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State Finds New Way to Jam

By Victor Davidoff

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Among the Soviet Union's many oddities was radio transmission. As people turned the dial of a shortwave radio, they passed through noise that sounded like a circular saw.

Almost 100 powerful transmitters run by the KGB jammed the Voice of America, BBC, Radio Liberty and other stations. Their operations were halted by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev when the Iron Curtain began to crumble and when there wasn't enough money to continue this expensive endeavor.

The Soviet Union is now history, and radio has long been supplanted by the Internet. But history repeats itself from time to time. Since March, the Russian Internet has been plagued by a series of denial-of-service attacks — the modern version of Soviet radio jamming.

First, on March 24, the popular anti-corruption blog of whistleblower Alexei Navalny was attacked. On April 4, a powerful attack paralyzed the entire Russian-language LiveJournal. And on Friday, a similar attack knocked out the opposition Novaya Gazeta, which, by strange twist of irony, is partially owned by Gorbachev.

It's easy to understand why suspicious minds looked to the authorities: Every major attack in Russia has had a political subtext. The first incident was an attack on Estonian governmental sites in 2007 after a monument to a Soviet soldier was moved from central Tallinn. (A representative of the pro-Kremlin Nashi took credit for the attack in a March 2009 interview with the Financial Times.) During the 2008 war with Georgia, denial-of-service attacks nearly closed down Georgian mass media sites.

"Who ordered the attack on LiveJournal is a rhetorical question. Who has been carrying out a mop-up operation of the mass media and the Internet for the last 10 years?" asked blogger Timur-nechaev77.

Vladimir Sanin, an Internet analyst, also believes that "the point of the attack was to mitigate the influence of LiveJournal as a platform for political expression." He noted that in contrast to other social networks like Facebook or Vkontakte, LiveJournal isn't just a social network but "a social medium capable of quickly bringing a large volume of information to a large group of socially active citizens."

Paradoxically, among the LiveJournal blogs that were inaccessible after the attack was President Dmitry Medvedev's video blog. To the credit of the country's No. 1 blogger, he unequivocally defended his provider. He wrote: "As an avid user of LiveJournal, I consider this action outrageous and illegal. The LiveJournal administrators and law enforcement agencies must get to the bottom of this."

Unfortunately, Medvedev's demands that law enforcement agencies identify criminals doesn't always lead to results. This case is particularly complicated because in Russia the threat to free Internet expression and communication doesn't come from hackers alone. On April 8, Alexander Andreyechkin, head of the Federal Security Service center for protecting information and special communication, stated that the FSB is concerned about the use of Skype, Gmail and Hotmail in Russia since all of them encrypt traffic. Andreyechkin said their use could lead to nothing less than "a massive threat to the security of Russia."

"Just think: Putin's siloviki are complaining that they're having a hard time eavesdropping on us," journalist Andrei Malgin said on his blog.

Andreyechkin's statement became another source of disagreement between the Kremlin and White House. An anonymous Kremlin source, whom analysts believe was Natalya Timakova, Medvedev's press secretary, told RIA-

Novosti that the statement was "his personal opinion and doesn't reflect state policy on Internet development."

In response, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said just the opposite — that this opinion was the official position of the FSB. "Representatives of the FSB don't express personal opinions. Naturally, this is the position of the service that has been carefully considered," he told Gazeta.ru.

Perhaps a former KGB agent — that is, Peskov's boss — believes that since the Internet can't be controlled, it should be limited, just like in the past when uncontrollable foreign radio stations were jammed. But people who don't want to go back to the Soviet Union have a

different point of view, succinctly put by the blogger Makhk: "IMHO, the biggest threat to Russia is from uncontrolled siloviki."

This battle bears watching. Medvedev's ability to get them under control will determine more than the fate of the Russian Internet.

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