

Zuckerberg meets Russian PM on Moscow mission (Update 2)

September 28 2012, by Stuart Williams

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg on Monday met Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev as he visited Moscow on a mission to boost the social network's presence in the country and scout for new talent.

Russia is one of the few major countries worldwide where Facebook is not the number one social network and, with an estimated five million users, it lags well behind the homegrown Russian-language rival VKontakte.

Local media also quoted industry sources as saying Zuckerberg was keen to tempt the best Russian programmers away from Moscow to work on higher salaries in the United States, a prospect that would hardly delight the government.

Zuckerberg met Medvedev—who promotes himself as a champion of innovation and a drive to give Russia a more diversified economy—at the former president's Gorki residence outside Moscow.

In a nod to the seriousness of the occasion, Zuckerberg, 28, dropped his usual uniform of hooded top, jeans and trainers in favour of a dark suit and tie.

"As you know we do not just have gas and oil and gold and diamonds in Russia but we also have an IT industry," Medvedev told Zuckerberg in comments published by the government.

He noted the social revolution caused by the growth of social networks: "There can be no doubt that today we live in a completely different world. No-one has any doubt about this and this is probably partly your doing."

Medvedev spokeswoman Natalia Timakova said they also discussed cooperation in IT technology and start-ups in Skolkovo—the new hub outside Moscow that has been championed by Medvedev as a counterpart for Silicon Valley.

Zuckerberg said the main reason for his visit was to attend the Facebook Hack in Moscow, an event where programmers compete to create the best new applications, and acknowledged he liked Russians' abilities.

"We have been really impressed by the quality, talent, innovation that we have seen not only from the engineers that we work with at Facebook but also developers," he said.

In parting, Zuckerberg gave Medvedev a symbolic if somewhat modest gift: a plain white T-shirt with the prime minister's Facebook page ([Facebook.com/Dmitry.Medvedev](https://www.facebook.com/Dmitry.Medvedev)) emblazoned across the front.

— 'I'm here to help people build stuff' —

After changing into a T-shirt, Zuckerberg was then given the rare privilege of a 10-minute interview slot on prime time state television news to explain his strategy in Russia and the philosophy of Facebook.

"I am here primarily to talk to the entrepreneurs and engineers who are here building things and about innovation in general. I'm here to help and encourage people build stuff," he said.

Zuckerberg denied that he had come with the specific purpose of

headhunting new staff and insisted he was more interested in helping homegrown start-ups that could then supply applications to Facebook.

"The point of why I am here is to talk to people and encourage people to build new companies here in Russia.

"That will help out Facebook but it will also help out the local technology community and I think it is good for everyone."

Representatives of VKontakte and Russia's largest Internet company Mail.ru confirmed to the Vedomosti business daily earlier that Facebook was trying to lure their employees with higher salaries.

According to a report by Renaissance Capital last year, Facebook is only the number four social networking site in Russia with five million users, compared with 21 million for VKontakte.

VKontakte, founded by Saint Petersburg native Pavel Durov, 27, is often described as the "Russian Zuckerberg" and aimed firmly at Russian speakers, allowing it to better respond to a very specific local market.

Although it is believed to be his first visit to Russia, Zuckerberg's company already has close links to the Russian Internet sector.

Russian technology investment firm DST Global, whose main shareholder is oligarch Alisher Usmanov, has a stake of at least five percent in Facebook, although some observers estimate that the holding is even higher.

The anti-Kremlin demonstrations that rocked Russia since December have largely been coordinated through social networks and analysts say that the increase in Internet use poses a significant challenge for the domination of President Vladimir Putin.

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