The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Will the Internet Integrate the Russian Federation — or Tear It Apart?

By Paul Goble

April 15, 2009



About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

A Duma deputy from Nizhny Novgorod suggests that the Internet can link the various parts of the Russian Federation in "much the same way that earlier great empires were linked together by roads," but other commentators have suggested that the Internet in its various forms in fact represents a threat to the country's integrity and political system.

Speaking to an information technology forum in Nizhny Novgorod a few days ago, Konstantin Rykov argued that only thanks to the Internet can Russia "tie together the space in the enormous land of Russia," with its "thousands of kilometers between major cities" and address common problems such as the economic crisis.

Because Russia now has 50 million Internet users, he said, the country need "not lose its faith" that the government's programs for 2020 will be realized, especially since, in his view, "the Russian sphere of information technology has not suffered as much as this sector has in other countries."

There is no doubt that the Internet can and is playing a key role in linking people together across the Russian Federation and between them and the rest of the world. Indeed, Rykov's words are particularly important as a reminder that in many ways Russian communications have jumped from a very primitive level in Soviet times to cutting edge now.

But if that is not a matter of dispute, the impact on the country of the Internet and its various engines, such as Facebook and Twitter, is very much a matter of dispute. Russian officials are increasingly concerned about the use of the Internet by extremists and about the threat of cyber-attacks against particular sites.

Moscow's proposals to declare the Internet a form of the media subject to laws governing other media mark the latest stage in the struggle between offense and defense in this area, with advocates saying they have no choice and opponents noting how site operators can end such efforts at regulation.

But there is another and perhaps greater danger here: the Internet tends to fragment populations by allowing individuals to get only information that reinforces their own ideas. One Russian site even features the rubric, "everyone wants to be informed honestly, dispassionately, and truthfully &mdash in complete conformity with his own point of view."

Were these people getting their news and ideas from more general sources, their opinions might be changed or at least moderated, but because they get it from sources they have chosen because they agree with them, their opinions tend to become more rigid and their sense of rectitude correspondingly greater.

That is a danger everywhere, but in the Russian case it is compounded not only by the decline in the number of people who read newspapers and by a growing distrust of officially controlled electronic media but also by the growing importance of linguistic and regional affinities in defining the audiences of various sites.

In Soviet times, large shares of almost all non-Russian nations within the USSR turned to Russian-language media, a phenomenon that promoted (sometimes successfully and sometimes not) a more common perspective. Now, though, ever more people in the non-Russian nations within the Russian Federation are turning to Internet sites devoted to their communities and in their own languages.

That can only be welcomed as a contribution to the free flow of information and the growth of national self-consciousness at a time when these things are under attack from Moscow and the broader culture, but they do promote a kind of separateness &mdash and that separateness may ultimately have greater political consequences than any specific message on any one site.

Moreover, such promotion of separateness and apartness to which the Internet has always and everywhere contributed may also be exacerbated in Russia and some of the other post-Soviet states by new Internet forms. Some analysts, for example, have called the recent Moldovan events the first "Twitter" revolution."

But because of this back and forth, it is certainly too soon to declare with any certainty that the Internet will "save" the Russian Federation as good roads helped earlier empires to survive as long as they did, or that it will destroy the country and lead to its splitting apart along linguistic, cultural, or religious lines.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2009/04/15/will-the-internet-integrate-the-russian-federation-or-tear-it-apart-a34977