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Putin's Brave New Russia

By Victor Davidoff

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Trouble, even when expected, can come at unexpected times. For many months, Russians have expected that authorities would begin to block Internet sites that publish opinions from opposition leaders, activists and supporters. But when a number of sites were blocked on Thursday morning, it was like a bolt out of the blue.

The Federal Mass Media Inspection Service blocked access to the website of the Ekho Moskvy radio, the online publications Ej.ru, Grani.ru and Kasparov.ru, the homepage of world chess grandmaster Gary Kasparov. The legal justification was the so-called Lugovoi law, named after its author, State Duma Deputy Andrei Lugovoi. He is also the main suspect in the 2006 London murder of Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko. Even if Lugovoi's guilt as a murderer has not been proven in court, there is no doubt that he is a killer of freedom on Russia's Internet.

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This law entered into force on Feb. 1, during protests in Ukraine. The law allows the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service to block sites "containing calls for unsanctioned acts of protest" without a court injunction. As usual for repressive laws in Russia, it is applied rather loosely. The editors of Grani.ru were not told which of their hundreds of online pages contained "calls for unsanctioned acts of protest," if there were any at all. It goes without saying that the Lugovoi law violates the Russian Constitution, where Article 29 strictly prohibits any censorship.

While similar to the Chinese approach, the Russian law is technically applied in a different way. China has its centralized "great firewall." In Russia, individual providers block sites if they receive notice from the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service about a problem on their URL. This model is far from perfect. Some providers do not block access at all; others block some access. Online publishers can get around it easily by creating a mirror site that has a different URL. It is even easier for users to get around it by using proxy servers.

Since their technical means are somewhat limited, the authorities have begun to threaten sites with misdemeanors and felonies. Editors of blocked sites have been warned that they will be fined significant amounts for creating mirror sites. Alexei Navalny, the No. 1 critic of the regime, has also been threatened. He is under house arrest, but his wife has continued posting on his blog. But Navalny has been warned that if his blog is not closed, house arrest might be changed to pretrial detention.

Attacks on Internet freedom have long been one of the trademarks of the Putin regime. Although the authorities monopolized most mainstream newspapers, radio and television, they lost the battle for the country's minds on the Internet, where official propaganda is treated as a joke. For more than 10 years, the Kremlin has tried in various ways to limit the possibility of free expression on the Internet. Hacker attacks on independent sites and blogs became the norm. Hundreds of trolls were paid to monitor forums and post nationalistic and xenophobic comments. Their aggressive comments in broken English can be found under many articles and comments on this newspaper's website.

All the same, these attempts to limit free expression on the Internet have failed. It has been far more effective to persecute bloggers for "extremism." Several have already been sentenced to fines or jail terms. Threats have forced others to flee the country. At present, there is a case against journalist Boris Stomakhin, who faces up to eight years in prison for alleged "extremism." He is accused of a long list of "criminal acts," from "inciting hatred of Orthodox believers by using an insulting term for the Almighty" to "justifying the actions of the terrorists who killed Tsar Alexander II,| which took place in 1881.

Against this background, the destruction of the most popular Russian news site, Lenta.ru, seems positively mild. The pro-Kremlin owner recently fired the editor, after which all the publication's employees, including technical personnel, quit. The newly appointed editor is the former editor of the openly nationalistic site Vzglyad, or Vz.ru.

There is no doubt that the new attacks on freedom of Internet are related to the events in Ukraine. But it is not clear if this is an attempt to prevent Maidan protests in Russia, or if it

is a rehearsal for total censorship if military operations escalate in Ukraine. The answer to that will become clear in the next few days.

What is not in doubt is that the increase in Internet censorship moves Russia closer to a totalitarian state. Igor Yakovenko, a media analyst, wrote: "When creating his authoritarian power vertical, Putin began by destroying the main private television channel, NTV. The authoritarian regime allowed a few small information niches that let the thinking public satisfy their need for diverse information. Independent thinking was not encouraged, but it was not persecuted. Today, the country is sliding toward totalitarianism, which ends when the authoritarian regime is transformed into a totalitarian regime."

This text was published on the site Ej.ru, which most readers living in Russia could not open unless they used an anonymous proxy. Welcome to the brave new world of Vladimir Putin.

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

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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