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CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND SOVEREIGNIZATION OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN RUSSIA: BETWEEN STRATEGIC NARRATIVE AND MARKET DRIVEN RATIONALITY [1]

TEORIAS DA CONSPIRAÇÃO E SOBERANIZAÇÃO DAS PLATAFORMAS DIGITAIS NA RÚSSIA: ENTRE NARRATIVA ESTRATÉGICA E RACIONALIDADE DE MERCADO

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Abstract: After the full scale invasion of Ukraine Russian authoritarian regime tends to restrict the contact of public opinion with alternative point of view and actively uses the strategy of partial isolation of RuNet from alternative information inflows. This paper examines the model of Russian digital "sovereignization" and shows the historically conspiracy-based narrative as a basis for it. This narrative organizes the discursive nature digital authoritarianism. At the same time the "real nature" of such authoritarianism is much more cynic and combines the anti-western rhetorics with pragmatic market-oriented decisions.

1 INTRODUCTION

The war between Russia and Ukraine continues during more than 3 years and this war dramatically changed the current media landscape in Russia. The possibilities of self-expression in legacy media as well as in social media were dramatically shrank (Volkov, Kolesnikov, 2023) due to closing of some oppositional media outlets, recognition of some of them as "unwelcomed organizations" and blockage of access to their web sites. This dramatical shift in self-expression in Russia is relatively well described right now (Alyukov, Kunilovskaya and Semenov, 2023; Pavlik, 2022; Litvinenko, 2022). But in

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parallel to this the technological infrastructure for this war, for support of state propaganda online, for pro-state framing of this war inside Russia as well as on international arena is not well studied.

In parallel to drastic shrinking the space of self-expresssion we may see a numerous shifts in technological infrastructure of digital services. Namely, a high number of western internet resources have been blocked. Actually around 500 000 internet-sites are blocked by the State watchdog in field of digital communications – Roskomnadzor (Lebedeva, 2025). Some infrastructural platforms are blocked as Facebook and Instagram (recognized as extremists), YouTube since august 2024 is slowed down. A part of foreign infrastructural platforms suspended by themselves any activities in Russia: Netflix and Amazon withdrew their applications from Russian Apple Store, Google suspended any paid services (such as YouTube Premium), Spotify blocked accounts registered in Russia. Such infrastructural changes are accompanied by development of local Russian platforms (Telegram, VK Video, Yandex demonstrate the growth of audience (VK, 2024; Yandex, 2025)). The blockages and voluntary withdraw of western platforms are usually commented by Russian authorities as measures to protect the Russian digital sovereignty. Among main objectives of the presidential decree “On national goals of RF’s development to 2030 and for a longer priorities to 2036” one is “to provide a network sovereignty and informational security within Internet” (Decree “On national goals of RF’s development to 2030 and for a longer priorities to 2036, 2024).

2 “DIGITAL SOVEREIGNTY” AS COLD WAR “FLASHBACK”

The concept of "citadel" is particularly relevant to describe Russia's relationship with information sovereignty since the Cold War. Tristan Mattelart evokes this notion to describe Soviet society, where the flow of information from outside was perceived as a major threat, likely to destroy or at least undermine its ideology (Mattelart, 1995). Because of the ideological fragility of the Soviet project, the question of the informational isolation of the USSR was of paramount importance. This concern is reflected in the afterword to the famous "McBride Report", where the Soviet representative Sergei Losev considered the final report on the phenomenon of "cultural invasion" too discreet (McBride, 1986, p. 262). This posture can be explained by the evolution of the Soviet strategic vision: first turned towards a world proletarian revolution before the Second

World War, it then turned towards a military and ideological confrontation with the West. Such changes may be observable on the basis of Russian strategic narrative. By strategic narrative we understand a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, et Roselle, 2018, p. 6). In other worlds, by strategic narrative we mean how Russian authorities tries to build a coherent explanation of sovereignty and its challenges in digital field.

After the fall of the USSR, the end of the Cold War and the opening of the Russian cultural and media market, the participation of foreign capital in these sectors remained relatively limited. In the field of federal television, this presence was almost non-existent, while it was much more the case of the magazine glossy press, telecommunications and cinema (Kiriya, 2019; Degtereva & Kiriya, 2010). The lack of foreign investment in television is mainly due to the involvement of the oligarchs, who controlled the main channels and used this leverage in political games. In contrast, the ICT and Internet sectors remained relatively open to investment. However, this cultural openness, the penetration of Western content and lifestyles, as well as the end of the Cold War were perceived by some far-right and "patriotic" movements as a "betrayal" of the homeland, a loss of cultural identity, and even an existential threat. It is in this context that a conspiracy vision of the collapse of the USSR developed in the 1990s, largely inheriting the isolationist ideas of information sovereignty.

One can thus mention an idea that is very popular in post-Soviet political discourse: the supposed existence of a "secret Dulles plan". This document, attributed to Allen Dulles, director of the CIA in the 1950s, allegedly exposed a strategy to dismantle the USSR through propaganda methods. Although the existence of this plan has never been proven, many Russian politicians have referred to it repeatedly. Another conspiracy theory, following the same logic that the collapse of the USSR was orchestrated from the outside, is defended by the historical writer Nikolai Starikov. The latter claims that Mikhail Gorbachev was a spy recruited by the CIA to destroy what he calls the "Evil Empire" (Starikov, 2009). Until the early 2010s, these conspiracy theories were not taken seriously by the Russian authorities. No mainstream political party openly referred to it. However, from 2011 and the popular opposition movements, there has been a change in

the rhetoric of the government. The Kremlin then began to see "Washington's hand" behind these demonstrations. Vladimir Putin himself adopted a more offensive discourse, accusing the Russian opposition of "jackaling with foreign embassies", implying that it received external funding. Ilya Yablokov shows how conspiracy theories have gradually been integrated into the Kremlin's political communication tools (Yablokov, 2018). This ideological shift is also linked to major geopolitical transformations. As early as the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia (2003), followed by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005), candidates supported by Moscow began to lose elections to often pro-Western forces in such ex-soviet republics. In the context of NATO enlargement, these political movements in the former satellite countries of the USSR are perceived by the Kremlin as links in a vast conspiracy to weaken Russia. It nourished the discourse that West always tried to “weakening” Russia. In addition, in the early 2010s, the "Arab revolutions", often referred to as "Twitter revolutions", further reinforced the perception of Western interference in the internal affairs of other nations. Thus, anti-Western conspiracy theories have converged with a primary techno-determinism, attributing to Web 2.0 a central role in global political upheavals and the emergence of a new type of political mobilization (Castells, 2012).

The opposition movements of 2011-2012, the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency, supported by a conservative discourse and an already heavily instrumentalized vision of digital technologies, have given rise to a new media policy. This aims not only at the instrumentalization of traditional media, but also at the control of self-expression in the Internet sector, which is perceived as beyond centralized control. Olesia Koltsova, in her article Livejournal Libra, highlights the independence of the Russian blogosphere from the propagandistic discourses of the mainstream media until that time (Koltsova & Shcherbak, 2015). Thus, in addition to restrictive measures (penalization of self-expression on social networks, introduction of content blocking measures, etc.) (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Kossov, 2023), the Russian state seeks to control the RuNet as a sovereign information space, which also implies large-scale actions at the infrastructure level. It is in this context that the political discourse is developing to distinguish between the "sovereign Internet" and the "foreign Internet". Thus, in April 2014 (just after the annexation of Crimea), Vladimir Putin, during a forum organized by

the National Front, repeated a conspiracy mythology according to which "the Internet was born from a special project of the CIA" (Golitsyna, Agamalova, 2014). In this kind of discourse, the digital border of the state is associated with the physical border, and it is on this logic that Russian public policies will be oriented. Now, "foreign" platforms are increasingly separated from "domestic" platforms, and many public policies (sovereign Internet laws, "Apple laws", foreign technology landing laws, etc.) are aimed at accentuating this distinction. Such a separation is, in fact, one of the consequences of the conspiracy mindset, which seeks enemies and foreign agents everywhere. According to Kolozaridi and Asmolov (Kolozaridi & Asmolov, 2021), in this view, the offline order of things is simply reproduced in online representations.

According to Johannes Thumfart, the approach to Russian digital sovereignty is based on the notion of "information sovereignty", which emerged from the debates around the NWICO (New World Information and Communication Order) and is integrated into the statutory documents of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), of which Russia and China are members (Thumfart, 2025). This representation of "sovereignty" is largely influenced by the idea of protecting local culture and cultural identity. However, as the author notes, the Russian model of Internet sovereignty has more rhetorical elements than the Chinese model, which is much more restrictive. Thus the Russian model of sovereign platforms, based largely on conspiracy ideas, is indeed much more ideological (focused on the search for an external enemy) than truly industrial.

3 BUILDING AN “ANTI-WESTERN” INTERNET IN TIMES OF WAR

The “times of war” in Russian strategic narrative starts long before the full-scale invasion. It starts from the seminal Putin’s speech on Munich security conference in 2007 where he appealed to the “multipolar world” instead of US-centered world hegemonic order. This was a beginning of the militarist anti-western rhetorics which lead to Crimea annexation in 2014. Since that time we may observe the growing interest in taking control not only on self-expression online but also infrastructural issues.

After the protest movements of 2011 and 2012 against Putin which attracted a record number of participants since 1993, the state is beginning to implement a logic of control over the expression of opinions on social networks. Many forms of expression are

now criminalized by the new laws on online extremism (2011) and the anti-blasphemy law (2013). As of 2013, according to the "Lugovoy Law", the public control institution Roskomnadzor (RKN) obtained the right to block sites containing illegal content without any court decision. Initially, this concerned sites that "propagandized drugs" to young people, but the reasons for blocking were quickly extended to pirated content (Kiriya and Sherstoboeva, 2015), and then to opposition political content, such as Grani.ru and Kasparov.ru sites (Kossov, 2023).

Among the digital control measures, several laws may have impacted the infrastructure of digital platforms. First of all, it is worth mentioning the Yarovaya laws (named after member of Parliament Irina Yarovaya) adopted in 2016, which make it mandatory to store digital data transiting through ISPs (Internet Service Providers) on Russian territory and provide it to special services according to the prescriptions. In 2015, Law 242-FZ imposed the storage of personal data of Russian citizens from IT services on servers located in Russia. Although many foreign services quickly located their servers in Russia, large platforms such as Facebook and Google preferred to pay the fines. In 2021 (six years after the law came into force), Google still had to pay a fine for non-compliance with this regulation (Roskomsvoboda, 2021), although its activities were not blocked. On the other hand, LinkedIn was blocked in 2016 at the request of the RKN (Roskomnadzor), in particular because of the violation of Act 242-FZ. Also worth mentioning is the "Sovereign Internet" Law (90-FZ), passed in 2019, which allows the state to take control of cross-border traffic points. To this end, all ISPs have been forced to install special devices at cross-border traffic points (boxes) (Kossov, 2023), which can be used to block the content of certain foreign sites as well as slow down their traffic. These technologies have been widely used after 2022 to restrict Russians' access to independent information. Finally, the law on "landing" (236-FZ) obliged foreign platforms to open branches in Russia, legally responsible before the Russian courts for the activities of their parent companies. We may also mention the so called Apple law (425-FZ) of 2019 which enforces all dealers to preinstall on sold digital devices (smartphones, smart TV, tablet PC) locally manufactured software (especially applications of Yandex ecosystem). Apple as well as other western manufacturers decided to comply with this law. In 2020 and 2021 numerous state governance agencies enforced

State organizations (universities, governmental bodies, state enterprises) to increase usage of Russian software such as Yandex.Telemost instead Zoom and Yandex office (cloud storage, cloud documents etc) instead Google applications.

These laws have often been passed under conspiracy pretexts. The explanatory memorandum to Law 90-FZ reads: "Due to the aggressive nature of the U.S. National Cybersecurity Strategy adopted in September 2018, in which Russia is accused without evidence of carrying out cyberattacks against the United States" (608767-7, project of law). Conspiracy logics continued to shape decisions in field of digital governance in Russia. In the explanatory note to the Apple law we may read: “The bill will protect the interests of Russian Internet companies, which will reduce the number of abuses by large foreign companies working in the field of information technology" (№ 757423-7, project of law). During Covid-19 pandemic numerous public figures loyal to the power advanced the idea that pandemic is especially orchestrated by Western technological giants in order to transform the society into digital concentration camp: “The stupid picked herd, which galloped for the fashionable liquid, received these codes, voluntarily transferred themselves to the category of goods, numbers in the system, and showed these non-humans who want to be the masters of the world that the majority agrees to this. For life in an electronic concentration camp, where every step of the digitized injection will be allowed or not allowed by a computer, and recorded” (Maria Shukshina, actress, https://t.me/mariashukshina/718). Michail Kovalchuk, a director of Kurchatov’s Institute of Nuclear Energy and brother of Yuri Kovalchuk, personal friend of President since Saint-Petersburg 1990es and one of the known loyal oligarchs in Russia, who pretended to be one of the main Putin’s advisors to start a war against Ukraine (Zhegulev, 2023), said: “Today, the situation of colonization, of enslavement, has been replaced by technological enslavement... Let me give you a simple example: the Internet. What is the Internet? This is a digital Gulag in its purest form, but unlike the Gulag, where people were captured, placed behind barbed wire, guarded, these people all came here of their own free will” (Vladimirov, 2020).

However, many foreign platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and YouTube, have simply ignored some of these laws, paying several fines without actually being blocked (Facebook and Twitter were only blocked after the war began, and for other

reasons). The case of LinkedIn is emblematic: it aimed above all to block a "small" platform with a relatively small audience, just to teach others a lesson. Thus, the adoption of these regulatory measures in the field of platforms has had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, these measures claimed to protect information sovereignty by deploying technological mechanisms, but on the other hand, they did not significantly change the dominance of foreign platforms (e.g., Google had more than 50% of the market share in the search engine market in 2021, before the full-scale invasion (Rusakov, 2022).

4 THE LEAKY FORTRESS?

After the start of the full-scale war in 2022, the world of platforms has gone through many changes: Meta's platforms (Facebook and Instagram) have been blocked on Russian territory, while some others (including Netflix's VOD services, Amazon and Spotify) have preferred to suspend their services. As for the "major platforms" of GAFAM, their role on the Russian market remains ambivalent. Neither Apple nor Google have officially left the Russian market. Apple has blocked all payment methods in Russia, with the exception of mobile account payment, which is only available from two operators, MTS and Beeline. Thus, the Apple subscription still works, and Apple TV+ continues to stream its series. For its part, Google has suspended all Russian means of payment but maintains access to its services. In 2022, YouTube blocked monetization for users in Russia and those targeting the Russian audience. In other words, YouTubers no longer receive revenue for videos viewed in Russia, and the platform no longer broadcasts advertising targeting Russian users. In August 2024, Google will deactivate Google AdSense, its algorithmic targeted advertising placement system.

In 2022, Google closed its office in Russia, while its Russian subsidiary was placed in bankruptcy procedure due to multiple litigations and debts, including claims from the Federal Tax Service and several Russian propagandist media. The latter have taken legal action to protest Google's blocking of their YouTube channels. In October 2024, Google was fined two undecillions of rubles (10^{66}), a sum far exceeding global GDP, for failing to execute the Russian court order to unfreeze the accounts of RT, Zvezda, Channel One, and other propagandistic state media (Tass, 2024). Despite these fines (which are not paid), Google is not blocked in Russia and is still among the ten most

visited sites in the country (Mediascope database). Seemingly Russia is note blocking entirely Google and its services because of its infrastructural role in whole digital ecosystem. The same is for YouTube. Rumors Russian authorities to block YouTube started to circulate just after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. But in reality this resource has been slowed down only in august 2024 and until now is not considered as "blocked" even if on desktop computers it's quasi-inoperable. Initially Russian authorities explained the slow-down by "withdrawal" of Google from Russian market and by suspension of renewal of Google Global Cash equipment (Shvetsova, 2024).

The deactivation of AdSense has contributed to the increase in the market share of Yandex, which has become almost monopolistic in the field of searching advertising. In 2024, Yandex had 66.4% of the internet search market and recorded a 30% increase in revenue in this segment (Yandex, 2025). Regarding YouTube's slowdown, it was rather the VK Video platform, launched in the fall of 2021, that benefited from it. RuTube and VK Video have started monetizing creators' content, and advertising revenue in the first nine months of 2024 shows a 19% increase compared to the same period in 2023, reaching 66 billion rubles (about 730 million euros) (VK, 2024).

The war has largely contributed to the industrial consolidation of Russian platforms. Just before it was triggered, in December 2021, Alisher Usmanov and his holding company USM sold 45% of VK to the insurance company Sogaz, which is close to Gazprom but controlled by the powerful oligarch and personal friend of Vladimir Putin, Yuri Kovalchuk. Meanwhile, Gazprom Media, another media conglomerate, consolidated another 45% stake in VK. Globally the Internet sector has become more concentrated over the past five years, and media capital now plays a much more important role in it, just like television. As a result, the space for self-expression is now largely under the control of oligarchic groups close to the government. However, this does not constitute a break with the traditional media landscape. However, in this area, the "oligarchs" and the financial poles are in competition with each other.

Despite all such dynamics which may be considered as "isolationist", in reality we may interpret much more as industrial policy for supporting local market, rather than voluntary action to cut-off Russian Internet from the global one, even if the discourse of Russian authorities remain quite isolationist one. The evidence of that may be founded in

a logics of reconcentration and consolidation of two core infrastructural companies – VK Group and Yandex. VK Group is controlling the Social media VK and a lot of digital services essentially inside the country. VK even developed a RuStore, a Russian application platform to host applications of Russian banks, essentially banned by Apple Store and Google Play. From this point of view VK Group seems to be a domestic company and that's why is controlled by oligarchs as Yuri Kovalchuk who is under the sanctions. On the contrary Yandex (build on the basis of big searching engine, taxi services and other technological companies) is totally opposing example. Yandex has been a company registered in Netherlands Yandex NV. After the 2022 Russia initiated domestication of Yandex on Russian jurisdiction. It has been acquired for approx 5 bln. dollars by the Russian Fund "Consortium. Pervy" (Ivanov, 2024). Among its main subsidiary there are no any big oligarchs. And the reason is seemingly related with very international business of Yandex. It's controlling the platform YoGo, which is a Uber competitor on a numerous markets, including European. So, as a result we may see that the strategy of Russian Internet and digital sector is not to be completely isolated.

5 CONCLUSION

As we may argue, until now the Russian digital sector remain dualistic per itself. On the one hand, a logic of "discursive sovereignization" is clearly observable. This is explicitly formulated and is primarily aimed at political objectives. It underlies certain legislative decisions taken in the last years before the war and has continued to influence strategic choices since the beginning of the conflict, in a context of open confrontation with the West. The discursive sovereignization is essentially using anti-western and conspiracy-based narrative coming from the era of the cold war.

On the other hand, a rather commercial logic prevailed, seeking above all the concentration of capital and ability to maintain functionality of digital infrastructure and its technological and infrastructural dependence. This is manifested in particular by the gradual acquisition of digital services and platforms by infrastructure giants such as Yandex (in the field of online search) or VK (in the sectors of video and digital social networks). In both cases, it is mainly the fields of online advertising and e-commerce that dictate this logic.

Basing their analysis on rigorous statistical methods, Dan Treisman and Sergueï Guriev show that authoritarianism at the turn of the millennium was seen to rely less on physical violence (in terms of number of political killings, prisoners, tortures, genocidal actions) and, arguably, more on manipulation of information (Treisman & Guriev, 2022). They call such kind of new authoritarianism "spin dictatorship" in contrast to "fear dictatorship" of the past epochs. This analysis shows us that Russian authoritarianism relies on a interaction between fear (coming from conspiracy driven strategic narrative) and consent (based on pragmatic organization of digital environment).

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