

RUSSIAN NET STATES AND THEIR ROLES IN RUSSIA

Srirath GOHWONG¹

¹ Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kasetsart University, Thailand; srirath.g@ku.th

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the current situation of Russian net states, specifically Yandex, VKontakte, and Kaspersky Lab. The study utilized documentary research. The findings found that all Russian net states exemplify the state monopoly capitalism model, featuring intimate ties with the Russian government, which sharply contrasts with the arms-length relationships American tech giants have with governments. In Russia, the government strategically wields one element of the Power marketing mix by expanding its ownership and enforcing laws over the products and services provided by Russian net states, with the aim of efficiently managing and controlling information discord. Moreover, the promotion of Russian national security through the Sovereign RUnet represents an innovative strategy that offers renewed prospects for sustaining the Russian government's power in the realm of meta-capitalism.

Keywords: Russian net states, Russia, Sovereignty

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of “net states,” introduced by Alexis Wichowski in 2017, is a groundbreaking idea in Public Administration, political science, and diplomacy. These digital entities, including major tech companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Tesla, possess four key characteristics in their digital operations, such as global reach and the ability to shape public beliefs. This concept also has a profound impact on the sovereignty of traditional nation-states, as net states can either support or challenge it through their services, cooperating with governments or operating independently (Wichowski, 2020). This innovative concept has reshaped the landscape of governance, politics, and international relations. In 2020, Srirath Gohwong conducted a comprehensive investigation into the roles of American net states like Microsoft, Google, and Facebook within the context of Russia. These tech giants posed unique challenges to Russian sovereignty by influencing public services, cybersecurity, and territorial perceptions. While they intervened in public service provision, they also occasionally disregarded certain Russian laws to protect their users (Gohwong, 2020). Nonetheless, given its emphasis on American companies, the aforementioned conclusions lack the ability to offer a thorough representation of the net states within the borders of Russia. In Russia, there exist Russian net states such as Yandex, VKontakte, and Kaspersky Lab. It is important to note that these Russian net states have not been previously explored within the context of net states as described by Wichowski. **Therefore, the aim of this investigation is to assess the current status of Russian net states.**

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Net states

Since 2017, Alexis Wichowski introduced the concept of net states to describe digital non-state entities like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Tesla. These net states shared four key characteristics: they operated globally, focused heavily on technology, shaped public beliefs through their platforms, and expanded their operations into providing public goods and services. Net states could impact a state’s sovereignty both positively by supporting the public sector and negatively by sometimes exceeding state jurisdiction. For example, Facebook’s global influence and technological innovation affected public opinions, but concerns about user data handling raised questions about privacy and the complex nature of net states’ influence (Particularly thank McNamee, 2020; Wichowski, 2020; Zuboff, 2020).

State monopoly capitalism

The concept of state monopoly capitalism traces its roots to Lenin’s 1917 theory of imperialism, which laid the foundation for understanding the dominance of large monopolistic corporations closely tied to the state. This theory emphasized the roles of monopolies, state support, and expansion into foreign markets, shedding light on economic power concentration, government intervention, political influence, limited competition, and resulting inequality. In 1928, Eugen Varga explored capitalism’s decline and inherent contradictions, while in 1981, Paul Wenlock introduced “The theory of state monopoly capitalism,” which focused on the partnership between the state and large corporations, resulting in monopolistic control over key industries. These works collectively contributed to understanding state monopoly capitalism, highlighting characteristics like concentrated economic power, government intervention, political influence, limited competition, economic planning, and exacerbated income and wealth inequality, as analyzed by Marxists (Particularly thank Lenin, 2010; Varga, 1928; Wenlock, 1981).

Free-market capitalism

Free-market capitalism was an economic framework with minimal government involvement, relying on market forces, competitive markets, private ownership, and decentralized decision-making. Influential texts like Adam Smith’s “The Wealth of Nations,” Milton Friedman’s

“Capitalism and Freedom,” and Friedrich A. Hayek’s “The Road to Serfdom” underscored the importance of self-regulating markets, economic freedom for personal liberty, and the drawbacks of centralized planning, collectively emphasizing free-market capitalism’s focus on limited government intervention, competition, private ownership, and individual and economic freedom (Particularly thank Friedman, 1982; Hayek, 2001; Smith, 1977).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study extensively employed documentary research, which gathered information and data from a diverse range of sources, including books, academic papers, and online materials.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Russian net states

Russian net states would typically encompass prominent Russian tech companies that exhibit the four characteristics outlined by Wichowski, which include Yandex, VKontakte, and Kaspersky Lab. Each was discussed in the following manner.

Yandex, a prominent Russian search engine and tech company, met the criteria of a net state due to its defining characteristics. It operated on a global scale, extending its array of digital services beyond Russia, including Yandex Search Engine, Yandex Cloud, Yandex Browser, Yandex Maps, Yandex Mail, and Yandex Translate. It strongly emphasized technology, particularly artificial intelligence and machine learning, while exerting significant influence over user beliefs in Russia and neighboring regions. Moreover, Yandex diversified its portfolio to offer public services like online advertising, transportation solutions, and cloud services, thus impacting various aspects of public life. Yandex’s various actions and services positively impacted a state’s sovereignty, particularly in Russia. Firstly, their provision of free coronavirus testing services during the COVID-19 pandemic, initially in Moscow and later in other regions, reflected their dedication to public health and safety. By delivering crucial healthcare services without charge to the populace, Yandex helped alleviate the burden on the healthcare system and effectively addressed a critical facet of public welfare, thereby bolstering state sovereignty. Next, Yandex played a pivotal role in ensuring information accessibility. While concerns had arisen regarding news aggregation, Yandex maintained that its news ranking was algorithm-driven and adhered to Russian laws pertaining to news sources. By facilitating access to a diverse array of information sources, Yandex supported a well-informed citizenry, a fundamental component of a functioning democracy. This, in turn, upheld state sovereignty by endorsing the principles of freedom of information and expression. Lastly, Yandex’s adherence to data privacy laws, its strategic decision to steer clear of politicization, and the transfer of its media assets to VK Holding further contributed to the overall positive impact on state sovereignty. These actions ensured the protection of user privacy, promoted a stable information environment, and minimized the risk of political interference in media operations, all while maintaining compliance with relevant laws and regulations (Particularly thank Dillon, 2022; Erbsen, 2019; Kolmanovskala, 1999; Jamal, 2022; Lomas, 2022; Peterson, 2022; Polak, 2017; Reyter, 2022; Voropaeva, 2022; Yandex, 2020, 2023; Yandex Cloud, 2023a, 2023b; Yu, 2023).

VKontakte (VK), formerly known as “Mail.ru Group,” a prominent Russian social media platform in Russia and the CIS, fell under the classification of a net state in accordance with Wichowski’s delineation of net states as digital non-state entities. VK demonstrated alignment with these characteristics: it operated internationally, extending its social networking services beyond Russia to various countries such as VK Music (former Boom), VK Jobs (former Worki), VK Classifieds (former Youla), VK Dating (former Lovina), particularly within the former Soviet bloc; it underscored a technology-focused approach, offering features for user

connections, content sharing, and online activities; it exerted significant influence over its users' beliefs, behaviors, and social interactions, notably within its user base and regions of influence; and it had expanded its services over the years to include features like music streaming, influencing different facets of online and social experiences. After being acquired by a Russian state-owned entity, Gazprombank and the insurance company Sogaz, in which banker Yuri Kovalchuk, a long-time ally of President Vladimir Putin, had partial ownership, in December 2021, as a result of tensions that had escalated in 2014 when VK refused to remove posts and groups linked to the Euromaidan protest movement in Ukraine, VK experienced increased government influence as these entities obtained a controlling 57.3% stake in the company. This consolidation of power significantly affected VK's role in strengthening the state's sovereignty through various channels. Firstly, VK was instrumental in the creation of the "Automated Workplace of a Civil Servant," also known as "APM ГС" in Russian, a comprehensive platform designed for use by Russian civil servants. This integrated system offered essential services, including email, calendars, cloud storage, instant messaging, and audio/video calls. By replacing foreign services like Telegram, WhatsApp, Gmail, Google Docs, Zoom, and Skype with this domestically developed solution, VK empowered the Russian government to exercise greater control over its public administration system, ensuring data sovereignty and reducing dependence on foreign technology. Moreover, VK contributed to bolstering cybersecurity within the Russian government. The Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media planned to invest in cryptographic protection for the "Automated Workplace of a Civil Servant" based on VK. This commitment to cybersecurity was vital for safeguarding sensitive government information, thereby enhancing the sovereignty of digital communications and data management. Next, in the context of cyber censorship, VK observed content restrictions as specific video categories became inaccessible due to the blocking of accounts linked to individuals or communities responsible for posting such material. These entities were often targeted because of their critical perspectives on Russian President Vladimir Putin and their commentary concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. VK also imposed search result limitations within Russia through extensive, keyword-based blocking, with particular emphasis on terms associated with the LGBTIQ community. Last, VK's support for local developers through hackathons and grant programs, like Start Fellows, fostered innovation and strengthened the domestic technology sector. By nurturing a vibrant local tech community, VK aided in the development of essential tools and services for the Russian public sector, reducing reliance on foreign platforms and services (Particularly thank Balmforth, 2021; Dollbaum, 2020; Fedyukovsky, 2020; Gohwong, 2020; Karamalak and Pozhidaeva, 2019; Kaveeva, Gurin, Solovyev, 2018; Knockel, Dalek, Meletti, Ermoshina, 2023; Kozitsin, Chkhartishvili, Marchenko, et al., 2020; Meaker, 2022; Myagkov, Shchekotin, Chudinov, Goiko, 2020; Sofina, 2017; Startseva, Khlopotov, Ivanov, 2017; TAdviser, 2023; Vasilieva Pulyaeva, Yudina, 2018; VK, 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Zhao, Shchekoturov, Shchekoturova, 2017).

Kaspersky Lab, a prominent Russian cybersecurity firm, met the classification of a net state according to Wichowski's criteria. Kaspersky Lab embodied these characteristics: it operated internationally, providing cybersecurity solutions to a global user base beyond Russia; it placed a strong emphasis on technology, specializing in cybersecurity solutions and related services; it wielded substantial influence over cybersecurity practices and solutions, shaping how users and organizations approached online security; and it diversified its offerings to include a wide array of cybersecurity solutions, impacting various facets of online security, data privacy, and protection for individuals and organizations. Kaspersky Lab had faced allegations from the United States and its allies primarily due to its perceived close association with the Russian government. This potential threat had been viewed as a direct implication of national security, leading to accusations and heightened scrutiny. For example, in 2017, Kaspersky Lab faced

accusations from the US government of having close ties to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), leading to President Donald Trump's prohibition on the use of their products and services as outlined in section 1634 of the H.R.2810 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018. Despite these allegations, it's important to note that Kaspersky Lab remained committed to complying with Russian government mandates and regulations in its operations. They adhered to Russian Federal Law No. 40-FZ (1995), which mandated assistance to the FSB by public authorities, businesses, and institutions. Moreover, they complied with Data Protection Laws, such as Federal Law No. 152-FZ (2006) on personal data, data localization laws per Federal Law No. 242-FZ (2007), and Export Control Regulations, like Federal Law No. 183-FZ (1999), which governed the export of sensitive technologies. This demonstrated their alignment with Russian laws and regulations (Particularly thanked Congress, 2017; Goncharov, Kruglov, Dashchenko, 2019; Farrier, 2022; Hayes, 2017; Information Technology and Communication Center, 2018; Kaspersky Lab, 2014, 2016; Kshetri, 2011; Moskvitch, 2015; Russian Federal Law N 40-FZ; Russian Federal Law No. 183-FZ; Russian Federal Law No. 152-FZ, 2006; Russian Federal Law No. 242-FZ, 2007; Taia Global, Inc., 2012).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Russian tech entities such as Yandex, VK, and Kaspersky Lab embody the principles of state monopoly capitalism by virtue of their strong affiliations with the Russian government and their dominant roles in pivotal sectors of the digital economy under governmental supervision, endorsement, and influence. Notably, Yandex and VK operate within an environment of amplified government influence, facilitated by their ownership by entities with close connections to President Vladimir Putin, thereby assisting the Russian government in shaping public administration, bolstering cybersecurity, and implementing content censorship, ultimately strengthening state sovereignty. In the case of Kaspersky Lab, despite facing accusations of close links with the Russian government, the company adheres to Russian laws and regulations, thereby illustrating its alignment with state interests. These intimate associations between the state and these technology companies contribute to the characteristics of state monopoly capitalism in Russia, which contrasts with the relatively arms-length relationships American tech giants like Microsoft, Google, and Facebook maintain with governments, operating within a free-market capitalist framework. In Russia, the government strategically employs one element of the Power market-ing mix by increasing its ownership or enforcing laws over the products and services offered by Russian net states. This approach is aimed at effectively managing and controlling information discord. Moreover, the advancement of Russian national security via the Sovereign RUnet, a distinct and independent internet infrastructure, signifies a novel strategy that holds “new hope for new life” for upholding the Russian government’s power within the context of meta-capitalism (Particularly thanks to Gohwong, 2020; Jermisittiparsert, Gohwong, Pavapanunkul, Mahittichatkul, 2023). In conclusion, this research, utilizing a documentary approach, has explored the unique role of Russian tech entities such as Yandex, VK, and Kaspersky Lab in the landscape of state monopoly capitalism. These close associations between the state and these technology companies stand in stark contrast to the arms-length relationships that American tech giants maintain with governments, thereby reflecting the state monopoly capitalism model. The study also delved into the strategic application of power market-ing elements by the Russian government to control information discord, emphasizing the critical role of the Sovereign RUnet as a new strategy for maintaining governmental power within the meta-capitalism.

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