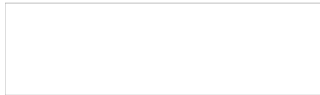


RUSSIA: LANDSCAPE AND TRENDS OF ONLINE TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVES

LE 13 OCTOBRE 2010 ALEXEY SIDORENKO

Does more technology = more transparency? Is Russia becoming a more transparent place? In the past two years the Russian blogosphere has empowered itself through technology, attracting a lot of attention from both the Russian and the international media.



This article originally appeared on **Global Voices**, and was written by Alexei Sidorenko.

For the past two years, we have witnessed the Russian blogosphere becoming more and more empowered by technology. Although the **bloggers' abilities are quite limited**, they have already attracted attention of **both the Russian and international media**.

Until recently, the technological level of online transparency initiatives remained quite low. The majority of IT professionals were not eager to join civil society activists and their initiatives. The evidence of this can be seen on technology blogs (e.g., **habrahabr.ru**), where numerous "technocrats" fall for the traditionally cynical explanation of civic activity (the bottom line of the discourse can be described as "conspiracy of the West").

In 2010, this seems to have changed. As technology is getting more and more accessible and easy to develop, more online initiatives appear and are planned to be launched in late 2010 and 2011.

Russian transparency projects can be divided into five main groups:

- > Official and semi-official transparency websites (e.g., **zakupki.gov.ru**, **rosspending.ru**),
- > Chaotic transparency communities (individual investigative bloggers and LJ communities),
- > Online representation of civil activist NGOs (e.g., **golos.org**, **publicverdict.ru**),
- > Next-generation social networks dedicated to transparency and civil rights activism (e.g., **democrator.ru**, **taktaktak.ru**), and a growing number of Ushahidi-based projects.

1. Official and semi-official transparency websites

Work on putting public procurement data online started in 2006 with the launch of **zakupki.gov.ru**, a catalog of major public expenses. Since then, a number of other official and semi-official websites have appeared (e.g., **statetenders.ru**, **igz.hse.ru**). All these websites have poor interface and a low level of data accessibility. These flaws and the lack of interactive functions lead to the emergence of LiveJournal communities dedicated to the analysis of the most bizarre deals.

In July 2010, **Rosspending.ru** was launched to solve the visualization issue. **Ivan Begtin**, the creator of the project and one of the Russian Gov 2.0 evangelists, took the data and presented it in a more user-friendly and understandable way. Despite the lack of social networking as well as **Semantic Web** functionality, the portal has been inspired by **data.gov.uk** and **data.gov** and is the best example of the Russian government data visualization so far.

2. Chaotic transparency communities and individual investigative bloggers

A number of non-institutionalized LiveJournal communities have taken up the watchdog functions that traditional Russian NGOs simply fear to conduct. GV has been **covering their activity recently**.

Individual investigative bloggers have probably had more impact than the LJ communities. **The New Times** called [RUS] eight most prominent investigative bloggers (Alexey Navalny,

Alexey Dymovski, Alexander Malyutin and others) employees of a “self-made Ministry of the Interior”:

[...] общество провело черту между собой и милицией. В интернете обнаружили диссиденты в погонах, подменяющие собой Департамент собственной безопасности МВД, рассказывающие властям и согражданам о коррупции в органах и деградации службы. А блогеры стали искать и находить виновных в преступлениях, взяв на себя роль и уголовного розыска, и департамента экономической безопасности, и милиции общественного порядка. Пока власти рассуждают о реформе МВД, народ начал свою.

[...] the society has drawn a line between itself and the police. Dissidents [in uniform] turned up on the Internet, filling in for the internal affairs division of the police, telling the authorities and the citizens about corruption and degradation of service. And bloggers started to look for and find those guilty of the crimes, assuming the role of the criminal investigations department, and the department of economic security, and public order units. While the government is discussing the police reform, the people have started their own [reform].

3. Online representation of offline NGOs

“Traditional NGOs” still struggle with new tools. This happens for several reasons: the lack of vision, resources, and external conditions. There is an exception, though – [golos.org](#), which has introduced two online transparency tools – **The Election Hotline** [RUS] and the **Fact Bank** [RUS]. (**GV wrote about Golos’ Election Hotline project here.**)

4. Next-Generation Transparency Tools

So far there are only two projects in this category – [democrator.ru](#) and [taktaktak.ru](#). Both were launched in 2010 and share social networking functionality (everyone can register, comment and take part in the site’s activity) and issue-based structure.

Democrator.ru helps citizens to discuss and prepare petitions and official appeals to the authorities, and monitors the issues by publishing official responses from the authorities. Taktaktak.ru connects citizens and lawyers, facilitating discussion of various issues and search for possible solutions. Both projects are of a very high technological level and represent unique transparency solutions.

5. Ushahidi platforms

The first Ushahidi in the Russian language was installed in Kyrgyzstan and was initially called “aikol.kg.” Later the project transformed into [save.kg](#). Altynbek Ismailov, a Bishkek-based IT specialist, wanted to start Ushahidi for reporting the “**Osh massacre**” events, but didn’t have enough time so he implemented it for the Kyrgyz Constitution Referendum that followed the tragic events. After the success of the referendum monitoring, Ismailov with his team is planning not only to monitor the upcoming election but also to use Ushahidi for reporting all kinds of problems.

A month ago, **Russian-Fires.ru (“Help Map”)** was launched. The project’s success brought to life numerous initiatives that are expected to start within the next few months. The topics of the planned projects include: observation of the upcoming Belarus election, **reporting on the state of the highways**, monitoring and fast response to civil rights violations (the so-called “Help Map 2.0”), monitoring in the city of Ufa, etc.

More technology = more transparency?

So, is Russia becoming a more transparent place then?

Blogger and journalist Igor Bogatyrev (aka LJ user Allan999), said in an interview to GV that in today’s Russia, the progress of technology in transparency is accompanied by the progress in perfecting various techniques of surpassing the transparency measures. Not to mention the “grey” money, which is not registered in any public account (according to some estimates, **the “grey area” accounts for half of the country’s GDP**). Grigoriy Melkonyants, deputy director of “Golos” Association, said that in the election field, corruption and fraud techniques have evolved so far that the transparency technology has a lot to catch up with.

More transparency initiatives that have appeared within the past year will neither eliminate corruption nor introduce the rule of law in the country. What they can do is to create an environment where information is efficiently verified, anti-corruption signals are distributed fast, and people from remote areas are united by transparency platforms and helping each other with no other mediator than a website.

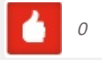
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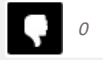
Thanks!

VOUS AIMEZ



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VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS



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