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Why Porn Will Never Die in Russia (Op-Ed)

A Russian adult film director rallies against government censorship

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The Russian government's recent battle against online porn has electrified our country's social networks. But much to the disappointment of the global porn industry, this so-called battle is, in fact, not much of a fight.

Yes, the authorities have indeed blocked a hundred extremely popular sites. But the reason why is fairly banal: petty local bureaucrats filing petty court cases and seeking self promotion. These district and local court decisions are subsequently used to block the sites in question nationwide.

The rulings themselves mean little in the context of the Russian Internet. Anyone of any age can still find porn — for free! — on Russia's unregulated social networks. Even children can watch porn as soon as they get the urge — and, naturally, they do.

For these reasons, Russia's war on porn is destined to fail — just as it has repeatedly.

As someone born in the USSR, where "there was no sex," I remember distinctly my first experience with pornography — how, together with the older students, we gathered in the gym to ogle the Western erotic magazines we found in the class ideology leader's satchel.

I didn't own magazines like that. Instead, I got my kicks from reading encyclopedia articles like "Reproductive Organs." I didn't need illustrations. At that time, the punishment for possessing immoral pictures of nude Soviet women was severe. Such images were deemed inappropriate for the builders of communism.

Then perestroika happened, and pornography reappeared — even on national television. The authorities rushed to regulate this new, burgeoning art form.

In the early 2000s, the city of St. Petersburg created a special city commission to control the sale of erotic goods. Prominent local art experts and sexologists were paid to give their expert advice. They suggested the local government allow the distribution of films and magazines with pornographic content.

Then, as now, only the "illegal distribution of pornography" was prohibited. And no one knew what legal distribution was. There was no definition of pornography. Experts distinguished eroticism from pornography as they pleased. In St. Petersburg, that was quite a sight. The commission simply decided that showing sex – classic or anal – was not pornographic. Only pedophilia, bestiality, necrophilia, rape outside of roleplaying and snuff were porn.

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The national Russian Culture Ministry took a different tack. To get the certificate necessary to legally sell or rent out porn films, you had to hide the bodily contact points with black-out circles. Special film editors worked for porn producers, doing what they considered grunt work — it was not easy to cut out the moving genitals, especially in group scenes.

If something happened to get past them — say, a little bit of scrotum — a Culture Ministry reviewer would make a mark in the time code.

Actually getting an erotic goods certificate was enjoyable. The Culture Ministry was one place where sex industry workers were always treated with love. We appeared in those offices much more often than the luminaries of mainstream cinema. I even had my own folder in the ministerial computer, where I could correct any inaccuracies in the submitted documents.

Occasional disputes over movie titles posed the biggest challenge. The names of some masterpieces made by other porn producers contained profanity. Those films just barely made it into general release.

In Russia, there were only two major distributors of pornographic materials — former companions, who later became brutal competitors. Their business conflicts resulted in lawsuits totaling 30 billion rubles ($519 million) and complaints to the prosecutor's office. Eventually, the government even withdrew the majority of the distribution certificates for their erotic productions.

However, the collapse of the DVD market and the dominance of pirated content in the public domain have decimated Russia's adult industry. Now it persists only in the form of individual content producers for Western sites and actresses who make regular trips to Budapest and Prague to be filmed in international studios.

But Russian porn stars are continually nominated for the prestigious AVN Award for best foreign actress, and they have fans all over the world. Many have become real celebrities. For example, Russian erotic star Estonika appears in YouTube videos that get millions of views.

Russia is in the top twenty countries with the most fans of adult videos. All this attests to the fact that porn will never die out in our country!

What do Russians want from porn? Probably the same thing as everyone else: To live out their fantasies and explore the forbidden things etched onto their consciousness. To have a hormone-soaked orgasm without getting pregnant or infected by some idiot. To experience some stirring emotions and a little naughtiness.

Of course, there are repercussions. But that’s true of all the nice things in our lives. Everything is good in moderation.

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