

A Modern Russia of Dust and Dead Flies

By [Nikolai Petrov](#)

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The Kremlin unveiled its ModernRussia web site last week as an image project. It was developed by the New York-based PR firm Ketchum, which has been working on improving Russia's image in the West through projects such as the Valdai Club and Russia's hosting the Group of Eight summit in St. Petersburg in 2006.

For some reason, most commentators have written about the government's site as though its main focus were modernization. In reality, modernization plays a minor role. The site is divided into several sections: economy, business sectors, policy initiatives, legal system, regional development, and culture and society.

The largest section is devoted to business. It has interviews and news going back as early as February, which is then duplicated in the other, smaller sections. This is an example of how a regional bloc is presented: Krasnodar leads the Forbes list for its good investment climate; a profile of the Novo Nordisk factory in Kaluga; a list of new investments in the country's automobile sector; and Nizhny Novgorod, we are told, is "open for business."

As you can see, the news on the site isn't very fresh or original. There are exceptions, however, such as an interview with John Conner, founder and portfolio manager of the Third Millennium Russia Fund; an article by political commentator Alexander Rahr; and a description of a recent sociological study ordered by the German fund Friedrich Ebert Schtiftung on attitudes toward modernization.

There are a few links to existing English-language resources easily available on the Internet. One of them is a hyperlink to the presidential commission on modernization.

Perhaps the most important question concerns the target audience: Who needs this site?

Dmitry Peskov, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's press secretary, said its purpose is to present foreign investors with the ABCs of Russia's investment climate. "We want to get feedback from those who are already investing in Russia, who want to express gratitude for the good investment climate, or, on the contrary, complain about something," Peskov explained.

Attention Bill Browder! Now you finally have a platform to air your views.

The only problem, of course, is that the site is moderated, and this will surely limit those who want to complain about Russia's treatment of investors.

In Soviet stores there was always a "buyer's corner" — a stand filled with dust and dead flies that had a list of consumer rules, laws and recommendations. The corner also had a notebook for complaints and suggestions hanging by a string where any outraged Soviet consumer could complain about bad service or substandard goods. (By the way, these still exist in some places.)

The ModernRussia site is like the old Soviet buyer's corner — only it is an "investor's corner" filled with positive news about great opportunities for investors.

I'm not gloating over the flaws in the ModernRussia site. I simply understand that the Kremlin's naive goal of trying to create a positive image using Internet PR is absolutely incompatible with its more important goal — attracting investors to Russia.

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