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THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION

Russia and Ukraine Compared

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ABSTRACT

Our research investigates the opportunities provided by the Internet for political parties to communicate to the electorate, and the extent to which party websites are used versus other information sources on the Web. We find that parties in Parliament, major parties and newly created parties are more prominent online than others, and, based on standard quality indicators, that parliamentary parties and new parties have better quality websites. This confirms some of the findings concerning parties online in established democracies. On comparing party with news websites, however, we find that sites of online-only newspapers are the most popular; that online versions of offline news outlets are of secondary importance, in contrast to what has been found in established democracies; and that party and politician websites are of least importance to users, based on the number of hits to these websites. The political role of the Internet in Russia and Ukraine is discussed in conclusion.

KEY WORDS ■ eastern Europe ■ Internet ■ online media ■ party systems ■ political parties

The Political Role of the Internet in Societies in Transition

From its beginning, the Internet was thought of as having great potential and likely to improve democracy, empower citizens and enhance public engagement with politics (Mann, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). The experience of the first elections in which the Internet was a part, however, led some researchers to recognize that it could also enhance existing divisions of

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power in society and create new gaps between the information haves and have-nots (Davis, 1999; Margolis et al., 1997; Selnow, 1998).

Among the earliest empirical research on the political impact of the Internet, the subject of political parties and their relationships with citizens online attracted considerable interest. The Internet gives politicians the opportunity to talk to the electorate directly, bypassing traditional news values and journalists' frames and interpretations. The transparency and interactivity provided by the Internet may also enable interested citizens to more readily hold politicians accountable. This might have positive consequences for confidence in government, which has been on the decline in many countries (Nye et al., 1997).

Scholars agree that the Internet offers citizens considerable opportunity for civic engagement. Margolis et al. (1999: 26–7) suggest three ways in which the Internet can facilitate citizen involvement: (1) citizens may be interested and informed about political issues and then look for the party or parties that support their policy preferences; (2) they may feel or know little about the issues and then look toward trusted political parties for information and guidance; and (3) citizens may become unhappy or bored with the political products that are readily available and may wish to survey the market to find out what else is being offered. Bruce Bimber (1999: 409) argues that the Internet expands the range of political involvement by offering

> new opportunities for citizens to engage in various political actions, such as attempting to persuade others how to vote, learning about issues or candidates, or attempting to coordinate or organize political action.

A key point is that the Internet gives citizens the opportunity to customize their news interests. Comparing opportunities offered by the Internet with those of other media, Doris Graber (2001: 110) concludes:

> . . . the information available to average citizens on the Internet, while in many ways similar to that available elsewhere, and certainly framed in similar terms, is richer and is packaged in ways that let the visitor control what he or she reads, hears, and views. . . . It is a nearly boundless treasure trove of political data.

The Internet also provides political parties with more opportunities to identify political support. According to Smith and Gray (1999: 439):

> ICTs have greater effect in strengthening the party's knowledge of the electoral landscape, and in allowing parties to move to take advantage of where majority opinion lies on that landscape.

The Internet in Societies in Transition

Research on the political role of the Internet has for the most part been limited to societies in which there has already been rapid growth in its use among the general public. There is a common profile to the demographic

characteristics of users in a number of the established democracies – Internet users tend to be better educated and better off financially than non-users (Norris, 2001). Candidates and political parties in these countries rely on the Internet as a new form of communication with their members and potential supporters.

When we consider the political role of the Internet in societies in transition, however, we first need to think about our comparative terminology. Russell Dalton (1996) reminds us that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, surveys found that many citizens in post-Soviet societies claimed to be supportive of democratic principles (Finifter and Mickiewicz, 1992; Gibson et al., 1992; Miller et al., 1993), and democratic norms and procedures (Dalton, 1994; McIntosh and MacIver, 1992; Weil, 1994). The earliest and strongest proponents of 'modernizing political change' in the former Soviet Union also tended to be 'the beneficiaries of those policies' (Finifter and Mickiewicz, 1992: 869). But as William Miller and his colleagues (1996: 126) note in their study of trends in public opinion during the 1993 Russian election campaign: 'The dominance of "the party" through 70 years of Soviet experience left voters in the former Soviet Union peculiarly allergic to the idea of committing themselves to any "party" '. They found that 31 percent of Russians identified with a political party just after the 1993 election. Another study on the 1995 Russian election found that the Communist Party was a source of 'public distrust of the actions of all political parties' (Pammett and DeBardeleben, 2000: 381). Other studies view the lack of a civic culture and the distrust of political parties as major problems in developing a functioning multiparty system in these post-Soviet societies (Klingemann and Watenberg, 1992; Rose, 1997; White et al., 1997). Because the term 'party' carries such a negative connotation, some political parties actually try to 'avoid the word itself' (White, 2000: 307). In sum, while democratic principles, norms and procedures may be admired, the political party, a primary institutional feature of established democracies, is not.

Other research by Arthur Miller and his colleagues on post-Soviet societies suggests that despite this lack of admiration for political parties, party identification has been on the increase over the past decade (Miller et al., 2000).[1] They go on to explain the origins of party identification in these societies, comparing the socialization hypothesis with the information processing/social learning hypothesis, based on analysis of the mass data. The socialization hypothesis suggests that partisanship develops over the period of one's lifetime, and leads us to expect that older cohorts exhibit higher rates of identification than younger ones especially in 1992 in these countries (Jennings and Niemi, 1974). Miller et al. (2000: 466) concluded, however, that while the data

> reveal virtually no support for the socialization hypothesis . . . [t]he available evidence strongly and consistently supports the information processing hypothesis.

The information processing or social learning hypothesis suggests that without a prior evaluative framework, learning proceeds on a piecemeal basis and those most attentive to information as well as those most educated or knowledgeable about politics (most capable of processing information) would be more likely to develop partisan identification (Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Lau and Sears, 1986). Miller et al. (1993: 470–1) also show that party identification 'strongly correlates with vote choice', and that 'party attachment not only reflects shared ideological and policy preferences, but that those who identify with different parties can be distinguished along policy cleavages'.

These findings point up the importance of sources of information not only for citizens but also for the building of democratic institutions in these societies in transition. We are broadly concerned with how established and new parties make use of the Internet in these societies.

Research Questions

Some research in established democracies has suggested that the Internet reinforces the current political structure by giving visibility to the most powerful parties (Margolis et al., 1997, 1999). Other research has suggested that the virtual political landscape gives more visibility to smaller or new parties and therefore presents the current political order with a challenge (Gibson and Ward, 1998; see also Gibson and Ward, 2002). In thinking about societies in transition, we ask:

RQ1: Does the virtual political arena mirror the actual political party landscape with respect to the numbers and types of political parties having a presence on the Web, or are some types of parties more visible on the Web than others? (For example, are parties in Parliament more likely to be visible on the Web than parties outside Parliament?)

Little is known about the quality of party websites in societies in transition. We therefore ask:

RQ2: To what extent are party websites accessible, interactive, user friendly and up-to-date?

Research conducted at election time in the USA and the UK has shown that traditional news websites are a more popular destination for Internet users than party or candidate websites (Research Center for the People and the Press, 2000). And although some traditional news media outlets in these countries are perceived to be politically biased by some citizens, it is generally accepted that the news media in the USA and UK operate independently from state control or government pressure (Semetko, 1996). In this respect, then, the information to be obtained from traditional news media websites in established democracies may be perceived to be more objective or credible than the information on party or candidate websites. In societies in transition, however, traditional news media are often under pressure from the government of the day to toe the party line, so to speak. The Assembly of the Council of Europe, for example, recently documented the many ways

that states or governments pressure and threaten news organizations and newsworkers in many societies in transition (Cherribi, in press). In these countries, therefore, traditional news media may not readily be perceived as any more independent or objective as a source of political information than partisan information sources. In thinking about societies in transition, we therefore ask:

RQ3: How important are party websites as sources of information for citizens in comparison with news websites?

Our research on the political role of the Internet focuses on two societies in transition that share a common border and the experience of the relatively recent introduction of democratic norms and procedures, two countries with similarly low levels of Internet use among the general public.

Russia and Ukraine

Russia and Ukraine are, geographically speaking, the largest countries in Europe, and, with 147 million and 50 million, rank number one and number five in terms of national populations in Europe. Both countries are members of the Council of Europe and have adopted legislation concerning the freedom of the press and the media, although in practice, and especially during election campaigns, there has been considerable favouritism towards the incumbent President or parties in power (Brants and Krasnoboka, 2001; Fossato and Kachkaeva, 2000; McFaul et al., 2000; Mickiewicz, 1997; Oates and Roselle, 2000). Both countries have been contemplating legislation to regulate and control the Internet, seen by the authorities as a source of non-objective information, whereas many journalists and those in opposition see it as a source of uncensored and objective information. In the January 2001 meetings of the Council of Europe, both countries were severely criticized for inhibiting freedom of expression via censorship, legal pressures and physical aggression against journalists. Ukraine in particular was singled out for human rights abuses.

Three recent examples serve to illustrate the perceived political importance of the Internet in these two countries:

- On 28 November 2000, Ukraine's President Kuchma and his colleagues were accused by Olexandr Moroz, the leader of the Socialist Party and parliamentary faction, of being involved in the recent disappearance and murder of a well-known journalist, Georgy Gongadze, who published a popular and critical online independent newspaper: *Ukrainska Pravda*, (http://www.pravda.com.ua).
- In a press conference in Russia in October 2000, the leader of the Communist Party said that he intended to visit all regional party offices and 'use a big stick' to make sure that party officials were using the Internet to its fullest so that the party could move away from its stereotype as an old-fashioned political force (http://www.lenta.ru).
- One year earlier, Boris Nemtsov, leader of the Young Russia Party,

credited the Internet with the development of his new political party (http://www.nemtsov.ru/rosmol/index.html).

These three examples illustrate a paradox. In Russia and Ukraine, in which the vast majority of the population remain too poor to buy a newspaper let alone to have access to equipment to get online, the Internet is nevertheless perceived by political elites as fundamentally important to the development of political democracy. We therefore investigate the unchartered territory of the political role of the Internet in these two societies in transition.

Research Methods

We begin by looking at party competition on the Internet. Armed with an inventory of political parties in these two countries we identify their main characteristics and then relate these to presence on the Internet. From this we are able to draw conclusions about the political role of the Internet with respect to its use by the different types of political parties.

While this may at first glance appear to be an easy task, the sheer number of registered political parties in these countries made it a daunting one. In addition, the commonly used categories for classifying political parties (Katz and Mair, 1995) are not readily applicable in the Russian and Ukrainian cases (Oversloot and Verheul, 2000).

Party Competition on the Internet

The Katz and Mair (1995) discussion of party types and party characteristics identifies four models of parties common in the literature on party development in Western democracies: elite party, mass party, catch-all party and cartel party. In response to this, Oversloot and Verheul (2000: 123) argue that in order to understand political parties in Russia it is important to add to this list a new party type, what they describe as the 'party of power'. They describe the concept in this way:

> What counts is being 'close to the king', close to the court. . . . The 'real party of power' is formed by the more or less closely knit group that has access to (those who have access to) 'the throne'. The 'real party of power' is not per se a registered, formal organisation, but it can and does (help) set up formal organisations, such as political parties, if the need arises.
>
> (2000: 133)

The concept of 'party of power' is also applicable to Ukraine, where political parties appear, unite, split and disappear with surprising regularity. Russia and Ukraine are still in the process of adopting legislation on political parties to provide a legal basis for their recognition and existence.

Our challenge is to classify political parties in a meaningful way in these two countries and to address questions about party characteristics and how

they relate to party competition online. We look first and foremost into whether the party is online or not, and how this relates to different party characteristics.

We base our classification on the parties elected in the last parliamentary elections in Russia (December 1999) and Ukraine (March 1998). We focus on parties that have been elected to the national Parliaments in these countries, and distinguish them from parties that were not elected. Since both countries have a mixed system of elections – proportional-majoritarian – we also indicate the form by which a party entered Parliament (via the party list or via a mandate for an individual candidate). To have been elected via a party list, the party would have to have received at least 5 percent of the popular vote in Russia and 4 percent in Ukraine.

Within Parliament, we distinguish between major and minor parties. We define a major party as one that came into Parliament via the party list, and also parties that play an important role in national politics by having a relatively stable and comparatively large electorate and are recognized by the majority of the population in the country. We also distinguish parties among factions. We introduce the category 'party of power' to reflect the special 'insider' importance of those parties that appear to be 'close to the throne' or close to the President.

As there are many parties, we also align them along a left–right continuum, to the extent that this is possible. We place the parties in one of three segments of the scale – Left–Center–Right – and although most observers would agree on the general direction of the place of the party, the exact positioning of a party relative to others within each of the three parts of the scale is open to discussion. For Russia this information is presented in Appendix A and for Ukraine in Appendix B. We can see in these appendices that several individual party names are also listed under the party block name. We can also see the name of the individual party website or whether or not the party had one; if there is an asterisk by the link then it means that it is now a dead website. There were 11 out of 36 dead websites in Russia by January 2001, and in Ukraine 4 (party) websites out of 28. The appendices are provided so that readers may inspect the data on which we base our major conclusions.

Quality of Party Websites

We also aimed to characterize the websites of different types of parties as of higher or lower quality, in terms of an overall general assessment based on the qualities most often mentioned as important by Internet researchers (De Landtsheer et al., 2001; Gibson and Ward, 1998; Margolis et al., 1999). We drew upon the key characteristics in the literature to analyse Russian and Ukrainian party websites to compare them in terms of interactivity, user friendliness, updatedness and accessibility. We rated party websites as having or not having these qualities.

Interactive is defined as at least one means by which the user could contact the party or communicate with party officials or other members via the website. User friendly is defined as having one or more easily identifiable options for navigating the website and search abilities. Examples of easily identifiable options for searching include a site-map and icons for a word search.

Here, a website is considered 'up-to-date' if it provides an account of recent political events, i.e. events that have taken place in the past 24 hours. Accessible refers to whether the website can be found through different national and international search engines, such as Yahoo, or whether the website has a name that is easy to remember and linked to the party. If the answer was 'yes' to either or both of these questions, we rated the website as accessible. We rated each characteristic as present or not present for each party website, and the content analysis was conducted in the month of February 2001.

Party Websites versus News Websites

We then look at political news competition on the Internet and visits to news websites in comparison with visits to party websites, to identify the more common sources of Internet information in these societies. We are interested in whether parties are able to compete with other sources of information on a relatively equal footing, and in what the most important sources of information are on the Internet.[2] We can then draw a number of conclusions about the importance of the online sources for political involvement and participation, broadly defined, in these societies in transition.

Findings

Visibility of Parties Online

Our first research question asked whether the virtual political arena mirrors the actual party landscape, or whether some types of parties are more visible online. Table 1 allows us to draw a number of conclusions about the types of parties visible online. First, parliamentary parties are more present on the Internet than those outside Parliament, especially in Russia where all parties and factions in Parliament are online. Second, in comparing parties that entered via the party list with those that won seats in majority districts, we see that in Russia both types are equally likely to be online, with 100 percent online. But in Ukraine those elected by the party list were twice as likely to be online as those elected in majority districts; this is probably a reflection of the fact that those coming in via the list are larger and more successful with more resources. Third, in comparing major and minor parties, we see that the latter, both inside and outside Parliament, are less often found on

the Internet than major parties. Fourth, parties of power are more likely to have websites and parties in factions are also more likely to have websites in both countries. Finally, all newly created parties in Parliament in both countries have websites. But newly created parties '*outside*' Parliament are less visible online: 50 percent in Russia and 20 percent in Ukraine have websites.

As we can see from Table 1, there are only two newly created parliamentary parties in Russia and four in Ukraine. New parties are defined as those created or officially registered after the last parliamentary elections in the country. In Russia at the time of the 1999 parliamentary elections, a number of relatively small parties grouped on the ballot into blocks. In 2000 a number then registered two All-Russian political civil organizations, with the names Unity and Union of Right Forces.

In the case of Ukraine, the creation of the new parties in Parliament was provoked by several factors. Party Fatherland appeared as a result of internal splits and problems within the Hromada Party after the arrest of Pavlo Lazarenko, the ex-prime minister and leader of Hromada. The Sobor Party appeared as a result of a split in the National Democratic Party (NDP), a former party of power. The Ukrainian National Rukh (UNR) and Yabluko emerged from the RUKH Party, and appeared after the tragic death of Vyacheslav Chornovil, leader of the RUKH Party, and the subsequent internal disagreements within that party.

Quality of Party Websites

Our second research question concerned the quality of party websites. This content analysis of party websites shows that in both countries interactivity is the least common characteristic, whereas the most frequent characteristic is user friendliness. Ukrainian party websites are more likely than Russian party websites to reflect updatedness or current political events. There was not much difference between the countries in terms of accessibility, over half of the parties displayed this characteristic in one or another way. We also distinguished between parties in Parliament and outside Parliament in both countries, and from this we can see that those in Parliament in both countries are more accessible, more up to date, more user friendly and more interactive. In Ukraine, however, the proportion of parties inside and outside Parliament that displayed interactivity was equally low (only one-third).

Table 2 displays these findings. The parties identified in bold are those that satisfied all characteristics. In the Russian Parliament, this included the only two 'new' parties that were elected in 1999 but registered officially in 2000 (Unity and Union of Right Forces) as well as four 'old' parties (Communist Party of Russian Federation, Fatherland-All Russia, Yabloko, Liberal Democrats). As these parties span the ideological continuum, the only thing they appear to have in common, apart from having high quality websites, is that they are major parties elected by the party list. Outside

Table 1. Party competition on the Internet: Russia and Ukraine (as of January 2001)

	Number of parties		*Number of parties with websites*		*Percentage of parties with websites*	
Parameter	*Russia*[†]	*Ukraine*	*Russia*	*Ukraine*	*Russia*	*Ukraine*
Parties in Parliament	12	28	12	19	100	67.9
Parties outside Parliament	85	65	27	10	31.8	15.4
Elected by party list	6	9	6	8	100	89
Elected in the majoritarian* district only	6	15	6	7	100	47
Major parties in Parliament	7	21	7	17	100	81
Minor parties in Parliament	5	7	5	2	100	30
Factions	6	13	6	12	100	92
Parties of power	4	5	4	3	100	60
New Parliamentary parties (major+minor)	2	4	2	4	100	100
Parties that competed but did not win seats	35	17	14	3	40	17.6
Major parties outside Parliament	8	6	5	4	62.5	67
Minor parties outside Parliament	70	24	18	0	25.7	0
New parties outside Parliament (major+minor)	8	30	4	6	50	20

[†] We do not count separately parties that have been united in pre-election blocks of parties Unity, Union of Right Forces, Liberal Democrats and Fatherland-All Russia.

* Single-member first-past-the-post.

Parliament there was only one party that satisfied all characteristics, the Russian National Unity Party, an extreme nationalist party. Of parties in the Parliament in Ukraine, only five satisfied all characteristics and three of these parties were 'new' (Fatherland, Sobor, Yabluko), whereas two were 'old' (Green Party, Communist Party of Ukraine). As in Russia, these parties span the ideological continuum, and they are major parties and were elected via the party list. The Communist Party websites in both countries are the highest quality party websites. Outside the Ukrainian Parliament there were only two parties that satisfied all characteristics and both were 'new' (All Ukrainian Chernobyl People's Party and United Family).

Content analysis of the quality of party websites reinforces the general conclusion we reached based on our review of party characteristics and their relationship to being online. The parties in Parliament have better quality websites than those outside Parliament in both countries.

Often, party leaders also have websites. In some cases, the party itself does not have a website or has only one page on the website of the leader. Our appendices therefore include references to party leader websites as well as party websites. For the Socialist Party of Ukraine, for example, much information can be found on the personal website of its leader Olexandr Moroz. The now 'dead' websites of Natalya Vitrenko, leader of the Ukrainian Progressive Socialists, and Yuriy Kostenko, leader of the Ukrainian National Rukh**,** also provided visitors with information about their political parties. Three key parties of the election block Union of Right Forces in Russia – Russia Young, New Force and Common Course – do not exist online separately from their leaders.

Political News Competition on the Internet

Our third and final research question inquired about the importance of party websites in comparison with news websites. Now that we know more about the importance of an online presence for political parties, let's consider the use of other sources of information on the Internet. One of the primary characteristics of using the Internet is that one has to be motivated and attentive to arrive at a website. Indeed, in its current form, the Internet requires the active involvement of users in the process of searching for information. That is why it sounds quite obvious that 'people search the Internet with particular destinations in mind' (http://www.vanishingvoter.org) and with particular, often very high, requirements for the quality of information and news.

We therefore sought to identify major sources of information on the Internet in Russia and Ukraine in order to see how often they are used in comparison with party websites. Here we compare the most popular website from a political party, a politician, a discussion forum, an online-only newspaper, an information server, an information agency, an online version of an offline newspaper and an online version of an offline television

Table 2. Quality of the websites*

Party	*Interactivity*	*User friendliness*	*Updatedness*	*Accessibility*
(a) RUSSIA				
In Parliament				
Communist Party of Russian Federation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
All-Russian Political Movement in Support of the Army	Yes	No	No	No
Fatherland-All Russia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yabloko	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Union of Right Forces	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Our Home is Russia	No	No	No	No
Liberal Democrats	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outside Parliament				
Women of Russia	No	No	No	No
Conservative Party of Russia	No	Yes	No	Yes
Open Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Honour and Fatherland	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
State	No	Yes	No	No
Russian Communist Workers' Party	No	No	Yes	No
Russian National Unity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Lefts	No	No	No	No
Social Democrats	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Social-Democratic Union 'May'	No	Yes	No	No
Black Sotnya	No	No	No	No
Russian Party of Communists	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Democratic Union	No	Yes	No	Yes
Russian National Socialist Party	No	Yes	No	No
Pamyat'	Yes	Yes	No	No
Russian Party of Future	No	Yes	No	Yes
Liberal Russia	No	Yes	No	Yes
Medjlis	No	No	No	Yes
(b) UKRAINE				
In Parliament				
RUKH	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Green Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NDP	No	No	No	Yes
Hromada	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
SDPU (united)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Democratic Union	No	No	No	Yes
Fatherland	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sobor	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
KPU	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socialist Party	No	Yes	Yes	No
Yabluko	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Liberal Party	No	Yes	No	No
Christian Democratic Party	No	Yes	No	No
Christian People's Party	No	No	No	Yes
Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists	No	No	Yes	No

Table 2. Continued

Party	*Interactivity*	*User friendliness*	*Updatedness*	*Accessibility*
Outside Parliament				
National Conservative Party	No	Yes	No	Yes
Slavic Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
UNCO	No	No	No	No
UNA	No	No	No	No
Beautiful Ukraine	No	No	No	No
All-Ukrainian Chornobyl People's Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
United Family	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Generation of Ukraine	No	Yes	No	Yes
Social Democratic Union	No	No	No	No

* The number of parties in the table is less than in Table 1. because some websites did not respond at the time of our quality content analysis.

channel. We selected one day in December 2000 and one in January 2001 with the highest number of visits, so these figures represent the high points of these months.

Figure 1 presents the results for Russia and Figure 2 those for Ukraine. Note that the range in the figures varies by up to 100,000 in Russia and by 30,000 in Ukraine. Hits on some websites actually exceed the top range in both figures, and this is why the actual number of hits on the websites are also displayed in the figures. It is worth noting that although the patterns are fairly similar in both countries, the frequency of unique hits on websites in Russia is three times greater than in Ukraine. That said, in both countries, party websites and leader websites are far less popular than the websites of other news sources. In both countries, the online-only newspaper is clearly the most important source of information. The number of hits on an online-only newspaper in Russia reached a high of 291,037 in January 2001, followed by the online sites of the offline television channel NTV, with 180,122 hits. In Ukraine, where the number of hits on websites is only one-third of what we have seen in Russia, the online-only newspaper is still by far the most popular source of information, with 37,478 hits in December and 30,630 hits in January, compared to January highs of 4,891 hits on a discussion forum site and 3,989 hits on the online equivalent of an offline newspaper. The online version of television news in Ukraine appears to be of little importance in Ukraine, with only 2,303 hits.

We can therefore conclude that when people have access to the Web, and when they are motivated and interested, the online newspaper (with no offline equivalent) is by far their most common destination.[3] Online versions of offline media are of less importance unless, as was the case in Russia, political repression or political issues are involved, which explains why there were so many hits on the website of NTV in early 2001. Party leader and party websites are of least importance.

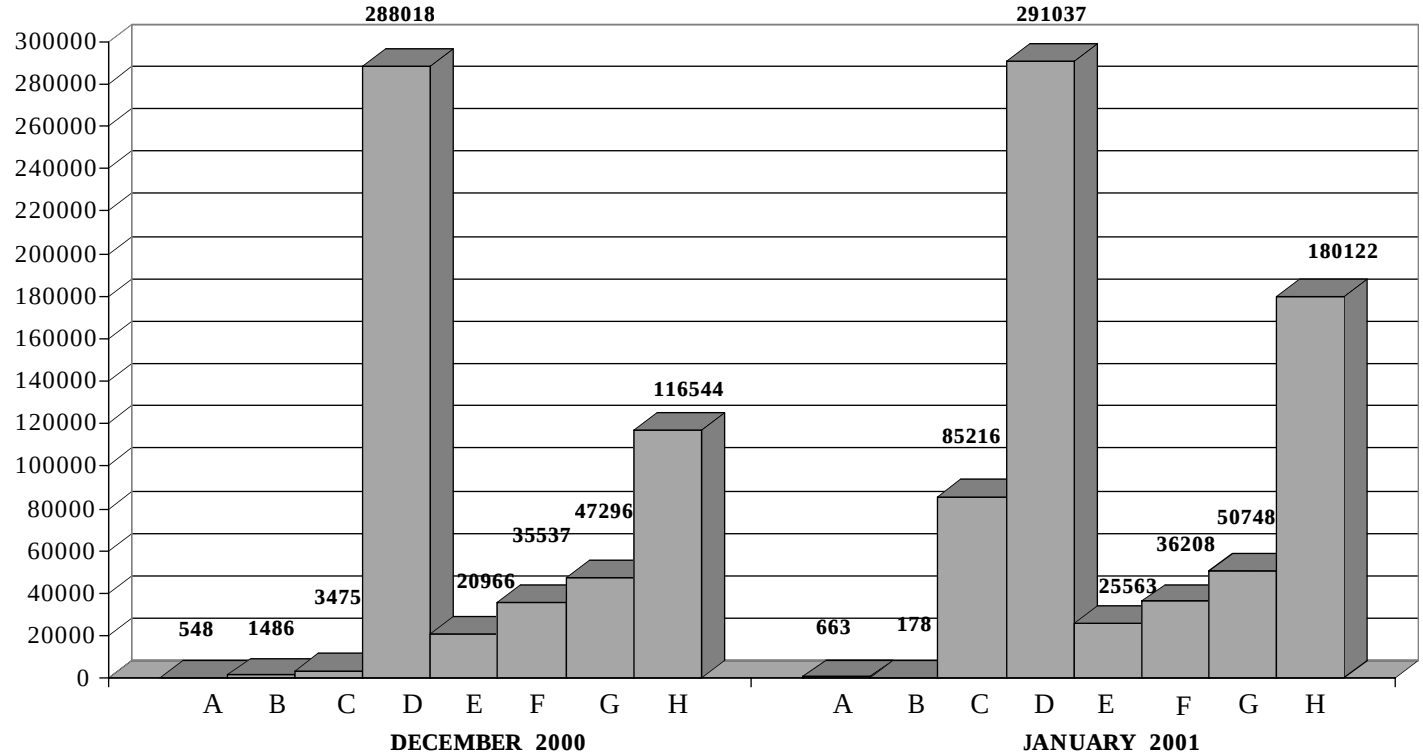

Figure 1. Political news competition on the Internet in Russia December 2000–January 2001

Notes: A – political party; B – party leader; C – discussion forum; D – online newspaper; E – information server; F – information agency; G – newspaper; H – television.

Source: LIST.RU.

Discussion

Our research shows very clearly that assumptions based on the political role of the Internet in established democracies do not always hold for societies in transition, where even the term 'political party' has a different connotation. At the same time, however, some of our results are similar to those found in developed democracies. In our study of the online presence of parties in Russia and Ukraine we found that major parties are more prominent, which corresponds with the findings of Margolis et al. (1997, 1999) in the study of American parties online. Our study also shows that 'new' political parties in these two countries sometimes have an even greater prominence online and better quality websites than 'old' parties. New parties in Russia and Ukraine, defined as those created after the previous parliamentary elections, are better equipped to compete with 'old' parties because of the Internet. This corresponds to some extent with the findings of Gibson and Ward (1998), who have argued that the Internet offers minor parties a more equal basis on which to compete with the major parties. As reported in this volume, however, more recent findings reveal a convergence in both countries toward the more normalized pattern of major party dominance.

During the 2000 US presidential election, research sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2000) found that there was little interest among the public in visiting the websites of political parties and candidates; when people were on the Internet they tended to go to websites of news organizations. This was also the case during the non-election period we studied here in Russia and Ukraine. But the low numbers of visitors to party websites in these two countries are also a consequence of the low visibility of many political parties on the Internet via links to other sites. Links to party websites are often absent in the top international and local search engines and databases. There is also little or no promotion of the political parties' websites in traditional media and in the parties' different communication channels. Whereas almost every advertisement or article in a Western newspaper now mentions a website address for further information, this is not common in Russia and Ukraine. In addition, many 'dead' websites of the political parties and otherwise complicated URLs for those that are still 'alive' play a negative role in attracting users' attention. Interactivity and updatedness, which are considered to be important parameters of the website, are the weakest features of the vast majority of these political party websites. With few exceptions, the political party websites do not 'justify' their virtual existence as something that is worth public attention.

Can we expect that in the future the best examples of parties online will set the standard for all party websites? While the expense of website registration and maintenance remains quite high for many political parties, the large number of unemployed technology specialists provides parties with relatively cheap labour. We conclude that the major reason for poor online presentation is the party's policy towards the Internet and the organizational

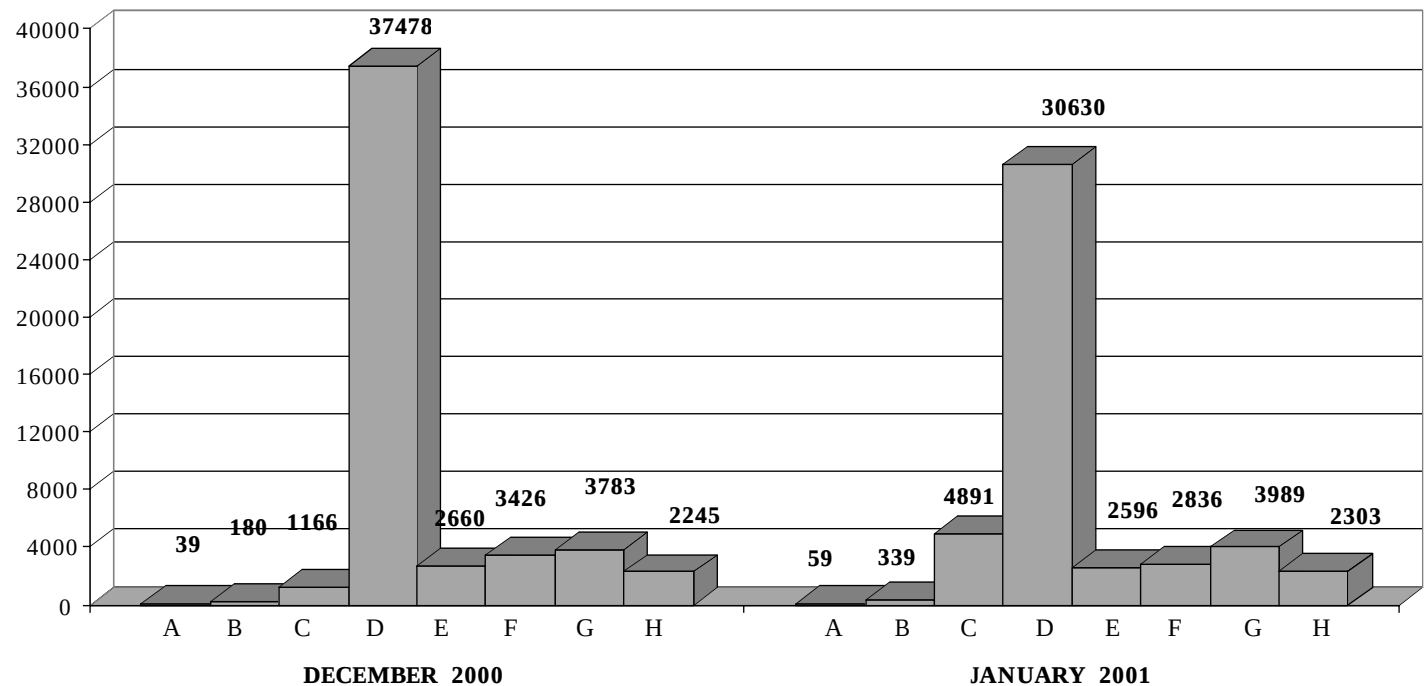

Figure 2. Political news competition on the Internet in Ukraine December 2000–January 2001

Notes: A – political party; B – party leader; C – discussion forum; D – online newspaper; E – information server; F – information agency; G – newspaper; H – television.

Source: PING.UA.

structure of the party. Only major political parties, mainly those represented in the national Parliament, have sufficient online presentation. The ideological affiliation of these parties is not important; most can be described as 'new' because of their relatively short history and general orientation (e.g. Greens, reformers, etc.). Parties with sufficient online presence generally have young leaders.

It is also worth noting that in many cases when both a party and the party leader have websites, the personal websites of the leaders are much more popular than the political party websites. This illustrates that the Web may also help to personalize politics in a way reminiscent of what Mickiewicz (1997) says of television in Russia. Parties are often created around leaders, rather than the other way around, and people tend to vote for leaders rather than for parties. Based on the numbers of visits to online sites, the Internet reinforces this trend.

The recent American (2000) and British (2001) elections suggest that the majority of Internet users in those countries are neither interested nor satisfied with the current stage of politics online (Crabtree, 2001). This is primarily relevant to the parties' presence online. The organizational structure of parties seems insufficiently flexible to react adequately to the demands of the Internet audience. At the same time, such a conclusion applies to the societies in transition studied here to a certain extent only.

The new type of 'authoritarian democracy' and the dominance of the ruling elite on the political scene and in traditional media pushes many parties in Ukraine and Russia to use the only free, cheap and accessible medium, namely the Internet, for their communication with citizens. Use of the Internet increased greatly after the recent scandals in Ukraine and Russia.[4] In Russia, the Internet played a considerable role in informing people about details of the NTV channel closure, whereas in Ukraine its role was crucial in the Gongadze affair and its aftermath. Unable to communicate to citizens through any traditional medium, leaders of the Ukrainian opposition turned to the Internet, regularly updating their websites and publishing forbidden material. The Socialist Party of Ukraine, for example, not only provided in-depth coverage of the conflict on the website of its leader Olexandr Moroz but also put major efforts into the support of its popular political newspaper *Grani-Plus* online. The coalition of the opposition forces immediately launched a new website, the Forum of National Salvation, which received one of the leading positions in the Internet ratings. Many opposition politicians have also taken all possible opportunity to give online press conferences.

The first decade of independence has not revealed considerable differences between these two major republics of the former Soviet Union in terms of election and media systems as they are formally or officially organized. Differences that exist in legislation (concerning media policy, for example) were as a rule diminished by political reality, which in both cases preserved many features of the old Soviet-style system. But Vladimir Putin's election

as President and current trends in Russian political and media affairs may signify serious movement towards a more authoritarian type of society, with the President as the leading authority. The political crisis that occurred in Ukraine at the end of 2000, however, set a completely different direction for political development, which introduces the possibility of closer cooperation with Western democracies and a new attempt to build a truly democratic state. It remains too early, however, to draw conclusions about the paths chosen by Russia and Ukraine.

Representative democracy based on the party system has become an example of political development for former socialist countries in eastern Europe. Although eastern European countries attempted to copy such a model, there are at least two key elements that distinguish parties in these societies in transition. As Lipset and Rokkan (1967) observed, traditionally the western European party systems are based on class and religious cleavages. This of course is not the case in eastern Europe, however, as witnessed by history and the political reality of Soviet times. The second reason is the negative connotation of party in eastern European countries, as mentioned at the outset of this article. This may be changing, however, because the research of Arthur Miller et al. (2000) suggests that party systems are beginning to emerge in these countries.

Parties in Russia and Ukraine find themselves in situations quite different from those in western Europe after the end of the Second World War. At that time, it was expected that in democracies

> . . . citizens develop general orientations toward the parties in order to reduce the complexity of the political processes to a level congruent with their own capabilities and motivations to participate.
>
> (Kaase and Marsh, 1979: 40)

When party development began in eastern and central Europe after so-called velvet revolutions that began in 1989, however, many citizens in these countries remained sceptical about the value of parties to, in the words of Kaase and Marsh (1979: 40), 'reduce the complexity of the political process'. Such a political environment forced political parties to find ways by which to obtain credibility, attract public attention and gain support. By the end of the 1990s, a visible presence on the Internet became one common approach taken by many parties, though as we have shown for Russia and Ukraine the quality of the information presented, coupled with citizens' scepticism and comparatively low accessibility to the Web, means that the challenge facing political parties in these societies in transition remains substantial.

Our comparison of the use of party and party leader websites alongside other sources of information on the Internet shows that in both countries the online-only newspaper was the most popular destination. Online versions of offline media became important when the offline outlet was politically threatened or challenged, as in the case of NTV in Russia.[5] Citizens turn to the online sources to obtain more information than is

available in offline media, as well as uncensored or, as some political observers say, less censored, information about political developments in these societies. From this perspective, the Internet may be seen as a vehicle for fuelling political protest (see also Beissinger, 1998, 2002).

Online-only media therefore appear to have more credibility as a source of information for Internet users in these societies in transition than offline media online. This is in contrast to established democracies, such as the USA or the UK, for example, where hits on websites of online versions of offline media are far more common than hits on online-only media. This difference is a reflection of the political constraints under which journalists in these societies are working. For example, Wu et al. (1996: 544), based on a survey of 1000 Russian journalists conducted in 1992, concluded

> . . . we can still see the traits of the role of agitator in Russian journalists. They believe more in such active roles as setting the political agenda and developing the interests of the public, *but not in investigating government claims*. (Emphasis added)

They note that their survey measures only attitudes and not behaviours and that Russia at that time was a place 'where an empire has disappeared, a political system has collapsed, and a new economic system is being created' (Wu et al., 1996: 545). They also note, writing in the mid-1990s, that Russia lacked established strong political parties and that without these, 'it is possible that the idea of journalistic independence carries little significance' (Wu et al., 1996: 544).

Whereas journalists in established democracies have considerable freedom to criticize the government of the day, in Russia and Ukraine and many societies in transition, this kind of behaviour can result in a variety of forms of pressure being brought to bear on the individual journalist and/or news organization. In 2001, the Committee on Culture, Science and Education (2001) in the Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE) reported numerous cases of violence against journalists and human rights abuses in CoE member countries. Ukraine was mentioned as one of several countries that still has legislation permitting the government to imprison a journalist for voicing his or her opinions. The report singles out the tragic case of online journalist Georgy Gongadze and calls for the government to complete a proper investigation of the circumstances surrounding his disappearance and alleged murder. According to Cherribi (in press), in these societies in transition: 'Censorship is not only brought about through violence. Legitimate arms of the state are often used to intimidate journalists and media organizations'. Arms of the state include the tax office, police and fire inspection officials, for example. For those who are opposed to or critical of governing authorities, it is under these most threatening of circumstances that the Internet provides an opportunity for communication and for obtaining information that would not otherwise be found in traditional media outlets.

Appendix A. Characteristics of political parties/blocks elected to the Russian Parliament

	Party	*Elected*		*Major party*	*Faction*†	*Party of power*	*Website*
		Party list	*District*				
LEFT	Russian Socialist Party	0	1	No	No	No	http://www.bryntsalov.ru*
LEFT	Communist Party of Russian Federation	67	46	Yes	Yes (87)	No	http://www.kprf.ru
LEFT	Pensioners' Party	0	1	No	No	No	http://www.pensioner.org *
LEFT	All-Russian Political Movement in Support of the Army	0	2	No	No	No	http://www.gull.ptt.ru/Asm/index.htm
CENTRE	Fatherland – All Russia	37	30	Yes	Yes (45)	Yes	
CENTRE	– Fatherland						http://www.luzhkov-otechestvo.ru
CENTRE	– All Russia						http://www.otechestvo.org*
CENTRE	– Agrarian Party						http://www.all-russia.ru*
CENTRE	– For Equality and Justice						http://www.allrussia.kzn.ru
CENTRE	– Union of Christian Democrats of Russia						http://www.apr.org.ru:8101*
CENTRE	Yabloko	16	5	Yes	Yes (19)	No	http://www.yabloko.ru http://www.youth.yabloko.ru
CENTRE	Unity (Bear)	64	8	Yes	Yes (84)	Yes	http://www.edinstvo.org * http://www.blok-edinstvo.ru
CENTRE	– People's Patriotic Party						http://www.edin.ru
CENTRE	– Political Movement 'My Family'						http://www.moledin.nm.ru
CENTRE	– All-Russia Union in Support of Small and Medium Business						
CENTRE	– Generation of Freedom						http://www.freegeneration.ru*
CENTRE	– Refakh						
CENTRE	– Russian Christian Democratic Party						http://www.aha.ru/~rcdp

Appendix A. Continued

	Party	Elected: Party list	Elected: District	Major party	Faction†	Party of power	Website
CENTRE	Union of Right Forces	24	5	Yes	Yes (33)	Yes	http://www.duma-sps.ru http://prav.ru http://www.pravoedelo.spb.ru http://www.pravdelo.ru (election site) http://www.spsnet.ru:8101 (regional network)
	– Democratic Choice of Russia						http://www.dvr.ru
	– New Force						http://www.kirienko.ru
	– Russia Young						http://www.rosmol.ru* http://www.nemtsov.ru/rosmol/index.html
	– Common Course						
	– Party 'Democratic Russia'						http://www.hakamada.ru
	– Peasants' Party of Russia						
	– Party of Economic Freedom						http://www.dr.ru
	– Russian Party of Social Democracy						
	– Russian Tax Payers						
	– Free Democrats of Russia						
	– Social-Federalist Party of Russia						
	Our Home is Russia	0	7	Yes	No	Yes	http://www.ndr.spb.ru* http://www-win.convey.ru/ndr http://www.ohr.ru
RIGHT	Congress of Russian Communities and Movement of Boldyrev	0	1	No	No	No	http://www.kro.ru* http://www.boldyrev.ru
	Russian All-People's Union	0	2	No	No	No	http://www.ros.ru*
	Liberal Democrats	17	0	Yes	Yes (14)	No	http://www.ldpr.ru
	– Liberal Democratic Party of Russia						
	– Party of Spiritual Renewal of Russia						http://home.ptt.ru/pdvr
	Russian Union of Free Youth						

† Members of some Parliamentary parties and non-party members of the Parliament have joined/created factions of Agricultural-Business Deputies' Group, National Deputy Group, Regions of Russia.
* 'Dead' websites as for January 2001.

Appendix B. Characteristics of political parties elected to the Ukrainian Parliament

		Elected					
	Party	*Party list*	*District*	*Major party*	*Faction*[†]	*Party of power*	*Website*
LEFT	Progressive Socialist Party	14	2	Yes	Yes (liquidated Feb. 2000)	No	http://www.vitrenko.kiev.ua/*
	Communist Party	84	31	Yes	Yes (111)	No	http://www.kpu.kiev.ua
	Party Union	0	2	No	No	No	No
	Peasants Party	10	2	Yes	Yes (liquidated Feb. 2000)	Yes	No
	Socialist Party	19	3	Yes	Yes (16)	No	http://alexmoroz.virtualave.net
	Agrarian Party	0	10	Yes	No	Yes	No
CENTRE	National Democratic Party	17	11	Yes	Yes (20)	Yes	http://ndp.org.ua
	Hromada	16	7	Yes	Yes (liquidated Feb. 2000)	No	http://www.hromada.kiev.ua
	Fatherland			Yes	Yes (32)	No	http://www.fatherland.freeservers.com http://www.tymoshenko.kiev.ua
	Democratic Party	0	1	Yes	No	No	No
CENTRE	Party of Justice	0	1	No	No	No	No
	Democratic Union	0	1	No	No	Yes	http://www.demunion.kiev.ua
	Sobor			Yes	No	No	http://www.sobor.org.ua http://www.matvienko.kiev.ua
	Yabluko			Yes	Yes (14)	No	http://www.yabluko.org.ua/ http://www.ussr.to/Ukraine/apple
	Party Reforms and Order	0	3	Yes	Yes (15)	No	http://reformy.org.ua* http://www.bt.lviv.net/club/prp/index.htm
	Social Democratic Party (united)	14	12	Yes	Yes (33)	Yes	http://sdpu.inter.kiev.ua http://www.medvedchuk.com.ua http://www.surkis.kiev.ua/
	Party of Regional Renewal of Ukraine	0	2	No	No	No	No
	Inter-Regional Block of Reforms	0	1	Yes	No	No	No
	Liberal Party	0	1	Yes	No	No	http://ln.com.ua/~lpu/
	Green Party	19	1	Yes	Yes (17)	No	http://www.greenparty.org.ua
	Social National Party	0	1	No	No	No	No

Appendix B. Continued

Party	Elected		Major party	Faction†	Party of power	Website
	Party list	*District*				
NRU	32	14	Yes	Yes (17)	No	http://www.rukhpress-center.kiev.ua http://www.rukh.org.ua http://www.mr.org.ua
UNR			Yes	Yes (23)	No	http://Yuriy-Kostenko.gluk.org/*
Christian Democratic Party of Ukraine	0	3	Yes	No	No	http://www.cdpu.org.ua/
Ukrainian Christian Democratic Party	0	1	No	No	No	No
Christian People's Union	0	1	No	No	No	http://www.hns.kiev.ua
Republican Party	0	2	Yes	No	No	http://www.urp.org.ua*
Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists	0	3	Yes	No	No	http://www.angelfire.com/celeb/stetsko http://users.iptelecom.net.ua/~1981ssss

† Members of some Parliamentary parties and non-party members of the Parliament have joined/organized factions of Solidarity, Working Ukraine and Renewal of Regions.
* 'Dead' websites as for January 2001.

Notes

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1 The percent identifying a party as representing their interests in Russia rose from 16 in 1992 to 61 in 1997 among the mass public and from 42 to 66 among elites; in Ukraine, the comparable figures went from 12 percent to 27 percent among the mass public and 17 percent to 54 percent among the elite (Miller et al., 2000: 462: Table 1). The study goes beyond previous research with mass and elite samples in three countries at three time points, and offers a more valid three-item measure of party identification than the single-item measures used in previous studies by White et al. (1997) or Colton (1996). Mass publics and elites in Russia, Ukraine and Lithuania were asked 'if there was a party that represented their interests, and 2) if so, which one, and 3) how much they had in common with that party' in 1992, 1995 and 1997 (Miller et al., 2000: 462 ff.). The measure captures a sense of psychological attachment to a party or closeness to a party, and it was further validated by the fact that only a small number said that their chosen party did not represent their interests well.

2 There are several rating websites in Russia and Ukraine that register hits and hosts to different national/local websites on an hourly/daily/weekly/monthly basis. We use these as reliable sources, as there have been very few complaints or negative reactions to the content and manner of these websites. We have used the most prominent ratings websites at the time the data were collected to measure hits: LIST.RU for Russia and PING.UA for Ukraine.

3 When we look more closely at the day-to-day patterns of hits to these news sources, we can see that there is a similar pattern across all outlets, though the online-only newspaper is far more popular than the others. The number of hits to the online-only newspaper site Lenta.RU is sometimes more than three times that of the next most popular site, the online version of the television news channel NTV. Information about the day-to-day hits on these websites during this period can be obtained from the authors.

4 The biggest political scandal to hit Ukraine since independence occurred in October 2000. The President of the country was accused of being responsible for the murder of well-known Internet journalist Georgy Gongadze. The special rating website PING.UA registered unimaginable growth in the number of visitors to the political and, especially, news websites. Within a month after the beginning of the scandal the online newspaper launched by Gongadze, for example, registered one million unique visits when, officially, Ukraine had only 400,000 users of the Internet at that time.

5 In March–April 2001 the most popular Russian television channel NTV faced allegations and problems that finally forced the key-team of NTV journalists to leave the station. Unable to receive any adequate information in traditional media,

many people in Russia then turned to the Internet as an objective and limitless source of information on the conflict.

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