

Speech delivered at the Annual Membership Meeting 2011 by Alexander Yolkin, TI Russia/ Vice-president of Intellectual Movement "Lebed".

I would like to tell you about a success story of promoting transparency in a particular region of Russia.

Several years ago, an intellectual movement called Lebed (which stands for “the swan” in Russian) was created with the aim to bring together intellectuals, journalists, scientists and public figures of the Vladimir region in Russia. The goal of the movement was to unite the efforts of modern thinking people of the region to develop tools for efficient civic activism. From the very beginning we knew that the movement will be in contact with the [Center for Anti-Corruption Research and Initiative Transparency International Russia](#) (TI Russia), because the main field for civic activism in our country in recent years is anti-corruption.

By August 2008, our colleagues from TI Russia launched [Askjournal.ru](#) – an anti-corruption online helpdesk. The project consists of a set of instructions and documents that help people overcome administrative barriers and build relationships with government bodies in a legal and transparent way. In 2008, the penetration of the internet in Russian regions was relatively low, which resulted in many vulnerable groups of citizens not being able to experience the benefits of the internet. Hence, the Lebed Movement and TI Russia decided to open the first regional ALAC in Vladimir together.

During the first year we received a lot of calls and requests, most of which could not be solved by general instructions from the website. Thus our ALAC started working in a similar way to other ALACs: providing legal consultations, helping to file appeals to the prosecutor’s office and to the courts. But the number of complaints that could not be solved without participation of the media and without public support kept growing.

Therefore, we decided to develop an independent instrument to expose all of those problems on the Internet.

Our first step was to create our own [regional online media](#). In Russia, the publication of information on NGO activities in traditional print or electronic media, especially regional ones, is almost impossible. Therefore we had to find a way to be heard.

The present level of IT development allowed us to create a sufficient resource to convey our messages and to influence decision-making processes on the regional level. It was necessary to reach the right audience, which can be divided into three groups.

The first group is made up of the opinion leaders: journalists, editors and popular bloggers. Our publications and the resulting discussions raise important issues professionally which are often picked up by other regional media. Additionally, journalists

who are well informed and are able to provide lively comments, often reveal things which would otherwise remain secret. Some of them are anonymous users of our resource as they do not want to lose their jobs. And we guarantee them their anonymity. But there are those who have voiced their opinion openly, and our site is a solid ground for them to do so.

The second group of users consists of those citizens who are interested in the public life and everything to do with it, but who cannot get unbiased, timely and accurate information about it in the region. Our regional online media portal gives them such an opportunity and allows them to share their opinions. It also informs them about activities in the public sphere in the region in which they can possibly participate.

The third group is public officials. Attracting them to our portal was the most challenging task. But at this point I do not know of any official, regional or local deputy, who does NOT visit our website at least twice a week, checking posts and comments. Many of them refer to the portal in their public speeches when accounting for their actions and, of course, treat the content of the website seriously.

Our online media is not political; it is not for or against the government. Nevertheless, we regularly witness attempts of authorities to put pressure on us for publishing undesirable materials or comments. But thanks to a well-designed legal status of the portal, all these attempts remain unsuccessful at the moment.

As of September, 2011, we get about six thousand unique visitors a day.

Since the start of the project two years ago, we helped to solve some major problems of our region. And we now get more complaints to our ALAC about local problems that we can realistically solve. Not all of these problems had to do with corruption, but they are always related to the city and regional economy or to the use of budgetary funds or the regional administration and development. Therefore, these issues also fall under our mission. But how can we make them heard, how do we get the government to address them, how can we make sure that our ALAC is not overloaded with all of those issues?

As a solution to this problem we introduced the ["Map of the problems of the region"](#) in 2010.

It is an interactive map, which brings together a variety of problems, categorise and place them on a map.

In order to post those problems to the map any citizen can use the form on the site, a hotline, e-mail or regular mail. Once the issue is published, it is passed on for consideration by our lawyers or other civic groups and they make the necessary inquiries to the authorities. All communication on the particular issue is also published and thus becomes public. Once the problem is solved, it is transferred to the "under control" section of the map, where our volunteers and concerned citizens keep an eye on it.

From September 2010 to September 2011 citizens posted about 300 problems to the map and we successfully solved 150 of them. In addition, some requests led to the solution of more complex problems. After our intervention, the city administration was forced to carry out repairs in 40% of public grounds in residential areas which had not been done for the previous 20 years.

In addition to the attractiveness of the whole idea of the map for citizens, its success was influenced by some additional factors such as

- Significant influence of our movement and our ALAC in the region - the authorities simply can not ignore the requests from us.
- All our requests are submitted on the solid legal basis of media law, granting media and online media the right to demand response for such requests.
- Each request is always referred directly to the fact that it is prepared by the ALAC of TI Russia. Reference to the name of this nationally well known organisation makes it more difficult for public officials to ignore the request.
- We regularly meet with the regional and city administration to discuss the most important and difficult problems in person.

Thus, “The map of regional problems” became a bridge between active citizens and the administration.

However, we have to make this bridge more and more efficient.

We analysed our experience, its pluses and minuses, and based on that, we modeled the upgraded technology which can be used in any country, any region or any territory, where the main problems are corruption on the national, regional and local level, and where it is difficult or impossible for citizens to engage in civic activism.

This technology belongs to the so-called Web 3.0 – the ideological and technological approach which connects civic online activism with real life outside the Internet.

Today, the internet has penetrated almost everywhere – homes, offices, transport, - and a lot of people have almost permanent internet access. New protocols of mobile broadband connection and a new generation of mobile internet gadgets contribute to that. And thus in the countries with politically challenging environments, civic activism has moved majorly to the internet and the real life problems were left outside it and remained unsolved.

We believe that it is time to move the internet-based civic activism back to real life activism.

For this purpose we propose to use a modular approach, where the ALAC, on-line civic media and internet based civic activism tools are part of one environment; where each module has its own role. A lot of additional modules can be added to that, such as social networks, mass online role-playing games, etc.

Many of those with whom we spoke and to whom we presented this approach were asking us:

- Is it possible to spread this system throughout the globe?
- Is it possible to create a network of networks?

We do not know the answer to these questions yet. I hope the TI movement will help us to answer it.

Thank you for your attention!