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POUR LA LIBERTE DE LA PRESSE

Enemies of the Internet - Countries under surveillance 2012

The authorities have used the issue of national security to expand Web monitoring and censorship – even while continuing to promote and develop Internet access for the population at large. The Web has played a key role in the political debate prompted by legislative and presidential elections and in the post-election mobilization of the opposition and civil society. These developments provoked a strong official response. The blogosphere has grown stronger and better organized in the face of state attacks.

Government anti-"extremism" campaign hits Internet content and access

Prime Minister (now President-elect) Vladimir Putin said on 9 February 2012: "Negative phenomena exist everywhere, including on the Internet, and should not be used as a pretext to limit Internet freedom." However, the authorities have used the justification of preventing violence to reinforce their control of the Internet, with the Federal Security Service (FSB) taking steps to close a number of online organizations in late 2011. Most of these groups have clearly called on their members to respect the law and not to let themselves be provoked into violence.

The government list of "extremist" content, as well as the boundaries of the category itself, keep growing. It now includes everything touching on religion and issues of ethnicity, which have become taboo subjects on RuNet – as the Russian Internet is known. That list is the basis of official demands to take down content, and of actions to block site access (see the Russia chapter in the 2011 report on Enemies of the Internet).

The process of domain name registration could affect freedom of expression online by leading to closure of more sites. New rules promulgated by Nic.ru, the biggest Russian domain name-registration company, allow the cancellation of domain names for inciting violence, "extremist" activity, advocating overthrow of the government, activity in conflict with human dignity or religious beliefs. The rules reflected new official regulations. Domain name-registration companies are authorized to suspend names in the .ru and .rf (рФ) domains upon written notification from "agencies conducting an investigation." That provision would potentially authorize prosecutors, the FSB, the police, or the drug enforcement agency (FSKN) to order such a move.

In Tomsk, Siberia, the broadcast arm of Roskomnadzor, the federal mass communications supervisory agency, has recently pressured the regional television network *TV-2* to stop transmitting two news programs by *Dozhd*, the first Internet TV network in Russia, whose content is critical of the government.

Anatoly Baranov, owner of the forum.msk.ru discussion platform, states that the Yandex search engine filtered out news items from his site on Yandex.News searches.

Danger of the spread of online monitoring and censorship

Roskomnadzor, whose regulatory authority extends to information technology and mass communications, has announced that it has installed online software to detect "extremist" material. The sites identified through this process will be given three days to take down content that meets this ill-defined standard. If a site does not comply, two additional warnings will be sent. The site will then be shut down.

The software was to go into operation in test mode in December, 2011. Its full deployment has been postponed indefinitely. Nevertheless, it carries the risk of system-wide monitoring of the Russian Web and could lead eventually to the taking down of all content that displeases the authorities.

The justice ministry, for its part, has invited bids to create its own monitoring system of content on the Internet. Such a system would allow close examination of all content touching on Russian government and justice systems, and any European Union statement concerning Russia.

Bloggers under pressure

Prison sentences and violent attacks were less frequent in 2011, except during the election campaign period. Yet legal proceedings and pressures of all kind continue – above all when the activities of netizens focus on sensitive topics and powerful interest groups.

Maj. **Igor Matveev** of the interior ministry garrison in Vladivostok has been prosecuted on charges that seem to have been prompted by his revelations last June of practices in the military region where he served. He reported that troops were served dog food in cans falsely labelled as containing beef stew. He faces a possible 10-year sentence.

Yuri Yegorov, a former employee of the regional government of Tatarstan's human rights ombudsman's office, received a six-month suspended sentence last June, as well as two years of probation, for defamation. He had revealed a case of alleged corruption in the ombudsman's office, headed by Rashit Vagiov, that took place from February to July 2007.

Leonid Kaganov, a prominent blogger, was forced last May to house his site abroad. In 2009, the FSB had demanded, through his hosting service, the removal of an anti-Semitic poem that was on his site because he had mocked it.

Roman Hoseyev is the target of administrative action for having quoted from "Mein Kampf" on a site in 2005, before the 2010 banning of the book in Russia. He had drawn comparisons between statements by US President George W. Bush and Hitler.

No information has been received about the fate of a Navy conscript who blogged under the name **Vasily**, publishing on Twitter under the name **Sosigusyan**. He denounced hazing and poor living conditions in his unit. His Twitter account was hacked and the content about the military taken down, except for the last three posts, which were written by another person.

Propaganda and cyber-attacks

In addition to mounting a campaign of repression against online oppositionists, the Kremlin deploys its own cyber-weapons. Several thousand Twitter accounts were hacked at the end of 2011 in order to flood social media with pro-government messages, using hashtags popular with oppositionists (notably, #navalny, from the name of the well-known political activist and anti-corruption blogger **Alexei Navalny**, and #триумфалънпая, from Triumfalnaya Square in Moscow).

Many Russian bloggers have pointed to a wave of "bots" unleashed against the LiveJournal social media platform. **Oleg Kozyrev**, an opposition blogger, has counted more than 2,000 of these software weapons.

Oppositionist Navalny's e-mail inbox has been hacked, with the contents displayed on a site called navalnymail.kz. According to several bloggers, this action could be part of a government-organized campaign to discredit Navalny.

The wave of cyber-attacks peaked at the time of the legislative elections last December. A series of Distributed Denial of Service attacks paralyzed sites critical of the government before and during the vote, apparently to silence the dissidents. Access to LiveJournal, which hosts blogs critical of the Kremlin, was blocked for three days, starting on 1 December 2011. The site had already suffered a DDoS attack the month before.

Among other Web targets are:

- *Echo of Moscow* radio's site, Echo.msk.ru
- The independent daily *Kommersant*'s site, komersant.ru
- The election-monitoring NGO's site, golos.org
- KartaNarusheniy.ru, an interactive map created by Golos to track reports of election fraud
- Gazeta.ru, an independent news site
- Lenizdat.ru, a Saint Petersburg-based independent news site
- Slonl.ru and Newtimes.ru, opposition sites which posted the Golos map after Gazeta.ru took it down
- Ridus.ru, a citizen-journalism site
- Doshdu.ru, the site of *Dosh*, an independent news magazine about the Russian Caucasus
- Zaks.ru, a news site on the northwest region.

Some media organizations and opposition groups, having anticipated these developments, migrated to social networks and called on their readers to follow them on Twitter and Facebook in the event that their sites went down.

Disputed elections, attempted control of online political debate

Most traditional media organizations, notably television networks, are under Kremlin control, genuine political discussions have been possible only online. Any measure deemed necessary to uphold the country's strongman, Putin, has been considered appropriate.

Even before and during the legislative elections, debates had been hindered by cyber-attacks and by the arrests of journalists and bloggers. Those detained included **Alexey Sochnev**, the editor of the independent news site Besttoday.ru; **Maria Plieva**, a prominent blogger in Ossetia; and the president of Golos, **Lilia Chibanova**.

Golos' interactive election-fraud monitoring map proved to be a great success as the elections unfolded. Thousands of videos showing irregularities at voting places were posted to the site, prompting Russians to take to the streets in great numbers to denounce election fraud. Navalny and many journalists were arrested during these post-election demonstrations,

The great majority of traditional media organizations – especially television networks – ignored these events. Instead, they provided largely favourable coverage of Putin's party, United Russia, which swept the legislative elections.

The social media site Vkontakte, which has more than 5 million members in Russia, found itself in the government spotlight. The FSB told the site's founder and director, Pavel Durov, to shut down seven groups calling for demonstrations last December (including a group rallying to defend the ruling party). A Russian blogger estimated that up to 185,000 netizens subscribed to protest-organizing groups. A spokesman for Vkontakte said publicly that the site would not practice censorship and would not carry out the FSB order. Following the statement, Durov was summoned to appear before prosecutors in Saint Petersburg on 9 December.

Regional discussion forums, very popular at the provincial level, with most participants anonymous, have become a favourite resource for political debate among Russian netizens, and a nightmare for the authorities. However, these sites are less powerful than the national media and easy to censor, though that has not prevented netizens from migrating to other sites, hosted abroad. At least three forums were closed or suspended during the months leading up to the early December elections.

One of these sites is the Kostroma Jedis regional forum, which was targeted following the posting of two satirical videos criticizing Igor Slyunyaev, governor of the Kostroma region, some 300 km northwest of Moscow. In November, other forums were shut down or purged of all political content by their administrators. One such case occurred in the Arzamas, a city 410 km east of Moscow, affecting the mcn.nnov.ru site. Another took place in the west-central city of Miass, 95 km west of Chelyabinsk, affecting the forum.miass.ru site. It is not clear if these were cases of official action or self-censorship. In either case, the closing of these forums signifies a narrowing of the possibilities for political debate on the Russian Web.

In the run-up to the presidential election in March, Golos, the election-monitoring NGO, put up a new version of its interactive map to track election fraud, with stronger defences against cyber-attack. Navalny, the activist and blogger, mounted a site, Rosvybory.org, to assist citizens in becoming presidential election observers.

The campaign of repression mounted for the legislative elections illustrated the official attitude toward protest. And the official response was designed to create a deterrent to popular action in the presidential election period. Tensions grew during the months between the two elections. On 17 February, Reporters Without Borders denounced a wave of intimidation aimed at national independent media. Major targets included *Echo of Moscow*; *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent newspaper, and *Dozhd*, the online television operation. The latter organization received a fax on 16 February from the Moscow prosecutor's office, demanding detailed information on the "network's financing for coverage of mass demonstrations on 10 and 24 December."

These barely veiled accusations against *Dozhd* track precisely with statements by Prime Minister Putin, who had publicly accused demonstrators of having acted at the encouragement of the US state department. Roskomnadzor, the mass communications authority, had already required *Dozhd* to defend its coverage of the December protests. After examining in detail the images that the network had transmitted, the agency finally concluded that they contained nothing objectionable.

Journalists were again arrested and beaten during the post-election demonstrations of 5 March 2012. The clear goal was to prevent coverage of the demonstrations. However, contrary to what was seen in December, cyber-attacks seem to have been set aside – for now.

Export of the Russian model of Web control?

Russia has played a leading role on the international scene in promoting its vision of the Internet and exporting its Web control strategy. Moscow has proposed to the UN, together with China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, an Internet conduct code designed to provide “information security.”

The impact of the Kremlin’s policy is all the greater because the RuNet sphere of influence extends throughout the region, influencing countries such as Belarus and Kazakhstan in their Internet monitoring and censorship programs.
