



What is the Russian for Facebook?

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¹ The “weaponization of information”, the use of information for military purposes, is nothing new. In Russia today it is an imperative: if you work as a journalist, you are a combatant in the information war, and you won’t be allowed to sit it out in the trenches.

The largest-scale and bitterest warfare is conducted, however, not in the newspapers or on television but in social media. The, often reluctant, participants are the millions of users of the Russian-language segment of Facebook and Twitter and, as they live in different parts of the world, the virtual war has the scope of a world war.

In December last year, Facebook blocked an event organized by supporters of Alexey Navalny. By means of postings on social networks, they were getting ready for the announcement of the verdict in a criminal case against Navalny and two other defendants. They were calling on oppositionally minded users to attend a protest rally on 15 January. Facebook blocked the page at the behest of *Roskommadzor*, the Federal Service for Supervision of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications. The agency claimed that the page’s creators were committing a crime under the so-called “Lugovoy Law”, which provides for blocking, without a court order, access to resources containing “incitement to riot, engage in extremist activities, or participate in mass (public) events in contravention of official procedures”. In this instance, the “contravention of official procedures” consisted of the meeting’s organizers not having agreed the date, time and place of the meeting with the Moscow authorities.

Representatives of Facebook declined to comment on their company’s decision, which came as an unpleasant surprise for the Russian opposition. The opposition had come to see social networks as almost the last, but wholly dependable, bastion of free speech not subject to Kremlin control. This was now evidently mistaken.

An editorial in *The New York Times* was titled, “Facebook Is Not the Public Square”. Its authors were referring to the ancient agora, the market in Greek city-states which served as a place of assembly for all the citizens. The article commented:

“Facebook’s decision serves as an important reminder that social media companies are under no obligation to support free speech if doing so would harm their business.”

The newspaper was far from applauding Facebook’s action. The editorial has a critical edge to it, but this is noticeable only on close reading.

One can understand the providers’ predicament. The global market for contextual advertising is growing rapidly. In the first quarter of this year alone, Facebook earned US\$ 3.3 billion from advertising, and more than half this revenue came from outside the US. In the segment of search advertising, Google remains the undisputed leader: in the first quarter of this year advertising earned it US\$ 15.5 billion.

¹ This paper was written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. It can be accessed at, Abarinov, V. “Kak budet Facebook porusski?”, *svoboda.org*, 16 December 2015, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/27431237.html>

WHAT IS THE RUSSIAN FOR FACEBOOK?

There is no arguing against figures like these but, at the same time, reputation does count for something. In order to maintain it, the Internet companies have taken to publishing regular “transparency reports” with information on how they are interacting with governments. Let us turn to Google’s report.

We find Russia included in the section on “Government requests to remove content”. During the last reporting period, January-July 2014, Google received 745 requests from official Russian agencies. (The number has been increasing steadily: in the second half of 2013 it was just 324.) Of these, slander, pornography, threats of violence, discriminatory statements (what, in American law, is called “hate speech”) and copyright infringement each account for 1%. Criticism of the government accounts for 3%; national security, 4%; advocacy of suicide, 7%; use of drugs, 80%.

Of the requests from official agencies in Russia, 92% were satisfied. 76% of requests referring to a court judgement were granted.

The report provides examples of requests from governments and the decisions taken on them.

Request: Russia's regional ISP Rostelecom informed us of a court decision ordering ISPs to block access to 2 blog posts containing extremist religious speech.

Outcome: We removed both blog posts from the blogspot.ru domain.

Or:

Request: The MVD (Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs) requested removal of 8 Google Play apps referencing 3 entries in the Russian Federal List of Extremist Materials for 3 Islamic prayer books. These books are prohibited under the Russian Anti-Extremism law.

Outcome: We restricted access to the 8 apps in Russia.

From July to December 2014, 134 requests were received from Russia for disclosure of personal data of 220 users. Of these, Google granted 5%, but it is impossible to establish what exactly these requests were, or what considerations the company took into account when satisfying some but not others. The information is too limited.

Facebook publishes a transparency report also, but it is even less transparent than Google’s. These are the statistics for the second half of 2014:

Number of pages blocked at the request of *Roskomnadzor* - 55.

Reasons: “content promoting drug use and self-harm; extremist activities, unsanctioned large-scale riots/marches; and the undermining of the integrity of the Russian Federation.”

Number of requests for personal data - 2. Complied with, 0%.

This, however, is only the tip of the iceberg. The bulk of content is blocked, not at the request of governments, but after complaints from individual users. These data are not included in the transparency reports.

Getting your brains in gear

Last May, in an interview with *Izvestiya* newspaper, the deputy head of *Roskommadzor*, Maxim Ksenzov, expressed his dissatisfaction with the insufficiently rigorous observance of Russian law by global service providers. As he put it, his agency's interaction with Google was often "no more than a kind of game. In one situation they seem able to take their own decisions, but in another refer to transatlantic corporate lawyers and managers and shrug their shoulders, claiming it is out of their hands." Ksenzov praised Facebook: "Unlike Google, their actions are as a rule very decisive and consistent." He laid into Twitter for their reluctance to cooperate: "In most instances, Twitter categorically refuses to remove illegal information ... By consistently refusing to comply with our requirements, they are deliberately creating conditions in which it is becoming almost inevitable that this resource will be blocked in our country ... We have the capacity to block Twitter or Facebook in Russia tomorrow, in a matter of minutes."

Ksenzov's interview caused a commotion, but the same day an irate tweet appeared from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, advising "certain officials responsible for developing this sector [...] to occasionally get their brains in gear." Nikolay Nikiforov, the Minister for *Roskommadzor*, ordered an official investigation into the interview, as a result of which Ksenzov was officially reprimanded.

Three days after the interview, Twitter banned the blog of "Right Sector", an organization illegal in Russia, and the company's vice-president, Colin Crowell, hastened to Russia for talks with *Roskommadzor*.

The most outrageous recent blocking or removal of content has involved the Facebook network. In order not to implicate the government in legally questionable cases, the Kremlin mobilized a vast army of trolls who flooded the network's administrators with complaints about posts which allegedly violated Facebook rules.

The blocking of accounts of Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian Facebook users began last year, and assumed such massive proportions that the Ukrainians sent a collective appeal to Mark Zuckerberg. The authors of this message, pointing out instances of unjustified blocking, wrote,

"In the face of a total information black-out and aggressive pro-Russian propaganda, Facebook is arguably the most important channel for information on developments in the hotspots of this war, and also the sole means of communication between Ukrainians living in the territories currently occupied by the Russian armed forces."

The appeal was supported by the Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, who, through his Facebook account, publicly proposed that Zuckerberg should open an office in Kiev. The Russian mouthpiece, *Sputnik*, claimed the Ukrainians had "declared war" on Zuckerberg.

The issue was becoming so serious that in May this year Facebook's founder was obliged to respond personally to the allegations at a "Townhall" question-and-answer session. Zuckerberg said he had "done some research" and believed that in the vast majority of cases the blocking had been justified.

Even though the staff employed to moderate content in Facebook's Dublin office speak foreign languages, there was always the possibility of mistakes. Zuckerberg admitted to only one, and blamed that on "a bug in the software", when the reason for the objection to content had been given as "nudity" rather than "hate speech".

Zuckerberg's explanations and excuses convinced no one. After the Townhall session he received a petition from Russian and Ukrainian users. The company limited itself to a statement admitting occasional overreactions, but this brush-off satisfied nobody.

Roskomnadzor was monitoring developments closely. Its leaders complained in interviews about the reluctance of global service providers to cooperate with the Russian authorities, despite their own infinite patience.

"Colin Crowell, the vice-president of Twitter, came to us in early July and enquired what sort of information we consider to be extremist," Alexander Zharov, director of *Roskomnadzor*, told the newspaper *Vedomosti* in August last year. "The Prosecutor General's Office prepared an explanatory document, which we have sent to Twitter. They very kindly replied that they will pass the information to the relevant experts and advise us of their opinion. A week passed. We wrote to Twitter again, saying that the information that access to illegal accounts was still not being restricted would also be passed to the relevant staff in our Prosecutor General's Office. That is the tone in which we are patiently talking to them."

At the same time, Zharov referred approvingly to Twitter's decision to block the account of "*Shaltai-Boltai*" ("Humpty Dumpty"), on which a hacker group calling itself "Anonymous International" posted documents obtained by hacking the mailboxes of Russian officials, thereby causing the authorities a lot of grief. A new *Shaltai-Boltai* Twitter account is currently accessible and has new tweets. The original website was declared illegal last July, after a ruling by St Petersburg's Smolninsky District Court on the grounds that they had refused to remove personal information about a citizen of the Russian Federation at his request. The members of the group believe this was a mere pretext.

We might mention that, after it had been blocked, *Shaltai-Boltai* posted hacked emails of the head of *Roskomnadzor* himself.

Requests without answers

By the end of last year, the main preoccupation was no longer blocking content but implementing the "Blogger Law", amendments to the law "On information, information technologies and data protection", which required bloggers with more than 3,000 followers a day to register their blog as a mass media resource. These blogs were to be subject to all the restrictions applicable to the other mass media in Russia: they could not be anonymous, and all their data must be stored in Russia and produced on demand to the law enforcement agencies. They could be shut down after two warnings.

The new version of the law came into effect on 1 August 2014. The social media providers claimed they kept no tally of the number of visits to individual accounts, and that the technology did not allow installation of counters to do so. *Roskomnadzor's* officials insisted that a solution must be found.

In March this year, Alexander Zharov again complained in an interview that Twitter and Facebook were showing reluctance to comply with the requirements of the law: “For example, Twitter in its annual report on requests from the governments of various countries, states that it complied 100% with more than 2,500 requests from the US administration for the personal information of users of its social networking site, whereas they satisfied none of the 108 requests from *Roskomnadzor*.”

Anyone who checks this claim with the actual report of Twitter will see that Mr Zharov’s statement is, to put it mildly, inaccurate. His figures for Russia are correct. As regards the US government, though, in the first half of last year it made 1,257 such requests to Twitter, and 1,622 in the second, a total of 2,879. These requests were satisfied in 72% and 80% of cases respectively. Why are US requests generally met while Russian requests are not? Because requests for information from the United States usually come as the result of a court ruling, whereas those from Russia originate outside the judicial process.

“Since this report also states that Twitter is deliberately not blocking extremist resources, Ukrainian extremist organizations which we have placed on our list of extremist organizations, we regard the situation as unacceptable,” Alexander Zharov continued.

What the Twitter report in fact says is:

“We received one court order and 89 requests from the Federal Service for Supervision of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications (*Roskomnadzor*). The increasing volume of requests made by Russia include those issued under the aegis of Federal Law 398. [The “Lugovoy Law” referred to above. Ed.] This law allows the Russian authorities to restrict access to content that is deemed to be “extremist” or that leads to “mass actions.” We denied several requests to silence popular critics of the Russian government and other demands to limit speech about non-violent demonstrations in Ukraine.”

Data for the first half of this year: requests for personal information from Russia - 43, satisfied - 0%.

Held to account for “honkies”

Relations between *Roskomnadzor* and Facebook, Google and Twitter remain tense. In May, these three companies received a letter from the Russian agency threatening to close them down in Russia if they continued to flout the Blogger Law. The letter was dated 18 May, signed by Alexander Zharov, and addressed to Facebook’s director for public policy for the Nordics, Central and Eastern Europe and Russia, Thomas Kristensen; Twitter’s director of public policy for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, Sinead McSweeney; and Google’s CEO, Larry Page. Having laid out possible consequences, Mr. Zharov continues: “Bearing in mind the necessity for *Roskomnadzor* to take the above measures in accordance with Russian law, I request that you report [your] position on the indicated issues of concern within the shortest possible timeframe ...”

Commenting on Zharov’s warning, Vadim Ampelonsky, *Roskomnadzor*’s press secretary, said, “We recognize the importance of these resources for Russian users. As regards potential sanctions, under Russian law these are fines and the blocking of pages, which may lead to complete unavailability of resources on the territory of the Russian Federation, due to their use of the encrypted protocol https:// . However, at the present moment, this scenario is unlikely.”

In response to Zharov's letter, all those to whom it was addressed duly came to Moscow. On 26 May, Zharov and Ksenzov met Colin Crowell and Sinead McSweeney. *Izvestiya* reported that both "promised to remove illegal content to which the Russian authorities took exception. Within a few days this promise was carried out."

Susan Pointer, Google's senior director of public policy and government relations, Asia Pacific, Middle East, Africa and Russia, came to Moscow in early June. "The tone of the meeting with Google was constructive," Vadim Ampelonsky told *Izvestiya*. "Issues of compliance by Google's Russian office with legislation, both current and impending, were discussed. We look forward to concrete steps by the company to remove illegal information."

Mr Ksenzov, however, gave a more sceptical assessment of the results of the talks. "The vice-presidents for third world countries of the world's largest company arrived (not themselves knowing why)," he wrote on Facebook.

This assessment seems closer to the facts.

"Susan Pointer," *Izvestiya* reported, "commented that Google considers the Russian market promising and plans to increase investment in our country. The company's representative did not, however, detail possible investments. Moreover, no clear indication was given of Google's stance on the removal of illegal content and transference of servers to Russia."

After the meeting with Pointer, *Roskommnadzor* intensified pressure on Google. On 27 June the agency warned YouTube, the video hosting service owned by Google, that if "illegal content" was not removed within three days, Russian users' access to the service would be curtailed by local service providers. The issue in this instance was infringement of copyright.

On 3 July something unusual happened: Facebook removed a posting by Maxim Ksenzov, its chief persecutor in *Roskommnadzor*, for violating community standards. The cause was his use of the word "*khokhly*" ("honkies"), an offensive term for Ukrainians.

In his response, Ksenzov appeared disconcerted:

"Splendid) They've deleted my post. Well, so what!"

If this had been done by a robot, it would have removed Ksenzov's explanation, which also contains the derogatory term. But no, Facebook was plainly making it clear that this was a response on the part of Facebook to the accusations of biased blocking of Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian users for which Mark Zuckerberg had had to explain himself. Ksenzov tried to keep his comments ironical:

"Other things being equal, and despite certain nuances of the situation, I would not want unknown citizens of foreign countries to forbid citizens of mine to speak their native language."

Facebook responded by completely blocking the account, at first only temporarily.

There was no way that could be regarded as accidental. Without waiting for more stringent treatment, Ksenzov left Facebook with his head held high, as he reported on Twitter. Maxim Ksenzov was in fact the second well known casualty of the ban on the offending word. The first, two days previously, had been Eduard Bagirov, a writer of fiction. Facebook responded on that occasion to a request from *Roskonnadzor* to explain the situation: “The word ‘khokhly’ in this context falls into the category of use of words such as ‘nigger’, and violates community standards.”

After the blocking of Ksenzov, a demonstrative exodus from Facebook of well-known pro-Kremlinites began. Journalist Maxim Kononenko provoked the automatic removal of his posting by quoting Pushkin’s poem, “My family tree”, which includes the word “*khokhly*”.

The *Moskovsky Komsomolets* newspaper thought up an even better provocation, with one of its journalists using the word with the different dictionary meaning of “a tuft of hair, fur or feathers sticking up on the head”. (This word is actually the origin of the derogatory term, as Ukrainians shaved their heads and left only one long braid of hair on it: the *oseledets*.) Another of the newspaper’s journalists then complained to Facebook and the posting was deleted.

It appeared that, if the staff of Facebook’s Dublin office really did speak Russian, they didn’t speak it well enough.

Anton Nosik also found his posting on Facebook blocked. He is a popular blogger, was a pioneer of the Russian-language Internet and the creator of one of the first Russian blogging projects, the “Evening Internet”. Nosik is not afflicted by Ukrainophobia and, in his opinion, had not offended against any community standards in his posting. He had done a re-posting of Kononenko with the quote from Pushkin, with the same result.

Expert opinions

I asked Polina Kolozaridi, a keen-eyed observer of Facebook, to comment on a situation in which it was being fired on from both sides. Polina is a graduate student and researcher at the Department of Sociology in the Higher School of Economics, Moscow. In addition to her work at the department, she participates in a project, The User Research Lab, run by the Centre for Digital Cultures, Leuphana University in Lüneburg, Germany.

“I agree that a lack of transparency over requests is a big problem for today’s social networks,” Polina says. “We can understand that they are under pressure from several directions. On the one hand, states are trying to pressure them; then again, they have their own, commercial, interests; and, finally, their users are concerned about the security of their personal information, not only because the state might exploit it, but also because they might fall victim to scams. This means that data security is also a social responsibility of the networks, and is why they are currently trying to work out some rules. In my opinion, it is a great pity they are not doing that in public. Facebook, Twitter and other companies are going to spring a ready-made solution on us and tell us that these are the new rules. It shows how questionable the assumption is that the social networks are a public space: they are, of course, but the public space is privately owned. If you were conducting debates in a park, and the owner of the park came along and told you the rules for debating there had just been changed, you would find yourself in a ridiculous situation. Because, there you were, thinking the park was your public space. Unfortunately, I can’t think of any encouraging precedents here. Users have never yet succeeded in establishing a right to make decisions within corporations.”

VA (Vladimir Abarinov): In a sense, this is the conundrum of the chicken and the egg. I once had an argument with Anton Nosik when he decided to make the whole of LiveJournal fee-paying. His logic was that LiveJournal was providing us with a platform, a service, and that services have to be paid for. I objected then that it was we, the users, who made his platform commercially attractive by creating the content which enabled LiveJournal to increase its traffic.

PK (Polina Kolozaridi): Today we are at a moment of truth for the development of the Internet, and possibly the result will be a different model for financing the networks. I personally am, of course, in favour of users having maximum rights over the site on which they are interacting.

VA: Have you watched Zuckerberg's Townhall Q and A? For some reason, it always seems to turn out that neither Mark Zuckerberg nor Pavel Durov dictate the rules that govern their resources.

PK: Yes. From his comments I got the impression that he was trying to ignore the political dimension. The ideology of the managers of today's networks seems altogether rather flexible, sometimes, perhaps, too flexible. The closest Russian analogue is Pavel Durov with his ostentatious libertarianism, which is a characteristic inherited from Silicon Valley: we are building a new world and can make up our own rules. This is all great, but in the end, for some reason, it always seems to turn out that neither Mark Zuckerberg nor Pavel Durov dictate the rules that govern their resources. Moreover, they don't even seem to be managing incidents they get sucked into very well. These incidents take on a completely different colouration, far more politicized than Zuckerberg, for example, would like. Anton Nosik has a curious perspective on this triple conflict of interests. I reminded him of the saga of the blocking of the Navalny rally, but he wanted to put me straight:

AN: That happened just once, late on a Saturday night. A few minutes after they were blocked, those same people were able to set up another page that was not blocked. It was evidently a mistake.

VA: The announcement of a rally in support of Navalny didn't, of course, violate any of Facebook's standards, but the page was blocked at the request of *Roskomnadzor*, who claimed the rally was a violation of Russian law because it had not been approved by the Moscow authorities.

AN: At a policy level, Facebook didn't accept that.

VA: You think it was the night shift who blocked the page, and then came to their senses?

AN: Yes, the night shift, consisting, I imagine, of one person. He took measures, in accordance with Facebook's procedures. But by the time the scandal erupted, there was already another page with the same announcement, on which thousands of people registered.

VA: Okay, let's say accept it was an accident. But then there was mass blocking of accounts of Ukrainian users and Russian users with pro-Ukrainian views. There was a petition from Ukrainian users, Zuckerberg gave a personal explanation... If we look at the chronology, we will see that Ukrainians began sending denunciations long before Russians.

AN: We shouldn't conflate blocking a posting for violating Facebook's standards with blocking a meeting which had done nothing of the sort. Blocking the rally page was so shocking precisely because the meeting didn't break any Facebook rules. When someone calls a Russian a "f*****"

katsap” [Russky Goatbeard], Facebook has every right to block it as hate speech. It’s a separate issue that for many years they didn’t implement that rule. The rally episode would have been outrageous if they had stood by the decision, but they didn’t. The hate speech issue is different. A huge number of people who support Putin, the Kremlin, the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Lugansk People’s Republic, including the military correspondents of Russian television channels, were blocked after complaints from the Ukrainian side, denunciations, not to mince words. They didn’t go running to Zuckerberg to complain about it, but the Ukrainians did. If we look at the chronology, we will see that Ukrainians began sending denunciations long before Russians. Actually, it was a habit the Russians picked up from the Ukrainians. Ukraine has exactly the same cybertroops as Russia, and they use exactly the same technology.

VA: But you yourself joined in the provocation over honkies and Pushkin, and you too got blocked.

AN: What provocation did I join in? I wasn’t involved in it. I wrote about it, and I was banned for writing about it.

VA: But you used that keyword.

AN: No, I didn’t. I was passing on truthful journalistic information about the fact that Facebook was blocking users over a certain poem by Pushkin. I didn’t use the word ‘honkies’. I had a screenshot of the letter from Facebook’s administration to a user who had posted a poem by Pushkin. That word was not present in my text.

VA: So, was the blocking of Ksenzov just another accident? They don’t give a damn whether a denunciation is right or wrong. You get denounced, we block you.

AN: That wasn’t an accident: that was Facebook policy. It has nothing to do with the politics of the authorities, Russian or Ukrainian. It is a matter of a relationship between a social network and its users. It is a very strict relationship, but it’s nothing to do with the authorities. It’s do to with actual people. That relationship is as follows: “Dear friends, We know you are using Facebook to fight a war. You write in Russian. For us you are second-class users. We don’t make money out of you. If you get denounced, we block you. Whether it’s a Ukrainian or a Russian denunciation, we block you, irrespective of the merits of the case. We know that normal users who write in Russian don’t get denounced. The people who do are those trying to fight a war on our network.” They have no idea of the merits of all the claims and counterclaims. The commercial entity known as Facebook is disinclined to waste significant moderating resources on checking who’s denouncing who in the Cyrillic segment. They don’t care whether a denunciation is justified or not. You’ve been denounced, we block you. This is a consequence of the fact that they just find us tedious.

VA: I don’t think you’re right in saying Facebook doesn’t make money from Russian users.

AN: That’s my take on it. There are a whole lot of facts here. Thousands of blockings on both sides. Idiotic blockings, which are quite unlike Facebook’s practice in other languages. If you were to quote Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” in an English account, no one would block you for anti-Semitism.

VA: So, it’s not a matter of a lack of expertise among the staff in the notorious Dublin office?

AN: No, it's a matter of principle. Zuckerberg gave it to us straight: if we block something, that's right. By definition, it must be hate speech. That's the principle. It doesn't matter whether you are engaging in hate speech or not. If our moderator presses the button, we know he's done the right thing. Mind you, that applies only to Russian-language Facebook, but it applies equally to Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews who live in Israel but write in Russian.

VA: Why does Twitter behave so completely differently? There's no problem there that you're trying to send a message to mother but some Russo-Ukrainian war is getting in the way.

AN: Twitter behaves differently because, from the outset, it was created as a platform for realizing the right to free speech. It's not a medium for personal messages, it's a platform for public statements. Public statements are privileged, protected by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. There's no problem there that you're trying to send a message to mother but some Russo-Ukrainian war is getting in the way. On Twitter nothing anyone tweets is private. You are speaking in public. Facebook was set up so that private individuals could communicate with people they know personally. Facebook is a realm of interpersonal communication, where war is just a nuisance. Using Facebook for propaganda campaigns and wars is a violation of the purpose for which Facebook, in its own view, was created. That's why antagonists are a problem for Facebook but not for Twitter.

VA: And that's why Twitter refuses point blank to block content at the request of *Roskonnadzor*?

AN: Of course. But *Roskonnadzor*'s big complaint against Twitter is that it refuses to divulge personal data.

Why has no one fired the starting pistol?

This is another problem in the dealings of global providers with *Roskonnadzor*. It came to the fore when Russia adopted a law on users' personal data.

Under the law of 21 July 2014 (which has the lengthy title of "On the introduction of amendments to certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation with regard to clarification of the processing of personal data in information and telecommunications networks"), databases with personal information of users who are citizens of Russia must be stored on servers located in Russia.

The initial date for the law to come into force was 1 September 2016. However, an amendment moved this forward by a year, to 1 September 2015 (although, in practice, the law, will only come into force in January 2016). Some foreign companies, such as Samsung, have fallen into line with its stipulations. Microsoft Corporation has agreed to retain for six months and forward to the Russian law enforcement agencies information on conversations, correspondence, and the exchanging of data between Skype users. The PayPal payment system has introduced restrictions on anonymous payments to Russia. What will happen to social networks which refuse, or claim it is technically impossible, to move servers to Russia?

The situation is paradoxical. On the one hand, President Putin is convinced that the Internet is controlled by the US government, and has regularly said as much. For example, in April last year, at a meeting with those attending a Media Forum of Independent Regional and Local Mass Media, he addressed precisely this problem of the storage of personal data:

“Everything goes through servers located in the United States, and everything is monitored there. That is what you have to start from. That’s how it is, because this was all constructed by the Americans, they did it. You know, after all, that this all arose at the outset, at the dawn of the Internet, as a special project of the CIA of the United States, and that is how it is still developing. All the rest is, so to speak, thanks to the market, it generated a huge market turnover. But still, this was originally a military programme, and that intelligence programme is still right there, in the centre of it, this presence of the security services.”

In the eyes of defensive, conservative commentators, the social networks are nothing more nor less than a tool to provoke “colour revolutions”, a weapon of the US in its struggle for global domination, which only Russia, in the whole world, is opposing.

On the other hand, the order to pull the plug on the global networks in Russia has not been given.

We continue our discussion with Anton Nosik.

VA: The law comes into force. What happens then to the global networks in Russia?

AN: Nothing.

VA: In other words, the law will not apply to global social networks?

AN: What do you mean by “apply”? It can’t apply to them. You can’t send a team to California to carry off the servers. You could punish someone for refusing to comply with the law, but the only available penalty is to block a particular network in Russia.

VA: So will they? The new law changes nothing. As before, Putin has only to say, “Pull the plug!” and they will.

AN: The law has no bearing on that question. There are already some 20 laws under which Russia could block Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google and so on. No law has the least significance on its own. It’s a waste of time pretending the law counts for anything in Russia: all the more so while we have Law 398-FZ, which says that any resource, without exception, can be blocked in Russia on the strength of a single phone call. When the political will to close the foreign social networks is there, they will be closed, and which law is used in the process is beside the point. Under Law 139-FZ, which was adopted in 2012, Twitter can be closed for refusing to remove a tweet. The new law changes nothing. As before, Putin has only to say, “Pull the plug!” and they will. Until he does, nothing will be shut down, no matter what laws came into effect on 1 September, or 1 August, or 1 July. All that this law achieves is to provide Excuse No. 21 for shutting down Twitter and Facebook in Russia. And if they are shut down, it won’t be because any law requires it, but solely because the order has been given to do so. What excuse is used is neither here nor there.

VA: Nevertheless, all year the heads of global networks have been flying to Moscow and having talks with *Roskommadzor*.

AN: They’ve been having nothing of the sort. *Roskommadzor* issued some demands and they turned them down. As *Roskommadzor* has no authority to punish them for that, it has been issuing

press releases about how productive the dialogue is which they are having with Facebook and Twitter, and how the heads of Facebook and Twitter have been flying to Russia to have talks with them. All the information on this topic is coming from *Roskonnadzor*. They have no authority to block the networks so, to keep smiling while playing a terrible hand, they issue infinite numbers of leaks and press releases to media who are on their side, about how everybody is flying in to see them. Mark Zuckerberg was in Russia when Dmitry Medvedev was president, and the president asked him to open an offshoot of Facebook in Russia. Zuckerberg replied that he saw no prospect of that happening.

VA: He gave Poroshenko the same answer.

AN: Yes, Poroshenko too. These people live in California and they observe the laws of California. It is highly unlikely they are going to start observing Russian laws. Their position is straightforward, and Russia's position is very convoluted, because in Russia there are stacks of laws which say they must be punished, banned, unplugged, but no one has fired the starting pistol.

VA: Why not?

AN: Ask Putin. For him to give the go-ahead, someone has to persuade him that Facebook needs to be banned in Russia.

VA: He's convinced, isn't he, that the Internet is a spawn of the CIA and still managed from Langley?

AN: Well, yes, but he also said the directors of Yandex were appointed by the Americans, and he didn't close them down. He says things, but for Facebook and Twitter to be shut down in Russia he has to give an order. He hasn't done so.

VA: So, perhaps a decision has been taken not to ban them?

AN: These decisions are taken by one person. Today he thinks this way, but tomorrow he may change his mind and we won't have Facebook. It all goes on inside one head, and what exactly is going on in there, nobody knows.

VA: So, does that mean Russia has no policy on this issue? Or has it been decided not to slam this window shut unless they are forced to, to leave people some air? What good would it do them to shut down Facebook? They're not going to be able to take it off Zuckerberg, are they?

AN: Well, here we're trying to read Putin's mind. What is most likely is that he simply doesn't know what Facebook is. How would he? He doesn't have a Facebook account. He needs someone to give him a report that there is something called Facebook. Or Wikipedia. Or YouTube. He needs someone to come up with a report on the subject. But that person would need to have a goal. When someone comes to Putin and says, "We need to punish such-and-such a bank," the aim is to help themselves to it. What good would it do them to shut Facebook down? They're hardly going to be able to take it off Zuckerberg, are they? If nobody has a vested interest, nobody submits a report.

VA: But *Roskomnadzor* needs somehow to justify its existence.

AN: *Roskomnadzor* writes regulations, issues warnings, and updates its blacklist. Without turning a hair, they have shut down 70,000 websites in Russia. Twitter and Facebook are not on that list. They realize that they can't just shut down Twitter and Facebook the way they remove other sites. They can't shut down Wikipedia the way they closed Lurk. They do at least realize they don't have the power to do that.

VA: But there wouldn't be any technical problems about doing it?

AN: Technical problems? They can always block sites, although that's pretty ineffective.

VA: There are ways of getting round blocking...

AN: For me personally, it makes not the slightest difference whether a site is blocked in Russia or not. I can continue to access it perfectly well. Anonymizers are supported by browsers. You can turn them on with a single click and then forget about them. If *Roskomnadzor* blocks certain sites, you won't even notice.

VA: That would seem to explain why the decision hasn't been taken?

AN: Well, yes. The solution would be ineffective, which is always an important consideration. People who have not yet set up a means of bypassing filters would simply do so. Of course blocking would achieve nothing. Yes, perhaps that's the explanation.

VA: But the Duma are planning to introduce a bill prohibiting the use of anonymizers.

AN: They've been planning to do that since 2012.

VA: It strikes me it's on the same level as introducing a law banning oral sex. In the case of oral sex, you could at least indicate which acts the law considered improper.

AN: In practice, yes, but at least you would know how to set about framing a law banning oral sex. How can you formulate a law prohibiting connecting to a server via a different server? The whole point of Internet communications is that requests go through a multiplicity of servers. In the case of oral sex, you could at least indicate which acts the law considered improper, but it is impossible to ban connecting to one server through another – that's precisely how the Internet works. Nobody connects to another server directly. There is always a relay, retranslation. Banning relays is tantamount to banning the Internet protocol. In other words, it is not a matter of these legislative proposals being written incompetently: it is in principle impossible to write them competently. When you send a connection request, you don't of course connect directly from your apartment to the website you need. Your request goes first to your Internet Service Provider, the ISP sends it to an uplink facility, an arterial channel going, for example, across the Atlantic. The request then goes to a hub, from there to another hub, and so on. That's just the way the Internet works.

VA: And every time a request follows a different route.

AN: Every time it follows the route which appears at that moment to be the fastest. How can that be banned? And what law can specify it? The reason they haven't introduced it yet is because they can't work out how to formulate it.

* * *

The Kremlin's official position on social media is self-contradictory. If the Internet is a conduit for colour revolutions, why would America want to disconnect Russia from it? Here is what Vladimir Putin said in a speech at a meeting of the Russian Security Council on 1 October 2014, which was devoted to countering threats to national security in the digital sphere. Many people were afraid he would take an axe to the problem, and were very relieved when the president promised not to act rashly.

“We can see that certain countries are trying to exploit their dominance in the field of global information to achieve not only economic, but also military and political objectives. They actively use information systems as an instrument of ‘soft power’ to promote their interests ...”

Of course, it was no secret which “certain countries” he was talking about exactly. The president's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, had named the country even before the council met:

“We hear crazy calls to cut Russia out of SWIFT, and there is no certainty that tomorrow we will not be hearing the same crazy voices calling for Russia to be disconnected from the Internet. The main administrator of the global Internet is the US, and Russia needs to be able to defend her interests.”

Minister of Telecom Nikolay Nikiforov promised to “work through the various scenarios.”

“Recently Russia has encountered the unilateral language of sanctions. In these circumstances, we are looking at scenarios in which our dear partners might suddenly decide to turn off our Internet.”

These labours had their glorious culmination in interagency exercises to safeguard the Russian segment of the Internet or, as the president put it, “deliver sovereignty in this area.” The exercises proceeded on the basis that the US and its allies had undertaken “malicious acts” that led to shutting Russia out of the Internet. In order to avoid this, Russia disconnected from the Internet itself. Again we get “anti-sanctions”. The malign West doesn't actually need to do anything: Russia does everything herself.

Quite apart from the wiles of foreign enemies, there is a federal law “On telecommunications”, which provides for suspending or limiting the use of communications networks in an emergency, which includes mass protests in the country.

Apparently, the exercises did not satisfy those who had organized them, and this spring the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications and *Roskomnadzor* conducted a further experiment. As Andrew Semerikov, chairman of the board of the ISP, ER-Telecom, explained at a press conference on 14 October, the exercises again came to grief:

“*Roskommadzor* sent the dispatcher stations of major telecom operators instructions to block traffic on certain major foreign arteries: ISPs were to block them by using appropriate settings in their existing systems of traffic management (Deep Packet Inspection). Traffic did nonetheless continue to go abroad and it proved impossible to determine the particular routes taken.”

This is exactly what Anton Nosik said. He may also be right that Facebook is not too bothered about the future of its Russian segment. Although the online advertising market in Russia is growing (in 2014 it grew by over 20%), the largest share among foreign providers, Google’s, was 22%. Moreover, 53% of the advertising market is accounted for by search engines, and only 14% by social networks.

As is clear from the draft doctrine of information security in Russia, the government is watching with concern an “increasing informational impact on the Russian population, and particularly on the young, which aims to erode cultural and spiritual values, undermine moral standards, historical foundations and patriotic traditions.” They intend to counteract this malign influence. It would seem, however, that Moscow should not count on the support of global providers.



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