

Saving Face(book)

By [Richard Lourie](#)

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Last week, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg came to Moscow bearing gifts. He presented Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev with a T-shirt with Medvedev's Facebook address on it. In all the photographs of them together, both men looked genuinely happy, two fantastically successful nerds.

In some ways, however, Medvedev remains even more inscrutable than President Vladimir Putin, whom journalist Masha Gessen called "the man without a face" in her book of the same title. Is Medvedev just a loyal aide, a Molotov-like stooge? Or have the heights of power stimulated his ambitions to challenge Putin at some point down the line? Probably not. Judging from his public reputation, Zuckerberg is more treacherous than Medvedev.

In Russia, however, Zuckerberg is the innocent abroad. His stated specific tasks are to recruit talent and to explore the possibilities of cracking the Russian market, the only sizable market where Facebook does not have much of a presence. But unless he was well-advised, he probably had little idea of the complex context he entered.

Sneering at Zuckerberg's approach to Russia as if it were "Africa," tech tycoon Anatoly Karachinsky quipped that Russian programmers were being offered "immediate evacuation to America." But there was an equal dose of venomous sarcasm in the rebuttal by Svetlana Mironyuk, editor-in-chief of RIA-Novosti, who said Karachinsky might "put forward a legislative initiative forbidding Russian programmers from working for Western companies. That would be in the spirit of the times."

Facebook's largest Russian investor is Alisher Usmanov, the country's richest man according to Forbes. In many ways, Usmanov is the typical flamboyant billionaire with a mansion in Surrey, a yacht and a British football team. But his route to riches was a bit unorthodox. Unlike Russia's previous richest man, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who ended his career in prison, Usmanov, born in Uzbekistan, served six years in an Uzbek jail en route to financial success. He was later cleared of all charges against him, though that did not in the least convince former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray, who depicts Usmanov as a dangerous criminal and a front man for Putin's efforts to muzzle free speech. For example, Usmanov, who bought Kommersant in 2006, fired the editor-in-chief of the company's Vlast magazine when, after the December State Duma elections, he published a photograph containing an expletive directed at Putin. **xxxx**

Usmanov has called the Internet "the central business of the 21st century," and he also believes that "Russia should be grateful to Putin" for the "massive scale of development" he initiated. As an investor, Usmanov prefers not to hold a majority share in any assets he owns. So what is he doing with Facebook? Playing both sides against the middle? It does seem difficult to be both pro-Facebook and pro-Putin when social media were used to mobilize thousands of Russians in anti-Putin protests. But since the opposition now seems to be waning, some may now view the Internet as they viewed Medvedev: as a useful tool but no real threat.

Putin's current crackdown has thus far spared the Internet. Perhaps his strategy is rather to sap the opposition by restrictive laws, the threat of arrest and, when necessary, actual arrests. A great believer in television, Putin seems to have little regard for the Internet. Unlike Medvedev, the man without a face doesn't even have a Facebook page.

But now that Russia has Ozon, its version of Amazon, Putin may agree with Usmanov that the Internet is the "central business of the 21st century" — that is, like everything else, it is best used to make money. That, too, would be in the spirit of the times.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin."

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