

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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In Defense of the “Fathers”:

A Closer Look at Eugene Gorny and Roman Leibov

In early May 2010, a scandal raged over the Russian blogosphere—Russian philologists Eugene Gorny and Roman Leibov, neither of whom have any technological background, were named “Founding Fathers of the Russian Internet” on the pages of a program for a weekend conference titled, “The Etiology and Ecology of Post-Soviet Communication,” at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute. The “founding fathers” designation resulted in a heated internet debate about the Russian internet (runet)—some argued about technological qualifications, while others questioned how the internet, which is a conglomeration of everybody’s ideas, could have any “fathers” at all. The truth of the matter is that Gorny, who had suggested the name in order to provoke, had used it ironically. “You have to be an idiot to take this hyperbole seriously,” Gorny stated at the conference. However, the statement did have a grain of truth—both men played a significant role in shaping the cultural evolution of runet.

The scandal started when Russian LiveJournal (ZheZhe-ЖЖ) user “geish-a” posted a link advertising Gorny and Leibov’s panel, “Understanding the Russian Blogosphere,” on the ЖЖ listserv “ru_nyc_events.” The post received 418 comments. “Who are these ‘so-called’ fathers? How can they claim “fatherhood” when they have no technological background?” users shouted into the blogosphere. Later, ЖЖ user “labas” re-published (in his very popular blog) a letter sent by Dr. Stas Polansky, a research staff member at the IBM T.J. Watson Research Center, first to the conference organizers, and then to Columbia University’s President Lee Bollinger, “I actively use Russian internet since early 90ies and I have never heard of these two individuals,” he wrote.

ЖЖ is the most active venue in the Russian blogosphere. Ironically, “self-proclaimed ‘father”” Roman Leibov is responsible for introducing it to the Russian community. If you Google the phrase “История создания ЖЖ” most sites identify Leibov as the author of the first Cyrillic post, including a February 27, 2007, *New York Times*

opinion piece titled, “All Power to Russian Bloggers,” which reads: “The Russian-language community on Zhivoi Zhurnal, or ZheZhe for short, got off to a typically Russian, intellectualized start in early 2001, when Roman Leibov, a literary scholar and social critic, launched the first Russian-language blog. His initial entry: “*Let’s try this in Russian. What a funny little thing.*”

In actuality, Andrei Tolkachev wrote the first Cyrillic post on November 30, 1999. However, Tolkachev did nothing beyond posting a couple of sentences, while Leibov made 18 posts (in different genres) within the first day of his registration with LiveJournal. “He went on writing and experimenting and missed not a single day that February,” Gorny wrote in his 2004 article about ЖЖ, published on Russian-cyberspace.org. Leibov was already an established philologist with a following, and his posts quickly attracted the attention of other Russian speakers.

Unlike the English-speaking blogosphere, where LiveJournal serves largely as an outlet for teenage journal entries, ЖЖ became the cornerstone of cultural, political and creative expression in the Russian-speaking blogosphere. About 45 percent of Russian bloggers are ЖЖ users, and Russia is second only to the United States as the world’s most prominent LiveJournal customer—coming in ahead of both Canada and the UK. Political figures, journalists and pundits post to ЖЖ—President Dmitry Medvedev started a blog there in April 2009.

“You will note that our announcement reads “founding fathers of the Russian internet,” not “THE founding fathers of the Russian internet,”” Barnard Professor Catharine Nepomnyashchy wrote in response to Polansky (Nepomnyashchy, former Director of the Harriman Institute, co-organized the conference as part of the Harriman Institute’s 2009-2010 Core Project, “New Modes of Communication in the Post-Soviet World.”), “Indeed Eugene Gorny and Roman Leibov were among the earliest shapers of the Russian internet, particularly in the cultural sphere, which may be why you are not familiar with their work.”

In 1999, Gorny made it into the “Top 25 leaders of Russian Internet” in *Internet Magazine*. In 2004, he was listed as one of the “Magnificent 20”—a list of people (elected by the International Union of Internet Professionals—EZhE) who contributed most significantly to the development of runet. Leibov also made this list, appearing on it in 2004, and 2005.

Gorny was one of the first people to write about runet. Starting in 1994, he worked as a journalist in Tallinn, covering a variety of topics ranging from astrology to new technologies and the internet. “I read a lot of Western press and would translate or re-tell interesting articles about internet technology to a public that perceived all of this as complete science fiction,” he said. Not many people were writing about the internet at the time and Gorny developed a reputation as “an expert on computer initiatives.” In 1996 he became the editor-in-chief of *Zhurnal.ru*, the first Russian journal about the internet, which later grew into a conglomerate of web sites, “an entire network of online creativity,” Gorny explained.

Nepomnyashchy’s answer about the cultural sphere did not seem to satisfy Polansky, who took the matter to President Bollinger. “I would like to draw your attention to the unhealthy situation that might compromise the outstanding reputation of Columbia University,” he wrote. Bollinger’s office supported Nepomnyashchy’s response. The exchange with Polansky, posted by “labas,” resulted in 176 comments on ЖЖ, involving over 20 different users. “As usual, one group creates, and another tries to take the credit,” commented a user called “kamushka.” “I’ve been surfing the internet since 1992, and also don’t remember these “fathers.” Who are these self-promoters?” posted the user “svl.”

Nepomnyashchy moderated Gorny and Leibov’s talk, which took place on the opening night of the conference, May 7, 2010. Despite the heated rhetoric, none of the protestors made it to the discussion. “This is typical of the blogosphere, that these people will not de-virtualize,” reflected an audience member. Nepomnyashchy got to the point, asking the speakers to explain why, in some circles, they are referred to as “fathers of the Russian internet.”

Gorny, who wore a black t-shirt with a red anarchy symbol, leaned back in his chair and reminisced. “In 1994, a friend of ours had just come from America and told us about the internet. This was when everything was still very primitive—green letters on a black screen.” Gorny and Leibov went to a computer center and created internet accounts. “At first we were just fooling around. This was like a toy for us, exploring the

opportunities of a new technology,” recalled Gorny.

Leibov described his first attempts to understand hypertext. “I remember clearly how I learned the rules of html. My first hypertext was called ‘How Gorny read hypertext.’” For those of us who have gotten so used to it we’ve forgotten the name, hypertext is the building block for the World Wide Web—a text that contains links to other texts, or, as Wikipedia describes it: “Hypertext is text displayed on a computer or other electronic device with references (hyperlinks) to other text that the reader can immediately access, usually by a mouse click or keypress sequence” (Wikipedia).

“This was an incredible time because the internet was uncharted territory—we could do whatever we wanted with it, it was boundless. This was an awesome feeling that only lasted a short while,” Gorny said, erecting his posture. “For instance, having an article about music with a link to ram files (the predecessor to mp3s)—no one had ever done that before.”

The pair started out with games—literary games. Both “fathers” finished the same department at the University of Tartu in Estonia. “We are not just philologists, but specialists in the history of Russian literature—colleagues in a very narrow sense of the word,” specified Leibov.

Naturally, Gorny and Leibov focused their cyberspace pursuits on a wide variety of online creativity, including literary topics. “Everything that concerned literary games already existed. These games not only entertained us—helped us pass nights by making up silly little poems, which were sometimes quite funny—but they also demonstrated that we could invent something for ourselves,” Leibov related. Back then, he was spending a semester at the University of Stockholm, and facing constant criticism from his friend Peter A. Jensen, a professor of literature. “Mr. Jensen would look at me; his eyes magnified by the thick lenses of his glasses, and express how much it upset him that I was wasting my time playing silly little internet games.”

Leibov wanted to prove Jensen wrong, “the only way I could do that was to turn my work with hypertext and Russian literature into something that he would understand.” Leibov compiled a list of all of the Slavic Departments in the world, “which was actually still possible at the time.” This project, launched in 1997, was called “Russian Studies on the Web.” Leibov stressed that this was before the existence of the search engine Alta Vista. “Alta Vista occurred during the compilation of this list.” Leibov admitted that he wasn’t able to convince Jensen. He did, however, develop

Ruthenia.ru—a large website for Slavists, launched in 1999.

Gorny and Leibov had a friend, Dmitry Itzkovich, from the University of Tartu. “He didn’t graduate, but moved to Moscow and dabbled in various endeavors—at one point he was sharpening knives, then he started a publishing house,” recounted Leibov. Itzkovich came up with the idea of publishing a magazine about the internet. At the time, Leibov had been in Kiev with Itzkovich. “He asked me whom I saw as the editor in chief of the journal and I said, ‘Well, Gorny, of course.’ He’d had the same idea.”

Gorny immediately agreed and prepared for his move to Moscow. “I started gathering contributors from within the small community of people who were interested in the internet, and looking to do something creative with this new technology.” Gorny said that it was laughable how tiny this community really was. Everyone he asked to participate agreed, and by October 1996 they published the first issue of *Zhurnal*, both online and in print. “This was the first online publication in Russia that talked about the internet as a cultural phenomenon,” explained Gorny.

During the journal’s initial stages, it remained nameless. “It was referred to in correspondence as simply a ‘journal,’ or ‘our journal,’” Gorny wrote in his book, *A Creative History of the Russian Internet*. “When the time came to register a domain, Itzkovich and Gorny complained to Eugene Peskin, who worked at Russia-on-Line, about not having a name for their journal. He exclaimed, ‘But you’ve got a great name already!’ This was probably the first use of the combination of a generic term and a first-level domain name as the name of a server on the Russian internet.” *Zhurnal.ru*, which, in Russian, simply means “journal/magazine,” set a precedent—later other online media outlets used the same format to name themselves. This was the case with the online paper *Gazeta.ru*—the word *gazeta* means newspaper.

“The story of *Zhurnal* was short, but quite turbulent,” Gorny conveyed. The journal lasted for about two years—there were seven issues, five of which also came out in print. The magazine involved “the majority of creative internet figures in Russia.”

Leibov wrote the cover story for the first issue, which was an article describing how to use the internet for game playing. “It was about the deconstruction of accepted ways of using the web,” specified Gorny. Vadim Maslov wrote about the pre-history of the internet. Anton Nossik wrote about various topics, including net sex, and Leonid Delitsyn, who later played a big part in

Rambler.ru, developed *Zhurnal*’s business section. “Artemy Lebedev made the design for the first issue, but we didn’t like working with him because we had new ideas and his design was too rigid to incorporate them,” Gorny commented.

Zhurnal came to an end rather quickly—the participants worked mostly on a voluntary basis and eventually the enterprise ran out of money. The journal finished “both for internal reasons and as a result of the changing times,” elucidated Gorny. “The journal itself constituted only a small fraction of the entire project. *Zhurnal* policy was to stimulate online creativity; therefore, it gave web space, technical and organizational support to innovative online projects initiated by the members of its distributed staff,” Gorny wrote in his book.

Gorny and Leibov moved to other projects, all of which had their seeds in *Zhurnal*. Gorny co-created the Russian Virtual Library, with Vladimir Litvinov and Igor Pilshchikov. This is a site featuring digital academic editions of Russian classics with commentary, references and various articles about the works. “One of our projects was a site where contemporary authors are published,” This was called “Setevaya Slovesnost” (<http://netslova.ru>). “Another project was Polit.ru, which emerged as a rubric of *Zhurnal*.”

Gorny, who wrote a dissertation on the topic, defined himself as an “historian of the Russian internet.” He confessed that he finds being an historian “psychologically taxing.” Nothing is surprising, “most things have occurred before, and often they were even worse the last time.” Participating in this particular niche has made it difficult for Gorny to communicate with people outside of his field. “They don’t understand your citations, allusions, your jokes—this is difficult because first you have to explain what you said, and then you have to explain what you explained,” lamented Gorny. Leibov interjected that the phenomenon is not unique to historians.

As for the term “founding fathers,” it is an ironic name that grew out of a brainstorming session. “We were looking for something to call our process. This is just a funny name for me—akin to calling ourselves ‘gods’ or ‘supermen,’ or the fathers of Russian Democracy and Fascism all at once,” Gorny remarked, adding that the name does have an historical dimension. “In internet discourse it is very important that there is a distinction between users and creators. The creators, or “fathers,” as we have called them, are a relatively significant group who were there from the beginning—people who gave birth to certain forms that developed further.”

Gorny predicts a bleak future for runet. “The Russian internet has become less creative than it once was. It is rolling towards death and destruction.”

Leibov, who told Gorny that he would like to see him defend his statement, commented on censorship and its impact on the future of Russian internet: “We know that creativity is to a considerable degree connected to limits, because you have to overcome them. As Pushkin once said, ‘you have to encounter difficulty in order to overcome it.’” Of course, Leibov acknowledged that he would prefer an internet without external limits. “But limits do help by raising the value of overcoming them.”

Gorny regrets that the increased popularity of the internet has brought with it a simplification and standardization of content. “More and more people keep coming and it is becoming terrible, like the fairytale *Teremok*,” a Russian fable about a little wooden house—a mouse finds it, then more and more animals start to come, it becomes too much, and the whole thing collapses.

As more people started using runet, the blogosphere became overwhelmed with jargon—curse words, abbreviations, broken grammar. Leibov reasoned that such a sub-culture made sense, given the “overemphasis on correct grammar” in Russia. “This rigid attitude could not

help but provoke such things. People who are making mistakes want to hide them by purposely breaking the rules—hiding a small tree in a large forest,” he reasoned.

Gorny was evidently more distraught than his colleague to see a community that started as a “high counter-culture,” level off. “Even those who once came across as intellectuals are starting to curse and use slang like there is nothing wrong with it. Individualism is becoming unfashionable. This has led to the erosion of individual interests; people are discussing the same movies, events—a foolish infinity of things that can be seen on TV.” (Leibov thanked Gorny for “an interesting summary of de Tocqueville”).

Despite these gloomy predictions, Gorny and Leibov continue in their endeavors with the Russian Internet. Leibov teaches in the Department of Slavic Philology at the University of Tartu, and Gorny has just spent a year participating in the Harriman Institute’s Core Project. The two may not be THE Founding Fathers of the Russian Internet, but they have certainly played their part in shaping it.

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner