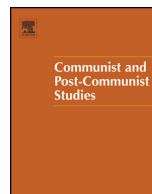




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'Dear Mr President'. The blogosphere as arena for communication between people and power

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ABSTRACT

Internet use in Russia is increasing rapidly. The former president of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, has actively utilized the Internet for political purposes, and promoted its use among state officials and politicians in Russia. This article examines the online communication between Medvedev and the Russian people, as seen through his official kremlin.ru weblog. The article combines two research fields – the Internet and demography – mapping the publicly generated discourse of demography as articulated on Medvedev's blog. Furthermore, the author assesses the communication between the authorities and the people, showing how it can be mismatched as individuals 'talk past each other'.

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Hello everyone! I'm on Twitter, and this is my first tweet.
([Medvedev, 2010a](#))

Communication can be described as a message sent between two points: a sender and a receiver. This is a somewhat simplistic view, as there is no guarantee that the message will reach the receiver in its intended form, or that the receiver will interpret the meaning of the message as intended by the sender ([Thwaites et al., 2002](#): 3). However, for the purposes of this article, this definition will suffice as the basis for understanding the interaction between the former President of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, and the Russian people. The venue of this interaction is Medvedev's weblog on [kremlin.ru](#).¹ With the Internet as the medium of communication, the sender has, in theory, access to millions of receivers.

The Russian state is often envisioned as centralized, with power concentrated around the institution of the presidency and the position of the prime minister ([Sakwa, 2011](#)). However, Russian policy-making also involves a cast of characters whose roles need to be explored ([Wilhelmsen and Wilson Rowe, 2011](#): 5) and so it is important to look for interaction between power and people. Even when this communication is choreographed and controlled, it may none the less contribute to policy-making. Through his Kremlin blog, Dmitry Medvedev was potentially able to communicate his message(s) to millions of Russians – and, more importantly, millions of Russians were able to leave their comments and directly communicate with him.² Ideally, the comments left and the input of the wider public should have some influence on decision-making, at the very least serving to alert the authorities to trends and currents influencing public opinion.

¹ A blog (or weblog) is an online journal consisting of brief entries, displayed in chronological order on a webpage ([Palser, 2002](#)); a blogosphere is 'the totality of all blogs and their interconnections' ([Gorny, 2009](#):8). This article focuses on communication on the blog and not the blog itself. For more about blogs see [Hewitt \(2005\)](#); [Farrell and Drezner \(2008\)](#) and [Woodly \(2008\)](#).

² After 6 May 2012 the blog was moved from the presidential website [kremlin.ru](#) to [blog.da-medvedev.ru](#). In this article the references are to the new location; however when my initial research was conducted in 2011, the blog was part of the president's webpage.

The Internet communication discussed in this article concerns an important issue that engages and affects the wider Russian public – the issue of demography. Throughout almost the entire post-Soviet period, Russia has experienced a severe and worsening demographic decline. The population of the Russian Federation shrank by more than two million people between 2002 and 2010 ([Russian Census, 2010](#)). According to the [United Nations in Russia \(2008\)](#), the disparity between the number of births and deaths could lead to a population decline of approximately 43 million people over the next 39 years.

The issue of demography was central in Vladimir Putin's Address to the Federal Assembly in 2012. The President said that the demographic programmes adopted in the past decade have contributed to the growth of Russia's population. 'For the first time in our country's recent history, natural population growth has been posted for five months in a row: the birth rate has finally started to exceed the death rate' ([Putin, 2012b](#)). This population growth can in fact be explained by factors other than the programmes mentioned by Putin. From 2008 onwards, those born in the 'baby boom' of the 1980's began having children boosting Russia's birth rates ([Shevelyeva, 2012](#)). However, the increase in birthrates will most probably drop again when the much smaller generation of the 1990s starts having children, unless the average fertility rate increases dramatically. This is something that is recognized by Vladimir Putin when he says 'I still believe that families with three children should become the standard in Russia' ([Putin, 2012b](#)). In order to ensure this population increase, issues relating to the economy, structural barriers and family values – all issues raised by commentators on Medvedev's blog – need to be dealt with through policy. The findings in this article are therefore relevant as they highlight important areas of concern where changes still need to be made.

A country's demography is a mirror of the welfare and everyday lives of its citizens. This article examines the publicly generated discourse of demography on Dmitry Medvedev's blog by studying communicative activity on the blog and the discursive constructions which influence the reality perceptions of the Russian people. In this article, a discourse is understood as 'a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)' ([Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002](#): 1). This implies that the world we live in is socially constructed, formed by history and the discourses which are dominant in different historical periods ([Burr, 2003](#)). A discourse is therefore the premise for the creation of meaning.³

With that in mind, I combine two research fields and seek to further our understanding of how one field may influence the other – the Internet and demography. As aptly noted in a report from the Berkman Center: 'Thanks to the tremendous amount of content created by users online, we may now have more data on human behaviour as at any other point of history' ([Alexanyan et al., 2012](#): 12). This article is based on this type of new data. Drawing on the information found on Dmitry Medvedev's blog, it focuses on the category 'Demography, Maternity and Childhood', showing how the field of demography is constructed by the blog users, including Medvedev. Additionally, I assess the extent to which Medvedev's blog can be considered a genuine arena for communication between the power and the people. As such, this article contributes to two Russian research fields: the Internet as a relatively new form of political communication, and the more established field of demography.

In order to *contextualize* the empirical findings, the first section introduces the development and use of the Russian Internet (RuNet), as well as the development of state Internet use, including Medvedev's blog. In addition, the first section offers an introduction to the demographic crisis in Russia. The second section gives a brief outline of the methodology and data on which the subsequent analysis is based, while sections three and four present the main blog analysis. Section three maps the *discourse of demography* in the blog, showing how it is constructed in relation to the economy, structural barriers within the society and family values. Section four assesses *the political communication* in the blog, showing how communication between power and people can be mismatched as individuals 'talk past each other'. Section four also shows how communication can be 'two-way' with a real policy effect, as demonstrated through a case study of blog communication concerning Federal Law 08.12.2010 № 343-F3. The article concludes with a prognosis as to the future of this new form of political communication under President Putin, who succeeded [Dmitri Medvedev](#) in May 2012.

1. The Internet in Russia

The Internet is a relatively new communication network which has defied established concepts of space and time, making it possible to reach enormous numbers of people simultaneously. It is also a global network, as indicated by the term World Wide Web, although different countries may use the Internet in their own specific ways. Russia has Europe's largest Internet market in terms of the number of users – due mostly to the country's relatively large population ([Filatova, 2011](#)), but also to the growing popularity of the Internet and the number of people with online access (see [Table 1](#)).

Internet penetration in Russia, the percentage of population which goes online, is rapidly increasing ([Table 1](#)). The greatest increase is in the number of daily users, indicating that the Internet is becoming both accessible and indispensable at the workplace, in educational facilities and at home. In 2010, the Russian Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication forecast that by 2014, 71% of the age group 18 and over will have regular Internet access in Russia. This prognosis contradicts the view of the Internet as an elite medium dominated by or restricted to urban and educated users ([Alexanyan and Alto, 2009](#)), and supports the idea that the ambition of the state is to see more ordinary Russians online. Unsurprisingly, Russia

³ By 'discourse' the author does not imply that there is no real world outside of discourse or that there are no structural constraints which give shape to various policy fields. Discourse is seen as what provides meaning to how phenomena are seen in any given society – in this case, by defining the core challenges in the field of Russian demography, thus contributing to shape people's ideas about what these challenges are.

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