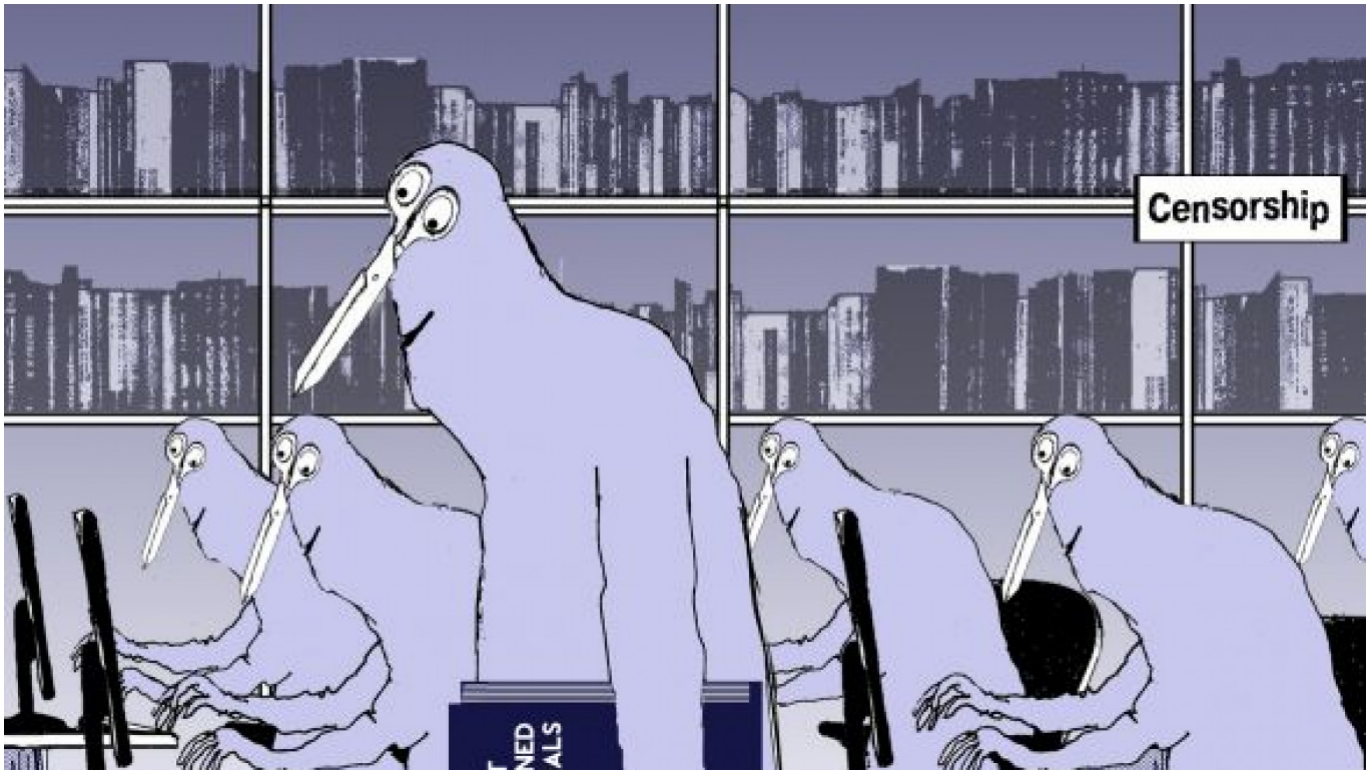
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Russian Censors Are Dim-Witted and Dull

By Victor Davidoff

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Once upon a time, there was a free country. The country's citizens could openly express their opinions, share information and read, watch and listen to whatever they wanted.
The Constitution of that country stated clearly that censorship was not permitted. That country was the Russian Federation.

Today the country bears the same name and Constitution, but the freedom is gone. Censorship is flourishing. In just eight years, more than 1,500 works have been put on the official list of banned materials. In comparison, Index Librorum Prohibitorum, issued by the Vatican over the course of 400 years, contained 4,000 works.

Lest anyone think that only "Mein Kampf" and al-Qaida manifestoes have been banned, a look at the list is enlightening.

The list is diverse. There are historical documents, like Benito Mussolini's memoirs and Joseph Goebbels' diaries; medieval Muslim theoretical tracts; scholarly research on the

Holodomor, the mass famine in Ukraine in the 1930s; a library of Jehovah's Witnesses' publications; books published by the Chinese sect Falun Gong; a brochure called "Paganism as Magic"; flyers from independent trade unions; petitions to the European Parliament and U.S. Congress from relatives of the victims of the terrorist act in Beslan and much more.

It is not only texts that are banned. Rock songs are on the list, including one called "No Chance for Marxists," as are paintings by avant-garde artists and even a computer game that is set during the Chechen war.

Just like their 18th-century predecessors, today's censors even banned an encyclopedia produced in 21st-century Moscow, specifically a volume with an article titled "The Chechen Republic."

Naturally, the new generation of Russian censors has focused its attention primarily on the Internet. They have blocked access to sites of skinhead groups, the anti-fascist movement "Antifa," fan sites of heavy metal rock groups and a forum that discussed the 1971 book "The Anarchist Cookbook." Like almost all censors, they lack a sense of humor. Lurkmore, a tongue-in-cheek youth version of Wikipedia, was banned in its entirety for one day for an article called "Marijuana Soup." The article is still forbidden.

Last week the censors grabbed the world's attention when they banned YouTube as an extremist site. The ban lasted all of one day, after which an official explained that its inclusion was a "technical error." In reality, Gennady Onishchenko, head of the Federal Consumer Protection Service, demanded that 22 videos on the site be banned.

This isn't the first time Russian Web surfers have been blocked from YouTube. Two years ago, the police in Komsomolsk-on-Amur made an attempt to block it for the reason that "our city doesn't need YouTube." In September, YouTube was blocked in Omsk and Volgograd. After several Muslim countries blocked YouTube during the riots over the film "The Innocence of Muslims," the site was also blocked in Dagestan.

The authorities' particular problem with YouTube is easily explainable. Along with social media, YouTube was one of the main instruments of the protest movement that began in December. There are clips on YouTube showing election fraud, as well as videos taken during the unrest on May 6 in Moscow that supports people accused of participating in "mass riots" rather than the accusers.

Not surprisingly, virtually the entire Russian blogosphere called this new escalation in censorship an insult. In a blog post on the Kommersant website, the user new_solomon wrote, "The authorities explain the bans as concern for children. Thank you, but I'll take care of my child myself through Parental Control and other useful programs. The government should first put its own house in order and earn the country's respect."

But censorship isn't just insulting. It can be outright dangerous. Everyone needs to know that if he or she posts a blog post quoting something from a banned book or a link to a banned video, it's an offense and may be punished under the law.

On Tuesday, writer Boris Stomakhin was arrested in Moscow after a search of his apartment. Stomakhin is one of the small group of Russian activists who believes that the only way

to revive democracy in Russia is through violent revolution. He has never hidden his views and has even supported Chechen separatists in his articles, which resulted in a five-year prison sentence in 2006. When the police came for him, Stomakhin tried to escape by jumping out a fourth-floor window. He broke his spine and both ankles and today uses crutches or a cane to walk.

The new charges against Stomakhin have not been made public, but some sources say they include posting articles on his site from three Chechen separatist websites deemed "extremist." One of the articles was a letter from the Chechen diaspora to the prime minister of Turkey about a number of murders allegedly committed by assassins sent by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. That could send Stomakhin back to prison for another five years.

Human rights activist Vladimir Bukovsky wrote about Stomakhin on the Grani.ru blog: "He is crippled with a broken spine. Why was he arrested? Only because Stomakhin wrote what he thought. He didn't blow anyone up, kill anyone, rob anyone or attack anyone. He was arrested for what he wrote. And with that, it's back to the U.S.S.R."

Bukovsky has been in politics for more than 50 years, and his predictions usually come true. One can only hope that this is one of the rare cases when he's wrong.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist who follows the Russian blogosphere in his biweekly column.

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