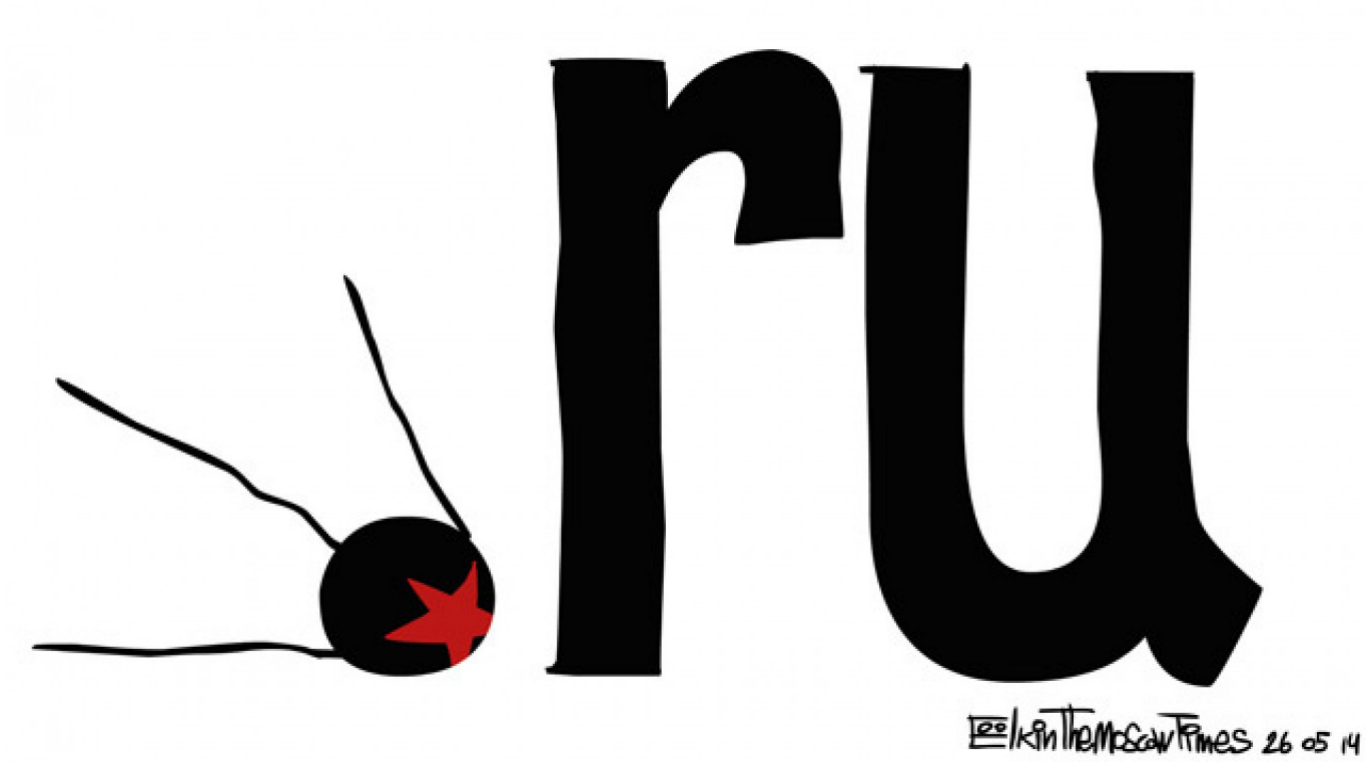
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High Casualties in Kremlin's Information War

By Victor Davidoff

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Information wars do not employ the use of machine guns or cannons, but they still have victims. After Russian state media began its campaign against Ukraine, it became clear that independent online publications and blogs would number among the casualties.

Now, a few months after the war began, a body count is available.

Russia's independent media is being punished for providing an alternative to state-controlled news on Ukraine, writes columnist Victor Davidoff.

On March 13 the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service blocked several websites: the political

journal EJ.ru, the website of chess grandmaster and opposition figure Garry Kasparov and the popular news website Grani.ru. All of them provided users an alternative to state-controlled news about events in Ukraine.

The authorities did not explain why they had blocked the websites or list the specific texts that they alleged violated the law. Grani.ru went to court over this, but on May 6 the Taganksky District Court handed down a verdict apparently taken from Franz Kafka's "The Trial." The federal authorities did not have to explain to the websites why they were blocked, the court said. Grani.ru lost its case.

After this first experience of Kafkaesque justice, Moscow courts threw the book at Grani.ru. On May 23, an even more absurd trial was held. The Tverskoi District Court declared that three user comments about a Grani.ru video on YouTube included "extremist content." The arguments from the Grani.ru editors that they had no control over commentary on YouTube were disregarded. Now the Grani.ru channel on YouTube will probably be blocked alongside the Grani.ru website.

Konstantin Zharinov, a blogger in Chelyabinsk, was accused of reposting a declaration by the radical Ukrainian organization Right Sector. Zharinov explained, "I am a political scientist who has written several books about the history of terrorism. I had a professional interest in the proclamation. It never occurred to me to post it as an appeal to take illegal actions." Time will tell if these arguments will convince the court. Zharinov is facing a five-year sentence under a new article in the Criminal Code: "calling for actions to violate the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation."

Despite these victories for the state, monitoring blogs and persecuting bloggers is both time-consuming and labor-intensive. Various state agencies are constantly trying to control the social media as a whole in ways that serve to push out domestic internet pioneers.

The creator of the popular Russian social network Vkontakte, Pavel Durov, known as the "Russian Mark Zuckerberg" left the country over this. Durov refused to block access to the blog of anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny on Vkontakte. This winter he refused to carry out another demand of the Russian security services — to give them personal information about the organizers of a group in support of the Ukrainian protest movement on Vkontakte.

That conflict was apparently the last straw. In April, Durov quit as general director of the company and left Russia. "I am out of Russia and have no plans to go back," Durov said in an interview with Techcrunch.com. "Unfortunately, the country is incompatible with Internet business at the moment. I am afraid there is no going back, not after I publicly refused to cooperate with the authorities."

With Durov's departure, Russia lost its last fighter against censorship in the country's social media. But the situation with foreign social media is much more complicated. An interview printed in Izvestia on May 16 with the deputy head of the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service, Maxim Ksenzov, was a bombshell. Ksenzov even threatened to block Facebook "if at some moment we determine that the consequences of turning off social media are less significant than the harm" they do to society. He also said that blocking Twitter "is practically inevitable."

Ksenzov's declaration shocked social media but elicited a sharp and unexpected tweet from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who recommended that some officials "turn on their brains." The fate of the social media in Russia was also taken up by President Vladimir Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Putin stated that Russia does not plan to limit use of social media. "We are not planning that kind of practice. We plan to develop modern means of communication. And we hope that we will never return to the time when our main means of communication is the Kalashnikov submachine gun."

Putin's words would seem to be a pragmatic statement. This indicates that despite his sympathy for the Soviet Union, the president understands the mistakes of the Soviet leaders, who tried to silence any expression of independent opinion.

In the Soviet era, the battle against intellectuals publishing samizdat and the jamming of Western radio stations cost the the government enormous resources — and had virtually no effect whatsoever.

Now in current state policy, there is a red line that separates what is allowed from what is forbidden. The problem is that the line keeps moving, and as the information war gains in strength, the space for free expression shrinks.

No one knows how close that line will come to every blogger. But at least no one is thinking about switching from iPads to Kalashnikovs yet.

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

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