

Fortress besieged: Russia's nationalisation of the internet

Maksim Orlov analyses the Russian government's attempts to substitute Russian for western internet services.

One of the most repetitive motifs of official rhetoric in Russia is that the country is surrounded by hostile forces. On the one hand, this message is leveraged by the long history of Russia's own type of occidentalism—the mindset in which Russia and the ideological “west” are opposites and this west is inherently malicious. On the other hand, the idea of entrenching the country against perceived hostile western forces is de rigueur in the framework documents of 2015, such as in the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, [revised in 2015 in response to the Arab spring](#). Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Security Council of Russia and in charge of the development of this document is well known for his defensive stance. In [one of his interviews](#) he claimed that the United States would prefer it if Russia did not exist at all.

In the same interview Patrushev quoted the former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright as saying that “in fact, neither Siberia nor the Far East belongs to Russia”. Journalists, surprised to hear this previously unknown statement, rushed to find the source of this quotation. However, it turned out that the secretary of state had never made this rather undiplomatic statement. It was a [fabrication churned out by an anonymous internet troll](#) that later spread across forums and social networks and was picked up by several officials. This almost ironic episode demonstrates both the significant extent to which social networks maintain the “besieged fortress” mindset and the centralised way in which internet propaganda is produced.

The rhetoric of an imminent threat from “the west” sounds all too familiar, especially if it comes from the mouth of someone like Nikolai Patrushev, who made his career in the KGB during the cold war. However, there is one important development that affected freedom of speech in Russia in 2015. In the aftermath of the Arab spring, the Russian government became fully aware of two striking facts: the extent of power that computer networks hold over the population and its own extreme vulnerability.

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The document entitled the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation was developed to replace a similar document introduced in 2000. The differences between these two versions of the document epitomise every major development of Russian official ideology in the third term of Vladimir Putin. Among other things, the document stipulates the objectives of the national security doctrine in the area of “information security”. The first of these objectives is “the protection of Russia’s national interests in the present situation of globalising information processes, forming of global information networks, and the ambitions of the US and other developed countries for domination in the area of communications”. In other words, the global nature of the internet is construed by national security officials as a major vulnerability that must be addressed by the state as soon as possible.

The document uses the rather broad term “information security”, the meaning of which in the new version is further expanded from mainly “the protection of information assets” to the protection of the population from undesirable information:

“Prevention and neutralisation of threats to information security first of all demands the open proclamation of the state, official ideology, acceptable for the majority of the population and including the cultural and historical traditions of the multinational country. Only on the basis of such ideology can clear criteria for the identification of threats be developed and key principles of state policy in this area be established.”

No official commentary was provided on how this particular article of the draft correlated with article 13, paragraph 2 of the constitution that stipulates that “No ideology shall be established as state or mandatory.” The general position of this document is clear: Russia’s key security officials are convinced that Russian audiences must be actively protected by the state from the undesirable information they receive from the internet, that the role of the state is crucial in this process, and that the internet is one of the key battlefields of the geopolitical struggle that they fight.

Apart from legal measures requiring service providers to [store all personal data of Russian citizens](#) and to [process bank card payments](#) within Russian territory, the government undertook a series of projects that were meant to be substitutes for “western” internet services. One of the first steps was the creation of a national search engine by the Russian state-owned telecommunications company Rostelecom. [The RT feature on the launch of the engine in May 2014](#) was released under the title “Russia launches ‘safe search’ Sputnik to rival Yandex, Google”. This ambitious tone was inspired by the key feature of the new search engine that, according to its proponents, would ensure the quick growth of its popularity—“safety”. “No unchecked links should appear in its results,” said Alexey Basov, the chairman of the project. “We consider the absence of unreliable information crucial for users rather than the recall ratio. Such an approach is at the core of the Sputnik concept”.

Official representatives of Rostelecom directly stated that there were no plans to filter content on instructions from the government. However, it became quite clear which websites the system

regarded as “more secure” for its users. Searching for “Vladimir Putin” in Russian gave the links to the president’s page on the official Kremlin website and news from the official Rossijskaya Gazeta and the state-owned news agency RIA. No international news agencies were present in the results.

The same query on Google returned a Wikipedia entry and news stories from Kommersant, RT and Echo of Moscow, that all represent different shades of opinion on the political spectrum.

However, the initial grand plans proved to be overly ambitious. Despite the plan to make Sputnik the standard search engine in state organisations, its [monthly audience has been negligible](#) and some experts predicted that it would [sink into oblivion](#) not long after the intensive state venture funding runs out.

Another popular service that is planned to be “substituted” is Wikipedia. Its Russian section is supported by the Russian branch of Wikimedia, incorporated in Moscow, and currently the Russian language is in the top ten by the number of entries, featuring more than 1.2 million articles. In April 2011 the director of the Russian National Library, Anton Likhomanov, announced plans to create a national online encyclopedia. From the beginning, this initiative was explicitly presented as an alternative to Wikipedia. In particular, the library’s PR director Valentin Sidorin [explained to ITAR-TASS](#) that there was a strong need to create a Russian online encyclopedia because Wikipedia contained many inaccuracies and “some facts pertinent to geopolitics can be presented in it in a biased way”. It is difficult to estimate the results of this declaration, but the blocking of Wikipedia on the orders of the telecommunications authorities in August 2015, to international uproar, suggests that the governments finds this resource seriously concerning.

In Russia, internet service providers are obliged to block access to websites on instructions from Roskomnadzor, a state agency responsible for telecommunications. Webpages that contain information on such topics as illegal drugs, suicide and “extremist information” among others, are included on the unified register. In August 2015, Wikipedia was blocked because of one of its entries could be used as a manual to prepare an illegal substance. Due to the fact that Wikipedia

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uses a secure transfer protocol (HTTPS) it was technically impossible for providers to block only one page so, as a result, the entire encyclopedia was blocked. If the purpose of the blackout was to protect children from potentially harmful information, as stipulated in the legislation that authorises Roskomnadzor to issue such orders, it was a gross political misjudgement. The public resonance caused by the denial of access to Wikipedia entailed a massive “Streisand effect” and the number of visits to the article in one day [multiplied by a thousand](#). This experience demonstrates that the medieval method of Index Librorum, prohibiting listed publications, is not applicable to the present-day internet.

The high-level initiative to create a “safe” encyclopaedia was preceded by the emergence of a whole swarm of Russian-language resources that Wikipedia defines as “[mirrors and forks](#)” (websites that use the code and the contents of the original encyclopaedia in an identical or altered way respectively) and independent encyclopaedia projects that use freely available Wikia code. Some of these independent encyclopedias introduce themselves as “patriotic” alternatives to Wikipedia. Ruxpert.ru (“The Patriot’s Handbook”), for example, [keeps track of all internet publications of the official Russian Wikipedia team](#) and contains articles about all independent countries of the world written from a patriotic perspective. The views expressed by the members of the official Russian Wikimedia team are carefully documented and described as “extremely pro-western and anti-Russian”. Although this developing project has already been noticed by [major news agencies such as Reuters](#), Oleg Makarenko, Ruxpert’s apparent leader was reluctant to mention the sources of funding for what seems to be quite an expensive enterprise. Other resources that claim to be run by enthusiasts of the alternative encyclopaedic movement include Cyclopedia, Traditio.wiki, Wikireality, among others. Despite the strength of their authors’ convictions and efforts, these resources have not fared very well in search results: Wikipedia is still the most popular source of general information on sensitive subjects, because of its higher general ranking with both Yandex ([with a 58% share of searches in Russia](#)) and Google (35% share).

On the political level, ideas of “sovereignty” over internet space were proclaimed in the agreement between Russia and China on “information security” [signed in May 2015](#). The “[destabilisation of national security and the social and economic situation](#)” was listed among the threats against which the parties agreed to cooperate. The details of the technologies that will be exchanged and used jointly by Russia and China have not been specified. However, the general tone of the agreement is clear: both countries, apart from the protection of their data assets, seek to further increase the autonomy of their internet spaces. Their governments work to expand their control over telecommunications under the flag of national security and the “[internationalisation of the control over the internet, currently dominated by the US](#)”. Speaking about the information security of their country, Russian officials actively use the term “national segment” of the internet that, given the geographically scattered infrastructure of the resources used by Russian users, makes it very difficult to predict the actual scope of these measures. Clearly, the Russian government regards the global network simply as a continuation of the geopolitical battlefield. In April 2014, at a session of the International Media Forum in St Petersburg, Vladimir Putin said that “[the internet started as a CIA project and still remains such](#)”.

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These developments reveal some original aspects of the information policies that the Russian regime seeks to implement as a part of the internationally discussed “hybrid war” in defence of its geopolitical interests. It is evident that the architects of these policies recognise that the straightforward “great wall” approach, in which the entire traffic going in and out of the country is filtered almost manually, cannot be transplanted into Russian soil technically or the amount of resources required to set it up is too large, even if China is willing to assist. The difficulties are multiplied by the fact that Russia also contains the most powerful army of hackers on the planet, making the costs of the “great wall” scenario even higher. A subtler approach of the “substitution” of “western” services by “national”, however, has not been effective due to poor management and the corrupt nature of far-fetched projects like Sputnik. As with many of Russia’s geopolitical moves, further steps in its fight for a “national segment” of the internet are hard to predict. What is absolutely certain is that the developing cooperation between China and Russia in this area needs to be carefully watched and that the naturally global nature of the internet is easier to cooperate with than to fight against.

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Published on: February 8, 2016