

Cops Idle, Vigilantes Seek to Stop Child Abuse

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July 20, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

It took just two days for the online profile of a fictitious 12-year-old girl to attract the attention of an older man.

When the man asked to meet the girl, whose profile was created by child rights activists and Moscow police, undercover police officers stood by to capture him on video camera.

But that was all they could do.

Russian legislation, unlike in the United States and other Western countries, does not allow the arrest of a suspected offender unless a child has actually been abused.

But at least the police showed up. Many police officers do not, ignoring a flood of reports from volunteers struggling to stem child abuse, activists say. Officers seem to prefer to crack down on suspected extremism, often involving anti-Kremlin political groups,

and unsanctioned street rallies.

Some disillusioned activists have turned vigilante, tracking down and even beating up suspected offenders who are, after all, unlikely to complain. But grassroots violence is no replacement for government action — which, so far, has been limited to a draft bill envisioning chemical castration for convicted sex offenders and reams of bureaucratic babble.

While President Dmitry Medvedev launched an overhaul of the corruption-ridden national police force in March after public confidence in law enforcement sank to new lows, activists fear that children will still receive scant attention.

The sting operation that ended in the videotaping occurred in Moscow this spring and was announced by children rights activist Denis Davydov at a roundtable organized by the ruling United Russia party this month.

"Maybe we should criminalize the cyber-contacts of pedophiles with children," Davydov said at the roundtable, which was devoted to child sex abuse.

None of the high-ranking attendees, who included federal legislators, a senior prosecutor and a police chief, voiced support for the proposal.

But U.S. law allows the arrest of people entrapped by police officers pretending to be underage, Davydov said in an interview. The problem, he said, is that Russian law bans entrapment of suspected child sex offenders.

The law also appears to be unable to curb abuse. Children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov [said](#) on his web site this month that reported instances of suspected abuse soared by 147 percent to 623 percent last year, depending on the type of abuse. More than 9,500 children were victimized last year, he said.

At the same time, about 7,500 people were convicted on child sex charges, including 2,500 repeat offenders, according to statistics on the Kremlin's web site.

But the figures tell little about the real story, say activists, who complain that police have ignored their attempts to expose cases of abuse.

Among the most prominent activists is Anna Levchenko, a Moscow-based member of the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi, who details her campaigning on her LiveJournal blog, Agatacrysty.

It's a depressing read. For example, she [wrote](#) in February that she had handed information to the Tula region police about a man who posted child pornography online and admitted to regularly abusing eight boys under 14 on an Internet forum.

The law requires police to reply to complaints within 30 days, but all Levchenko got was a private conversation with a local police officer two months later, she said by telephone. The officer told her that the region's Investigative Committee had refused to open a criminal case for lack of proof that the man had acted intentionally when he posted the pornography online.

But Tula region police said in an e-mailed statement Wednesday that they did take action on Levchenko's complaint and informed her of that by telephone. They declined further comment on the case, citing an ongoing investigation.

The statement also accused Levchenko of frightening the suspect into fleeing Russia by continuing to report about him on her blog despite being asked not to do so. The man left Russia in June, the statement said, without specifying why he was not detained before that.

Levchenko said the police should have "at least sent a piece of paper" to prove that they were working on the case. "How can I know that they are really looking into my complaint?" she said.

Levchenko, who works with some 200 activists, said her group has alerted law enforcement agencies about 80 suspected offenders over the last six months and received by e-mail about 2,500 complaints since March.

The group's efforts have led to four cases being opened.

A more aggressive group of activists operates under the name Head Hunters and posts personal information about suspected offenders on a blog, Goodwin-hunters. According to the blog, the Moscow-based group also alerts the friends and relatives of suspected offenders about their alleged activities, and its members sometimes pretend to be children and arrange meetings with adults online. When the adult shows up for a "date," several activists beat him up.

"We believe that even though we are hunting them, their numbers are only growing," said the group's leader, whose online name is Goodwin and who only agreed to a telephone interview on condition of anonymity for fear of his personal safety.

The group says it has been active since 2007 but only went public in May 2010 when it launched its blog on Mail.ru.

Despite its tactics, the group never faced criticism from the authorities. Goodwin said the group comprises about a dozen regular activists and hundreds of occasional or one-off supporters. He claims that it has tracked down 700 to 1,000 suspected offenders.

But the group's efforts have failed to impress law enforcement officials. In 2009, it sent information about several suspected offenders to the Prosecutor General's Office, but the agency forwarded it to the Interior Ministry's cybercrime department, which "flat-out refused to accept information about pedophiles," saying its job was limited to child pornography, Goodwin said.

When the group passed a list of 150,000 web pages containing child pornography, many of them on the Vkontakte social networking site, to the cybercrime department last year, police blocked access to most of these web pages and sent a note of thanks to the group but no pedophile was prosecuted, Goodwin said.

Nashi activist Levchenko, who has monitored the Internet for sexual content involving children for three years, said that "so much child pornography appears daily that we are constantly late in tracking it down."

Yana Lantratova, a senior member of Childhood Territory, an initiative of United Russia's youth wing, Young Guard, also said her group was getting the "runaround" from law enforcement agencies.

In March, Lantratova said, she complained to the Interior Ministry's cybercrime department, the Prosecutor General's Office and the Investigative Committee about a gynecologist who was suspected of posting online pictures of his underage patients. She received no reply.

Inquiries submitted Monday to the Interior Ministry's cybercrime department, the Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General's Office went unanswered.

Child pornography is "a business sheltered by certain people," said State Duma Deputy Grigory Ivliyev. Although he named no names, he spoke of "a system of corrupt law enforcement agencies" at the recent roundtable. He also said he and fellow legislators have asked police and Internet service providers to remove child pornography from the Internet but have been told that both groups lacked the power to act.

Ivliyev, a United Russia member and chairman of the Duma's Culture Committee, also co-authored a 2009 bill introducing definitions for erotica and pornography, still absent from Russian legislation. The bill was dropped because the government did not approve of its wording.

Some organizations have had more luck in their efforts. The Friendly Runet Foundation, for example, has managed to have some 10,000 web resources with pornographic content involving children — both whole web sites and individual pages — taken down in 2010 alone, its head, Yevgeny Bepalov, told the roundtable.

Another group, League for a Safe Internet, was created in February under the auspices of the Communications and Press Ministry and four telecom giants to combat illegal online content, including child pornography. It is headed by Davydov, who helped create the fake profile of a 12-year-old girl in the spring.

But Bepalov said the task is getting harder because child pornography is circulating mostly through social networking sites and file-sharing systems, not easily identifiable web sites.

Participants of the roundtable had no problem agreeing on the general outlines of what needs to be done: tightening Internet regulations, introducing hotlines to report suspected offenders, and spreading awareness about the issue among both children and parents.

But when activist Lantratova proposed to introduce "direct" communication between activists and law enforcement officers, the then-acting chief of the Interior Ministry's cybercrime department, Konstantin Machabeli, questioned the very notion of activists hunting suspected offenders.

He said exposing suspects online would only make them "hide their activities better," and fighting them face to face would be dangerous because their "reaction might be unpredictable and daft." He did not comment on complaints of his agency's nonfeasance.

Machabeli declined to comment to a Moscow Times reporter on the sidelines of the roundtable. Admittedly, he may have had other things on his mind — he was fired by the

Kremlin days later. The presidential order cited no reason for the dismissal, but former Yevroset owner Yevgeny Chichvarkin earlier accused Machabeli of ordering police raids that bankrupted several companies.

After taking office last year, children's ombudsman Astakhov [spoke](#) about a "pedophile lobby" in the Duma blocking legislation on the issue. But he voiced a more reserved stance in an interview with The Moscow Times on Tuesday, saying the police simply lack specialists and courts underestimate the danger that offenders pose to children.

Machabeli was "voicing his personal position, which for the most part is outdated," Astakhov added.

Astakhov said he would not give up efforts to amend legislation on child abuse and noted that he convinced Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev this month to start training police officers to handle child sex crimes.

Meanwhile, Medvedev on July 12 submitted a bill to the Duma that would toughen punishment for convicted child sex offenders. The bill bans suspended sentences, makes it harder for convicted offenders to receive parole and introduces life sentences for repeat offenders, the Kremlin web site [said](#).

The bill, which will not be reviewed before the start of the Duma's fall session in September, also introduces voluntary chemical castration for offenders ruled by a psychiatric examination to be legally sane and not suffering from a mental disorder. Offenders found sane but suffering from a mental disorder could be prescribed unspecified mandatory treatment.

Days before Medvedev submitted his bill, A Just Russia introduced its own version envisaging mandatory castration. The bill has slim chance of being approved because the Duma remains controlled by the Kremlin-friendly United Russia.

Neither bill mentions the fact that the police cannot arrest suspected offenders until they are caught in the act.

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