

Protesters Harness the Power of Facebook

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Russia inched closer to a Facebook [revolution](#) Thursday, after the number of users who signed up for a protest against the State Duma vote results crossed the 30,000 mark.

Web dissent spilling offline sparked suspicions that the authorities may be mulling a crackdown on Internet freedoms, a fear fueled by reports about law enforcement agencies' disjointed attempts to pressure the online community.

But analysts interviewed for this article said the cost of such a crackdown would be too high and that the Russian segment of the World Wide Web would likely remain a bastion of free speech and political discussion.

Analysts also said the sudden mass mobilization is the consequence of widespread anger over Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's decision to return to the presidency, reinforced by reports of widespread vote-rigging at last Sunday's elections.

The activism is fueled by the massive spread of the Internet, not just at home but everywhere thanks to modern smartphones.

"Especially those who supported [President Dmitry] Medvedev feel betrayed and are ready to protest," said Yevgeny Gontmakher, one of the country's leading sociologists and a board member of the Contemporary Development Institute, an influential think tank that had backed the president's reformist course.

The potency of this mix became evident Monday night, when a sanctioned rally of 5,000 by the Solidarity opposition [movement](#) unexpectedly snowballed into a hundreds-strong protest march to Lubyanka, the headquarters of the Federal Security Service.

While nobody would make accurate predictions on how many of the 30,000 signees will show up at the rally on Saturday, the fact that another 16,600 confirmed their attendance on the homegrown Facebook [competitor](#) Vkontakte and about 30,000 users of both networks combined opted to "maybe" attend made the likelihood seem high that both the capital and the country are facing the largest protest in a decade, if not in post-Soviet history.

Ilya Ponomaryov, a Duma deputy for A Just Russia who took part in the protests, said the scale of support on Facebook was proof that previously passive people were suddenly becoming politically active.

"Facebook has kicked us all in the bottom," he said on Ekho Moskvyy radio Thursday.

He added that many of Monday's participants were not members of any opposition movement.

The prospect of a snowballing mass opposition movement clearly irritates the Kremlin, triggering some knee-jerk reaction. While Putin on Thursday accused the West of conspiring "orange" revolutions like in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, law enforcement agencies raised the specter of Internet limitations.

Vkontakte spokesman Vladislav Tsyplukhin [confirmed](#) Thursday that the company received a request from the FSB to shut down groups that call for street fights or revolution.

"We replied that we monitor these groups but that we can block them only if individual users call for violence," Tsyplukhin wrote on his Vkontakte page.

Also on Thursday, a senior Interior Ministry official argued that widespread anonymity on social networks poses a threat to society and called for forcing users to go by real names.

"Register under your real name, give your real address before you start a conversation," Alexei Moshkov, the head of the ministry's cyber security department, told Rossiiskaya Gazeta in an interview.

However, Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev was quick to play the good cop, stressing Thursday that there were no plans for online "face control."

"This is stupidity, and no one is planning to introduce this," he was quoted as saying by Interfax.

Closing down the Internet is technically a no-brainer because authorities can withdraw a provider's license for minor violations, said Anton Nosik, the country's Internet pioneer and popular blogger.

"If they decide they do not want the Internet, it will be gone tomorrow," he said by telephone Thursday.

"[But] I do not expect them to act Mubarak-style," he said with reference to the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who ordered a complete shutdown of the Internet during massive protests in February — only to be ousted days later.

The reason that this is not happening is that any limitations are likely to alienate many more people.

"It would anger many more than 30,000 expected protesters — nobody would do such a stupid thing," he said.

The country has 50.8 million Internet users in September, according to a survey by market research company ComScore, making it Europe's biggest national online community. But that number still is well below half of the population of 142.9 million.

The web site that Russians spend most time on is Vkontakte, where users spent an average of 7.1 hours in September, the survey said.

Security analyst Andrei Soldatov, of the Agentura.ru think tank, said the country's relatively liberal approach also reflected a lack of strategy.

"There are no established procedures to close down the Internet partly or as a whole," he said in e-mailed comments.

He added that intelligence services and the Kremlin had long underestimated Facebook in particular, thinking that it is only for journalists or full-time activists.

"They did so little because they saw no threat — and for many years only mainstream media mattered, primarily TV," he said.

Indeed, the Kremlin approach seems less useful once the Internet gets crowded with opposition sentiment.

In the past, authorities targeted individual bloggers to scare off others, like the jailing of Tatar activist Irek Murtazin, who served 14 months in prison for a blog post deemed extremist until he was released last February.

But that policy is not likely to work in the present situation, nor is it possible to detain leading activists if a protest is sanctioned, said Yury Korgunuk of the Indem think tank.

In a strange twist, the Facebook frenzy coincides with a Russian-American row about Internet freedom inside the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE.

Moscow effectively blocked a U.S.-backed call for the adoption of a declaration of freedoms

in cyberspace at an OSCE meeting in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius earlier this week, the New York Times reported.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton touted the [declaration](#) in her address to last Tuesday's meeting.

"Fundamental freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and religion apply as much to a Twitter conversation and a gathering organized by NGOs on Facebook as they do to a demonstration in a public square," she said according to a State Department transcript.

She added that "today's activists hold the Helsinki Accords in one hand and a smartphone in the other."

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