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Will 'Bloggerization' of Russian Bureaucracy Change Relationship Between State and Citizens?

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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.

VIENNA &mdash Following the example of President Dmitry Medvedev, an ever-increasing number of Russian officials and politicians are creating their own blogs, but the hopes of some observers that their use of this communication channel, still the freest of any in Russia, will by itself lead to the formation of civil society are overstated, or at least premature.

In a commentary on the Chaskor.ru portal today, Vladimir Tuchkov argues that the reasons for this lie both with officials, many of whom are extremely uncertain of how to function in this new environment, and with the population, many of whom fear that officials will track them down using their IP addresses if they say anything critical.

But despite those limitations and the fact that Russians remain far behind much of the developed world in terms of Internet use, the Chaskor.ru commentator suggests, "the

bloggerization of the apparatus" can provide opportunities for both officials to present themselves to the population and for the population to respond.

Tuchkov discusses several cases, including the appearance of Ministry of Internal Affairs Major Aleksei Dymovsky on YouTube and the "symmetrical" response of Col. Gen. Viktor Ivanov, the director of the Federal Narcotics Control Service, who invited suggestions for a policy in that area that has already largely taken shape.

The general's approach, of course, suggests he is more interested in appearing to be responsive to the population than in actually taking the views of Russian citizens into consideration. And as Tuchkov notes, anyone writing to an FSB general has got to be concerned that he will identify and perhaps act against those who write anything critical.

But however that may be, Tuchkov continues, at least Ivanov's blog attracted some comments from visitors. Many of the new blogs put up by officials have attracted no comment &mdash or at least those who have put them up or their staff have decided against posting whatever messages they have received.

Many of these new blogs, the Chaskor.ru commentator says, contain interesting information about the blogger, including his judgments about public events and so on. And consequently, as this form of media spreads, three things are likely to happen. First, as officials try to attract attention to themselves or to win support for their ideas, they will have to become more open.

Second, even if the official bloggers have no interest in being more open, the large number of officials who appear likely to go online, many in the Duma, a significant share of the governors, and other officials, guarantees that the blogs wholesale if not retail will tell a lot about opinion within the bureaucracy.

And third, because these officials will be operating within the far larger community of nonofficial Russian bloggers, they will likely converge on the latter both in style and content if not in attitude or position, a process that could over time have the effect of changing the way in which officials think.

None of these things is going to have an immediate impact in most cases: The Internet and even the more limited blogosphere &mdash or "LiveJournal," as the Russians call it, referring to the most popular blog site &mdash are simply not going to transform Russian political life or Russian culture as quickly as many of the partisans of the world wide web have suggested.

But as Tuchkov points out, these new blog sites contain "useful information," and that, in the increasingly restricted media space in Russia, is not unimportant. Indeed, it may be one of the few hopeful signs that Medvedev's entrance onto the Internet will play a positive role, if not now then a few years hence, as ever more officials decide they too must blog.

Monitoring this diverse set of sites will not be easy &mdash the number is likely to overwhelm any individual analyst &mdash but keeping track of at least those offered by the most senior officials and politicians is likely to be the focus of attention, not only in the traditional media but also by individual Russians and, one hopes, by all those who care about the direction Russia is going.

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