



The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries

Andrei Soldatov, Irina Borogan

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Half of Russia's email traffic passes through an ordinary-looking building in an otherwise residential district of South West Moscow. On the eighth floor, in here a room occupied by the FSB, the successor organization to the KGB, is a box the size of a VHS player, marked SORM. SORM once intercepted just phone calls. Now it monitors emails, internet usage, Skype, and all social networks. It is the world's most intrusive listening device, and it is the Russian Government's front line for the battle of the future of the internet.

Drawn from scores of interviews personally conducted with numerous prominent officials in the ministry of communications and web-savvy activists challenging the state, Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan's fearless investigative reporting in *The Red Web* is both harrowing and alarming. They explain the long and storied history of Russian advanced surveillance systems, from research laboratories in Soviet era labor camps to the legalization of government monitoring of all telephone and internet communications in 1995.

But for every hacker subcontracted by the FSB to interfere with Russia's antagonists abroad—such as those who in a massive Denial of Service attack overwhelmed the entire internet in neighboring Estonia—there is a radical or an opportunist who is using the web to chip away at the power of the state at home. Empowered by communication enabled by social media, a community of activists, editors, programmers and others are finding ways to challenge abusive state powers online. Alexei Navalny used his LiveJournal to expose political corruption in Russian, and gained a viral following after attacking Putin's "party of crooks and thieves." Grigory Melkonyants, deputy director of the nation's only independent election watchdog organization, developed a visual that tracked and mapped voter fraud across the country. And on December 10th, 2011 50,000 people crowded Bolotnaya Square to protest United Russia and its lawless practices. Twenty-four-year-old Ilya Klishin had used Facebook to spark the largest organized demonstration in Moscow since the dying days of the Soviet Union.

The internet in Russia is either the most efficient totalitarian tool or the very device by which totalitarianism will be overthrown. Perhaps both. The Red Web exposes how easily a free global exchange can be splintered coerced into becoming a tool of geopolitical warfare. Without much-needed activism or regulation, the Internet will no longer be a safe and egalitarian public forum—but instead a site Balkanized and policed to suit the interests and agendas of the world's most hostile governments.

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