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Web Will Win in Cyber War

By Victor Davidoff

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Last week from Monday through Friday, the Russian-language segment of the popular blog server LiveJournal once again was subject to a series of DDoS attacks. This is the third attack in the last six months. It wouldn't be news if it weren't for the massive scale and peculiarity of this attack. What happened last week was beyond the usual definition of hacking. It could only be called an act of cyber war against LiveJournal.

The victims of the first attack were individual blogs — coincidentally, those that criticized the current Russian leadership. The second attack blocked the work of all the servers of SUP-Fabric, which house the data for LiveJournal accounts. The last attack was much broader. According to information provided by the director of project development at SUP-Fabric, Ilya Dronov, "This attack was so powerful that it didn't even reach LiveJournal servers. It hit the servers of our providers, Qwest and Verizon, and for several hours their data centers were completely cut off from the world." The intensity of the attack, which used thousands of computers largely in Latin America infected by a virus, was about four times stronger than the previous attack.

The political smoking gun is so obvious that it's a waste of time to consider other versions. In Russia, LiveJournal is a unique Internet resource with about 5 million Russian accounts read by about 30 million people every month. It is home to blogs representing the entire spectrum of political opinion in the country — from conspiracy theories and governmental propaganda to calls for revolution. But research has shown that oppositional attitudes predominate, which correlates closely to the social and political portrait of Russia's Internet users: young professionals with mainly Western values.

LiveJournal isn't just a social network. It's also a platform for organizing civic action. Dozens of network projects and groups mobilize people to solve specific problems — from defending the rights of political prisoners to saving endangered historic architecture in Moscow.

"LiveJournal is now the main communications resource of civil society in Russia," Tomsk political activist Victor Korb wrote on his blog. "For all of LiveJournal's many software weaknesses, it is far and beyond other social networks in its accessibility and its serious and active community. LiveJournal is the main organizer of those rare and modest local victories of civil society over the stultifying regime of 'stability.'"

The Internet's role in mobilizing people has long worried many in the government. Konstantin Dolgov, the Foreign Ministry's commissioner for human rights, democracy and rule of law, commented in early July on U.S. plans to support independent Internet in autocratic countries. He warned that these independent systems "might infringe on the rights, freedoms and possibly even physical security of the civilian population."

The blogger Fastrain responded wittily: "Unfortunately, the ministry's commissioner didn't give the name of the person whose rights might be violated by an independent Internet. But it's not hard to guess. It looks like he means the person who wants total control over Russians' lives. The sweeping rights of that person might indeed be violated."

These attacks resemble military training maneuvers to test various methods of jamming LiveJournal so that it can be quickly and effectively disabled — without shutting down the country's entire Internet like Egypt did — during an emergency. This plan is theoretically more effective than pulling the plug on the Internet, but bloggers note that if these are rehearsals, they are undermining the plan itself. Now that bloggers' main communications resource has been brought down again, most of the best-known bloggers have already created mirrors of their blogs on other social networks. Fyodor Krasheninnikov, a political scientist in Yekaterinburg, said: "Even if LiveJournal falls totally and irrevocably at some point, Internet activists will find each other on other platforms, and they'll gradually rebuild their entire network of ideas and plans."

Not surprisingly, after the blackout, the hottest topic in the political segment of LiveJournal was which are the best social networks that could be used if LiveJournal is shut down. Twenty years ago, new communications technologies like faxes contributed to bringing down the Iron Curtain. The Internet's enemies haven't learned that lesson. They still don't get it. In the war against new technologies, they are doomed to lose again.

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