



## Developing a “Digital Potemkin Village”

**OE Watch Commentary:** Not that long ago, some in the West were hailing new digital technologies as tools to help strengthen civil society and build democracy in repressive countries. These digital platforms would allow citizens to freely voice their views and to coalesce to demand political, economic and social change. Not surprisingly, repressive governments were also working with these new technologies to both monitor and respond to these digital “threats.” In the brief accompanying excerpt from the liberal weekly, *Novaya Gazeta*, the author describes a new digital tool which will permit the Russian authorities to not only monitor local grievances on social media traffic, but which will allegedly encourage local leaders to respond to these citizen complaints.

The author begins by pointing out that because local “media are controlled by the governors... it is increasingly difficult for the federal center to derive useful information from that source.” Instead of encouraging free speech in the regions, the Kremlin is in the process of developing the “Incident Management system” which will “automatically monitor five social networks -- VK, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram -- on the basis of certain keywords.” If something negative begins to trend on these platforms, an incident report is generated and sent to both regional and federal officials. According to the article, “regional authorities will have to respond to complaints on social media and a copy of their response will go to the program administrator.” Moreover, “statistics will be compiled on all ‘incidents,’ and both the local authorities and the Presidential Staff will have access to the figures.” The author suggests that since federal officials will be able to monitor how regional officials handle these complaints, local officials will be more solicitous in resolving problems.

Given the nascent protest mood in Russia today, the author suggests that the rationale behind this new digital tool is twofold: “an attempt to minimize ‘politicization’ in the regions...[and] centralized monitoring of the regional authorities’ activities.” He further explains that such a system is predicated upon “the total lack of trust that is widespread in society” where there is mutual mistrust between the people and the authorities. To ensure their digital reputations remain high, the author posits that local leaders will merely develop “their own Internet troll factories ready to load the correct subjects into the ‘Incident Management’ system.” The author concludes on a negative note, claiming that because the authorities “are scared to death of democracy,” they are “pumping large amounts of money into developing a digital Potemkin village.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

*“People will go to any lengths if they are scared to death of democracy.”*

**Source:** Kirill Martynov, “Ручное управление мышкой; Кремль ищет цифровой эрзац демократии (Manual Government Using Mouse. Kremlin Seeks Digital Facade of Democracy),” *Novaya Gazeta*, 24 July 2018. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/07/24/77264-ruchnoe-upravlenie-myshkoy>

*As of 2019 the Kremlin intends to monitor the situation in the regions in a new way. The current system for monitoring sentiment in the country is based mainly on reports in the local press. But it is increasingly difficult for the federal center to derive useful information from that source. The media are controlled by the governors, and, consequently, the picture is rather a smarmy one. The Kremlin has absolutely no interest in the fact that local newspaper front pages always carry reports on the latest successes and a picture of the gubernatorial leader, but there is nothing they can do about it. Consequently, the “Incident Management” system is being invented.*

*A program of that name has been developed by the Medialogiya company and is currently being introduced in practice. It makes it possible to automatically monitor five social networks -- VK, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram -- on the basis of certain keywords. The innovation in this instance is to not simply analyze the situation but to force the local authorities to respond to it.*

*The results of the monitoring go to the system’s regional administrator, who decides which cases require attention from the relevant departments, regional ministries, or municipalities. Within the “Incident Management” framework, representatives of the regional authorities will have to respond to complaints on social media and a copy of their response will go to the program administrator.... RBK reports that statistics will be compiled on all “incidents,” and both the local authorities and the Presidential Staff will have access to the figures. And regional officials will face some tough demands on their time -- all “incidents” will have to be processed within 24 hours....*

*...It is clear that “Incident” has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is an attempt to minimize “politicization” in the regions. A certain unpleasant event will happen, people will write about it on the Internet, and they will call on the local authorities to intervene; and, in that situation, the robot from the Presidential Staff will appear and introduce the dissatisfied parties to the officials they need, making it possible for the latter to offer a response.... The other aspect of the issue is no longer about nipping protests in the bud, but about centralized monitoring of the regional authorities’ activities. Although the majority of “incidents” will be processed locally, the system makes provision for the position of a federal censor who can at any time see how much bad news there is in a region and how the governors are coping with the problem.*

*In other words, we are facing the digitization of manual control of the country on a permanent emergency footing and the reequipping of this practice with the last word in technology.*

*“Incident Management” has been made necessary, on the one hand, by the horror that leaders have of their own citizens and, on the other, by the total lack of trust that is widespread in society (the Kremlin does not trust reports from local level, the people do not trust the governors, and so forth)....*

*...Judging by everything, the Presidential Staff’s reading of governors’ panegyrics will be repeated, but at a new technological level.... Correspondingly, all governors will need their own Internet troll factories ready to load the correct subjects into “Incident Management.” The state is pumping large amounts of money into developing a digital Potemkin village. People will go to any lengths if they are scared to death of democracy.*