

# From hippies to hackers: New film tracks saga of Russia's internet

In the early days of Russia's internet, hippies founded the first telecoms venture with Americans, an astrophysicist ran the country's most visited website and providers punished hackers by kneecapping them with baseball bats. The heady time, which coincided with the 1991 break up of the Soviet Union, is the subject of a new documentary that looks back at a very different era as the Kremlin clamps down on internet freedom in present-day Russia.

Setting the tone, footage from 1990 shows American Joel Shatz and his Soviet partner Joseph Goldin—the duo behind the first Soviet-American telecoms venture—driving a ballistic missile transporter carrying clowns to Red Square after convincing the traffic police that the performance had been approved “by the highest authorities”. Andrei Loshak, a former television reporter, tracks the main personalities behind the Russia-based internet, known as Runet, for the documentary “Holy War. The history of Runet,” to be screened Sunday at Moscow's Beat Film Festival.

His travels take him back and forth across the Atlantic to film the current lives of early internet savants, website editors and trolls, who are now Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, cannabis investors and pro-Kremlin politicians. Although Russia now dominates headlines with ever-tougher legislation restricting internet use, in the 1990s “the internet developed completely freely,” Loshak says.

Russia has benefited enormously: internet access is cheap and home-grown platforms are more popular than US-based corporations like Google and Facebook. “The internet was the place where everything developed as it can develop when the government does not intervene,” he says. In one clip, Russian President Vladimir Putin is shown meeting internet entrepreneurs in 1999 and telling them that the Internet is a “promising initiative” that he would not touch.

“And in fact, he did not touch the internet for 15 years,” Loshak says, adding: “Thanks for that, curiously.” However, a raft of new laws clamping down on internet use were passed following mass anti-government

demonstrations in 2011-12 and Moscow's rift with the West after its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

## ‘Insane laws’

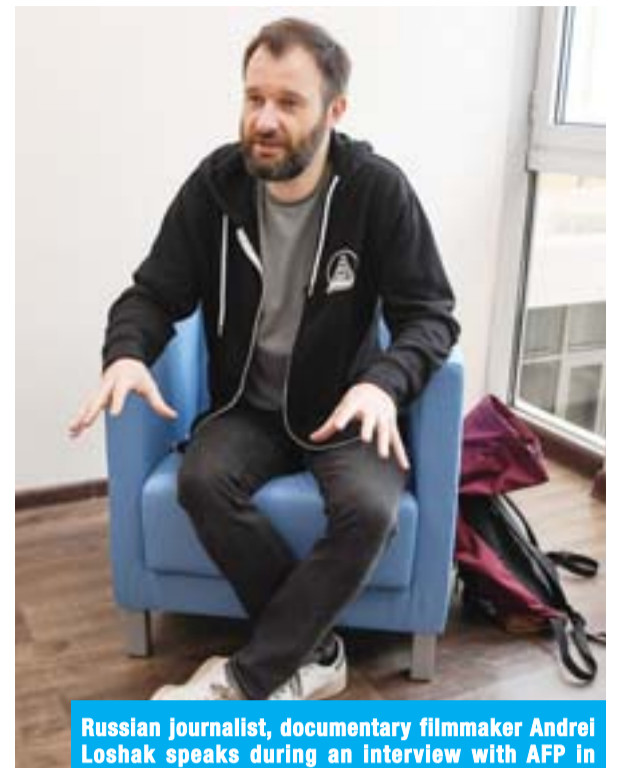
New restrictions of online content are proposed weekly, while internet companies are now required to store personal data in Russia and comply with security services. Many websites and services deemed dangerous for law and order are blocked, from professional social network LinkedIn to the Telegram messaging app—though the blocks are easily circumvented for the moment.

In March, Putin signed laws making it a crime to publish “fake news” or show “disrespect towards authorities” on social media. In May he signed a law on “digital sovereignty” that will provide the Kremlin with the ability to cut off Russia, or a particular Russian region, from the global internet.

Russia now slaps fines on users bad-mouthing Putin online. Current Time, the producers of the documentary, say it is particularly pertinent for younger audiences

who did not witness the early days of the internet in Russia first-hand. “It reminds them that information is not supposed to be censored or weaponised. It's supposed to be free,” they said in a statement to AFP. The “insane laws” will continue, since the government views the internet as a threat, Loshak says. “It's a battle, and it's not very clear who will come out on top.”

The restrictions have already taken a toll. “There are fewer large internet media outlets in Russia now, they have lost their influence,” Loshak says. “And new companies stopped appearing. There have been practically no IPOs” since the Russian internet leader Yandex went public in 2011. But Loshak believes it's too late for Russia to impose a rigid Chinese-style system of censorship because the internet was born in an atmosphere of freedom and that cannot be easily undone. “In China, they didn't have the 90s like in Russia, when everything was swept away and we had real freedom,” he says.—AFP



Russian journalist, documentary filmmaker Andrei Loshak speaks during an interview with AFP in Moscow.—AFP

# Jamaica, Bob Marley and football: A FAMILY LOVE AFFAIR



Jamaica's players pose for a team group photo before the friendly match between Jamaica and Panama at the National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica.—AFP photos

In Jamaica, the spirit of Bob Marley is inescapable: it permeates the Caribbean island nation, even its football pitches—a sign of the reggae legend's passion for the sport. After Marley's death, his children picked up the torch—and the country's women's team, who have qualified for their first-ever World Cup this summer in France, owe a lot to the musician's daughter Cedella. “Two things he loved were music and soccer,” says Allan “Skill” Cole, a one-time local football star who befriended the music icon in the 1960s. Cole told AFP that Marley was a football “fanatic”, and liked to organize pick-up matches with his bandmates between concerts.

Cole, who is now a 68-year-old with fine gray dreadlocks, was a teenager at the time. “He wanted to do everything that we did. We trained together, we ran in the morning... The only thing he didn't like was going to the gym,” Cole said at a hotel in the Jamaican capital Kingston. Just a few minutes away, at the Bob Marley Museum, among the portraits of the musician that line the walls is a photo of him on a football pitch, chest squared and socks high, 1970s style. “If I were to play him on a team, I would put him on defense—he was fearless, he loved to tackle,” said Cole, who eventually became Marley's tour manager and even was credited with co-writing some songs, including “War.”

Football is even intertwined with the story surrounding Marley's death in 1981 of skin cancer, which first developed under his toenail. During a game, Marley was tackled and injured his toe. A closer look revealed the rare form of melanoma. Many including Cole believe that an initial infection caused the can-

cer, even if no medical evidence backs up the theory. “That's where the toe first gave signs” that something was wrong,” he said. “But we didn't take it very seriously then.”

## In the name of the father

Marley's passion for football runs through his family. In 1998, his eldest son Ziggy recorded the official anthem of the “Reggae Boyz,” Jamaica's men's national football squad, when they qualified for their first World Cup. In 2014, Cedella Marley came to the rescue of the women's team when their program was axed by the national federation and they even slipped off FIFA's official rankings list. Thanks to Cedella, the “Reggae Girlz” quickly regained sponsors and media attention—and launched themselves right into the race for the 2019 World Cup. “She had a vision from her father. I'm fortunate to be part of it. The players are the same way, they talk about it all the time,” said head coach Hue Menzies, with an air of reverence. “She stuck her neck out for us. She has been here from day one.”

In Jamaica, such a gesture does not go unnoticed. On May 19, at the team's last home game before the World Cup begins, the announcer at the National Stadium in Kingston thanked Cedella—a businesswoman, singer and fashion designer—at least a half-dozen times. Marley, who was in the stands, told AFP after the game—a 3-1 victory for the home team over Panama—that her passion for the sport came from her dad. Football “has been in my life since I was born, so it was only natural to be a part of it,” the 51-year-old said after embracing the players—and consoling the



Jamaica's Khadija Shaw looks on ahead of the friendly match between Jamaica and Panama at the National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica.

losing squad.

“They needed help, they are women, they were being told they couldn't play a sport that they love. So we got involved and here we are!” Even if many of the players were not even born before Bob Marley's death, they are aware of his legacy and the power his name still holds in Jamaica. “To have a Marley behind us, it's a great feeling,” said one of the team's stars, striker Khadija Shaw, her eyes lighting up. “Everywhere you go, everybody knows Bob Marley.”—AFP



Cedella Marley attends the friendly football match Jamaica vs Panama at the National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica.



Cedella Marley (center bottom) poses with Jamaica's Women football team ‘Reggae Girlz’ after the friendly football match Jamaica vs Panama at the National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica.



Panama's Aldrith Quintero (left) pulls the shirt of Jamaica's Chantelle Swaby during the friendly match between Jamaica and Panama at the National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica.

# ‘I worked here’: Home of Ibanian author Kadare becomes a museum

Ismail Kadare draws the curtain to bring a shaft of light into the Tirana apartment where he wrote furiously during the dark days of communism—a space visitors can now explore first-hand after his former home was turned into a museum. “I worked here, next to the fireplace,” the renowned 83-year-old Albanian novelist told AFP, sitting in the spot where he used to write his drafts by hand. “I wrote on my lap” and “I only worked in the morning,” added Kadare, who penned some of his most famous works, including “The Palace of Dreams”, while living in the third-floor apartment of the concrete building with his family, from 1973 to 1990.

During that time, the windows were covered with heavy drapes to shield their home from the paranoid eye of the communist regime led by former dictator Enver Hoxha, who painfully isolated Albania during his 40-year-reign. The museum, called “Kadare House Studio”, opened in May. With wooden floors and pale green and white walls, the space is sprinkled with personal mementoes: a set of pipes laid out on a table, a typewriter, a shelf full of books and an ID card listing a young Kadare as a “reserve officer”.

There is also a photo of Italian actor Marcello Mastroianni in the film adaptation

Kadare's first novel to win international acclaim, “The General of the Dead Army”. The slice-of-life setting honours the author's wishes that the place be a museum and not a “mausoleum”. With his wife Elena, also a writer, Kadare now splits his time between Tirana and the Latin Quarter in Paris, where he went into exile in 1990 shortly before Albania's communist regime collapsed.

## Cubist crime

The intense repression of Hoxha's regime is captured by the fate of the architect of the apartment, Maks Velo, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for the building's cubist design—considered a deviation from socialist aesthetics. However, Kadare says he did not let the dictatorship crush his own creativity. His novels, essays and poems rejected the brand of socialist realism dictated by authorities and instead used allegory, history and myth to expose life under totalitarianism. “Dark times bring unpleasant but beautiful surprises,” Kadare, speaking slowly, told AFP.

“Literature has often produced magnificent works in the dark ages as if it were seeking to remedy the misfortune inflicted on people.” While some poets and creatives were imprisoned—or even killed—by the

regime, Kadare was spared. In her memoirs, Hoxha's widow Nexhmije said the Albanian leader, who prided himself on a fondness for literature, saved the internationally-acclaimed author several times.

Archives from the Hoxha era show that Kadare was often close to being arrested, and his poem “Red Pashas”, published in 1975, saw him temporarily banished to a remote village. Kadare, for his part, denies any special relationship with the dictator. “My work obeyed only the laws of literature, it obeyed no other law,” he insists. The writer eventually fled to Paris to seek asylum a few months before the regime toppled in the early 1990s.

That departure was “an act of healing” and a form of protest, says Kadare, who at the time left several manuscripts in the Tirana apartment that were seized by authorities but later recovered from a police cellar.

## ‘Against modesty’

Kadare's writing has been translated into more than 40 languages, making him the Balkans' best-known modern novelist and winner of numerous awards. He won the inaugural Man Booker International Prize in 2004 and has been nominated several times



Renowned Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare visits his apartment in Tirana.—AFP

for a Nobel. Although the topic “embarrasses” him, Kadare said he enjoys seeing his name “mentioned among the candidates” for the Nobel. “I am not modest because, in principle, I am against modesty,” he said. “During the totalitarian regime, modesty was a call to submission. Writers don't have to bow their

heads.” As for whether he was happy during the days spent scribbling in Tirana under communism's grip, Kadare finds the question irrelevant. “The people who lived through this period were unhappy, but art is above all that. Art is neither unhappy nor happy under a regime.”—AFP