with Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin and with Ella Pamfilova, who chairs former President Putin's Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights Council, aimed at organising a round table on responsible driving with the participation of officials and civil society representatives. Finally, in a posting dated 6 December, Lysakov noted that the case had showed 'great cynicism' on the part of the authorities investigating it from the beginning. However, as of January 2008 no protest action had been taken.

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

This does not mean that the organisation has become ineffective. Among the useful social initiatives recently organised 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 making the use of car seats for children compulsory. Other pressing issues that are of great interest for motorists and society alike, including discussions on petrol prices, on insurance and on parking issues, are likely to become the focus of the movement's future activity and are already the subject of heated discussions on the website forums.

The general presentation of the website is, however, misleading at present, since it still emphasises the protest activity of the movement. Possibly this reflects Lysakov's statement that 'Svoboda Vybora will continue using protest methods until the situation concerning drivers' right and the rights of all citizens in Russia improve significantly'. He believes that this resolution doesn't contradict the acknowledgement of the 'quality metamorphosis' that took place in 2007, when the organisation switched its focus 'from protest at government action into work with the government from the inside'. In fact, Lysakov is keen to assert his genuine independence and that of his organisation. He often states in forum discussions that he 'keeps his distance' from all political forces, and this point is clearly central to his image.

For Svoboda Vybora, Lysakov said, the internet is 'as essential as air'. 'Without it we could not exist, discuss, and make contacts.' He said that, for the movement, the most effective medium besides forum and internet chats is radio. Articles published by newspapers follow, as a way to make public issues and tactics used by the organisation and support civil control on state agencies.

Lysakov said that another active forum user on the organisation's website – Rosavtodora – is in charge of attracting attention to 'hot' problems. Besides road security, Lysakov added infrastructural issues. He compared investment in roads in China (US\$5 billion in the last five years, according to his data) with Russia's (US\$250 million the last five years) and said that only 37 per cent of federal roads and no more than 24 per cent of regional roads are in good order. This is a possible subject of discussion in forums and feedback from motorists, and will certainly be useful to state agencies as the government intends to embark on multi-million infrastructure upgrade initiatives across the country.

The forums of Svoboda Vybora made only sporadic mention of the December parliamentary election during our monitoring period. These did not trigger any online discussion. Asked to comment on links with opposition movements such as Drugaya Rossiya, Lysakov told our researchers that he had serious doubts about the effectiveness of that network. 'Drugaya Rossiya is not a very effective organisation', he said. 'In order to carry out successful actions, one needs to sustain emotionally charged forums, select effective formulas that in turn resound among the public because they touch common issues.' In his opinion, the leadership of Drugaya Rossiya has not been serious about this, and the result is poor.

Lysakov said that he had twice attended meetings of the coordination council of Drugaya Rossiya. Initially, he said, the goal of the organisation

seemed to be creation of an open platform for all opposition organisations, with the political component being minimal. It was, in Lysakov's words, 'created as a social organization that wanted to be an arbiter for the discussions of politicians'. But later, with elections looming, politics became predominant and Lysakov said he felt that Svoboda Vybora was 'a mere background'. Lysakov, without elaborating, added that he personally felt 'used' by coordinator Marina Litvinovich. He thought that, if Drugaya Rossiya had wished to establish real cooperation with his organisation, it should have worked more on questions of security and morality, producing, for instance, examples on 'how the police discredits the country', or other issues that are a cause of concern for many drivers.

As an example, Lysakov said many people in Russia are outraged by the commercial agreements that the police have with rich and influential individuals, particularly in Moscow, whereby these people buy, legally, security services for the protection of their bags or watches and then carry them with them at all times – with one or even two armoured police cars accompanying them – 'protecting goods, not people'. The number of these commercial agreements has grown in Moscow from 30 to 970 in recent years, he said.

It is clear that Svoboda Vybora will continue supporting civil activities. If Lysakov remains the unquestioned leader of the organisation and if members do not request a change in the decision-making process and executive structure of the movement, however, Svoboda Vybora will likely become a useful extension of the Public Chamber. This may imply playing an important role highlighting transport issues at government level. But it will lose its potential as an independent grassroots civil society movement.

It is of course the case that NGOs everywhere are – increasingly – consulted to assist the work of governments. In every area of public life, pressure groups and expert NGOs lobby, advise and work with government officials and elected representatives. In, for example, the sphere of humanitarian aid, bodies like Oxfam, Medecins sans Frontieres (the founder of which is presently French Foreign Minister) and the long-established Red Cross, which has for decades performed the wholly confidential service of visiting prisoners and reporting on their condition to the relevant government, as it has done for the inmates of Guantanamo, have close governmental ties. But these NGOs have been careful to retain the necessary independence to criticise the governments with which they work, and from which they often receive financial support – sometimes, to be sure, to the fury of these governments. In Russia, it seems that such a posture is not regarded as being available: there is no such thing as a 'loyal oppositionist NGO'.

Conclusion

This report started from the argument that, to understand the way in which the internet might empower greater independence among Russia's civil society forces, we need to have a better understanding of the content and of the dynamics in action on RuNet. We have therefore sought to present a contextualised picture of our three case studies. We have endeavoured not only to explain the technical facts and figures related to the internet presence of the movements we examined, but have also tried to portray something of the personalities upon which the internet presence of the three networks considered depends.

Our research has pointed to the following trends, each of which would repay more detailed and extensive investigation:

- the qualitative level of internet discussion seems to be low;
- lack of trust is widespread and on occasion skilfully manipulated by the authorities;
- online networks seem to be generally rather closed and tend to the intolerant;
- it seems that leaders of internet sites can often be co-opted, compromised or frightened;
- Russian internet users appear not to respond actively to political campaigning on the web.

For these reasons, Russians have for some time been much less sanguine about internet developments than the foreign observers we quoted at the beginning of this study. Boris Dubin, a director of the Levada Centre for sociological research, told our project⁴⁴ that

⁴⁴ Interview with Boris Dubin (Sept. 2007).

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 is needed for the creation of ideas that can translate into offline activity and mobilisation.

Dubin's phrase would remind a Russian of the more common formula used by the Kremlin, a 'vertical of power', by which is meant a structure which reaches deep into the political and social system. His adaptation of it means, he said, a network of 'existing institutes, whose functions are sometimes obstructed, but whose existence is nonetheless respected by society and by the political leadership'.

He believes that all institutions of civil society have been emasculated and manipulated by the authorities in recent years. Thus the internet, in his view, has been restricted to the status of 'a device to test one's own circle' and, although in a slightly different way from in the Soviet period (more technical, modern, creative), can be used to reproduce well-tested mechanisms of propaganda and manipulation.

It is, of course, the case that internet activity and internet engagement are increasing strongly, in Russia as elsewhere – as Dubin recognises. But though he sees this as positive, it is more than balanced, he believes, by an increase in a wide range of provocations and manipulation – a development he sees as 'poisoning' meaningful platforms for dialogue and discussion. Russia's society, he says, is essentially 'guided by simple, quite archaic frameworks – and for this reason the value of internet and blogs for the development of civil society is extremely limited'.

Dubin's view of the limitations of the internet to create (as against amplifying) the links, networks and habits of civil society accords with the view of social scientists who study the effects of different communications technologies, such as, for example, Robin Brown of the Leeds Institute of Communications who writes that

mobilization is not only something that non-governmental actors do, but something that states do. States have provided the framework within which other political actors have emerged – parties, trades unions, social movements. Yet the current wave of interest in mobilization and new technologies is driven by the belief that new developments are breaking down this pattern and driving a shift of power away from the state.⁴⁵

In Russia, however, the state has strengthened itself over the period of office of President Vladimir Putin, and it does not seem to be about to allow a shift of power away soon. The power and potential of the Russian internet is severely limited. From our research, and from intense monitoring of a selected number of websites and blogs of individuals and organisations, we argue that, in the Russian context, at present at least, new communications developments are not yet breaking down well-established patterns of power. The state remains the main mobilising agent in Russia. Following a few years of spontaneous – and inexpensive – ‘anarchy’, RuNet currently does operate as a device to spread information, but largely among closed clusters of like-minded users who are seldom able or willing to cooperate. However, it does operate as a platform which the state uses increasingly successfully to consolidate its power and spread messages of stability and unity among the growing number of Russians regularly accessing websites and blogs.

A paper by Markku Lonkila on ‘The Internet and Anti Military Activism in Russia’⁴⁵ reveals that the movement against the war in Chechnya, whose main activists are the mothers of soldiers serving there, is split into different, sometimes hostile, factions; has little or no links with anti-war movements elsewhere; and limits its protests exclusively to Chechnya, and largely to the soldiers’ conditions. Lonkila finds that the net anti-war movement lacks coherence – but adds that this is in line with the fragmentation of offline forms of activism, an underscoring of the point that the net cannot and does not bestow any new element not already there in the activists’ behaviour. His study, Lonkila concludes, ‘suggests that the online anti-military activism on the Russian internet is fragmented and run by a small group of activists’.

Those in the Kremlin supporting a ‘third way’, a soft approach to the management of the ‘vertical of power’ built by President Vladimir Putin have clearly prevailed so far in the matter of managing the internet, and the opinions expressed on it. Selective and well-publicised cases of outspoken, oppositionist websites and blogs which have been closed down by the authorities in a number of regions are more the over-zealous initiative of local authorities than a planned move from the centre – for all that these sporadic crackdowns may be welcomed in Moscow, because of the feeling of fear and suspended punishment that they spread among internet users.

⁴⁵ Robin Brown, ‘Mobilizing the Bias of Communication: Information Technology, Political Communications and Transnational Political Strategy’, paper for panel of the American Political Science Association Convention, Washington DC (Aug.–Sept. 2000).

⁴⁶ *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60/7 (Sept. 2008).

We have noted that President Medvedev has taken a relatively liberal line in regard to proposed legislation to control the internet: it is too soon to judge if this will remain a settled policy.

Such cases, however, have been the exception rather than the norm in Russia at this time. The advantage of widespread, increasingly skilful and creative manipulation has been twofold. In the first place it is manipulation, not censorship, that effectively defuses the attraction of political activity among the young population – the more so since entertainment is used as a weapon. As the British scholar Andrew Wilson put it in a recent interview with RFE/RL, ‘In the society of the spectacle, your spectacle has to be spectacular.’ In second place, by avoiding the overt internet censorship that the Chinese authorities enforce, the Kremlin has placed itself in an advantageous position *vis-à-vis* those in the West who routinely demand freedom of expression in Russia. The new president, Dmitry Medvedev, has said in interviews that he is an avid internet user and is fully satisfied by the degree of diversity of opinions on offer on the Russian segment of the internet.

We were lucky to have completed our project during the first part of the Russian electoral cycle. We recorded a wealth of information on pro-Kremlin internet manipulation, including ‘brigades’ of bloggers which spread the President’s message on line and which took great pleasure in disrupting the online activities of Kremlin opponents, by using abusive language and obstructing discussions, or acting in an organised way to prevent certain issues making the headlines on the influential Yandex Top 20 issues of the day.

Our monitoring confirmed the amplitude of the manipulation effort, although it was not at the centre of the present research. One of the main names who emerged was 28-year-old Konstantin Rykov (whose LiveJournal was formerly <<http://real-rykov.livejournal.com>>; the journal was deleted and purged during our monitoring) who became a member of the State Duma on the United Russia party list in the Nizhny Novgorod region in December 2007. Rykov has been the editor-in-chief of Kremlin-friendly online newspaper *Vzglyad* <<http://www.vzglyad.ru>> that is one of the 10 most-visited news sites in Russian, according to Rambler statistics <<http://top100.rambler.ru/top100/Media/index.shtml.ru>>.

Rykov has also been identified by Russian media as one of the creators of the website <zaputina.ru> that was launched in November 2007. <Gazeta.ru> said on 9 November that ‘the distinctive feature of

the parliamentary election has been the use of Internet technologies. Political technologists in the United Russia camp make ample use of these technologies.⁴⁷

The logos of both these projects are aimed at recalling the logo style of the Rossiya state television channel – thus providing a direct link between the channel and the regime's propaganda output. There are only three sections on the websites – politics, society and music – and during the campaign, the politics section was entirely structured around carefully produced propagandistic video spots. One video clip on <zaputina.ru> is borrowed from Rossiya television: it was named 'The day of the jackal' and covers the 'Dissenters' March' of 24 November.

In the clip, Mahler's First Symphony is used as the musical background to fragments of Putin's electoral speech in front of 'United Russia' activists at Luzhniki stadium on 21 November. The picture is framed to correspond perfectly to the president's words. When Putin says 'unfortunately there are still in our country those who scrounge from foreign embassies like jackals', the picture on the screen is synchronised to show Kasparov. When Putin talks about 'those who in the 1990s during their tenure in office caused huge damage to society and to the state as they served the needs of oligarchs', the picture is that of Boris Nemtsov, who in 1998, at the time of the financial crisis, was serving as deputy prime minister. And when Putin declares that 'they are responsible for making corruption the main mean of economic competition', the picture moves to Maria Gaidar, daughter of Yegor Gaidar, the architect of Russia's economic reform.

The launch of these websites during the parliamentary campaign was aimed at involving as many young people as possible in the electoral process. Several internet experts commented to <Gazeta.ru> that it would be impossible to measure the effectiveness of these activities. Anton Nosik of SUP told <Gazeta.ru> that the emergence of propagandist websites of this kind makes use of budgets allocated to support Kremlin-friendly political propaganda.

As agencies linked to the Kremlin (the Central Electoral Commission, United Russia, websites and individuals affiliated with political consultants) continue competing for influence on internet users, we believe that our project could continue with a study of the methods of interaction they develop with other sectors, to research whether this interaction leads to a qualitative improvement, or to the decline of the sectors. It would be worthwhile to study in particular the forms of influence used during the

⁴⁷ <<http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2007/articles/2296913.shtml>>.

interaction. If Russia really is developing a 'third way' for indirect state control of the internet, and in particular the websites of independent organisations and blogs, then it will certainly be watched by others who wish to do the same. This third way is thus an important, even an urgent, subject of study.

Our research suggests, and many experts have confirmed, that further study of content on the internet in Russia would be both worthwhile and possible: and that it should be a priority to begin research on the presence of state structures and their affiliates on RuNet. 'In a situation of total manipulation of the electorate through the media,' senior Carnegie expert Masha Lipman told our researchers, 'one realises how important it would be to study in detail the mechanisms that allow to operate also on new technologies, including the Internet, so far the most open and potentially democratic communication platform in Russia.'⁴⁸

We agree very largely with the conclusions of Rafal Rahozinski, a British-based scholar who served as adviser on 'digital divide' issues to the United Nations. In a 1999 report that examined the emergence of new telecommunication technologies in the late years of the Soviet Union and in the early post-Soviet era⁴⁹ Rahozinski said that the Russian case vividly shows to what extent 'the impact of information technologies is critically shaped by the social context in which they are deployed . . . Thus, what is the most interesting about the Internet's emergence in Russia is not the way in which technology transformed society, but rather the way in which society colonised the technology.'⁵⁰

We do not question the notion that the growth in accessible telecommunication technologies can advance democracy and freedom, modifying the power relation between individuals, groups and governments. However, we agree with Rahozinski who says that 'the leap to declaring that these technologies also have the ability to reinforce, or even create, democracies, is a long one indeed'.

What we witness here is a clash of quite differing views on the 'promise' of the internet. For liberals, that promise – as we defined it above – is of various kinds of individual liberation. For those in power in Russia – and it seems for a majority of the Russian people – the promise is nothing like so clear-cut. Though they may, and do, attest to its usefulness, it is also suspect for a different kind of potential: not just for individual liberation, but for social

⁴⁸ Interview with Masha Lipman (Sept. 2007).

⁴⁹ Rafal Rahozinski, *Mapping Russian Cyberspace: A Perspective on Democracy and the Net* (Geneva: UNRISD, 1999), <<http://www.unrisd.org/infotech/conferen/russian/toc.htm>>.

⁵⁰ The UNRISD report was the basis for an article in *Current History* (Oct. 2000), <<http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/5014.html#7>>.

manipulation. The necessity, strongly proposed by the government and at least passively assented to by the majority, for a nation at one with itself, militates against an active net culture. The medium does not carry the inevitable message of individual liberation. It depends upon larger messages, actions and traditions. There is no short cut for which the code is www.

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