

Non-User President: Will @PutinRussia replace @MedvedevRussia? (guest blog)

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2012-5-7



So how do I control this?

On May 7 Russia got an old-new President and a new Prime Minister. Among the many differences between the members of the so-called “Russian tandem”, there is one that is less visible, but important. It is the approach of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev to the Internet. Russia says “Goodbye” to its “Geek-President” and in exchange gets a “President-Non-user”. Polis Silverstone Scholar [Gregory Asmolov](#) examines the consequences for Russian political communications.

Both Putin and Medvedev have been seen in public in close proximity to computers. But the photos expose a significant difference: while Medvedev is always engaged with the computer and his fingers are touching the keyboard, Putin never touches the electronic device – he is gazing at the

screen from a distance.

What is the consequence of this difference for Russian Internet Freedom, Russian governance and Russian politics? Does it mean that the good times, when gadget mania arose even in the Kremlin and radical offers for Internet control were blocked, will end? How will Putin manage the space that is vacated from the online activities of President Medvedev?

Probably the first sign that President Medvedev was preparing to leave the chair in the Kremlin took place more than a year ago, when the Kremlin administration decided to divide presidential activities between two Twitter accounts: @KremlinRussia, which was created by Medvedev during his visit to the Twitter compounds in San Francisco and was left as an official account, while Medvedev shifted his tweeting to @MedvedevRussia. If he had not done so at that point, he could have faced a situation in which he would need to separate not only from his chair, but also from his Twitter account. But can we expect to see now @PutinRussia? (Currently, this account is suspended.)

The answer was given in October 2011 by Putin’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. In an [interview to the “Dozhd” TV channel](#) Peskov said that Putin is not planning to open accounts in social networks, while the options to expand Putin’s online activity beyond the governmental official website were considered and denied. “He is far from living in the Internet. Rarely, but he uses it”, said Peskov.

A few months later, last February, [Putin himself explained](#) that he doesn’t use the Internet since he doesn’t have time for “seating sitting online, surfing, writing and responding”. According to Putin, he doesn’t want to let someone else write for him, since he is convinced that the social networking account should be managed only by the person himself.

Actually the only engagement of Putin with the blogosphere took place during wildfires in the first days of August 2010. He responded to a blog post by a blogger who in a very emotional way [complained about the emergency response and demanded to give him back his “rynda”](#) (a bell that used to be used to call for help in case of fire). Putin’s response was a pretty cynical letter and later he actually sent a “rynda” to the blogger.

But even in this case the contact was indirect, since the blog post was submitted to the Prime Minister’s

administration by a chief editor of the popular liberal radio station “Echo Moskvy”.

During the election campaign it was also noticeable that Putin stayed focused on his favorite medium – TV, which is considered to be the most controlled media space in Russia. Putin likes sending strong visual messages, if it's shooting tigers or flying a firefighting plane.

Unlike TV viewers, the Internet is not Putin's audience. During his presidency, Medvedev adopted the online medium. The strong visual messages were replaced by informal communication and direct responses to users (e.g. Medvedev replied to a girl who had a dream about him and told Twitter users about his cat).

Much research, including the Harvard-based Berkman Center report “[Mapping the Russian Blogosphere](#)”, demonstrates that Russian TV and the Russian online sphere present two different information worlds. Those who watch TV and those who consume news online live in two different countries. As a consequence, as an Internet user, Medvedev had to deal with a relatively hostile environment that gave him a personal hashtag #жалкий (pathetic).

Unlike Medvedev, Putin not only almost ignored the online sphere, but was pretty aggressive in his approach to Internet users who participated in political protests during the recent election campaign. The symbol of the protests “Belaya Lenta” (a white band) was described by Putin as condom. Moreover, Putin placed as a head of his electoral committee a movie director Govorukhin, who made a number of strong negative statements about the bloggers and [argued that the Internet is a “rubbish site under control of the State Department”](#).

Sometimes Putin's opinion about the Internet was not so far from Govorukhin's. Once he said that Internet is 50% pornography. On a few occasions, however, Putin said that he doesn't support Internet censorship. In April 2011, while some security services suggested blocking Skype and Gmail due to its western origin, Putin [said that he is not going to “cut” the Internet](#). On another occasion Putin [compared the Internet to a knife that can be used by a criminal for killing or by a surgeon for treating patients](#). According to the Russian leader one cannot control the Internet, it can be only blocked, however the latter would be “the worst thing that could be done”.

Moreover, Putin initiated some projects that were enabled by ICT and the Internet. The Russian Prime Minister was the first to introduce the idea of a web cam surveillance system to monitor presidential elections. It was not the first “webcam for transparency” project. Earlier, Putin suggested online monitoring rebuilding of villages that were damaged by the wildfires.

In light of the ambivalent position of the new Russian President toward the online space, how will the switch between Medvedev and Putin influence the Internet? The Kremlin will not no longer be a home to a geek and president who actively uses the Internet. We will not see the direct interaction of the President with Internet users as we have seen in case of Medvedev. Unlike Medvedev Putin won't surf online, but instead will get information indirectly from his aids. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Internet might become less important, or more restricted. On the contrary, the role of the Internet in Russian politics will increase.

In an [article that was published by Putin before the elections in the Kommersant newspaper](#), he described his vision of the Internet democracy as something that allows greater citizen participation and self-organization. He argues that citizens need to be engaged in consultation about laws and various state projects, as well as have an opportunity to suggest their own initiatives. This vision of the Internet democracy will play an increasingly significant role under Putin's presidency. We will see more platforms that allow citizens to express their opinion about particular legislation or policies, as well as to complain about particular regional officials. Does it mean, however, that Putin's Internet democracy will start a new era of transparency and accountability in Russia?

Putin uses the concept of crowdsourcing to describe how citizen-based expertise and opinions can be collected as part of decision-making. However, one might suggest that what we actually see is an increasing effort to harness the power of online networks within the Kremlin's goals and re-shift the resources of network power from citizen based

bottom up projects (e.g. the Rospil.info project by Alexey Navalny that uses crowdsourcing for exposing corruption in the state's procurement) to state affiliated platforms. To some extent, it is an attempt to embed crowdsourcing and the power of networks within the Kremlin's vertical (Russian media [reported](#) that the Kremlin considers appointing a special deputy head of presidential administration for crowdsourcing).

The idea of "Vertical crowdsourcing" has an oxymoronic nature and is reminiscent of another oxymoronic Russian concept -"sovereign democracy". It approaches the horizontal bottom up dimension with a vertical top down strategy. It can also be approached as a step towards [strengthening the state's sovereignty within the online space](#).

In other words, although Putin is not an active Internet user, under Putin's presidency we will see increasing activity of the Russian authorities online, with a focus on developing new e-government platforms. These platforms will on the one hand create an imitation of democracy, and on the other hand mobilize the resources of the crowd for the interests of the state, or at least under the state's control.

At the same time, however, [alternative open data, e-gov and citizen based platforms will continue to be developed](#) and create some type of "shadow e-government". We will witness increasing competition between government affiliated and alternative platforms with similar functions.

We might also witness new legislation that will restrict online freedom to some extent and increase the "soft control". For instance, there might be more measures against online anonymity. However, the nature of the restrictions will be limited. The authorities realize the potential of online space as a resource of power, as well as a field for sublimation of offline protests by oppositional forces that can be kept online. Online governance projects can also significantly contribute to the false sense of transparency and accountability.

So President Putin has all the reasons to support Internet development and a certain degree of Internet freedom. This policy might change once the authorities realize that bottom up forces can't be harnessed or limited by top down efforts, especially in the time of political or economical crisis.

Last, but not least, Russia separates from its Geek-President, but gets a Geek Prime-Minister. @KremlinRussia will continue to be used for distribution of official messages by the Kremlin's press office, Prime-minister @MedvedevRussia will continue to make headlines when Medvedev writes about his cat, and president @PutinRussia will continue to be suspended. That's how it works in Russia – things change, but stay the same.

This article by Polis Silverstone Scholar [Gregory Asmolov](#)

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