Russie.Nei.Visions n°59

"Digital Kremlin": Power and the Internet in Russia

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April 2011

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Summary

The Russian Internet, which has undergone considerable development in the last decade, remains subject to constant scrutiny from the Kremlin. Digital technology has posed a challenge to the governance and political legitimacy of the ruling class, which has been anticipated by President Medvedev. In a bid for technological independence from the major information technology players (American firms for the most part), the Russian government is seeking to fragment the web to extract from it a Russian component, facilitating the establishment of subtle state regulation. This "russification" of the web ties the private sector closely to state initiatives, and will be something to watch carefully in the run-up to presidential elections in 2012.

Introduction

One of the characteristics of the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev is the growing tendency for Russian citizens to air their grievances on the Internet. From policemen disillusioned by corruption to motorists angry at officials' conduct on the roads, many people have uploaded videos to websites and sent messages to the President. At the same time, Medvedev has made himself the standard-bearer for new technologies, regularly posting videos on his blog, using *Twitter* and campaigning for a greater democratic use of the digital media. The growing political potential of the blogosphere[1] has led the government to adapt to the new digital reality. While the government is tightening its control over traditional media—particularly television—the web seems at first glance to be an intermediate space and relatively open.[2]

Since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, state control over the audiovisual media and certain press publications has gone hand in hand with strong growth in the Russian Internet (commonly known as the RuNet). Between 2000 and 2008 the RuNet—which also includes the CIS countries[3]—saw average growth in user numbers five times greater than the Middle Eastern component of the Internet and fifteen times greater than the Asian one.[4] Today, Russia is the world's largest Internet user in terms of percentage of Internet users, ahead of South Korea.[5]

While the growth of the web is the result of the Russian authorities' desire to catch up with the West in technological terms,[6] a number of questions arise regarding the nature of the state's involvement in and on the web. With an increasing number of projects

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Translated from French by Nicola Farley.

[1] This subject is worthy of a separate study on its own.

[2] In its 2009 report on Internet freedom, however, NGO <Freedom House> judged the Russian web to be "partially free" owing to obstacles to access, control on content and violations of Internet users' rights.

[3] It also includes the Russian-speaking diaspora which, due to successive waves of emigration, is estimated at 27 million people worldwide.

[4] Miniwatts Marketing Group, "Internet World Statistics 2009."

[5] Just under a quarter of the Russian population are online, some 38 million Russians. As of 30 June 2010, the five countries with the highest number of Internet users were China, the US, Japan, India and Brazil. See Miniwatts Marketing Group, "Top 20 Countries with the Highest Number of Internet Users."

[6] A. Wilson, "Computer Gap: The Soviet Union's Missed Revolution and Its Implications for Russian Technology Policy," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 2009, p. 49.

in the digital sphere, the Russian state is a "proactive player" on the web. It tries to mold the national information space and broadcast political messages favorable to itself, all while ensuring that shares in Russian Internet firms remain concentrated in the hands of Kremlin-affiliated entrepreneurs.

While the web has given rise to a real "web culture" in Russia distinct from other authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, the Russian authorities' substantial investment in the web is coupled with the active encouragement of the use of digital technology by a part of the elite. This is not only a matter of making the Internet more accessible to the public but also of prioritizing a particular segment of the web with the aim of creating a "sovereign web." The emerging model of Russian control over the web recognizes the difficulty of implementing direct control over information flows, as is the practice in China, for reasons of image and economic profitability. Instead it aims at *recreating the state* on the web and encouraging Internet users to remain within this framework.

Recreating the State on the Web

The internet is causing the Russian government to face a twofold challenge to governance and political legitimacy.

Firstly, the expanse of the Russian territory poses a challenge to maintaining a national identity among Russian citizens. Having one network to connect all citizens is essential to countering the fragmentation of the country. Television used to play this "connecting" role but its impact is distinctly declining, especially among the younger generations.[7] In practice, the Kremlin is adapting its governance model to the new digital reality by democratizing access to it.

Secondly, on the web the Kremlin is striving to boost interaction between the governors and the governed. This means introducing *horizontality* into the "vertical of power" by politicians having a presence on the Internet. For President Medvedev, the inclusion of politicians in the digital *game* serves to reinforce the legitimacy of the Russian political system.

Democratizing the digital sphere

Adapting the country's governance to opportunities created by the development of digital technologies is one of the key measures of the Medvedev presidency.[8] For the Russian government, the Internet should act as a link between the public and the state, as well as furthering economic modernization to make Russia less dependent on energy resources.

Above all, the state is seeking to connect the maximum number of citizens to the Internet by developing digital infrastructure. Since 2009 the government has launched several initiatives aiming to reduce the "digital divide", which means to say the disparity in access to information technology, particularly the Internet (price controls,

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[7] "Internet prodolzhaet narashchivat' auditoriyu v protivopolozhnost' rossiiskomu TV" [The Internet Continues to Gain a Larger Audience in Contrast to TV], Rumetrika survey, November 2010.
[8] See "Speech at Joint Session of the State Council and the Council for the Development of the Information Society," <Kremlin.ru>, 23 December 2009.

increase in bandwidth, etc.). The digital divide is especially visible in the Russian Far East, where the rate of Internet penetration is only 21%, whereas 52% of Muscovites have Internet access.[9] More generally, a considerable divide can be seen between the major towns and the regions where there is little infrastructure and where wages are lower (the North Caucasus, High North and Far East). Conversely, the better-equipped regions are those which have successful universities and are connected to the rail network (the Urals, Volga).[10] Both the connection speed and the operators' tariff policies are criticized: for example, the average connection speed is about 17 times faster and web access costs are five times lower in Moscow and Saint Petersburg than in major provincial towns.

As a result of these disparities, the Russian authorities have instigated a regulation of Internet prices. Two initiatives were put forward in 2010: a "social Internet" project proposed by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology and the state telecoms operator Svyazinvest, whereby Internet access for people with the lowest incomes will be directly subsidized by the state; and a "social plug" project, a *package* consisting of access to radio stations, public television channels and Internet access limited to "socially important" sites, supported by the presidential administration and Moscow city's radio broadcasting network.[11] However, it seems that these initiatives will provide access limited to a specific segment of the Internet, based in Russia. What is more, official statements intimate that these projects are designed to enable the development of "e-government,"[12] supposedly creating a direct link between state and citizen.[13]

Whereas it is a trend current in most countries, Russian e-government is distinguished by its lack of transparency and the fact that a link of trust is still yet to be established between the state and the citizenry.[14] The UN, in its annual survey of the level of e-governance development, ranked Russia 59th in 2010, between Saudi Arabia and Montenegro.[15] The rankings, which have barely changed

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[9] G. Asmolov, "Authorities to Eliminate Digital Divide in 2010," <Global Voices>, 7 March 2010.

[10] A. Sidorenko, "Nanesenie na kartu cen na shrokopolosnoi Internet" [Mapping of Internet Broadband Prices], <Global Voices>, 16 March 2010.

[11] The "social plug" project, to which 30% of the population will have access by 2015, was approved by Dmitry Medvedev and will be set up in 39 major towns in Russia. It has a budget of close to US$ 2bn. G. Asmolov, "Flaws and Pitfalls of the Subsidized 'Social' Internet Plan," <Global Voices>, 21 June 2010.

[12] E-government designates the use of ITC by public administrations, aiming to make public services more accessible to their users and improve their internal workings.

[13] The Federal Program "Electronic Russia 2002-2010," supported by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technologies.

[14] G. Tumanov, R. Faliyakhov, "Elektronaya Rossiya offline" [Electronic Russia Offline], <*Gazeta.ru*>, 1 March 2010. Observers note strong bureaucratic resistance and a lack of coordination and communication on the part of the government. P. Baigarova, "'Electronic Russia': Reality or (Empty) Promises?" <*Digital Icons*>, No. 3, 2010.

[15] *United Nations E-Government Survey 2010*, 2010, p. 148.

since 2008, angered Medvedev at a meeting of the Presidential Council for the Development of the Information Society in 2009.[16] The government also announced that it wanted to provide each Russian citizen with a single e-mail account to simplify online transactions.[17] Russian analysts query this initiative, which is still at the project stage, highlighting the risks that would be posed to the respect for privacy by an e-mail address being included in the official documents of each citizen.[18]

This effort of democratization is accompanied by an integration of both the presidency and politicians in the digital sphere.

Political involvement

President Medvedev's strategy is to integrate digital technology into the political system to increase the perceived *legitimacy* of the Russian political system. His technophile character is an asset in implementing these initiatives.

Politicians engage with the web

Russian politicians' engagement with the Internet is supposed to create a sense of closeness between political circles and the largely depoliticized citizens, tightening the connection between regional inhabitants and central power. The visibility of politicians on the web is very recent and stems from the warning issued by the president in December 2009 to members of the government: politicians who do not have an online presence will not be able to gain positions of responsibility. In particular, the Kremlin wants to encourage regional governors to create their own blogs and make use of other Web 2.0 tools (blogs, micro blogs and social networks).[19] Although officially this is a question of bringing governors and governed closer together, this initiative can be analyzed from three perspectives.

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[16] The President declared that "[the electronic government] is nothing but a chimera." See "Opening Remarks at a Meeting of the Presidential Council for the Development of the Information Society in Russia," <Kremlin.ru>, 12 February 2009.

[17] "Elektronnuyu pochtu sdelayut identifikacionnym priznakom" [E-mail Will Serve as a Form of Identification], <CNews.ru>, 9 February 2010.

[18] A. Smolin, "Kogda e-mail budut vydavat' kak pasporta?" [When Will E-mail Be Issued like a Passport?], <RIA Novosti>, 12 February 2010. This type of measure can be seen in other countries, such as Turkey and Iran. See E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, New York, Public Affairs, 2011, p. 237.

[19] E. Bilievskaya, "On-line politika" [Virtual politics], <*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*>, 21 January 2010. These blogs are yet still little frequented, except nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovski's blog, which is followed by almost 511,000 readers as of March 2011. See "Reiting Blogov Runeta," <Yandex.ru>.

Firstly, the presidential administration is concerned about loss of trust in official media in the regions.[20] Secondly, Moscow wants to promote the expansion of broadband access outside the capital. If regional leaders go online, the population will follow to the benefit of private Internet providers. Lastly, as the president suggested, promoting the web is one aspect for modernizing the political system, which will foster "good governance" even further and will create "added value," which is likely to improve their management of public affairs.

Hence there is a rush of high-ranking Russian leaders (ministers, senators, MPs, governors) toward blogs on *LiveJournal* and other social network platforms, such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube*. This new penchant for the web is predominantly self-interested: the governors want to express their loyalty to the Kremlin above all else, following a deeply entrenched tradition of mimicry in the conduct of Russian politicians.[21] The problem is that few leaders write their blogs themselves, preferring instead to turn to public communications agencies, which see a market to be conquered in this area.[22] Thus Nikita Belykh, governor of the Kirov region, published on his blog (which he writes himself) an offer he had received from one company to develop and manage his blog.[23] Aside from the still very limited audience of political blogs, analysis focuses on the slide into self-promotional use that will be made of these platforms, particularly during elections.[24] For the Kremlin, the politicians' investment in Web 2.0 enables it to boost the legitimacy of the political system: the governors will present the government's *success stories* and will be there to listen to their citizens. However, the latter are not fooled by disinformation; indeed a growing number of "citizen blogs" have emerged since 2010. Among them, "investment activist" Alexey Navalny's Rospil.info, a website compiling information on corrupt government acquisitions, and BestToday.ru, a web-aggregator that monitors the Russian blogosphere recently launched by civic and human rights activist Marina Litvinovich.

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[20] *Idem.*

[21] F. Töpfl, "Blogging for the Sake of the President: the Online Diaries of Russian Governors," *Europe-Asia Studies*, forthcoming. As of May 2010, 38% of governors administrated a blog.

[22] G. Asmolov, "Kogda politiki idut v Internet" [Politicians Invest in the Blogosphere], <Global Voices>, 26 February 2010.

[23] The creation of a blog would cost US$ 5,500 and management US$ 3,000 per year. Blog promotion would be billed at US$ 7,000 per year. "Promotional activities" include the remuneration of other bloggers who have more than 1,000 virtual "friends" to publish information on the blog and the blog's links to different platforms. E. Miyazina, "Chinovniki i blogosfera," <*Vedomosti*>, 3 December 2010. In addition, <*Vedomosti*> lists the presence of Russian politicians (governors, MPs, senators, ministers, etc.) on Web 2.0 platforms.

[24] S. Kononova, "Official Tweet," <*Russia Profile*>, 15 November 2010.

Dmitry Medvedev, a plugged-in President

Unlike Vladimir Putin, who is cautious with the web,[25] Dmitry Medvedev shows a real hunger for new Internet technologies. He has placed them at the heart of the drive for political modernization and economic diversification he has pursued since his accession to power, as demonstrated by the project to create a technology cluster in Skolkovo, near Moscow.[26]

The president likes to present himself as a *geek*, discussing the latest technical innovations with the press[27] or calling upon influential bloggers to follow him on trips around Russia.[28] Since October 2008, he has had a video blog accessible from the official Kremlin website and the *LiveJournal* platform, and opened a *Twitter* account (fed by his staff[29]) at the company's headquarters in California during his trip to Silicon Valley in June 2010. At Davos in January 2011 the president made several references to his personal, daily use of Web 2.0.[30] He was also voted "Best Blogger in Russia 2011" among state representatives in February 2011.[31]

Medvedev is campaigning for cyber-literacy and the use of blogs within public authorities. He does not fail to maintain that he uses his online newspaper as a source of information on what is happening "on the ground." Examples of the President's reactions to events that have shaken the Russian blogosphere are well-known: the petition for the release of Svetlana Bakhmina (lawyer for Yukos, who was freed); police officer Evsyukov opening fire in a supermarket (he was relieved of duty); the death of lawyer Sergey Magnitsky while

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[25] Vladimir Putin's relation to the web is ambivalent. In December 1999, then Prime Minister, he declared that the major powers should no longer be measured by their number of tanks but rather by their capacity to create and use advanced technology; in addition, his accession to the Kremlin was partly enabled through a much tailored use of TV. Although the former President admitted to the magazine <*Time.com*> in 2007 "[that he] had never used [new technology such as] e-mail," his political entourage prioritized the web during the legislative election campaigns in 2007. His supporters created a site, <Zaputina.ru>, where Internet users were encouraged to express their support for the Kremlin leader. Nevertheless, his name is still associated with amendments to laws on extremism (2006, 2007), given media attention in the West through the distorting lens of a regression on freedom of expression and assembly.

[26] Note that the fund in charge of organizing Skolkovo, presided by the oligarch Viktor Vekselberg, has several multinational ITC heads on its board, such as Cisco and Nokia.

[27] D. Muratov, "Deklaraciya Medvedeva—2009" [Medvedev's Declaration—2009], <*Novaya Gazeta*>, 15 April 2009.

[28] Such as Anton Nossik, one of the RuNet's "gurus," and Roustem Adagamov, a very popular figure on LiveJournal. See A. Kornia, T. Dziadko, A. Golitsyna, "Prozhit' chuzhim umom," <*Vedomosti*>, 25 September 2009.

[29] Called *MedvedevRussia* instead of *KremlinRussia* since November 2010. His Twitter account had 219,000 followers as at 15 March 2011, compared with President Obama's following of more than 7 million.

[30] His speech is available at <Kremlin.ru>.

[31] The competition, <Blog RuNet 2011>, was organized by the Federal Agency on Press and Mass Communication.

remanded in custody (the heads of the judicial sentencing system were dismissed).

Medvedev argues that domination of the web confers an undeniable political advantage.[32] Moreover, he published his famous article "Forward, Russia!" on the online newspaper *Gazeta.ru*'s website. In addition, his video blog enables him to update Russian public diplomacy by fashioning a form of *soft power* apt for the network age. Thus, echoing the deterioration in Russo-Belarusian relations, Medvedev posted a video in October 2010 in which he addressed the Belarusians and sharply criticized President Lukashenka and the anti-Russian rhetoric emanating from Minsk.[33]

The President's "techno-friendly" stance remains, nevertheless, fragile. It is possible that he is promoting the web to circumvent a political system which he does not entirely control or in which he has little trust. The current Minister of Communication and Information Technology (and President of Svyazinvest's Board of Directors), Igor Shchegolev, is close to Putin, whose protocol service he managed at the Kremlin between 2001 and 2008. His predecessor in the government, Leonid Reiman (1999-2008), rose in parallel with Putin during the 1990s in Saint Petersburg, where he was head of a telephone operator. He resigned his post as presidential adviser in September 2010; in that capacity he headed the Presidential Council for the Development of the Information Society, which drives the main state initiatives for "e-modernization."

"Imagined community 2.0"

More deeply, the Internet poses a real challenge to national identity in multiethnic states like Russia. Therefore, the Russian authorities are seeking to outline a "Russian identity" on the web.

In this respect, the parallel with the works of sociologist Benedict Anderson is significant. He theorizes the concept of an "imagined community" from which he draws the definition of a nation: an "imagined political community," bringing together people who do not know each other and who will never meet but feel a strong sense of belonging to a community.[34] According to him, the development of the nation state in the 19th century was promoted by the emergence of the written press, which created "communities of readers". The

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[32] Parliamentary session with members of the United Russia party on 8 April 2009, transcribed on the site <Kremlin.ru>.
[33] Video available at <Kremlin.ru>.
[34] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Information*, London, Verso (Revised and extended, ed.), 1991.

Internet is not only a space of "collective reading" but also of "collective interaction."

Thus, stepping up the government's digital activities—particularly in relations between the governors and the governed—engaging citizens (principally young people) with the national agenda, and structuring the web as a *national space* help to include Russian citizens in a collective imagination. On the second point, the United Russia party has had some success in its attempts to adapt to the "social web" era by "engaging in dialogue" with bloggers[35] and organizing debate sessions with young people on digital issues.[36]

In addition, with the help of various Russian-speaking emigrant communities, the Russian "imagined community" is projected far beyond Russia's physical borders, which serves to develop a "Russkiy Mir"—a virtual Russian world. Indeed, the RuNet brings together all Internet users writing in Cyrillic and promotes the Russian language on the web: aside from Russians, significant Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia and Israel "live" online via the RuNet.[37] In the post-Soviet space a large proportion of official sites and national media also have Russian versions of their websites.[38] In 2010, Russian was the ninth most-used language on the web, roughly the same level as French.[39]

Democratizing access to the Internet and encouraging citizens to go online is only a part of the Russian government's policy, which is "sovereignize" their approach to the web.

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[35] "Edinorossy razvivayut dialog s Internet-soobshchestvom" [United Russia Steps up Dialogue with the Internet Community], <Edinaya Rossiya>, 30 November 2010.

[36] In October 2010 a debate was organized on the topic "Is an inter-party dialogue possible in the blogosphere?" Note that the United Russia party's head of digital issues is 28-year old senator, Ruslan Gattarov, former President of the United Russia's "Young Guard" political council. "V blogosfere nuzhno obshchatsiya tak zhe, kak v offline" [Dialoguing in the Blogosphere as if Offline], <Edinaya Rossiya>, 20 October 2010.

[37] B. Etling, *et. al.* "Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization," Harvard University, Berkman Center for Internet & Society, October 2010, p. 42-44.

[38] T. Kastueva-Jean, "Soft power russe : discours, outils, impact" [Russian Soft Power: Discourse, Tools, Impact], *Russie.Nei.Reports* No. 5, October 2010, p. 10.

[39] Source: <*Internet World Stats*>, 2010.

Regulating the RuNet

While the web offers new perspectives for governing the country, the nature of the state's involvement remains open. Together with the private sector, the authorities are increasing the number of projects in the digital sphere to try and model the Russian-speaking information space. This is important, given the emerging political potential of the Internet in Russia and the sensitivities in light of the approaching parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012, respectively. It is a matter of fragmenting the web in order to extract the Russian component, facilitating the establishment of subtle state regulation, avoiding hard control over the web as practiced in China.

"Russifying" the web

"Nationalizing" the Internet is certainly nothing new, yet the Russian case is original in several respects, particularly because it combines a series of governmental initiatives inciting Russian internet users to stay within the framework of the national cyberspace, delimited by language. The idea of creating a *national search engine* is part of this effort. The daily newspaper *RBK* revealed in March 2010 that this project would aim to "meet the needs of the state," such as "facilitating access to secure information" and "filtering sites which post prohibited content."[40] The government is said to be prepared to invest 100 million US dollars in the project, with the help of private sector partners, but without any foreign involvement. During a meeting with Russian MPs in 2009 Medvedev said that "foreign investment in search engines and social networks is inevitable, but must be monitored. It is a question of national security."[41]

Beyond the question of technological capabilities, this project is mainly political. It was during the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 that the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology was said to have become interested in search engines and information aggregators, having noticed that articles defending

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[40] See E. Sergina, "Kremlyandeks," *<RBK>*, 26 March 2010. The idea comes from Vladislav Surkov, Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration and member of Skolkovo's Board of Directors.
[41] Report of 8 April 2009 available at <Kremlin.ru>.

Georgia were easily accessible by international search engines.[42] Another issue arises: Yandex, the leading search engine on the RuNet, would be in direct competition with this state project. As in China, a national company controls the Russian market for Internet searches.[43] At present the Kremlin regards Yandex as one of Russia's most innovative companies and monitors its operations closely: in particular, the state holds a veto on the sale of more than a quarter of the company's shares. Clearly the state has no interest in "scuttling" Yandex; the real target of this nationalization would be Google, which is seen by an increasing number of leading Russians as an extension of the US Department of State.[44] However, the Kremlin's ability to build a credible rival to Google remains limited, knowing that the US company has almost unlimited financial, technological and legal resources.[45] Lastly, some experts maintain that the main challenge is not to develop a search engine but rather to make it popular and viable when Russian Internet users already have the choice between Yandex, Google, Mail.ru and Rambler.[46]

In a similar bid for "russification" the government is planning to adopt *open source*—free—software as part of a vast plan for developing a national operating system intended for use by the various state institutions. In December 2010, a four-year plan (2011-2015) was signed by Putin, providing for a budget envelope of around 3.5 million euros for developing an IT system based on the Linux model. Aside from a concern for saving money, this project also shows the Russian authorities' desire to distance themselves from Microsoft.[47] Since the project was made public, two rivals have appeared to seize the Russian *open source* market: Rostekhnologii, the public conglomerate specializing in high-technology which acquired a blocking minority in Alt Linux, the distributor of Linux in Russia; and the investment fund NGI which, in July 2010 under Leonid Reiman's supervision, bought a minority share in Mandriva, a French developer of open source programs.

Another government initiative is helping to russify the RuNet: obtaining a Cyrillic domain name (.рф) from ICANN in 2009 enabled

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[42] R. Badanin, *et. al.*, "Naidetsiya ne vsё" [Not Everything will be Found], <*Gazeta.ru*>, 14 July 2010.

[43] In June 2010, Yandex had almost a 65% share of the market in Russia, compared with 22% for Google. Source: *LiveInternet.ru*. In addition, according to comScore, Yandex was the search engine that saw the greatest growth in the world in 2009 and ranked 7th in the world in terms of requests. Yandex was one of the only three non-Anglophone portals to rank among the world's top 10, outstripped by Baidu (China) and NHK (South Korea).

[44] E. Morozov, "Is Russia Google's Next Weak Spot?" *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2010.

[45] Interview between the author and a Russian blogger, November 2010.

[46] These search engines accounted for 64.6%, 22%, 7.3% and 2.5% respectively of requests in Russia in June 2010 (data *LiveInternet.ru*). See A. Amzin, "Gosudarstvo po zaprosu" [The State on Request], <Lenta.ru>, 27 March 2010.

[47] It is estimated that at present IT equipment accounts for US$ 12bn of expenditure per year, with US$ 1bn for the payment of licenses. See A. Malahov, E. Kiseleva, V. Lavickij, "Programmisty-maksimum," *Kommersant*, 8 July 2010.

the Russian authorities to sketch out a division of the "virtual Russo-sphere".[48] While it is still too soon to analyze the political implications of this domain name—which so far remains limited to official websites—the event has provoked a strong response in the blogosphere, with some activists talking about a "cyber ghettoization" of the Russian web.[49]

The idea of creating a national search engine and the launching of a domain in Cyrillic are both attempts to shape the information space and encourage Russian Internet users to stay within the framework of the national web and, therefore, give rise to a natural isolation, despite the *global* nature of the internet. The relative isolation of the Russian web is not new. The "russification" of the RuNet is essential to our understanding: unlike the majority of the web, which is in English and dependent on applications and services from the US, the RuNet is in many respects linguistically and culturally sealed off, with efficient and very popular search engines, web portals, social network sites (see below) and free e-mail services.[50]

The increase in the state's digital presence, therefore, is striving to *russify* the RuNet but also to be more closely associated with it. In addition to the above-mentioned projects, for example, only platforms and software financed by the government are used in the education system. As a result, they become an integral part of the socialization process for the new generations of "digital natives", people having grown up in a digital environment.

Controlling the web

Added to the ongoing "russification" of the Russian Internet, the Kremlin is deploying an array of social, legal and commercial initiatives that aim to establish a firmer and more sophisticated control over the RuNet.

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[48] At the end of October 2009 ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) ratified the use of characters not in the Roman alphabet for top-level Internet addresses from mid-2010. It is now possible to have domain names in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Cyrillic, Hebrew and Japanese.
[49] "Kremlin Allies' Expanding Control of RuNet Provokes Only Limited Opposition," <Open Source Center>, February 2010.
[50] R. Deibert, J. Palfrey, R. Rohozinski, J. Zittrain (eds), *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010, p. 19.

Blogger state

Like the majority of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes,[51] the Kremlin is showing a tremendous ability to adapt to the digital age. The Russian authorities have been able to both create a legal environment favorable to controlling information flows and cultivate a dynamic community of "Internet gurus" who work more or less directly for the government. This (disparate) community, close to business circles, enables the Kremlin to overcome its inability to control information flows in the blogosphere.[52] This inability is mostly positive: Medvedev being popular among Internet users, it is another source of praise for the leaders. Nevertheless, sometimes bloggers reveal stories which embarrass the Kremlin, which Web 2.0 tools allow to be amplified. The leaders would like to have a better knowledge of sites where they should present counter-arguments to prevent these accounts gaining an audience. Mapping connections between the different parts of the blogosphere and understanding the way in which they influence each other is, therefore, essential. It is all the more crucial for the government to be aware that the opinions of *active* Internet users are rather representative of the "beliefs" and concerns of the Russian middle classes.[53] Studying, then molding them is key to maintaining the leading classes in power, particularly ahead of the presidential campaign in 2012.

The authorities are not restricting themselves to "passively" mastering the main platforms and getting to know players in the digital sphere. The development of blogs and social networks has helped the state to promote its own messages, enabling it to intervene in online discussions (forums) and to neutralize them before they lead to action offline. There are plenty of examples. Thus the Foundation for Political Efficiency, a think-tank close to the government co-founded by political scientist Gleb Pavlovski, has set up new online media projects which are meant to improve the Kremlin's image among the younger generations. The latest project to date, *Liberty.ru*, was sponsored by Alexei Chadaev, "ideologist" of the Russia United party and organizer of conferences on the role of the

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[51] See S. Kalathil, T. Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: the Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule*, Washington, CEIP, 2003. Although the authors do not analyze the Russian case, they show through the examples of China and Arab countries that since 2003 authoritarian governments have been able to adapt to the challenges posed by the use of the web for political ends.

[52] E. Morozov, *op. cit.* [18], p. 124-126. For example Konstantin Rykov, member of United Russia, President of the Committee on New Technology to the Duma and patron of the start-up company New Media Stars, responsible for producing comments flattering to the regime; Igor Ashmanov, one of the most influential consultants on digital issues (see the transcription of his radio interview on <*Ekho Moskvy*>), and manager of Ashmanov & Partners, canvassing as far as Vietnam; and Askar Tuganbaev, creator of <RuTube>.

[53] Interview between the author and a Russian blogger, November 2010. For that purpose, the Ministry of Communication issued a call for tender in 2009 with a view to studying "the possibilities of promoting the interests of federal authorities via social networks."

Internet in society and Russian political life at the "Kremlin's school of bloggers".[54] In addition to these projects, there are the networks of bloggers paid by the state, charged with producing messages indulgent to the authorities. The Ministry of the Interior, for example, suggests that influential bloggers present the police in a positive light.[55] For that purpose, the reform of the police—Medvedev's key measure—was launched *on* the Internet *because* of the Internet.[56]

Legal arsenal

Developing access to the web and encouraging the use of it enables the government to lay down the law on the regulation of the RuNet from a position of strength. On several occasions, particularly during riots,[57] politicians have suggested that a legal framework be set up to allow for direct control of the Internet.[58] In January 2007, the Federal Council's Committee on Information Policy discussed the establishment of a "secure" digital environment aimed at protecting Internet users from the rise in illegal activities online.[59] The government has set up a legislative arsenal which consolidates its repressive powers online and shows its growing ambition to control the web. Firstly, the doctrine on information security, published in 2000, expounds that the information space is used by other countries and "hostile elements" for the purpose of destabilizing Russia. Controlling the information space is, therefore, an issue of national security. Moreover, this idea appears in the military doctrine updated

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[54] Examples can be found <here> and <here>. A. Chadaev proposes that "Internet democracy" is "the next step towards developing the institutions" and "a way of reformulating the issue of democracy, [for example] by trying to reflect on the dangers posed by the digitalization of communication."

[55] The story on <LiveJournal> of an investigation by a militant blogger into the way in which the networks of paid bloggers works in the Russian blogosphere. Two examples, <Radulova> and <ma79>, commentaries full of praise for the police.

[56] A series of scandals involving the police was, in fact, disclosed online: the Dymovsky case, a police officer criticizing corruption within the police force in a video uploaded to <*YouTube*>; the Barkov case, named after the Vice-President of Lukoil who caused the death of a motorist without being convicted. In addition to the reactions and initiatives of the blogosphere are criticisms of Medvedev, who dismissed 16 senior heads of the police in February 2010. The President then launched a public debate on the reform of the police by publishing a draft law on the Internet, available at <http://zakonoproekt2011.ru/#law/police>.

[57] Such as those that saw football supporters clashing in Moscow in December 2010. These confrontations between extreme nationalists and Caucasians also sent shock waves through the blogosphere. The authorities, for their part, criticized the supposed role of the web in preparing for these outbursts.

[58] Following the example of Sergei Mironov, President of the Federation Council and of the Just Russia party, who suggested the creation of an "Assembly of Bloggers," a consultative body intended to decree new rules of "tolerance" on the web. E. Morozov, "Russia May Soon Create a 'Bloggers' Chamber'," *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2009.

[59] The text is available on the opposition's site <Forum.msk.ru>.

in February 2010.[60] Secondly, since 2010 the Supreme Court has exonerated the websites of traditional media from all responsibility for the comments published on their forums, while giving Roskomnadzor (the federal service in charge of applying the law on the internet laid down by the Ministry of Communication and Media) the authority to classify some comments as "inappropriate." If a website is called to order too often, because specific content has not been removed from the site, Roskomnadzor can then suspend its activities.[61] The risk is that a mechanism for closing "inappropriate" sites will be set up, amounting to a new method to control critical media. Thirdly, the FSB has proposed a number of amendments to the law on "Information, IT and Privacy."[62] In addition to the FSB's activism, there is the SORM-II law which, since 1999, has authorized the special services to monitor Internet traffic primarily by restricting service providers' scope for maneuver.[63] Beyond anticipating the next elections, this legal arsenal also betrays the government's concerns in the face of the influence of new media and social networks.

Offensive on popular online firms

The market capitalization of the main Russian web start-up companies can be seen both as proof of the significance the authorities attribute to the Internet's political potential and of the progressive nationalization of the RuNet. Since 2007-2008, oligarchs close to the Kremlin have increased their levels of investment in Russian web companies exponentially. Businessman Alisher Usmanov,[64] reportedly close to Medvedev, controls *LiveJournal*, the most popular blogging platform in Russia—often used to criticize the authorities[65]—and *Mail.ru Group* (formerly Digital Sky Technologies) via the holding company SUP (in which he acquired a 50% stake in 2008 from investor Alexander Mamut). Under the impetus of manager Yuri Milner (voted Businessman 2010 in Russia), Mail.ru Group

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[60] For a concise analysis of the military doctrine's approach to information, see G. Asmolov, "New Military Doctrine and Information Security," <Global Voices>, 23 February 2010.

[61] "Internet-SMI osvobodili ot obyazannosti moderirovat' forumy" [Internet Media Freed from Obligation to Moderate Forums], <Lenta.ru>, 15 June 2010.

[62] Namely: data conservation, the possibility of closing sites within three days of a ruling by the prosecutor and not by the courts, or even the possibility of deactivating a domain on the basis of a letter of "justifiable" arguments from the management of certain special departments. See "FSB uporyadochit Internet" [The FSB Regulates the Internet], <*Vedomosti*>, 25 June 2010.

[63] R. Deibert, *et. al., op. cit.* [50], p. 219.

[64] Co-owner of Metalloinvest and managing director of Gazprominvestholding (Gazprom's financial investment subsidiary), A. Usmanov has diversified his activities into the media: he owns the publishing house *Kommersant* and holds a 50% stake in SUP, an investment fund for new media (which also owns *LiveJournal* and *Gazeta.ru*). He is also the co-owner of telecom operator MegaFon. According to *Forbes* magazine, Usmanov is one of the richest men in Russia and is said to be close to Putin.

[65] See H. McLeod, "Examining Political Group Membership on LiveJournal," *Digital Icons*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2009, p. 19-21.

launched an offensive on the main social network sites. In Russia, it owns some of the most popular websites: the Mail.ru portal and the social networks Vkontakte.ru and Odnoklassniki.ru, which are similar to *Facebook.com* and *Classmates.com* respectively. According to the fund, 70% of pages viewed on the RuNet belong to the websites owned by the group, which also owns other sites in the post-Soviet space.

It must also be noted that since 2009 the Mail.ru Group has been following a policy of buying shares abroad, as shown by its noticeable acquisition of a stake of around 10% in Facebook; its share purchases in Zynga, the social-network games publisher, and e-commerce site Groupon; its acquisition of messaging service ICQ from the US company AOL; and its successful initial public offering on the London stock exchange in November 2010.[66] These investments show entrepreneurs' confidence in Russia's "new economy." Indeed, the Kremlin's support for this sector allows for a "Russian vision" of the web to be spread.[67]

Russia: a test-ground for Internet control?

In his book *Power and Powerlessness,* sociologist John Gaventa defines three dimensions of power.[68] The first portrays player "A" who uses his power to influence and overcome player "B". The second is "A" putting obstacles in the way of "B"'s participation by controlling the agenda. The third involves influencing or molding "B"'s conscience through control of socialization and information. The control of the web as practiced in Russia is akin to this third approach: it involves developing a digital environment which promotes passivity, which reduces citizens' desire to go beyond content associated with the state and the Russian-speaking space.

Thus a "third way" is being established in Russia in terms of control over the web, one which goes far beyond censorship and direct propaganda.[69] Some authors think that the next generations of web control will emerge on the RuNet: "[where] control strategies are relatively subtle and sophisticated, and designed to shape and affect the way in which information is received by internet users."[70]

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[66] Note that Alisher Usmanov appointed Y. Milner to the Presidential Committee on Economic Modernization in 2009, alongside Anatoly Chubais and Vladimir Evtushenkov.

[67] Interview between the author and a European expert, January 2011.

[68] J. Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1982.

[69] M. Alexander, "The Internet and Democratization: the Development of Russian Internet Policy," *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2004, p. 620.

[70] R. Deibert, e*t. al., op. cit.* [50], p. 16.

Professor Ronald Deibert and information security expert Rafal Rohozinski define three generations of control of the digital sphere. The first generation focuses on denying access and censoring specific content, this method is virtually unused in Russia. The second generation corresponds to the creation of a legal environment and technical capacities enabling players to refuse access to information. The third generation of control involves moving from a *reactive* policy to a *proactive* policy: "it is less a matter of refusing access as of competing with potential threats through effective counter-information campaigns which discredit or demoralize the opponents."[71]

The specificity of Russia's digital policy is all the more enlightening when compared with China's approach to the Internet. Russia and China share a state-focused approach to the Internet: using the web to preserve the legitimacy of the political system and the ruling regime. The two countries also have a utilitarian approach to the Internet, which is viewed as a means to an end. Rather than seeing the Internet as an extension of individual freedoms and the market system, as Western countries tend to, Beijing stresses the importance of new technology for Chinese economic growth and for raising the standard of living among the population.[72] The priority of the Russian and Chinese leaders is the preservation of the legitimacy of their regimes through sustained economic growth, and political and social stability.[73] The two countries' approach to the web is, therefore, inseparable from this desire for political legitimacy. Moreover, the Chinese authorities published a white paper on their internet policy in June 2010, where the *sovereignty* of the Chinese web is clearly expressed.[74]

Where the approaches of the two states differ, it is primarily to do with structure: both the number of internet users (around 420 million) and the share of ITC in China's GDP (10%) make comparisons with Russia misleading (1.4% in 2007). Nevertheless, the "Chinese model" is distinguished by its recourse to a sophisticated system of censorship (the "Great Firewall"), blocking access to the main Western social networking sites and censoring Google. This system is organized into overlapping circles: the policing of the Internet; private regulation by the operators of sites and forums; and self-censorship by internet users, moderators and hosts. These attitudes are encouraged by an official discourse extolling a return to Confucian morality.[75] To summarize, the Chinese "model" for

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[71] *Idem.*
[72] M. Jiang, "Authoritarian Informationalism: China's Approach to Internet Sovereignty," *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2010.
[73] In his speech at Davos in January 2011 [30], D. Medvedev emphasized the link between connectivity and economic growth.
[74] Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *The Internet in China*, June 2010.
[75] "China and the Internet: An Uphill Fight for Freedom," *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2009.

regulating the Internet shares elements of capitalism and authoritarianism in common with Russia—although the latter is less prevalent in Russia's case—by incorporating specific cultural elements.

Conclusion

The Russian government's increasing activity on the web aims to *recreate the state* online, the strategy being motivated by a concern to preserve the RuNet's "sovereignty." This is a topical concept, a growing number of countries no longer hide their unease with regard to the rise in Western—primarily US—companies launching new technology on their markets. In addition to Russia, countries such as China, Iran and Turkey are trying to draw up their own vision of a "sovereign web",[76] distancing themselves from Google in particular. Some observers have given to understand that the RuNet is a development model for other "national webs." The question is whether we are heading toward a fragmentation of the globalized Internet as we know it and toward the emergence of multiple "sovereign Internets".

In the Kremlin's view, "direct democracy *via* the Internet" is a win-win strategy. Internally, the use of the web makes leaders more accessible to the population, which is given the impression of being part of the democratic process. Internationally, the use of digital tools helps Russia project a progressive, modern and Western-oriented image. The aim is twofold: to live down Russia's nuisance potential on the net (cyber-attacks against Estonia and Georgia are still remembered) and capitalize on its *soft power* while fending off initiatives from the Obama administration on *Internet freedom*.[77]

We are seeing a gradual rise in Russia and China's digital power. In addition to a development in control over the web by the Russian authorities, it is imperative to take an interest in public-private relations: Russian Internet players, supported by the Kremlin, are leading a strategic offensive on the world's new technology market. The development of this trend will certainly enable the emerging *Russia brand* to be polished up and to define the credibility of Russia as a *digital power*.

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[76] I. Bremmer, "Democracy in Cyberspace," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 6, November-December 2010.
[77] On digital tools in US diplomacy, see: J. Nocetti, "La diplomatie d'Obama à l'épreuve du Web 2.0" [Obama's Diplomacy as Showcased by the Web 2.0], *Politique étrangère*, No. 1, 2011.