

**ANAND VARGHESE**

E-mail: avarghese1@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.7179

Mapping the Russian Blogosphere

Summary

- Analysis of more than 11,000 Russian-language blogs reveals an active political blogosphere comprising internationally linking bloggers; Russian media-focused bloggers; nationalists; members of the democratic opposition; bloggers focused on business, economics, and finance; and social and environmental activists.
- Russian bloggers tend to be less politically polarized than their counterparts in the American blogosphere, and they prefer to blog about political issues from a nonpartisan position.
- Future research should focus on the offline outcomes of online political blogging, the effect of blogging platforms on polarization, the responses of the Russian government, and mapping the effects of newer social networking platforms.

Introduction

Researchers have analyzed more than 11,000 blogs to provide a detailed, quantitative picture of how politics is discussed in the Russian blogosphere. In an October 2010 event titled Mapping the Russian Blogosphere and hosted by USIP's Center of Innovation for Science, Technology and Peacebuilding, Bruce Etling and Karina Alexanyan of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society and John Kelly of Morningside Analytics presented this research. Their report, "Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNet Politics and Mobilization," is the third in a series, following similar analyses of the Persian and Arabic-language blogospheres. A panel of Russia experts and bloggers responded to the research.

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Mapping Blogospheres

To create a three-dimensional visualization of the Russian blogosphere, researchers used social network analysis, automated content analysis, and human coding. They analyzed how Russian bloggers link to one another and to other online media in order to understand how social media moves information in societies, Kelly said. This link analysis helps characterize the Russian blogosphere based on the tendency of individuals to link more frequently to things that interest them and to people with whom they share attributes or social relations.¹

The researchers began with a sample of almost 5 million Russian blogs, which they then narrowed to the "discussion core": 11,792 of the most active blogs dealing with politics, culture and public affairs. Over 70 percent of these types of blogs are based in Moscow and St. Petersburg, though researchers speculated that bloggers may become more decentralized as Internet penetration expands to rural areas.

Clustering around Platforms, Not Ideology

In link analysis visualizations, blogs that link to each other are represented as clusters. The more often blogs link back and forth, the more pronounced these clusters become. Large clusters represent large groups of bloggers who are paying attention to and referencing each other's content. In the American political blogosphere, clusters are sharply delineated along ideological lines: liberal bloggers link to other liberals and conservative bloggers to conservatives. With few bloggers crossing the digital aisle, the American political blogosphere is divided into two large ideological clusters.

In contrast, Russian bloggers link both to those they agree with and those they criticize. Kelly noted that Russian nationalists link about 25 percent of the time to the democratic opposition, and 30 percent of the time the democratic opposition links to the nationalists. (Only 15 percent of U.S. bloggers link to opposing viewpoints.) Instead, the Russian blogosphere clusters more tightly around specific blogging platforms like LiveJournal, the most popular blogging site among Russian political bloggers. Both technical and social factors explain this trend. Unlike blogging sites like Wordpress and Blogger, which are popular in the United States, LiveJournal combines the traditional blogging capabilities of those platforms with the social networking capabilities of sites like Facebook. Users can blog in long-form prose while also friending fellow bloggers, sending private messages, and interacting socially online. These social functions promote greater linking, and therefore greater clustering, between bloggers using LiveJournal, regardless of their political persuasions.

Russian bloggers also prefer to blog about political issues without declaring ideological affiliations. However, conflict flashpoints like the South Ossetian war in 2008 appear to change this dynamic. Using content analysis to examine discourse around the war, researchers noted an increased "rally around the flag" effect, in which mainstream media were far less critical of the government. The blogosphere largely followed this trend, adopting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's frame around the incident: that the war was not just an interstate conflict, but a personal one between Putin and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. They found that a majority of Russian bloggers (55 percent) used partisan frames. Of those, only 16 percent were anti-Russian. The rest were anti-Georgian, at times using xenophobic language and referring to Georgians as "gryzuny" (rodents).

Types of Russian Political Bloggers

Content in the Russian blogosphere varies widely, but what does this mapping reveal about Russian political bloggers and how politics are discussed online? The report finds political discourse in the Russian blogosphere divided between six main types, though researchers acknowledged that their labels were open to interpretation and refinement:

- *Internationally linking public discourse*: Russian-language bloggers (including expatriates) who frequently link to English-language and foreign news sources. They tend to be slightly more liberal and oppositional.
- *Russian media-focused public discourse*: Russia-based bloggers who link to domestic news sources. This type contains the most prominent "A-list" Russian bloggers from across the political spectrum.
- *Nationalist*: Nationalist discourse ranging from violent anti-immigrant rhetoric to less extreme discussions of Soviet history and Russian culture.

- *Democratic opposition*: Bloggers from the democratic opposition movement, who use blogs as a form of political mobilization.
- *Business, economics, and finance*: Politically neutral discussion of local financial issues. When politics is discussed, it tends to be oppositional.
- *Social and environmental activism*: Bloggers covering diverse social and environmental issues, including architectural preservation, ecosystem preservation, and charitable causes. The profile of this type of blogger has grown recently in the wake of their activism during recent wildfires around Moscow.

News and Information Sources

Link analysis reveals not only how Russian bloggers link to each other but also how they link to other parts of the Internet for information and content. Researchers explored the linkage patterns between Russian political bloggers, Web 2.0 tools, and websites of traditional news organizations.

- *Russian bloggers and Web 2.0 tools*: As is the case of other blogospheres the researchers mapped, Web 2.0 tools like YouTube and Russian Wikipedia are the most linked-to sites by both political and nonpolitical bloggers. The democratic opposition is using YouTube to further its cause by linking to videos that criticize or satirize around contemporary issues like the abuse of power and corruption.
- *Russian bloggers and traditional media*: Russian political bloggers link to conventional media sites, with significant differences in trends across the political spectrum. Democratic opposition bloggers have a greater number of traditional media sources at their disposal than nationalist bloggers. According to Kelly, "It is often said that the Russian government has been effective at closing down oppositional media sources, [but] we see that, in fact, for things that feed content to the democratic opposition, they still have media sources that are go-to media sources. But for the right wing, the nationalists, the ethno-nationalists, they don't have media sources that feed them." Overall, Russian bloggers demonstrated a "slight preference for independent, foreign, and even oppositional news sources."²

Directions for Future Research

Three Russia experts placed the Berkman Center/Morningside Analytics report within the broader context of Russian politics and suggested future research. Respondents included Ivan Sigal (Global Voices), Angela Stent (Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies, Georgetown University), and prominent Russian blogger Alexey Navalny. Their discussion was moderated by Sheldon Himelfarb (USIP) and centered on the following topics:

- *The effects of blogging on the "real world"*: The Russian blogosphere "has been a very important tool for people who question government policy to express their views and mobilize," Stent said. Navalny confirmed that blogs have been "a shelter in the world of censorship." As a campaigner against corruption, he found the blog a useful way to draw attention to issues that mainstream media may ignore. However, he hesitates to create more formal, offline political structures around this online discourse, citing the dangers of increased government crackdown.
- *Platforms and polarization*: The tendency of Russian bloggers to cluster around platforms appears to suggest that a specific technology environment like LiveJournal can trump ideological polarization. Is this so? Or does platform-based clustering simply hide the degree of partisanship in the Russian blogosphere, which is only revealed upon closer inspection through content analysis during conflict flashpoints? The clustering phenom-

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief was written by Anand Varghese, senior program assistant to the Center of Innovation for Science, Technology and Peacebuilding. At a USIP public event held on October 19, 2010, researchers presented a mapping conducted by Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society and Morningside Analytics. The event was part of USIP's ongoing Blogs and Bullets initiative, which seeks to understand online discourse as a cause of conflict and a means for dialogue and has published two reports identifying the need for new analytical tools in this field. This Peace Brief summarizes the methodology and findings of the Berkman Center/Morningside Analytics researchers and the panel discussion that followed.

enon also raises questions about the direction of cause and effect: does the functionality of the blogging platform impede ideological clustering, or does the bloggers' lack of political polarization explain the clustering around LiveJournal? Sigal suggested that the apparent lack of polarization in online discourse could indicate its ineffectiveness in influencing Russian politics. Increased polarization in the blogosphere would thus be a sign of the growing prominence of online discourse in politics.

- *The reactions of the Russian government:* Even though Russia's political space is fairly closed, the government has made few moves to actively censor the Internet. Stent observed that Russian authorities are only beginning to understand the blogosphere and are hoping to shape it without destabilizing the current system. Sigal said authorities are looking to co-opt online discourse when it is beneficial to them, citing online citizen responses to the recent forest fires. Seeing the effectiveness of these efforts, Russian officials tried to cast them as part of a government emergency response program. Navalny suggested that authorities could shut down popular blogging platforms like LiveJournal, now owned by a Russian oligarch close to Putin, with negative long-term effects on the blogging community. Government clamp-downs could point to the effectiveness of the blogging community: "When there is effective political speech in Russia, then it gets shut down," Sigal said.
- *Mapping other social networking platforms:* Is the rise of "micro-blogging" having an effect on the long-form blog? The Berkman Center and Morningside Analytics are conducting research into this layer of discourse in the Russian online ecosystem. Pending more detailed analysis, Kelly ventured that Twitter removes some of the "noise" from the blogosphere, relegating less serious commentary to microblogging. Overall, he finds that Twitter and blogs complement each other. "Twitter is mainly used by the tech and the nonpolitical bloggers," he added. "However, when it is used by political bloggers, it's used mainly by the democratic opposition and not the nationalists." Audience members also pointed to the need for research on how social networking services like Facebook, where elite Russian bloggers from across the political spectrum interact, are setting the agenda for political discourse in the Russian blogosphere.

Endnotes

1. Bruce Etling, Karina Alexanyan, John Kelly, Robert Faris, John Palfrey, and Urs Gasser. "Public Discourse in the Russian Blogosphere: Mapping RuNEt Politics and Mobilization." The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, October 19, 2010. Available at: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2010/Public_Discourse_Russian_Blogosphere
2. Ibid.



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
202.457.1700

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For media inquiries, contact the office of Public Affairs and Communications, 202.429.4725