BULLETIN

The Future of Russia's Sovereign Internet

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So-called "sovereign internets", which are networks cut off from the global internet, is attractive to authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China, and Iran. Russia declares that it has achieved the technical capacity to implement it, which would allow the Russian authorities more control over society but could cause problems for business. The Russian authorities therefore will limit its use to a preventive measure at key moments and for blocking foreign networks and communicators inside Russia to try to control public moods in the country.

In February this year, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev announced that Russia had achieved the technical capabilities to control traffic on its national internet (RuNet). This marks the final stage of the implementation of its sovereign internet concept, established by law in November 2019. It says that in case of a threat (e.g., a cyberattack), Russia may disconnect from the global internet and operate in isolation (RuNet). However, the increased control over usage on the RuNet has mainly an internal dimension and is intended to weaken the potential of protests, which intensified around the time of the return to Russia of the oppositionist Alexei Navalny. The capability is also especially important in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Russia in September and the presidential elections in 2024.

Sovereign Internets. Russia, like China, advocates an increased role for states in regulating the global internet, which in their view means controlling internet traffic and overseeing servers located on their territory. The Russian authorities want to have supervision over Russian systems and users on the internet, a sector that has developed spontaneously over many years and has achieved a high degree of connection with the global network. In Russia, more than 80% of people use the internet (as of 2020), the eighth-highest in the world. Russia is striving to increase control over internet infrastructure similar to the way China does (Great Firewall), by filtering material and creating specific access points through which network traffic will be directed.

The desire to increase control over the internet via RuNet results from the need to maintain control and stabilise the political regime in Russia. The generational change in Russia (94% of people aged 18-24 get information about the world from the internet and social media) and the waning attractiveness of pro-government media mean that Russians watch less TV (in 2009, 94% of people; in 2020, 69%) and have less trust in the information they receive from it (in 2009, 79%; in 2020, 48%). This changing appetite translates into changing political preferences. According to research carried out by the Levada Center, Russian internet users have a much better view of Navalny than the average respondents who mainly get their news from TV (45% compared to 19%). A video by Navalny's group about an ostentatious palace controlled by Vladimir Putin and published on YouTube had 115 million views (as of 29 March). It became an accelerator of the largest, unsanctioned demonstrations in the history of Russia. The Russian authorities see the increasing activity of non-systemic opposition on social networking sites as a challenge for the ruling elite.

Russia views the global internet as a place of information warfare and a space dominated by giant American platforms. It aims to overcome the technological domination of the internet by Western countries to limit the freedom of speech in the digital sphere. It has successfully promoted the sovereign internet concept, gaining support among some Asian and African countries. Similar ideas are supported by, among others, China and Turkey. In December 2018, the UN General Assembly

passed two resolutions that fit with the Russian vision of the internet. The first was about adopting a digital code and increasing states' accountability for online safety. The second addressed fighting cybercrime. In the proposal about the principles of sovereign internets in March this year, representatives of the Russian parliament spoke about including sovereign internets in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

RuNet in Practice. For many years, the Russian authorities have tried to restrict Russians' access to independent content and social media. In 2016, they blocked LinkedIn. Despite repressive legal regulations, blocking websites, and user surveillance, the Russians avoided security measures such as restricting VPNs (Virtual Private Networks), which make it possible to hide IP addresses and easier for Russians to access blocked sites. The authorities also tried unsuccessfully to force the Telegram messenger to give them access codes so they could read the encrypted communications, for example, during demonstrations.

The regulator of the Russian internet, the Federal Service for Supervision of the Communications, Information Technologies, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor), has gained new technical possibilities to regulate traffic on RuNet. Operators were forced to install so-called "deep inspection packets", which are used to monitor and regulate (filter) traffic. With that in place, Roskomnadzor can change the speed of all unwanted connections. On 10 March, Roskomnadzor used this mechanism for the first time and ordered material sent via Twitter to be slowed down. The Russian authorities aimed to hinder Twitter's operation (in December, the site had 11 million registered Russian users) to warn off larger platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram (about 79 and 60 million Russian users, respectively), and especially a kind of pressure on the former to comply with the Russian authorities' demands to remove certain content, such as the Navalny videos (they were not deleted), and not to remove Russian TV videos also published on the website but labelled as propaganda. The most popular Russian social networking site, Vkontakte (around 73 million users), is also subject to Roskomnadzor, which requires the site to collect and provide information about its users (including for law enforcement agencies). In 2020, 289 criminal cases were opened in Russia against citizens for disseminating information the authorities did not want on social media. Users face up to two years in prison for alleged defamation on the internet. An alternative to blocked Western social networks is the Chinese TikTok, highly popular among mainly young people (about 20 million users).

At the same time, if RuNet is fully cut off from the global network, it would mean losses for the Russian economy, including a decline in foreign investment. That may hinder the functioning of Russian businesses that use foreign software and need access to the global market. The volume of the Russian e-commerce market in 2020 reached RUB 2.5 billion ($33 billion), an increase of 44% compared to 2019. In addition to Russian technology companies such as Yandex and the Mail.ru Group, Chinese Aliexpress.com is taking the lead on the Russian internet market.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The implementation of a sovereign internet will have consequences for the internal situation in Russia and may impact the global governance of the internet. Fearing social unrest, Roskomnadzor will continue to restrict, slow down, and block the operation of certain websites and independent messengers. It will force domestic and foreign operators to remove content related to the activity of the opposition and materials related to the Duma elections that are inconvenient for the rulers. This could lead to self-censorship in Russia by YouTube, for which Russia is the fifth-largest market by number of users. From 1 April, the giant tech firm Apple agreed to allow the optional install for Russian customers of government-approved software, otherwise it would have been forced out of the Russian market. The government's control of the internet in Russia will make it difficult for Russians to access independent content and reduce the influence of the Russian anti-system opposition. However, for economic reasons, it is doubtful that the Russian authorities will permanently disconnect RuNet from the global network.

Promotion of sovereign internets may lead to disruption of the global network and barriers to the free flow of information. This may also result in discrimination in trade, as such networks hinder the functioning of foreign, mainly Western businesses in Russia where their websites or services may be blocked.

Poland could cooperate with Western countries to counteract Russia's attempts to fragment the global network. Polish diplomacy may work toward ensuring freedom of access to the global internet, including within the framework of the UN, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE (the latter of which it takes over the presidency in 2022). The free flow of information is crucial for the promotion of democracy, maintaining global contacts, and communications with civil society in Russia. Poland could support initiatives promoting internet neutrality, which would ensure the protection of freedom of speech and freedom in international trade.