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Internet Can't Compensate for Kremlin's Info Blockade, Analysts Say

By Paul Goble

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VIENNA &mdash Too few Russians currently go online for their news &mdash and even fewer of them can cope with the variety and often contradictory quality of reporting for the Internet &mdash in order to compensate for Moscow deciding to throw an information blockade around events that it would like Russians to ignore, according to Russian observers.

Evidence for that conclusion, the editors of Nezavisimaya Gazeta say in a lead article Wednesday, is provided by what has taken place since Moscow ordered OMON troops to crush protests in Mezhdurechensk. And, they say, it points to even more serious problems in the future for the Russian state and society.

About The Columnist

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Since the OMON clashes with the miners, the paper observes, "the federal television channels have practically ignored the protests of the miners," leaving most Russians with little or no reliable information about them, especially since "only 38 percent of Russians" have a personal computer linked to the Internet.

(For a more detailed and extensive discussion of the information blockade that Moscow and the regional government have imposed on Mezhdurechensk, see the article by Taras Burmistrov and especially the commentary by Marina Litvinovich.)

But even those who do have a personal computer, the paper continues, "are not prepared for the variations of information which the Net guarantees" precisely because they were "educated by television." (Indeed, another analyst writes, differing reports on the web often cancel each other, leaving people with little or no information at all.)

As Nezavisimaya Gazeta points out, "Paragraph 29 of the Russian Constitution guarantees citizens the right to information, but it does not guarantee them the opportunity to receive it." And because most Russians still get their news from national television, a medium controlled by the government, they often do not have that chance.

"What does the television viewer know about the events in Mezhdurechensk?" the paper's editors ask. "He knows that at theRaspadskaya mine two explosions occurred, miners and rescuers died, and a time of mourning was declared in the region." He also "knows" that Vladimir Putin has taken control of the investigation of the accident.

"It is very probable that the television viewer has heard nothing about the blocking of the railroad by the miners on May 15, or if he has heard, then he has heard only about some supposedly organized actions of criminals, which were neutralized in a timely fashion by the forces of order."

Moreover, the paper says, "the TV viewer has not seen 'pictures' from the place of events, although it would not have cost federal television anything to have them. He has not heard the participants of the actions and, in the best case, knows about the demands of the miners only from hearsay."

Thus, the Nezavisimaya editors say, "the majority of Russians &mdash for television viewers are the majority &mdash do not have full information about the central event of the week. They cannot draw independent and objective conclusions" about what has happened and how well the powers that be have coped.

Such a situation completely contradicts the "general line" that President Dmitry Medvedev

has proclaimed on the modernization of the state and society. And it means that TV viewers are being cultivated as a kind of "retro-society" which is given information only of the kind and amount judged necessary by the "elect," which will make all decisions.

Supporting this situation are the Russian special services, which have been "attempting to block the pages on the Runet" that have sought to report on what has taken place. But these efforts have been far from successful: Many who use the Internet have quickly found ways to go around them.

But that is not the greatest harm, the paper says. Instead, "the real misfortune" is that " a government which does not understand how in a contemporary society information can and must be transmitted converts itself into a retro-state," one that cannot modernize itself or the society even though it has declared itself "the locomotive of modernization."

By restricting information in the way that it has, Nezavisimaya writes, the government has "voluntarily limited its own picture of the world" and ensured disaster. Indeed, "as a result, the powers do not understand their citizens, and a society is emerging which does not know itself."

Such "silence about events will not extinguish the energy they give birth do," the Moscow paper warns. Instead, such enforced silence will "only feed upon itself and transform in dangerous ways," a trend that the editors suggest will come back to haunt those who are trying, still with some success, to control information as the Soviet system did.

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