

# Understanding the Political Effect of Russian Blogs

## *analytical brief*

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The Russian blogosphere is to the Western blogosphere as the Cyrillic alphabet is to the Latin. You cannot understand the political activism of Russian bloggers without appreciating the central role of black humor in Russian political discourse any more than you can read Russian without comprehending Cyrillic. Unfortunately, most Western researchers have missed that point completely, taking too limited an approach to their analysis and concluding that there is little serious political commentary and activism in the Russian blogosphere.

In undemocratic countries like Russia, virtually any topic may acquire political connotations, yielding a diffuse – often obtuse – political discourse filled with oblique, indirect and symbolic language which may seem non-political or quasi-political to outsiders. Negative attitudes about official institutions – indeed, toward any “other” – permeate Russian society, while social atomization leads Russians to rely heavily on personal networks for information, opinions and support. A nimble interpretation of Russian bloggers’ expressions of resentment, cynicism and black humor is the key to understanding how the Russian blogosphere really works and to revealing the unwritten rules by which it is governed.

Anglo-American researchers generally have approached the Russian blogosphere from a political science perspective, often following a flawed logic: overtly political discussion or serious conversations about serious issues are the main functions of blogs; those discussions should result in political action; and because they do not generally on Russian blogs, the Russian blogosphere is devoid of political expression that could lead to political action. The researchers are victims of their own a priori assumptions.

The blogosphere in Russia serves as a substitute for the public sphere, much as literature did in the 19th century and the independent media did in the 1990s. Unlike the public sphere – which is rational, serious and follows the rules of public discussion – the Russian blogosphere is full of emotions, mockery and highly informal speech including jargon and *mat* (profanity and swearing).

The Russian blogosphere is a paradoxical mixture of the public and the private. Most blogs are publicly accessible, but very few follow the norms of public discourse, relying on informal in-group communication, symbolic action and dark humor. Think Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1941/1993) theory of popular laughter culture, not Jürgen Habermas’s (1962/1989) concept of the public sphere. If you want to read Russian, you have to learn Cyrillic.

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