

Blogging for the Sake of the President: The Online-Diaries of Russian Governors

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Abstract

Many western researchers have hailed blogs of politicians as new, interactive, and 'inherently democratic' tools of political communication. Yet, as this chapter illustrates, blogs can be of comparatively even greater appeal to politicians in semi-authoritarian political contexts: In Russia, 29 out of 83 regional leaders (roughly 35 %) were keeping a weblog in May 2010. This chapter accomplishes a comprehensive content analysis of all governors' blogs and, subsequently, fleshes out a typology of three characteristic types. In conclusion, it is argued that politicians' blogs are playing a far greater role in generating legitimacy for the Russian political system than they do in democracies, because the semi-authoritarian Russian system lacks other mechanisms which generate (input) legitimacy in developed democracies, such as highly competitive elections.

I came to like this phrase, it is beautiful. I'd like to repeat it:
Losing the initiative online will result in losing the initiative offline.¹

President Dmitry Medvedev
Blog Entry of 31 May 2010

Blogging is currently highly en vogue amongst the political leaders of Russia's regions. In May 2010, 29 of 83 regional leaders kept a so-called 'weblog' or 'blog'. So roughly 35% of all Russian governors² made use of this new tool of political communication which is a surprisingly high quota in a country that, firstly, according to many western observers (Freedom House 2010) has a semi-authoritarian rule, and where, secondly, internet penetration is still relatively low in comparison with most developed countries. According to data presented by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTSIOM), in April 2010 only 34% of all Russians accessed the internet at least once a week (VTSIOM 2010; see also Alexanyan 2009, pp. 1-4).

None the less, in terms of blogging activity, Russian governors by far outperformed politicians in most western democracies. In Germany, for instance, not a single leader of a 'Bundesland'³ kept an online diary at the time of research. In Canada, the UK and the USA, the proportion of blogging members of parliament seemed to fluctuate around the 10% mark (Pole 2010, p. 77-78; Williams 2009; Francoli & Ward 2008; Ott 2006). These findings are puzzling, given the fact that many western researchers have hailed blogs as new, interactive, inherently democratic tools of political communication. Blogs of politicians, in particular, have been most often discussed with regard to their 'democratic potential' (Coleman 2005b, p. 279-280) and their possibility to reconnect an increasingly passive electorate with its representatives (Coleman 2005a, p. 12-14). Yet, as the figures quoted above indicate, the new tool of political communication has turned out to be of comparatively greater appeal to politicians in the semi-authoritarian, Russian context. In May 2010, some Russian governors dedicated considerable amounts of their time weekly to keeping online diaries; for others, having a blog published by their press team seemed at least to be a mandatory part of their communication mix. Although most Russian governors started to blog as early as 2008, and the phenomenon of the blogging Russian politicians is extremely

¹[Mne ponravilas' fraza, ona krasivaya, ya ee dazhe povtoryu: poterya initsiativy v onlaine vlechet poteryu initsiativu v oflaine.]

² In the regional constitutions, the leaders of the 83 Russian Federal Subjects are referred to as 'governors', 'presidents' or 'heads' of their jurisdiction. In this chapter I refer to regional leaders uniformly as 'governors'.

³ The Federal Republic of Germany consists of 16 partly sovereign states, so-called 'Bundesländer' (singular: 'Bundesland').

important for the understanding of Russian political communication, there has been very little research produced on the topic.

This chapter hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of the exceptional phenomenon of the blogging Russian governors, its role within the vibrant Russian blogosphere and its significance and implications for the semi-authoritarian regime as a whole. Why, how, and with which effects for the political system did Russian governors blog in May 2010? To approach the three central questions of research, the chapter starts out with reviewing the existing research on Russian blogging politicians and outlines some key characteristics of the Russian blogosphere. The second section addresses the question of why so many Russian governors have started a blog; my claim here is that the vast majority of governors set up an online diary primarily to showcase their loyalty to President Dmitry Medvedev who – as it transpires from the epigraph to this chapter – regards political communication via the internet as central to his political profile. The third section of the chapter enquires to what degree governors emulated the President's style of blogging – and in which aspects they did not and why. The fourth section develops a typology of blogs of Russian governors, singling out three different types of blogs: 1) PR-blogs, 2) 'effective statesmen'-blogs, and 3) '*internetchik*'-blogs. I contend that these three types of blogs differ not only in the degree of interactivity and the style of discourse between politician and voters, but also in the extent to which they strengthen 1) the perceived responsiveness of regional governments and 2) the perceived legitimacy of the Russian political system as a whole. In terms of methodology, this chapter combines a series of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The latter includes a comprehensive analysis of all governors' blogs in existence in May 2010 and compares such features as the blogging platforms chosen by the governors, the number of posts per month, the maximum number of comments to a post and the type of posted materials (text, photo, or videos). The qualitative analysis is based on an interpretative approach (Yanow 2006) and draws on newspaper articles, government documents, and posts and comments published in the blogs.

Overview of Blogs of Russian Politicians

The word ‘blog’ is a contraction of ‘weblog’. Both terms are usually understood as a form of ‘online diary’ of a single person or a group. In a rather challenging definition, Drezner and Farrel conceive of a blog as

a web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources (2008a, p. 2).

Some of the blogs of Russian politicians do not feature hyperlinks or lack a comment function; others are edited by press teams. Therefore, for the purpose of a more holistic approach and inclusion of all varieties of Russian politicians’ blogs, I will resort to a more general definition provided by Coleman and Wright who think of a blog simply as ‘a regularly updated webpage (...) with information (textual, photographic or video) presented in reverse chronological order’ (2008, p. 1).

For some scholars of political communication, the ‘remarkable rise’ of weblogs has been ‘one of the most unanticipated developments of the twenty-first century’ (Sunstein 2008, p. 87). From an estimated fifty blogs in 1999 (Drezner & Farrell 2008a, p. 3), the number of blogs grew to over 150 million worldwide in November 2010 (Nielsen 2010). The phenomenon of blogging politicians is best researched in the American and British political environment (Kerbel & Bloom 2005; Bichard 2006; Trammel 2006; Wright 2009; Coleman 2005b; Coleman & Moss 2008; Coleman & Wright 2008; Wright 2009). However, most studies centre on campaign blogs⁴ rather than on permanent blogs (Howard 2006; Trammel 2006; Stanyer 2006) or on the role of the internet in elections campaigns in a more general perspective (Bimber & Davis 2003; Ward & Davis 2008; Williams & Tedesco 2006; Kluver 2007).

The only study that has investigated the blogs of Russian politicians to date is an analysis by Goroshko and Zhigalina (2009) which is based on data gathered in autumn 2008 during the South Ossetia War. At that time, blogging politicians were a rather marginal phenomenon in Russia, for example, the blog of the President did not yet exist. In this context, the article compares 16 online diaries, i.e. nearly all politicians’ blogs active at that time (Goroshko & Zhigalina 2009, p. 93),

⁴ Campaign blogs are blogs that are set up by politicians exclusively for an election campaign and not continued thereafter.

using such criteria as Google-page rank, frequency of blog entries, number of comments, number of friends and user-friendliness. Goroshko and Zhigalina find four politicians to be particularly active in blogging in August 2008: Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia [Liberal'no-demokraticeskaya partiya Rossii, LDPR], the leaders of the democratic opposition, Nikita Belykh and Boris Nemtsov, and the speaker of the Federation Council Sergei Mironov – all of whom updated their blog daily. In terms of interactivity, Zhirinovsky's blog was found to lead the field, with an average of 230 comments per blog entry (Goroshko & Zhigalina 2009, p. 94). In their conclusion, Goroshko and Zhigalina suggest that Russian politicians' blogs could 'become a rather powerful PR-tool, directed primarily towards the target group of opinion leaders', with one of their key features being that they 'blur the borderline between the public and the private, thus helping to create the illusion of an intimate and open discussion with the audience' (2009, p. 97).

In the past two years permanent blogs of politicians have become a widespread and heavily discussed phenomenon in Russian politics; they have received broad coverage in Russian mass media (cf. amongst others: Bilevskaia 2010; Sazonov & Stolbun 2010; Vrazhina 2010). Yet, little academic research has been produced on the topic so far. This chapter seeks to contribute to the study of these blogs by scrutinising the role of the permanent blogs of a specific group of Russian politicians, i.e. the governors. While the analysis of this study deals exclusively with the Russian case, the implications of the chapter also aim to enrich the broader, currently ongoing academic debate on the question whether internet-mediated communication in a non-democratic state should be seen rather as a 'technology of liberation' or as one of 'control' (Dreibert & Rohozinski 2010; Diamond 2010).

Blogging in Russia started on the platform *LiveJournal* in the early 2000s (Alexanyan 2009, pp. 4-5; Gorny 2006a, pp. 228-275; Gorny 2006b). In spring 2009, a report of the leading Russian search engine *Yandex* counted 7.4 million Russian language blogs (Yandex 2009, p. 2). Of these blogs, only 12% or 890,000 were 'active', i.e. they had been updated at least once in the last three months. While blogs are often regarded as the least trusted and least reliable political media in western countries (Drezner & Farrell 2008a, 5), the blogosphere plays a rather different role for many Russian citizens. With the central television stations acting as the mouthpiece of the government and with independent print and online media being, at least supposedly, under continuous pressure by vested interests, the blogosphere emerges as a promising and prominent

space for politically highly motivated individuals to search for unmediated, firsthand, credible information.

In spring 2009, more than 76% of all active Russian language blogs were hosted on one of the four leading blogging platforms <http://www.livejournal.com>, <http://ya.ru>, <http://mail.ru> and <http://www.liveinternet.ru> (Yandex 2009, p. 3). A specific characteristic of the Russian blogosphere is that all of these four leading blogging platforms are ‘social network system hybrids’ (SNS-hybrids; Etling et. al 2010, p. 12). SNS-hybrids combine features typical of open blogging platforms like *Blogspot* or *Wordpress* with features of closed social network services like *Facebook* or *Myspace*. With regard to politicians' blogs, the most momentous difference is that SNS-hybrids allow bloggers to maintain a network of ‘friends’ or ‘followers’, i.e. permanent readers. Consequently, Russian blogs are often received through a ‘friends’ page’ similar to the ‘News Feed’ section of a Facebook account. By contrast, blogs in the USA and in most western countries are usually read by directly accessing the blogs’ URL or subscribing to a RSS feed. As a result, the ‘macro structure of the Russian blogosphere features a network divided into largely separate camps, each based upon a large SNS hybrid, with strong internal and weak external links’ (Etling et al. 2010, p. 13).

Of the four major blogging platforms, *LiveJournal* is the leading platform for political, intellectual and public affairs-related discourse (Etling et al. 2010, p. 13). As an analysis of outgoing links showed (Etling et al. 2010, p. 13), *LiveJournal* bloggers were far more active than those on other platforms in linking to news and other online content. Moreover, *LiveJournal* hosted the highest number of active blogs. In 2009, for example, roughly 100,000 *LiveJournal* blogs were updated at least once a week; 250,000 blogs had been updated at least once in the three months before the data collection (Yandex 2009, 3). In July 2010, 49 Russian *LiveJournal* bloggers had more than 10,000 friends, with two bloggers being followed by more than 50,000 friends (Yandex 2010a). The most popular *LiveJournal* blogger was Artemii Lebedev (nickname ‘tema’), a Moscow-based designer who posted mostly cynical reflections on social realities in Russia in a rather vulgar language. The second *LiveJournal* blogger with more than 50,000 friends was Rustem Agadamov (nickname ‘*drugoi*’), at that time already an employee of the Russian internet company SUP which owns *LiveJournal*. In his blog, Agadamov was mostly reposting topical photos of the leading news agencies *Reuters* and *AFP*, adding short personal comments. The majority of the remaining TOP-50 *LiveJournal*-bloggers were artists, writers,

poets, journalists, intellectuals, comedians, or photographers. There was no politician listed in this TOP-50 ranking.

Although in November 2010, roughly 15,000 *LiveJournal* users ‘watched’ the videoblog of the President Medvedev, his online diary did not appear in the TOP-50 ranking because it was registered on *LiveJournal* not as an individual blog but as a ‘moderated community’ (Medvedev 2010a). In addition, Medvedev’s blog was also being published and read on the website *Kremlin.ru*. The President’s Twitter account, opened only in June 2010, had already gathered 115,000 followers. By contrast, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had neither set up a Twitter account nor a blog by November 2010.

At that time, by far the most successful blog of a politician in number of followers was that of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the radical-populist leader of LDPR. According to the *Yandex* ranking of readers, Zhirinovskiy’s blog was followed by 540,000 users in November 2010 (Yandex 2010a). However, Zhirinovskiy did not blog within the network of the SNS-hybrid *LiveJournal* but on mail.ru (see also Goroshko & Zhigalina 2009, p. 92-96). Compared with Zhirinovskiy’s online-diary, the blogs of other political figures were rather unpopular with Russian internet users. For instance, in November 2010 the *LiveJournal* blogs of the leaders of the democratic movement ‘Solidarnost’, Boris Nemtsov and Il’ia Iashin, were followed by only 6,800 and 5,700 friends, respectively. The blog of Sergei Mironov, the chair of the party Just Russia [*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*], had fewer than 2,700 friends while Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party [*Kommunisticheskaya partiya Rossiskoi Federatsii*, KPRF] did not keep a blog.

How did Russian governors blend into this picture? Figure 1 presents a list of all blogging governors in May 2010, providing the information on their regions, the URL of their blogs and the dates when they started to blog. It is sorted by the date of the first entry in each blog of a governor, in ascending order. I compiled this list in three stages on the basis of three sources. First of all, I searched for newspaper articles on the phenomenon of blogging politicians (amongst others Bilevskaia 2010; Sazonov & Stolbun 2010; Vrazhina 2010), compiling a preliminary list of the blogs of governors mentioned in these articles. During the second phase, I supplemented this list with governors’ blogs quoted on the Russian internet portal goslyudi.ru. The portal is operated by the online platform polit.ru and aims at making politicians’ blogs from all over the country accessible. Finally, I carried out searches on yandex.ru and google.ru using the search words ‘a governor’s blog’ [*blog gubernatora*] and ‘a president’s blog’ [*blog*

prezidenta] and screened the first 150 hits for blogs of governors that were not on my original data sheet. In the course of these three steps, not only did I find blogs of governors that contained only two or three entries, but also came across announcements of governors to launch blogs that did not yet exist. Thus I have good reason to believe that the list of blogging governors in figure 1 is comprehensive. As the data indicates, by May 2010, 32 of 83 (or 38%) of regional leaders had opened a blog. Three of these blogs (those of the Governors Dudka, Tkachev and Komarova) must be considered aborted by the time of research, because these blogs had not been updated for more than three months. 29 governors were actively blogging, which equalled a proportion of 35% of Russia's regional leaders.

Figure 1 near here: List of Blogging Governors as of May 2010

Source: Florian Toepfl

How big was the audience that the governors reached out to with their blogs? Of those governors who blogged on a SNS-hybrid and thus could accumulate followers, the field was led by Governor Chirkunov with 4,420 friends. He was followed by the Governors Belykh (4,306 friends), Zhilkin (1,719), Yurevich (666), Brovko (333) and Dudka (99). Another measure for the audience of a blog is *Yandex* index on blog 'authority' [*avtoritetnost'*], a figure calculated on the basis of the number of links to a blog, the number of comments, the number of readers, and other data (Yandex 2010b). In *Yandex* ranking of all Russian language blogs according to their 'authority', in December 2010, governor Chirkunov ranked highest at position 304, followed by Belykh at 366 (Yandex 2010c). Zhirinovsky's blog was listed at position 455, probably because of a lack of interlinkage with other popular bloggers.

Therefore, the data indicates that the blogs of Russian governors are a phenomenon of rather recent origin that has gained rapidly in importance only since the end of the year 2008. By the time of research in November 2010, however, the leading governors' blogs had managed to enter the discussion core of the vibrant Russian blogosphere, being amongst the top 500 most influential members of this networked public sphere according to *Yandex* ranking of 'blog authority' (Yandex 2010c). The next section aims to explore why so many governors had decided to resort to this new tool of political communication.

Demonstrating Allegiance: Why Did So Many Russian Governors Set up Blogs?

Why did 38% of Russia's regional leaders make an effort to set up an online diary? This section claims that most governors started to blog primarily to demonstrate their allegiance and loyalty to the President who is known for his internet enthusiasm. So I aim to provide evidence for this hypothesis in three stages. First, I will discuss how central the internet is to the political profile of Medvedev and how he repeatedly called upon officials to follow his line. Secondly, I will demonstrate that governors had strong incentives to respond to the presidential demands. Thirdly, I will provide empirical evidence documenting that 93% of the blogging governors started to do so only after the President had started his blog. And finally, I will address possible counter-arguments that might undermine my central thesis.

Over the past two years, Medvedev has heavily propagated the notion of 'modernisation of Russia' making it central to his political profile and turning the notion into a real buzzword (Kamyshev 2010). As many observers have pointed out, Medvedev regards the internet not only as a means but also a symbol for his endeavours to 'modernise' the country and make it less dependent on natural resources. In line with that thinking, Medvedev opened a personal videoblog on *LiveJournal* as early as in October 2008 and a Twitter account in June 2010. By contrast, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin did not make an effort to keep a blog or a Twitter account. The buzzword central to Putin's political profile seemed to be 'stability', a concept that did not necessitate a continuous emphasis on the pivotal importance of new communication technologies to the future of the country. These differences in the ideologies of the two leading Russian political figures are also visible in their communication strategies. Whereas Medvedev tries 'to give his image as a tech-savvy modernizer a broader appeal' (Bratersky 2010) by organizing semi-annual online conferences with citizens, Putin continues to stick to the more traditional format of the call-in TV shows.

In line with his political profile as a 'moderniser', Medvedev has called repeatedly upon his officials to familiarise themselves with the internet and new tools of political communication. Speaking directly to governors at a State Council⁵ meeting dedicated to the so-called programme of 'Electronic Government' in December 2009, Medvedev announced that in the future 'internet-

⁵ The State Council [*Gosudarstvennyi Sovet*] is an advisory body to the President of the Russian Federation, established in the year 2000. The council is made up mostly of leaders of Russia's Federal subjects and meets four times a year.

activity' would be one of the evaluation criteria for the performance of regional leaders (Bilevskaia 2010). During a meeting in March 2010, he stated publicly that he considered a 'basic computer literacy' [*elemntarnaya komp'yuternaya gramotnost'*] to be very important for political leaders (vesti.ru 2010). He explicitly called upon governors to follow his example and to 'dig on the internet' [*kovyryat internet*] (vesti.ru 2010). And he contended:

Only those who are able to do so are contemporary managers and those who cannot – I am sorry for having to say this – are just not fully prepared. If I watch [the internet], all others should watch [it] as well. I hope this will be noted not only by the government head offices but by the leaders of the regions. (vesti.ru 2010)

In an article published in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on 21 January 2010, an anonymous source from within the Kremlin details the rationale behind these public calls of the President (Bilevskaya 2010). According to this source, the Kremlin was determined to 'inoculate the political elites of the country with internet-culture' [*privit' politicheskoi elite strany internet-kul'turu*] because the 'growth of internet users in Russia had brought about new challenges for Russian politicians' (Bilevskaya 2010). In particular, the Kremlin was worried about the decreasing trust in the broadcast media (Bilevskaya 2010). As the source stated, the assumption was that in the future the presence of politicians in blogs and social networks would have 'real impact' on the outcome of elections. Consequently, the governors were expected to 'permeate the blogosphere and become ringleaders of political discussions' (Bilevskaya 2010).⁶

How strong were the incentives for governors to respond to these expectations of the Kremlin by setting up a blog given that Russia's regional leaders were not elected directly by citizens but appointed (and dismissed) by the President? Only during the second and politically less important step were they confirmed by their regional assemblies (Zhuravskaya 2010, p. 10-12; Turovskii 2010; Chirkova 2010a, 2010b). Thus, first and foremost, the political fate of a governor depended on how the President evaluated his or her performance. According to the analysis by Turovskii (2010, p. 68-72), the federal centre based its decisions to appoint or dismiss a governor mainly on two criteria: 1) the governor's control of the regional situation, i.e. above all his or her capacity to generate votes for the 'party of power', United Russia [*Edinaya Rossiya*], and to prevent intra-

⁶ [*Pered gubernatorami postavlena zadacha vnedrit'sya v blogi i stat' zavodilami virtual'nykh diskussii.*]

elite conflicts; and 2) his or her 'controllability', i.e. the governor's willingness to act as the junior partner of the central power and to follow the rules of the administrative hierarchy.

My central claim here is that, for Russian governors, the need to adhere to the central power rather than the control of the situation in the region is the dominant incentive to set up a blog. In other words, Russia's governors established their blogs primarily to showcase their allegiance to the President and their willingness to act as the 'junior partners of the center' (Turovskii 2010, p. 69), whereas the intention of generating votes seemed of secondary importance. The reason for such an assumption is that the audience of most governors' blogs could be expected to be rather limited, with the local TV channels remaining a much more important channel to convey political messages to the mass audience. Secondly, the political fate of the governors was only indirectly dependent on citizens' vote, but directly on a decision of the President which, in turn, was based on a wider array of evaluation criteria and political agenda (Turovskii 2010, p. 68-72). Thirdly, the proportion of bloggers amongst other types of Russian politicians that are not directly dependent on the president is still comparably low. For instance, only 5.5% (25 out of 450) members of the Lower Chamber of the Russian parliament, the State *Duma*, were keeping a blog in November 2010 (goslyudi.ru 2010). Finally, the proportion of bloggers amongst politicians in most western, competitive democracies is far smaller, even though internet penetration in these countries is higher and incentives to generate electoral support can be assumed to be even stronger in these more competitive political environments. In the United Kingdom, for instance, according to the most recent study on the topic by Williams (2009, see also Francoli and Ward 2008, p. 27), no more than 11% of all MPs kept a blog in 2008. In Germany, in November 2010, not a single regional leader of a Bundesland made an effort to keep an online diary. Thus, it seems very unlikely that gaining the support of voters could have been the predominant incentive that motivated an astonishingly large proportion of 38% of Russian governors to set up a blog.

Figure 2 near here Number of Russian Governors Keeping a Blog

Source: Florian Toepfl

Figure 2 shows how the number of blogging governors started to grow rapidly after October 2008, the month when the new President, who had taken office only half a year before, started an online diary. Only two governors had blogs before Medvedev started his own: Nikita Belykh of Kirovskaya Oblast' and Oleg Chirkunov of Permskii Krai. Nikita Belykh, the most experienced blogger, was the leader of the opposition party Union of Right Forces [*Soyuz pravykh sil*] when

he started blogging in January 2006. It was only in December 2008 that Belykh was nominated as a governor by Medvedev – to the surprise of both, pro-Kremlin and opposition politicians. Chirkunov was already governor of Permskii Krai when he started experimenting with his blog in June 2008.

Even though there has been no evidence for a governor having being dismissed for a lack of ‘internet activity’ or ‘computer literacy’ the President’s statements must have made a strong impression on Russia’s regional leaders. Political consultant Marat Gel’man links the sudden enthusiasm for blogging amongst Russian governors to a long-standing tradition of Russian officials emulating the leisure activities of their political leader:

When Yeltsin played tennis, everyone played tennis. Putin took up judo, and everyone took up judo. Medvedev started a blog and officials started developing the Russian internet space (Fedina 2010).

In other words, Russian officials were mimicking Medvedev’s blogging activities to express their loyalty to and their respect for their political leader.

Figure 3 near here: The Distribution of Blogging Governors across Federal Districts (May 2010)

Source: Florian Toepfl and GfK (2010)

Figure 3 provides further empirical evidence, comparing the geographical distribution of blogging governors across Russia’s eight Federal Districts as of May 2010. Whereas 55% (6 of 11) governors kept a blog in the North Western Federal District, the proportion of blogging governors was the smallest in the Siberian and the Far Eastern Districts (21%). The data indicate a strong correlation between the level of internet penetration and the number of blogging governors. In other words, the higher internet penetration, the higher is the proportion of governors who keep online-diaries. However, the correlation between internet penetration and the proportion of blogging governors does not contradict the central point made in this section. Rather I conclude that the soft pressure on governors to establish a blog is higher in those regions where internet penetration is high.

While attempting to emulate Medvedev’s political agenda, only very few of Russian governors referred to the President directly in explaining why they set up their online diaries. For

example, Aleksandr Tkachev of the Krasnodarskaya Oblast' writes in blog: 'I had a long talk with Dmitrii Anatol'evich [Medvedev] and he recommended that I should pay attention to the internet. I have good relations with our President and I am sure that he is leading the country to a new level in many spheres of life' (Tkachev 2009). A more typical statement – without reference to Medvedev – comes from Anatolii Brovko, governor of the Volgogradskaya Oblast', who writes in his permanent welcome post:

I hope that my blog will be an effective communication platform, where I will learn about your proposals to improve the quality of governing, social and economic projects and ideas, and constructive criticism (Brovko 2010).

Similarly, Governor Slyunyaev (2009) promises his readers that 'on my blog in *LiveJournal*, we can discuss, as we call it "without ties"'. Governor Yurevich (2009) appeals to his audience: 'Friends, not always does the government know about the real problems. You can help!' And Governor Kanokov (2009) raves:

Here and today, thanks to the internet I have the opportunity to discuss with you interactively events in the republic and government decisions and to put forward new proposals and express opinions and so help Karbadino-Balkariya quickly move towards our common aims' (Kanokov 2009).

In their blogs most politicians emphasised motivations aimed at improving communication with the electorate, learning more about the problems of citizens, getting closer in touch with citizens and discussing issues frankly and informally and passing on unmediated, unfiltered information. Thus, while the aim to demonstrate loyalty to the President appears to have been a central incentive for many Russian governors to set up a blog, they stressed different reasons in front of their readers.

Emulating the President: How did Russian Governors Blog?

If many governors set up their blog to demonstrate their allegiance to the President, to what degree did they emulate the President's style of blogging – and in which aspects did they deviate?

To answer these questions, I will first outline the specific style of Medvedev's blog. Then, I will evaluate to what extent governors followed the President's blogging style.

Figure 4 near here Screenshot of the Blog of the President (16 November 2010)

Source: www.kremlin.ru (accessed 16 December 2010)

Since its launch in October 2008, Medvedev's blog launched and adhered consistently to a specific style of a 'videoblog' (see Figure 4).⁷ In November 2010, the blog consisted of 199 entries. Without exception, all posts were videos, each lasting between two and five minutes. Most entries were recordings of Medvedev's meetings with government officials or speeches held in front of invited audiences, with only roughly every tenth video being arranged specifically for the blog. The only texts provided in the posts are the transcripts of the videos. In 2010, between two and nine entries were published per month. In terms of content, the messages usually dealt with political issues of the day, for instance corruption, the reform of the police forces and forest fires. In nearly all the posts, Medvedev appeared wearing a suit and a tie. Only very rarely did the President speak about non-political issues, with one of the few exceptions being a post on his hobby - photography (Medvedev 2010b). His family life has never been shown explicitly in the blog. The posts are simultaneously published on two platforms: on the government-administered platform kremlin.ru, a site that was previously used by Putin when he was president, and on the SNS-hybrid *LiveJournal*. On both platforms, readers were allowed to comment. However, all comments were checked by moderators before being published. In the typology delineated in the next section, this blog would fall into the category of a 'PR-Blog'. Before discussing the impact of this type of blogs on politics, I would like to address the question to what extent the governors were emulating the President's blog.

With regard to the style, only 12 of 32 governors closely followed the role model of the President and kept their blog in the style of an exclusive 'videoblog'. Just like Medvedev's blog, these online diaries unexceptionally consisted of video-clips of approximately two to five minutes in length. The only texts provided were the transcripts of the clips. Most videos were recordings of meetings with other officials, public speeches or footage taken from local TV channels. Only very few clips were recorded exclusively for the blog; and even these videos addressed viewers in a rather formal language. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the striking similarities

⁷ Also, see Jagodon's article in this issue, pp. ??

between the layout of the blog of the President and that of a typical videoblog of a governor, in this case of Governor Denin of Bryanskaya Oblast’.

In terms of the choice of the blogging platform, the governors’ blogs could be divided into two groups, 1) 14 politicians opened their blog on the SNS-hybrid *LiveJournal*, the leading platform for public affairs-related discourse in the Russian blogosphere, and 2) the remaining 18 governors chose to set up their blog on a privately administered website: i.e. either the websites of their regional administrations, their personal websites, or the websites of regional information portals. In most cases, these blogs were accessible through the main menu of these websites, by clicking on a button captioned as ‘blog’ or ‘videoblog’. The webpages employed customised software solutions which allowed publishing posts or videos in a reverse chronological order and, in some cases, also featured a comment function. To conclude, with regard to the choice of a platform, not a single governor fully copied the approach of the President by publishing his blog simultaneously on two platforms, i.e. on a private website *and* on *LiveJournal*. Yet none of the governors completely deviated from the President’s role model by opening a blog on an alternative blogging platform, be it a western platform like *WordPress* or one of the other three big Russian SNS-hybrids (ya.ru, mail.ru or liveinternet.ru). Instead, governors decided to publish their blogs either only on *LiveJournal*, or only on a privately administered website.

The decision of many governors to open their blog on a privately hosted website and not on *LiveJournal* seems to have been, first of all, one in favour of control, i.e. for the possibility to disallow comments. Disallowing and moderating comments is technically possible on *LiveJournal* but is not common in the culture of the network. Blocking comments completely would have been regarded as a grave faux pas by the vast majority of the *LiveJournal* community, discrediting and ridiculing such a blog right from the start. In total, 8 of 32 governors’ blogs did not allow the public to comment. All of these 8 blogs were hosted on private websites and not on *LiveJournal*. Secondly, the decision to establish a blog on a private website seems to have been one in favour of the form of a ‘videoblog’ – which is not at all common amongst bloggers on *LiveJournal*. Without a single exception, all 12 of the 32 governors who established a ‘videoblog’, modelled closely after the blog of the President, did not choose to do so on *LiveJournal* but on a private platform. Thus, whereas the President obviously had the authority to enter the *LiveJournal*-community with a ‘videoblog’ that largely deviated from the blogging culture of the platform, no governor dared to do the same.

Figure 5 near here. Screenshot of a PR-Blog: The Blog of Governor Denin of Bryanskaya Oblast'

Source: <http://www.bryanskobl.ru/news/videoblog/> (accessed 16 November 2010)

Conversely, those governors who choose to blog on *LiveJournal* aligned their blogging style with the blogging culture of the platform. On average, *LiveJournal* bloggers amongst the governors posted more frequently than non-*LiveJournal* bloggers. The seven bloggers who posted more than 10 entries in May 2010 hosted their blog on *LiveJournal* (see Figure 6). Governor Chirkunov is leading the field with 33 posts. He is followed by the governors Belykh (23), Brovko (21), Morozov (17), Zhilkin (15), Zelenin (13), Shantsev (11). By the same token, while many blogs on private platforms were obviously administered by press teams, all *LiveJournal* bloggers seemed to keep their blog personally (judging from how they blended in recent personal experiences and expressed rather personal thoughts). As a result, *LiveJournal*-bloggers seemed to be more successful in actually getting in touch with citizens and generating feed-back, i.e. their posts attracted more comments than those non-*LiveJournal* bloggers (see Figure 7). The six governors that attracted the largest numbers of comments to a post in May 2010 were, without exception, blogging on *LiveJournal*. In the next section, the characteristics of the 29 governor blogs in existence in May 2010 and their impact on politics shall be discussed in greater detail.

Figure 6: Blogging Activity. Number of Entries in May 2010

Source: Florian Toepfl

Figure 7: Audience Response: Maximum amount of Comments to a Post in May 2010

Source: Florian Toepfl

Political Impact: A Typology of Governors' Blogs

What effects can politicians' blogs have on politics? For many researchers of western democracies, the primary hope associated with politicians' blogs is that these blogs would contribute to reconnect political elites with the demos. For example, Coleman attests, 'the problem faced by contemporary democracy is horribly simple <...> Governments have come to believe that the public don't know how to speak; the public has come to believe that governments

don't know how to listen' (2005a, p.1). In this dilemma, blogs are seen as a new tool of political communication to alleviate mutual misconception. Brucy and Gregson (2001, p. 375) introduce the concept of 'media participation' as a new 'form of participation that provides symbolic empowerment' to resolve the 'dilemma of the civic decline'. With this conception, suddenly, despite decreasing turnouts at votes in western democracies,

there is a form of participation in which a growing segment of the public regularly engages. [...] Even if only symbolically empowering for the individual, the experience of media participation is pivotal to maintaining the perception of system responsiveness and thereby serves as an important legitimizing mechanism for mass democracy. (Brucy & Gregson 2001, p. 375).

Can the blogs of Russian governors fulfil similar functions? Can they help increase the 'perception of system responsiveness' and thus serve as an 'important legitimizing mechanism' for Russia's semi-democratic regime? To increase the perceived legitimacy of the Russian political system, the blogs of governors would have to create one or more of the following impressions amongst their audience:

- 1) that the politician is seriously listening to citizens (Coleman & Moss 2008, p. 16-18); i.e. the politician should author his/her blog in person, there should be a possibility to comment, and the politician should at least pick up and refer to some of the comments in his/her posts;
- 2) that the issues addressed in the comments are tackled by the politician in real life;
- 3) that the politician is 'just like you' (Coleman & Moss 2008, p. 10-14); i.e. s/he is able to 'represent' and decide for his/her audience because s/he is perceived as 'one of them'; this aim can be pursued by politicians talking about non-political, private issues and creating emotional closeness.

By strengthening one or more of these three impressions amongst their audience, the blogs of Russian politicians increase the 'perceived perception of responsiveness' of the regional authorities and the 'perceived legitimacy' of the Russian political system as a whole. Against this backdrop, I suggest distinguishing the following three types of blogs:

- 1) 'PR-blogs' that do not fulfil any of the three criteria and are kept by a press team.

2) 'Efficient statesmen' blogs that fulfil criteria 1 and 2.

3) '*Internetchik*-blogs' that fulfil criteria 1, 2 and 3

PR-blogs

PR-blogs are obviously not kept by the governors themselves but by their press teams. On many blogs, only press releases or recordings of public speeches of the governor are published. The blogs draw very few comments, because the audience clearly feels that the governor is not seriously listening and only very rarely takes a look at the blog. On some of these blogs comments are not even allowed. On others they are to be filled in into a special form and thus do not become visible to the public. Many of these blogs are kept as explicit videoblogs, being close imitations of the President's blog. Others publish textual posts but follow the same communicative pattern. However, while Medvedev's blog, because of the enormous power he wields, frequently draws several hundreds of comments, the PR-blogs of governors remain largely uncommented on. Examples are the blogs of the following 14 governors: Artamanov, Boos, Denin, Gaevskii, Bogomolov, Savchenko, Morozov, Tolokonskii, Dudov, Volkov, Katanandov, Kress, Pozgalev and Kanokov.

All PR-blogs are kept on privately-administered platforms, with the exception of the blog of Governor Morozov of Ul'yankovskaya Oblast' which is kept in the form of a moderated 'community' on *LiveJournal*. All but one of the 12 videoblogs fall into this category. The exception is the videoblog of governor Nagovitsyn of the Republic Buryatiya who published only messages recorded specifically for the audience of his blog, in which he also referred to comments. Eight of the 12 PR-blogs did not even feature a comment function. In comparison with other types of blogs, PR-blogs drew the smallest number of comments. The only governor who generated a substantial amount of comments – 83 – to a post in May 2010 was Kanokov (see Figure 7); however, this post was exceptional as it was the first entry to Kanokov's blog. All other PR-blogs did not attract more than a maximum of two comments to a post in May 2010. The frequency of posts on most PR-blogs was found to be quite low. Governor Gaevskii of Stavropol'skii Krai, for instance, seems to post only one video per month. However, there are also highly active blogs such as that of Governor Savchenko of Belgorodskaya Oblast' that featured four entries in May and 16 entries in October 2010.

Figure 5 shows a typical PR-blog, that of Governor Denin of Bryanskaya Oblast'. Denin's videoblog is clearly modelled on the online diary of the President (see Figure 4). On average one entry per month is posted. Common titles are 'The All-Russian Census of the Population 2010', 'Visit to a Company in Bryansk', or 'September 17 – The Day of the Liberation of Bryansk!'. The only entry posted in May 2010 is captioned 'Congratulations on the 65-anniversary of the Victory' in World War II. This video clip is about one minute long. It shows Denin, wearing a tie against the background of the flag of his *oblast*'. In his formal address, he congratulates veterans on their victory. There are no reactions to this post, as the blog does not offer a facility to comment.

PR-blogs do not fulfil any of the three criteria presented above. They do not succeed in creating an impression of the politician listening seriously to citizens. The level of interactivity seems to be rather low on PR-blogs, and most posts do not draw a single comment; and the audience of these blogs is marginal. As a consequence, the potential of PR-blogs to increase the perceived responsiveness and the perceived legitimacy of politics in Russia can be evaluated as rather low.

Efficient statesmen-blogs

In contrast to PR-blogs, on efficient statesmen-blogs no press releases or TV footage of local channels are published. These blogs are kept by the governors themselves – or at least they seem to be judging from the way personal experiences and thoughts are blended into the posts. In spite of this, these bloggers do not talk about non-political issues such as hobbies, family life, sports activities, music, etc. Yet, the governors generate the impression of seriously listening to citizens. For example, all blogs feature a comment function, and all politicians at least refer to comments in selected posts. To varying degrees, issues addressed in the comments are actually tackled by the politician in real life. This is why I call this type of blogs that of 'efficient statesmen'. The blogs of the following eight governors belong to this category: Turchak, Nagovitsyn, Bochkarev, Kozhemyaka, Yurevich, Slyunyaev, Serdyukov and Gordeev.

Of these blogs, three are kept on the platform *LiveJournal* and five are kept on privately hosted platforms. On average, they attract far more comments than PR-Blogs, usually several dozens per post. A typical example is the blog of governor Serdyukov of Leningradskaya Oblast'. Serdyukov keeps his blog on a privately owned website (<http://www.serdyukov-vp.ru>). He does not post photos, the entries rather remind of long, formal letters to his readers. The few pictures

on the website show the governor sitting in his office behind a desk, dressed in a suit and wearing a tie. Typical posts are captioned ‘You ask – I answer’, ‘On Gas and Water Tariffs’, or ‘I have Enough Power to Put Things in Order’. In the entry ‘You ask – I answer’ Serdyukov addresses the consequences of irregularities related to invoices for public housing utilities that readers of his blog had uncovered in comments to previous posts. This post reads as follows:

I thank all of you for bringing up the problem and telling me about the situation in the villages, and also some of you for taking up my calls, sending me copies of utility bills. [...] This information has been handed over to the office of the public prosecutor. [...] Gennadii [name of commenter], trust me, I have already started tough negotiations. (Serdyukov 2010a)

As this post exemplifies, the style of communication on these blogs is far more interactive and conversational than on PR-blogs. The governor directly refers to one of the commenters by his nickname, and he reports on measures taken by him personally. The post quoted above drew 114 comments. The readers of Serdyukov’s blog seemed to feel that the governor was seriously listening to them. Many of the comments raised specific problems related to public housing, roads, buses, or kindergartens. A typical comment reads as follows:

Dear Valerii Pavlovich,

I would like to write to you about a certain problem. My great-grandfather, a disabled person and veteran of World War II, was provided with a car nine years ago. In the past, according to regulations, the cars of invalids were exchanged after seven years. After nine years, the car is now practically useless. The only request he [my great-grandfather] made on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II was to receive a new car. But this request was denied! They said that they have no instructions to exchange cars. He is unable to walk. I beg you to help my great-grandfather! He lives in the countryside: Leningradskaya Oblast’, Gachinskii Raion, Vysoko-Klyuchevaya ploshchad’, Komsomolskii Village, house 1, Phone 881137158727, Mobile 89110911968. (Gnatenko 2010)

From the western perspective, it is remarkable that this commenter – as many other authors of comparable ‘complaint comments’ that seem to thrive especially on the blogs of efficient

statesmen – does not bother to relate her claim to any existing formal provision of law. Instead, she argues by referring to the conventions of ‘former times’ and to the fact that officials obviously do not have ‘instructions’ to exchange cars. Moreover, the author of the comment also seems convinced that the Governor Serdyukov can put the perceived grievance right, if he wishes so, independently of legal provisions. To make it easier for the governor to show mercy, she even provides both telephone number and address of her great-grandfather. To sum up, the patterns of interactions between politicians and citizens which can be observed in these ‘complaint-comments’ seem to be rather Russian specific and an intriguing topic for further research. Presumably, these interactions can only be fully understood when interpreted in the context of the very specific Russian administrative culture whose roots are to be traced back to the 19th century (see Heusala 2010). However, this is a task that lies far beyond the scope of this article.

More central to this study is the question to what extent the blogs of efficient statesmen fulfilled the second criterion quoted above and actually tackled grievances brought up by the readers of his blogs in real life. In the first few weeks after opening his blog in February 2010, Governor Serdyukov actually tried to react to some of the complaints made public on his blog, as for instance the irregularities related to bills for public utilities mentioned above. However, after barely three months of blogging in the time period between February and May 2010, the governor apparently abandoned his blog. By November 2010, he had not posted a single blog entry for more than five months. In one of his very last posts (Serdyukov 2010b) he states that he does not want to ‘decline any responsibilities’ but that many of the complaints published on his blog should better be addressed by municipal leaders. He proposes the simple solution to involve municipal leaders into the practice of blogging. Serdyukov provides links to six blogs of municipal leaders that were at the time establishing a blog. However, a visit to these websites in August 2010 showed that these blogs seemed to fail as well. Thus, the rise and fall of Serdyukov’s blog illustrates how opening a blog in the style of an ‘efficient statesman’ can put a governor under an unbearable pressure to address an ever growing list of complaints published in the comments section.

An example of how to cope more successfully with a large amount of complaints is the online platform *Turchak.ru*. On this platform, Governor Turchak of the Pskovskaya Oblast’ encourages his regional officials and the heads of cities to respond to questions and grievances brought up by internet users. The personal blog of the Governor is embedded in this website. The ‘internet

reception room' [*internet priemnaya*] is divided in the sections 'Blog of the Governor', 'Problems', 'Questions' and 'Proposals'. By November 2010, the section 'Problems' contained approximately 600 complaints. To nearly all of these complaints, one of Turchak's officials had reacted. At least according to the conversation threads between officials and citizens published on the website, a series of these complaints were redressed (Turchak 2010b). Amongst these were: Svetlana Ural'skaya's plea to repair a fountain on a public square (Ural'skaya 2010); veteran Pavel Semenov's request for a new apartment (Semenov 2010); and Anna Smirnova's complaint about her grandfather being denied free medication (Smirnova 2010).

On Serdyukov's blog as well as on Turchak's platform, the style of language remains rather formal. The governor does not share any details of his private life – a typical feature for efficient statesman-blogs. In a blog entry, Turchak voices this strategy explicitly as follows:

The purpose of my site is not to engage officials and citizens in a football game. This is a platform that citizens can use to get timely information on problems of their everyday life and to help resolve the issues. (Turchak 2010a)

As these examples illustrate, efficient statesmen-bloggers fulfil criteria 1 and 2 quoted above as they create the impression of listening seriously to citizens, and they do address selected issues brought up by their commenters in real life. In contrast to the first type of PR-bloggers, they – most probably – author their blog posts personally. Their blogs attract a far bigger audience and far more comments than the first type of PR-blogs. Thus their potential to increase the perceived responsiveness and the perceived legitimacy of politics in Russia seems far greater than those of PR-blogs.

Internetchik-blogs

In sharp contrast to efficient statesmen-bloggers *internetchik*-bloggers discuss private topics and tend to use informal language. These bloggers are usually even more active than the efficient statesmen-type. On some blogs, new entries appear roughly every other day (see Figure 6). All *internetchik*-governors use *LiveJournal* as a platform. As governors are unveiling their private lives and talking about issues of human interest, these blogs on average attract a greater audience. Entries draw a high number of comments, usually several dozens and in some cases even hundreds (see Figure 7). The seven governors that can be assigned to this category boast the

largest numbers of friends amongst the bloggers under investigation: Belykh, Chirkunov, Brovko, Zhilkin, Zelenin, Mitin and Shantsev.

The degree to which private issues are included and informal language is used varies within the group. For instance, governor Shantsev talks in very few posts about non-political issues. However, after watching an ice-hockey game he titles a post ‘OUR GUYS DEFEATED THE CANADIANS!!!’ (Shantsev 2010), using only upper-case characters. In the post, he tells his readers about how he was able to predict the outcome of the game. To express his joy, he uses the smiley symbol ‘;)))’. In the comment section of the post, he replies three times to the readers’ comments. Information on the private life of these politicians is common on these blogs: Governor Mitin posts a video of him rafting on a Russian river (Mitin 2010a) and pictures of him playing badminton (Mitin 2010b). Governor Zelenin shares with his readers his successful strategy to stop smoking (Zelenin 2010), and governor Zhilkin publishes a post under the title ‘Extreme fishing’ that documents in a series of pictures how he caught several enormous fish (Zhilkin 2010a; see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Screenshot of an *Internetchik*-Blog: Pictures in the post ‘Extreme Fishing’ by Governor Zhilkin, 16 June 2010

Source: <http://alexandr-jilkin.livejournal.com/> (accessed 16 November 2010)

An exceptional example for this type of blogger is Nikita Belykh, governor of the Kirov Region. Belykh tells his readers about his private life including his experience of losing a tooth (Belykh 2010a) or his successes in teaching his son how to play poker (Belykh 2010b). In another post (Belykh 2010c), the governor links to a webpage that shows an extremely unfavourable photo of him: sunburnt, seemingly drunk, with a baseball cap, smiling dizzily. In the post, Belykh complains ironically about the fact that the media always pick up the most unfavourable pictures of him. This example illustrates the degree to which Belykh is making fun of himself and of media in public, and how he reduces the emotional distance between himself and his voters by chatting with them as if they were his closest friends. The comments of his readers mirror the extreme emotional closeness between audience and political leader. For instance, one commenter asks Belykh if he has ever thought of losing weight, because then he ‘would look better in photos’ (Olga_Strelkova 2010).

The blog post that drew the most comments in May 2010 was published on the blog of another *internetchik*, on that of Governor Zhilkin (2010b). In this blog entry, the Governor announces a competition asking his readers to come forward with ideas for a social advertising campaign. As prizes for the best ideas, Zhilkin promises three iPads, a couple of T-shirts and an illustrated book with pictures of the region Astrakhan'. Subsequently, the competition is also promoted on the news programme of a regional television channel. Similar forms of 'crowdsourcing' can be occasionally observed on the blogs of other *internetchiks* and efficient statesmen. Other governors call for ideas for what to say at certain meetings or conferences, how to spend a part of the budget, or how to rename streets in their cities. Moreover, just as efficient statesmen, *internetchiks* respond to selected complaints of readers. On the blog of governor Slyunyaev, for instance, a user complains that a medal commemorating the 65th Anniversary of the Great Victory has not been delivered to his grandmother. The medal is then presented within less than 24 hours (Jusupov 2010). In this respect, the behaviour of both *internetchik* and efficient statesmen bloggers mirrors that of President Medvedev who also reacted publicly to selected complaints. In reaction to comments on the President's blog, for instance, a Casino in Balashikha was closed, a person from Saratov who was sacked was hired again and a businessman from St. Petersburg got a loan (Sidorenko 2010).

Thus, the blogs of *internetchik*-governors fulfil all of the three criteria stipulated above: with these blogs, governors create the impression of seriously listening to citizens, they tackle issues brought up by their readers in real life, and they succeed in reducing the emotional distance to the electorate. Consequently, *internetchik*-blogs are, most probably, superior to PR-blogs and efficient statesmen blogs in terms of raising the perceived responsiveness and legitimacy of politics in contemporary Russia.

Conclusion: Blogs as a Means to Strengthen the Legitimacy of the Russian Regime

This chapter set out to explore the exceptional phenomenon of the blogging Russian governors who in May 2010 in terms of blogging activity by far outmatched politicians in many developed democracies. However, I maintain most Russian governors did not set up their blog primarily with the intention of gaining electoral support. Rather, for these officials starting a blog seemed to be, first and foremost, a symbolic action that showcased their allegiance and loyalty to the

President, who was widely known for his internet enthusiasm. Medvedev's passion for the internet can, in turn, be interpreted as a pivotal pillar of his overarching political strategy of 'modernisation'.

Yet, even though most Russian governors may have started their online diaries primarily to appeal to the President, this does not implicate that their blogs, once in existence, had no impact on politics. In this chapter, I argued in particular that these blogs were, to various degrees, capable of strengthening the perceived legitimacy of the Russian semi-authoritarian regime. Drawing on Scharpf's (1997; cf. Easton 1957) distinction between 'input' and 'output' legitimacy and adopting a radical-constructivist perspective (Glaserfeld 2001), I would like to suggest a further differentiation between:

- 1) 'input legitimacy', understood as the portion of legitimacy belief that citizens draw from the perception that their voice is being heard in the decision-making process;
- 2) and 'output legitimacy', conceived of as the portion of legitimacy belief that citizens derive from their perceived satisfaction with the outputs (decisions and policies) of the political system.

It is important to note that according to these definitions not the *actual* design or efficacy of the input mechanisms at disposal are decisive, nor are the *actual* outputs of the political system. Instead, my radical-constructivist notion of legitimacy exclusively refers to the degree to which the electorate *perceives* that it makes significant inputs to the decision process, respectively the way it *perceives* the outputs of the political system.

Viewed from this theoretical perspective, I argue Russian governors strengthened the input legitimacy of their government, for instance: by referring to comments in their blog posts; by asking the blog audience for advice on specific political decisions; by generating emotional closeness; by publicly referring to complaints of citizens when justifying political decisions; or by generating the impression of listening seriously to the public and considering their demands in the decision-making process. Moreover, many governors contributed to the output legitimacy of the Russian regime, mainly by presenting 'success stories' on their blogs about how selected grievances were brought up by citizens and subsequently redressed by the politician.

It is crucial to remark here that these endeavours of the governors reached audiences far beyond the regular readership of their blog. First of all, the archive of blog posts, conversations

and ‘success stories’ remained a persistent ‘online testimony’ of the efforts of the governor. Thus even internet users who visited the governors’ blog only once and skimmed through the website were – to the degree the governors’ efforts appeared convincing to them – left with the impression that the authorities were taking needs of citizens seriously.

Far more momentous, however, must be considered the fact that the blogging efforts of Russian governors were extensively amplified and propagated by the Russian mass media, which can be regarded as largely loyal to the ruling elites. A TV report about a governor making an effort to blog can already increase the belief in the input legitimacy amongst Russian citizens – even amongst those citizens who have never accessed the internet. Moreover, the same effect can be assumed for reports about how governors dealt successfully with various grievances presented in blogs.

In this theoretical perspective, Medvedev’s political strategy of inducing officials to blog can be interpreted as being aimed at increasing the perceived input and output legitimacy of the Russian political system. Given the fact that the proportion of blogging politicians in Russia is higher than in most western democracies, I would even argue that blogs are playing a far greater role in generating legitimacy for the semi-authoritarian Russian political system than they do in western democracies. In contrast to western democracies, the Russian political system lacks a series of mechanisms commonly perceived as major sources of (particularly input) legitimacy in democratic states, such as highly competitive elections, deeply rooted party systems, or well-organized interest groups. As a consequence, it may not come as a surprise that other channels of creating input legitimacy (such as politicians’ blogs) have gained major importance in Russian context. Thus, paradoxically, politicians’ blogs seem to actually live up to the hopes of many western researchers by re-connecting the political elites with the demos. However, their potential to establish closer ties between the representatives and the represented appears to be of particular appeal to political elites in the semi-authoritarian Russian context.

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Blogging for the President – Tables and Figures

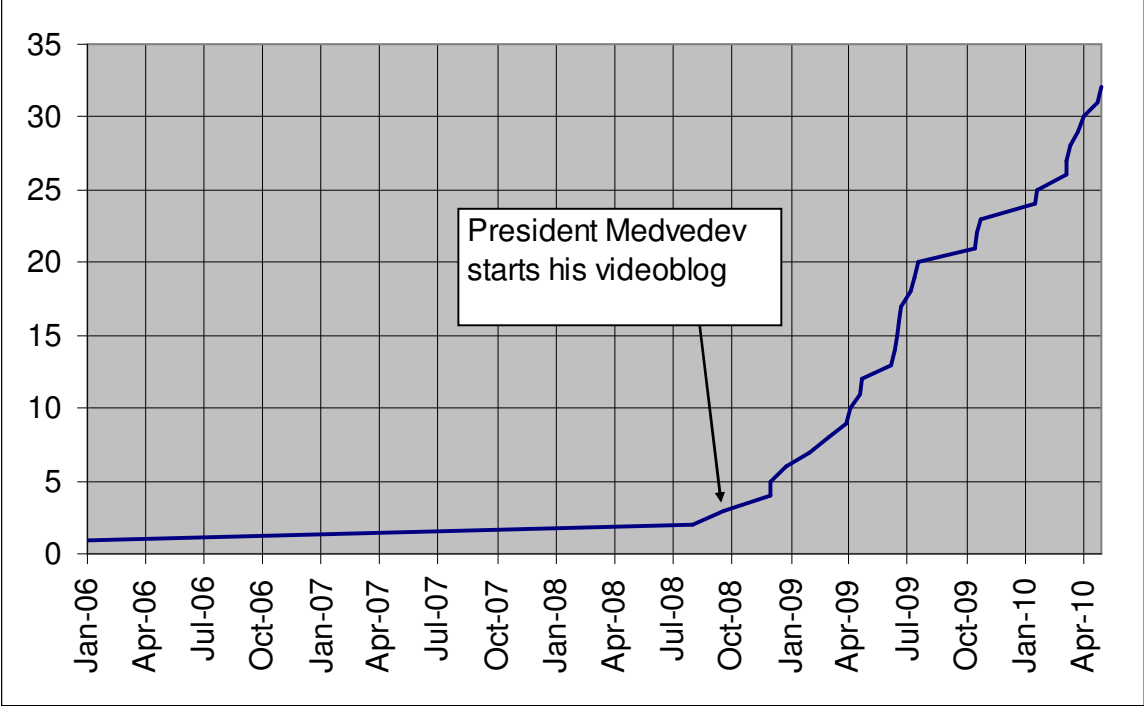
Florian Toepfl, Harriman Institute, florian@toepfl.de; ft2195@columbia.edu

Toepfl 1. Blogs of Governors accessible online in May 2010

Source: Florian Toepfl

Name	Federal Subject	Adress	First Entry
Belykh, Nikita	Kirovskaja Oblast'	http://belyh.livejournal.com/	27.01.2006
Chirkunov, Oleg	Permskii Krai	http://chirkunov.livejournal.com/	26.06.2008
Komarova, Natalia	Chanty-Mansiiskii Avtonomnyi Okrug (Tyumenskaia Oblast')	http://n-komarova.livejournal.com/	15.10.2008
Bogomolov, Oleg	Kurganskaia Oblast'	http://www.kurganobl.ru/6477.html	25.12.2008
Boos, Grigorii	Kaliningradskaia Oblast'	http://www.gov39.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=45&Itemid=71	26.12.2008
Denin, Nikolaii	Brianskaia Oblast'	http://www.bryanskobl.ru/news/videoblog/	19.01.2009
Gaevskii, Valerii	Stavropol'skii Krai	http://www.gubernator.stavkrai.ru/?go=video	25.02.2009
Pozgalev, Viacheslav	Vologodskaia Oblast'	http://www.vologda-oblast.ru/photos.asp?LNG=RUS&V=52	25.03.2009
Dudka, Viacheslav	Tul'skaja Oblast'	http://blog-dudka.livejournal.com/	22.04.2009
Slyuniaev, Igor'	Kostromskaia Oblast'	http://slyunyaev.livejournal.com/	29.04.2009
Morozov, Sergeii	Ul'ianovskaia Oblast'	http://community.livejournal.com/blog_morozov/	14.05.2009
Kozhemiaka, Oleg	Amurskaia Oblast'	http://www.portamur.ru/blogs/kozhemya-ko/	17.05.2009
Volkov, Aleksandr	Udmurtskaia Respublika	http://aifudm.net/blog/volkov/	01.07.2009
Artamanov, Anatolii	Kaluzhskaia Oblast'	http://www.artamonovguber.ru/blog.php	07.07.2009
Zhylnin, Aleksandr	Astrakhanskaia Oblast'	http://alexandr-jilkin.livejournal.com/	10.07.2009
Tkachev, Aleksandr	Krasnodarskii Krai	http://a-n-tkachev.livejournal.com/	14.07.2009
Dudov, Nikolaii	Magadanskaia Oblast'	http://www.gubernator.magadan.ru/	17.07.2009
Zelenin, Dmitrii	Tverskaia Oblast'	http://dzelenin.livejournal.com/	31.07.2009
Savchenko, Evgenii	Belgorodskaia Oblast'	http://www.savchenko.ru/	06.08.2009
Katanandov, Sergeii	Kareliia, Respublika	http://www.gov.karelia.ru/gov/Blog/index.html	14.08.2009
Gordeev, Aleksei	Voronezhskaia Oblast'	http://blog.govvrn.ru/blog/	08.11.2009
Nagovitsyn, Viacheslav	Respublika Buriatia	http://baik-daily.ru/blog/61/	11.11.2009
Kress, Viktor	Tomskaia Oblast'	http://kress.tomsk.ru/ru/videoblog/	19.11.2009
Tolokonnikov, Viktor	Novosibirskaia Oblast'	http://sibkrai.ru/blog/	09.02.2010
Serdyukov, Valerii	Leningradskaia Oblast'	http://serdyukov-vp.ru/blog	14.02.2010
Brovko, Anatolii	Volgogradskaia Oblast'	http://anatoliy-brovko.livejournal.com/	01.04.2010
Bochkarev, Vasilii	Penzenskaia Oblast'	http://blog-bochkarev.livejournal.com/	01.04.2010
Mitin, Sergeii	Novgorodskaia Oblast'	http://mitinsg.livejournal.com/	07.04.2010
Turchak, Andreii	Pskovskaia Oblast'	http://turchak.ru/blog/	19.04.2010
Shantsev, Valerii	Nizhegorodskaia Oblast'	http://shantsevvp.livejournal.com/	28.04.2010
Jurevich, Michail	Cheliabinskaja Oblast'	http://yurevich-m.livejournal.com/	19.05.2010
Kanokov, Arsen	Respublika Karbadino-Balkariia	http://blog.president-kbr.ru/	24.05.2010

Toepl 2. Number of Russian Governors Keeping a Blog
Source: Florian Toepl



Toepl 3. The Distribution of Blogging Governors across Federal Districts (As of May 2010)

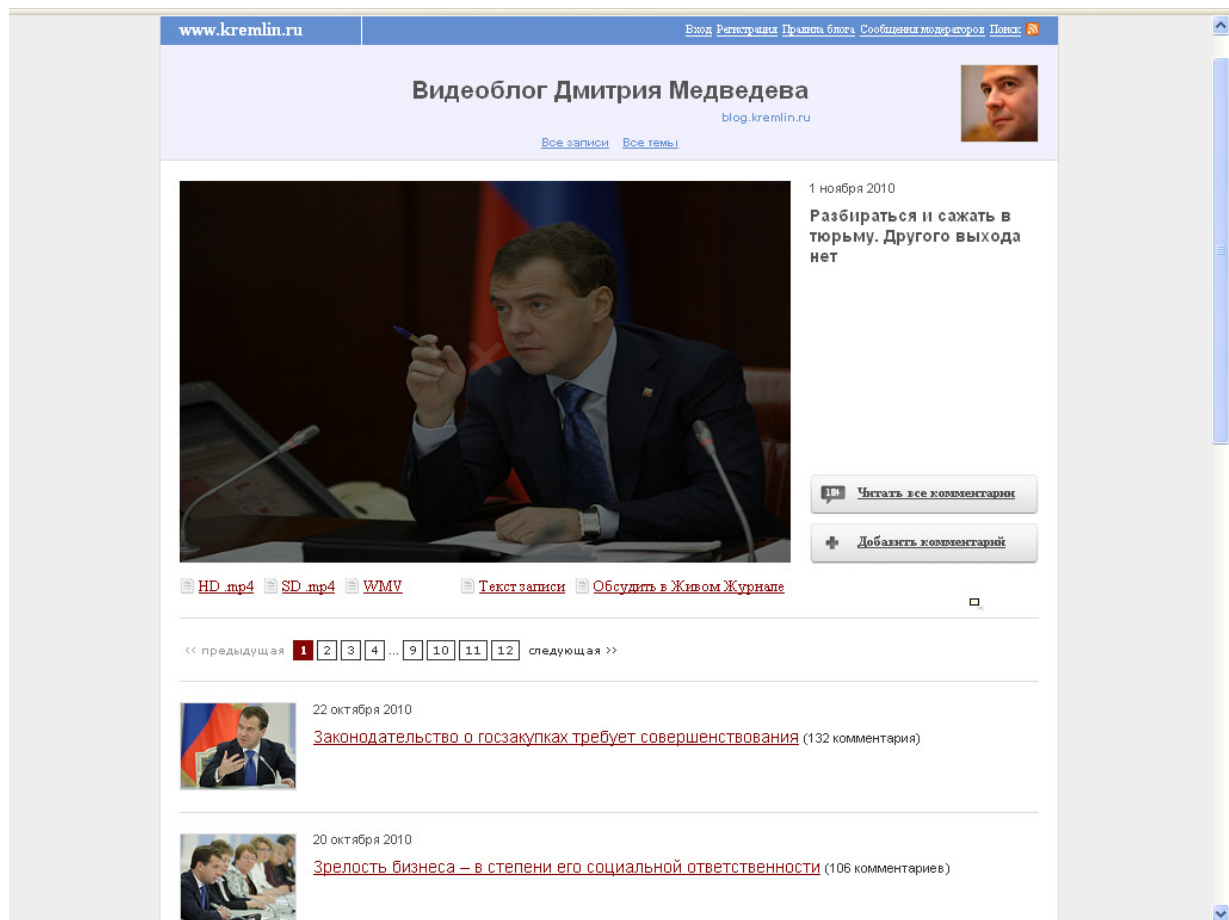
	No. of blogging governors in May 2010	% of blogging governors in May 2010	% of citizens accessing internet at home in 2009 ⁸
North Western Federal District	6 of 11	55 %	37 %
Southern Federal District	3 of 6	50 %	N.A. ⁹
Urals Federal District	3 of 6	50 %	23 %
Volga Federal District	6 of 14	43 %	27 %
Central Federal District	7 of 18	39 %	24 % ¹⁰
Northern Caucasus Federal District	2 of 7	29 %	N.A.
Siberian Federal District	3 of 12	25 %	21 %
Far Eastern Federal District	2 of 9	22 %	21 %
Total	32 of 83	39 %	30 %

Source: Florian Toepl, GfK (2010)


⁸ Data for 2009 according to GfK (2009, p. 2).

⁹ The North Caucasian Federal District was split from Southern Federal district on 19 January 2010. Separate data on internet penetration was not yet available by the time of research. For both districts combine, the figure was 20 %.


¹⁰ Without the capital Moscow (52 %)



Тоepfl 4. Screenshot Blog of the President
Source: www.kremlin.ru (16 November 2010)



**Администрация
Брянской области**
 WWW.BRYANSKOBL.RU



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 вторник, 16 ноября 2010 г.
 Погода в Брянске вечером
 Пасмурно, без осадков, +7 +9 °C
 Ветер северный, -1-1 м/с
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Наши приоритеты

ВИДЕОБЛОГ ГУБЕРНАТОРА БРЯНСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ


**ВИЗИТ НА БРЯНСКИЙ ЗАВОД
ТЕПЛОИЗОЛЯЦИОННЫХ МАТЕРИАЛОВ**
 Текстовая версия
 12 ноября 2010 г.

Сервер трансляции:
 Основной

Зеркало видеоблога размещено на видеохостинге RuTube.ru
 Videоблог также доступен для брянских пользователей сети Метро-Домолинк.

ОСТАЛЬНЫЕ ЗАПИСИ



С ДНЁМ НАРОДНОГО ЕДИНСТВА
 Видео Текстовая версия
 03 НОЯБРЯ 2010 г.



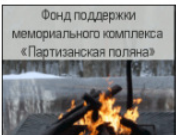
ВСЕРОССИЙСКАЯ ПЕРЕПИСЬ НАСЕЛЕНИЯ – 2010
 Видео Текстовая версия
 14 ОКТЯБРЯ 2010 г.



НОВЫЕ ФЕРМЫ
 Видео Текстовая версия

Новогодние пожелания


**Восстановим Брянский
Кафедральный Собор!**



**Фонд поддержки
мемориального комплекса
«Партизанская поляна»**
**НИКТО НЕ ЗАБЫТ!
НИЧТО НЕ ЗАБЫТО!**



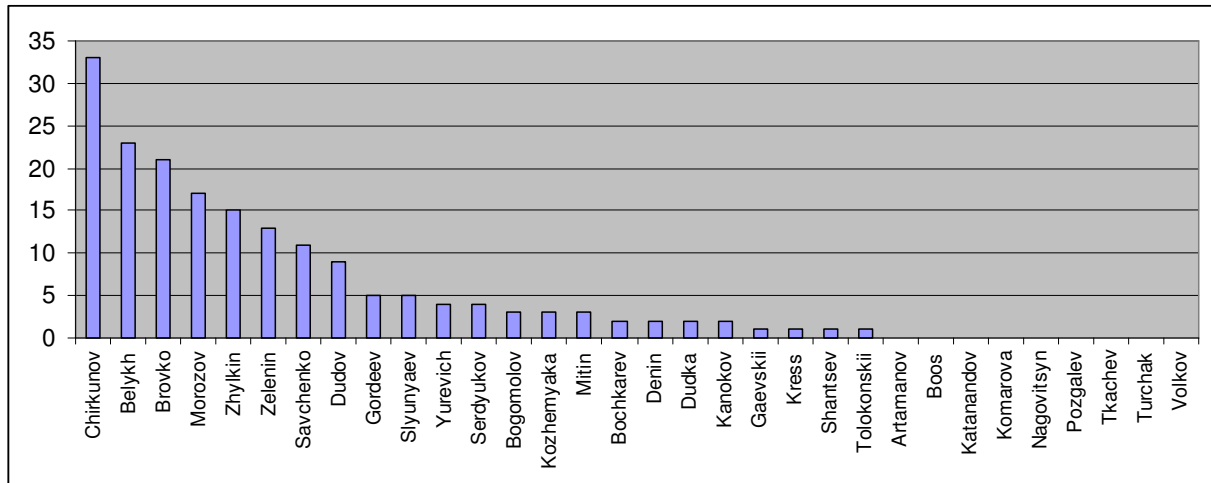
**Сбор средств
на строительство
онкогематологического
отделения
детской областной
больницы**

Для граждан
 График приема
 Горячая линия

Тоepfl 5. Screenshot of a PR-Blog. Governor Denin of Brianskaia Oblast' (Screenshot 16 November 2010)

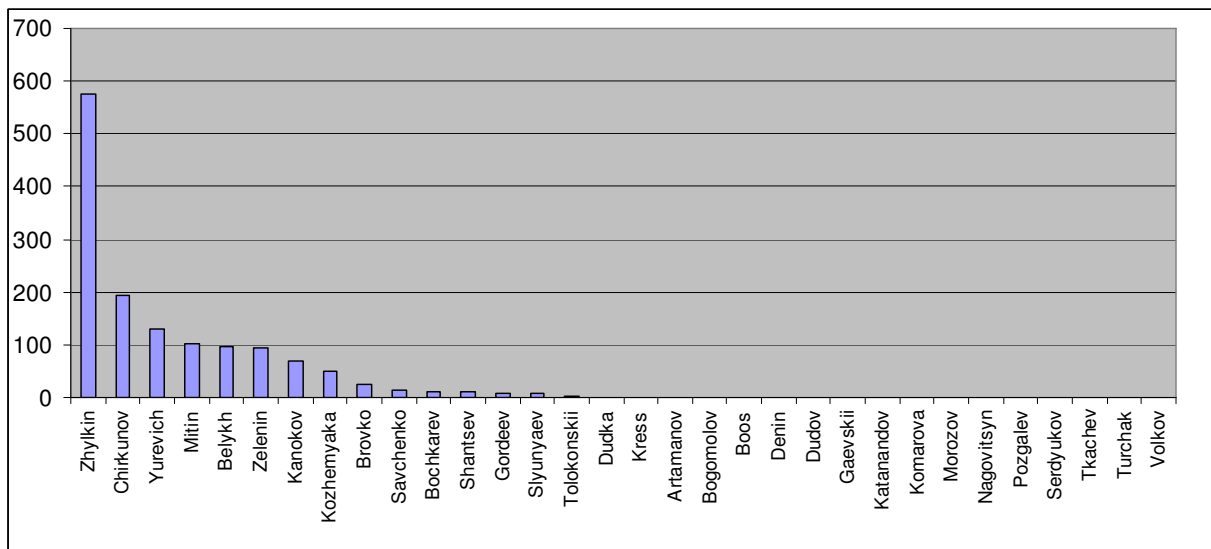
38

Toeplitz 6. Blogging Activity: Number of Entries of Governors in May 2010



Source: Florian Toeplitz

Toeplitz 7. Audience Response. Maximum Amount of Comments to an Entry in May 2010



Source: Florian Toeplitz



Андрей Турчак
Губернатор Псковской области

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[Жильё ветеранам](#) (Жильё) 7/5 **решено**

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[Получение льготных лекарств](#) (Здравоохранение) 2/2 **решено**

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[Жильё для ветеранов](#) (Социальная защита) 3 **решено**

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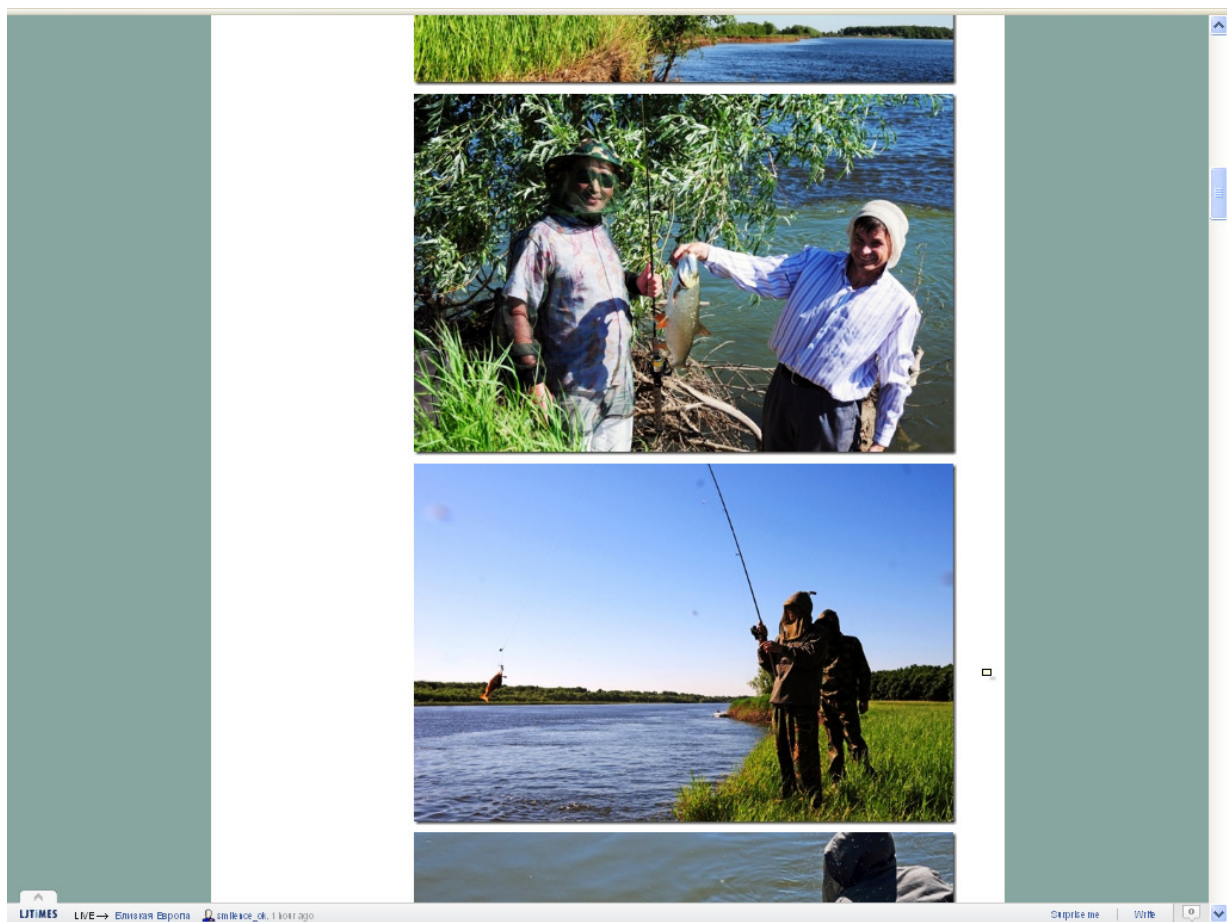
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Suchen: ☐ Groß-/Kleinschreibung

Toepfl 8. Screenshot of an Efficient Statesman-blog. Listing of Solved Problems in Governor Andrei Turchak's 'internet reception room' (17 November 2010)

Source: www.turchak.ru



Toepl 9. Screenshot of an Internetchik-Blog: Pictures in the post 'Extreme Fishing' by Governor Zhilkin, 16 June 2010

Source: <http://alexandr-jilkin.livejournal.com/>

florian_toepfl

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Никита Бельх ([belyh](#)) wrote,

@ 2010-05-13 16:22:00

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Entry tags: [Личное](#)

Покер

Случилось то, чего я и опасался, когда [учил сына играть в покер](#). Он научился блефовать. Вчера вечером играли ечетвером – 3 взрослых и Юра. Он выиграл 5 игр из 7. Мне кажется, у него даже на фотографиях лицо стало хитрее.



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LJTimes

LIVE → Жители многоквартирных домов могут стать жертвами платежной пирамиды...

bel_ok, 30 min back

Surprise me

Write

o

Toepfl 10. Screenshot of an Internetchik-Blog. Governor Belykh talking about Non-Political Issues: Teaching his Son How to Play Poker, 13 May 2010

Source: belyh.livejournal.com

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