

# QUIET REVOLUTION OF MEDIACRACY

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It is hard to shake off the feeling that quite a sudden trend has been forming in Russia for the last year right under our eyes. Development of technical capacities of the Internet (YouTube, Twitter, web-cameras) has given an impetus to the development of civil society, though, at present, only in the virtual world. Starting with the campaign of public outrage over 'the case of major Evsukov' (assumptions have been voiced that the major's protectors would have managed to secure a much softer sentence for him had the case not produced such a stir among the public), the Internet public has begun to bring to bear an increasing influence on the events of the real world.

The MVD (ministry of home affairs) reform has been prepared, to a large extent, by information campaigns originating in the blogosphere (such as video-addresses of major Dymovsky, homespun records of breaches of law by the militia in different cities made with mobile telephone cameras, and spin-offs of various scandals like the assault of the music conservatory professor in Chelyabinsk).

Naturally, similar information campaigns were previously carried out over the Internet, but, generally speaking, they did not entail any significant consequences. The major difference of the political season of 2009-2010 is the reaction of authorities to the information waves rising on the Net. Resignations have followed (sometimes noisy ones), and cases that might have been hushed up and concealed have been handed over under the control of the Investigative Committee of the MVD of Russia, such as the incident with the traffic accident on Leninsky Prospekt.

We can try to explain this by differences in political traditions of

the former and of the current presidents (it is known that Putin, in principle, did not really like dismissing any of the officials, and he *never* did so under the pressure of 'public opinion'), or by the fact that president Medvedev is an active blogger himself. However, these observations should not overlook the central point: **society has outgrown the narrow boundaries of an archaic model that granted the bureaucracy freedom from responsibility for its actions.**

Over past centuries, the power of the Russian bureaucracy was in its ability to usurp the function of the people's relations with authorities, and to close down all channels of feedback. It was possible to get through to the conditional 'czar' through the conditional 'clerk,' but by no means was there any other way. Today, on the other hand, the technical capacities of common Russian citizens allow them to raise, with

permeating Internet, the universality of **cyberspace**.

We cannot say that this revolution is related to the creation of new information mediums – such mediums existed earlier. However, it is exactly now that they have started to have a significant influence on the processes taking place in the society and in the state.

## *Sometimes they return*

The main advantage of Runet is that it is, at least as of now, not subject to censorship and control, neither by 'protectors' nor by 'liberals.' **Artemy Troitsky** was excommunicated from the air of the most liberal 'Echo of Moscow' for his intention to broadcast his composition Noize MC, about the top manager of LUKOIL, Anatoly Barkov. Shortly thereafter, his composition quickly beat all downloading records on Runet. It is a place where Chechen separatists and

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the use of a web-camera and a notebook equipped with Wi-Fi, an information wave that will reach the 'czar,' bypassing all the previous encumbrances built by the bureaucracy.

As a matter of fact, we are dealing with a **quiet revolution**, whose consequences society has yet to fully perceive.

Society has received a signal that a feedback channel does exist. And this channel does not involve letters to the president read by faceless clerks, or courts where the truth is sought but not found. This channel is the all-

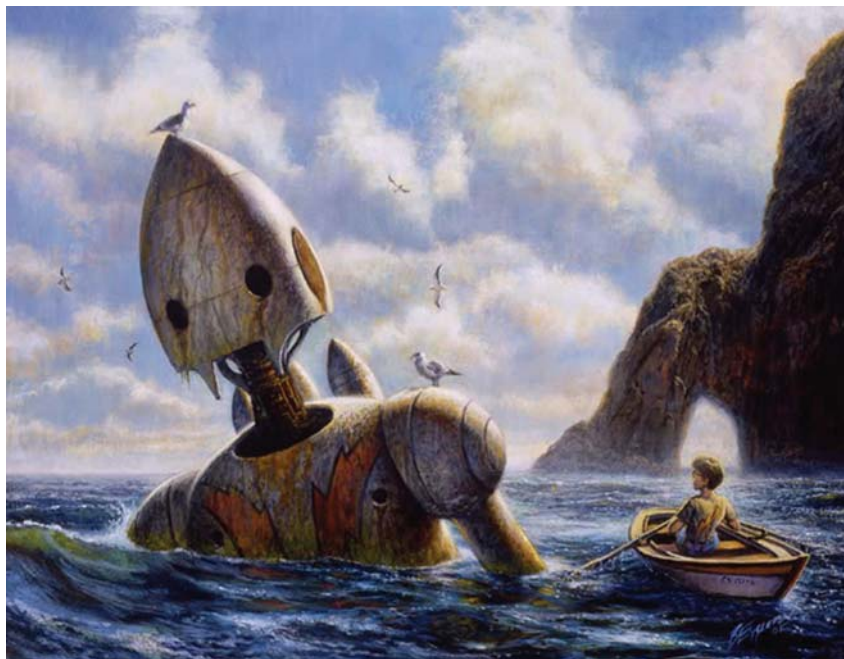
Russian nationalists, communists and liberals, conservatives and national-bolsheviks of Limonov coexist together. It is possible that no attempts have been made at censoring Runet because such a coexistence acts as a relief valve, without which the representatives of certain political forces, worn out by the impossibility to voice their opinion, would have begun to erect barricades a long time ago. This state of affairs suited the authorities only until the moment at which the Internet started to exert a tangible influence on the political situation in the country

(covered in the first section of the article).

A change in the balance of forces within the mass media has clearly revealed itself during the recent coverage of the terrorist attacks in Moscow. At a time when the Internet mass media and the blogosphere were monitoring the picture of the unfolding events almost from the first minutes following the explosions at Lubyanka and Park Kultury metro stations, the television media (except for the 'Vesti-24' channel) pretended that nothing out of the ordinary was happening in the country. *'Television lost to blogs and to Internet mass media on all counts: it is unprofessional, it is not capable of swiftly reacting to events as they unfold, and it does not feel the needs of the audience. It is not clear who needs it in its current state. It is difficult to imagine who will trust our TV channels after what has happened today,'* wrote **Mikhail Budaragin**, a political scientist and a member of the political council of the 'Molodaya Gvardiya' ('Young Guards') movement in his column in 'Vzglyad' ('View').

Nothing else can be expected from the media while it exists under the total control of bureaucracy. When the heads of TV channels are preoccupied solely by the timing of state leaders on TV screens, and not even by organising commentaries by the 'politically correct' 'talking heads,' it means that the logic of media management has become completely undistinguishable from that of the bureaucrats. But **it is exactly this bureaucratic logic that sharply decreases the value of mediacracy in the eyes of the authorities.** In his column, Budaragin concluded that, *'The most powerful media resource at the disposal of the president and the prime-minister is firing blank shots today, mainly engaging in the broadcast of idiotic programs and seven year old movies, as well the carving up of advertisement budgets. Such allies are worse than many enemies.'*

Looking forward it seems likely that whatever scraps of influence



television retains today will all but be lost by the political season of 2011-2012. Of course, there will always be an inert mass of a TV audience, uncritical to the information broadcast by official TV channels, but its share will nevertheless decrease. On the contrary, the role of politically active citizens using the new capacities of the Internet will forever be on the rise.

In this way, **bureaucracy is losing the crucial lever of pressure on mediacracy:** any administrative measures aimed against journalists can now become the subject of discussion in the blogosphere and eventually be turned against the authorities. Such was the case with **Maxim Sokolov**, the reviewer of 'Izvestia,' whose column publication was refused by the newspaper. Sokolov immediately published the rejected column in his blog, and dozens of Internet mass media sources re-published it. Sokolov wrote in his column that he intended to tender his resignation from 'Izvestia' on the grounds of censorship. Yet it is evident that Sokolov did not lose anything from this situation. On the contrary, he has gained additional popularity amongst his Internet audience.

It seems to be quite evident that in the coming years the Russian

media community will try to use such opportunities, due in large part to the large-scale informatization of the society, to liberate itself from the control of bureaucracy and to regain the positions lost at the beginning of this century. It should not be ignored that, by guiding and controlling informational waves over the internet, such an online media could become an alternative structure for the management of Russian society. However, several players with strategic thinking and a powerful support of oligarchic capital will be required to strive towards this goal. But those are mainly technical issues. The possibility of such a scenario, on the whole, does not seem unlikely.

The authorities are faced with a very big problem, as they get ready for the campaigns of 2011-2012; a problem which they are already beginning to perceive. Remember that, 'the most powerful media resource at the disposal of the president and the prime-minister is firing blank shots.' There is a sufficient number of professional journalists, top-notch reporters, and competent editors on TV, but at the moment the very nature of Russian television media seems to exist in a parallel and disjointed reality. ■