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The imaginaries of RuNet: the change of the elites and the construction of online space

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Abstract

By exploring the changes among online elites who have constructed the Internet, this article traces the unique history of the Russian Internet (RuNet). Illustrating how changes in online elites can be associated with changes in the socio-political role of the online space in general, it concludes that, although the Internet is of global nature, its space is constructed on the level of nation, culture and language. To show this, the article presents five stages in the development of RuNet, suggesting that the change in the stages is associated with the relationship of power between, first, actors (users, developers, the government, etc.) that construct Internet space and, second, alternative elites that emerge online and the traditional elites that seek to take the online space under their control by making their imaginary dominate.

Keywords: RuNet; Internet elites; Internet imaginaries, social construction of technology, Internet regulation, Internet historiography

Introduction

On 29 April 2011, Dmitry Medvedev, then president of Russia, hosted a meeting with representatives of the Russian Internet community.[3] The list of people who were invited to take a part in the discussion included representatives of Russian and international Internet companies and projects (including Facebook and the Wikimedia Foundation), well-known bloggers, journalists and online media editors, representatives of Internet governance organizations and representatives of independent citizen-based projects. Four and a half years later, on 22 December 2015, President Putin hosted a meeting of a similar nature. However, this time the title of the meeting and the list of participants were substantially different. The 'Meeting with representatives of the national IT-industry' included only one person

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[3] "Vstrecha s predstaviteliami internet-soobshchestva", 29 April 2011, *Kremlin.ru*, available at http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/11115, accessed 9 December 2016.

who had taken part in the 2011 meeting (the head of Mail.ru Dmitry Grishin). The rest of the participants represented Russian IT organizations, including search engines, domain providers and security companies.[4]

The difference in the composition of the two meetings is significant; it illustrates which people the state regards as playing a key role in the Internet space. However, the meaning of this change as well as other changes in the type of actors playing a lead part in constructing the social and political role of the national cyberspace has yet to be conceptualized and analyzed. We approach these groups of actors as 'Internet elites'. These groups can be composed of varying types of actors, e.g. there are the 'elites' who dominate Internet traffic, which include bloggers and viral video personalities; and the 'elites' who interface between the state and the Internet and IT developers. At different periods different types of actors can be considered as Internet elites. Given the diversity of actors with the potential to be considered co-constructors of the Internet within specific socio-political contexts, it is imperative that the Internet elites be conceptualized to deepen our understanding of the development of RuNet, as well as the history of the Internet more generally.

The history of the Internet is a popular research topic; this is reflected in the number of studies produced in recent years. However, as we note in the literature review section, much of this literature deals with the history of the development of the Internet as a technology, not with the socio-political role of these technologies within the context of specific countries and languages. We argue that to explore the history of the Internet in a particular socio-political and cultural segment of cyberspace, we need to focus on the emergence of the Internet elites and to trace how these change. The history of RuNet development offers case for such an investigation.

We argue that although various aspects of RuNet history are well-covered, not enough attention has yet been dedicated to the dynamics of RuNet development as a cultural and socio-political project. We explore the development of RuNet by juxtaposing literature about the social construction of the Internet with Internet historiography and theories of elites. Our conceptual framework approaches the development of national Internet segments as a social construction that can be

[4] "Vstrecha s predstaviteliami otechestvennoi IT-otrasli", 22 December 2015, *Kremlin.ru,* available at http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50997, accessed 6 December 2016.

associated with changes in the Internet elites, as well as changes in the power relationships between different members of the elites including individual actors (e.g. users) and institutional actors (e.g. government).

Background: key issues in studies of RuNet.

Studies of Russian informational networks tend to date their inception from Soviet cybernetics as a part of the Soviet planned economy.[5] Peters explores how early development of a Soviet nationwide computer network (All-State Automated System), which was inspired by 'a utopian vision of [a] distinctly state socialist information society', failed due to 'the institutional conditions supporting the scientific knowledge and the command economy'.[6] That said, most research examines the Russian Internet as a part of the current global Internet network starting from the late 1980s.

As an object of investigation, the Russian Internet poses a conceptual challenge. The Russian Internet is often called RuNet, a term that acknowledges it serves not only as a national domain but also a language domain, open to Russian-speaking people from all over the world.[7] RuNet has been studied as a complex phenomenon consisting of several key themes. These themes include, among others, the technological infrastructure and development of the Internet[8]; the role of the Internet for the emergence of new communities and cultural spaces[9]; the political role of the Internet including political mobilization and the empowerment of activists[10]; and the state's policies in regard to the Internet with a focus on governance and regulation.[11]

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[5] Slava Gerovitch, *From newspeak to cyberspeak: a history of Soviet cybernetics* (Harvard: The MIT Press, 2004).

[6] Benjamin Peters, *How Not To Network a Nation. The Uneasy history of the Soviet Internet*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 2-4.

[7] Henrike Schmidt and Katy Teubener, "Our RuNet. Cultural identity and media usage", in *Control+ shift. Public and private usages of the Russian Internet*, ed. Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener and Natalja Konradov (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006), 14-20.

[8] Andrei Soldatov, Irina Borogan, *The Red Web. The Struggle between Russia's digital dictators and the new online revolutionaries* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).

[9] Eugene Gorny, "A creative history of the Russian internet", Doctoral dissertation, (London: Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2006), available at https://web.archive.org/web/20120714163402/http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/russ-cyb/library/texts/en/gorny_creative_history_runet.pdf, accessed 6 December 2016.

[10] Bruce Etling et al, "Public discourse in the Russian blogosphere: Mapping RuNet politics and mobilization", Berkman Center Research Publication, no. 2010-11 (2010): available at

One point of debate in the literature about RuNet is its contribution to the development of political freedom in Russia. This debate addresses the question of the extent to which the development of the Internet in Russia has followed the state's interests or, rather, has presented an alternative to state power. Scholars in this field tend either to optimism or pessimism. Cyber optimists explore how the Internet empowers activists and challenges traditional actors, including the media and state institutions; cyber pessimists question 'technological optimism' and the capacity of RuNet to challenge traditional political actors.[12] Some scholars highlight that from the outset RuNet presented an alternative information network, beyond the control of traditional political institutions, while pre-Internet networks like FIDOnet offered a space for development of informal communities of users in the final years of USSR.[13] On the other hand, there are debates about whether the Internet re-enforces the state's surveillance capabilities and whether RuNet constitutes an influential public sphere with a real influence on offline politics or, rather, a technology that diminishes the scale of offline activism.[14]

These debates also question the extent to which the community of Internet users in Russia has ever represented the Russian population at large, and at what period of time this occurred. For instance, Alexanyan maintains that RuNet has given rise to a different type of imagined community of Russian citizens, distinguishing 'between "Internet Russia" and "TV Russia"'.[15] Facebook is claimed to be an 'echo

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http://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.harvard.edu/files/Public_Discourse_in_the_Russian_Blogosphere_2010.pdf, accessed 6 December 2016; Sarah Oates, *Revolution stalled: The political limits of the Internet in the post-Soviet sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Anna Popkova, "Political Criticism From the Soviet Kitchen to the Russian Internet: A Comparative Analysis of Russian Media Coverage of the December 2011 Election Protests", *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 38, no. 2 (2014): 95-112.

[11] Andrey Tselikov, "The Tightening Web of Russian Internet Regulation", Berkman Center Research Publication, no. 2014-15 (2014): available at https://ssrn.com/abstract=2527603, accessed 16 December 2016.

[12] Floriana Fossato, John Lloyd and Alexander Verkhovskii, *The Web that failed: How opposition politics and independent initiatives are failing on the Internet in Russia* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2008).

[13] Rafal Rohozinski, "Mapping Russian Cyberspace: Perspectives on Democracy and the Net", United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Discussion Paper, no. 115 (1999): available at http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN015092.pdf, accessed 16 December 2016.

[14] Fossato, Lloyd and Verkhovskii, *The Web that failed.*

[15] Karina Alexanyan, "The map and the territory: Russian social media networks and society", Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University (2013), 161, available at http://hdl.handle.net/10022/AC:P:19097, accessed 16 December 2016.

chamber' for protest action, and social networking is an alternative to television consumption.[16] Other scholars, by contrast, oppose the distinction drawn between online and offline worlds. According to Gorny, the 'Russian blogosphere reproduces fundamental structural features of Russian society such as social atomization and negative attitudes to[wards] official institutions'[17].

The role of the state in shaping and regulating RuNet is a popular research topic. The key themes here are state censorship, e-government and other digital initiatives, state-sponsored hacktivism, Internet-related legislation and security. Deibert and Rohozinski have explored the different Internet control regimes including denying access to online content and filtering; 'legal and normative environment and technical capabilities that enable state actors to deny access to information resources'; counter information campaigns; and enhancement of jurisdiction over national cyberspace.[18]

Some scholars periodize RuNet development. Vlad Strukov divides the development of Russian digital networks into two periods: 1985-1995 and 1995-2005.[19] He links the development of Russian computing technologies to the political transformation of the USSR into Russia, to the technological and social processes that changed the Internet from a technology of 'elites' to a technology of 'masses' and to the cultural shift from collective to collaborative usage. Kuznetsov traces RuNet history as the shift from the alternative cultural and anarchist space of the early adopters to a more commercialized Internet and business-oriented structure.[20] Most research into RuNet historiography, however, has paid limited attention to the factors explaining the transformations in the Russian online environment. The

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[16] Svetlana Bodrunova and Anna Litvinenko, "Fragmentation of society and media hybridisation in today's Russia: How Facebook voices collective demands", *The Journal of Social Policy Studies* 14, no.1 (2016): 113.

[17] Eugene Gorny, "Understanding the Real Impact of Russian Blogs", *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 69 (2009): 8-11.

[18] Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski, "Control and subversion in Russian cyberspace", in ed. Ronald Deibert et al. *Access controlled: The shaping of power, rights, and rule in cyberspace* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010), 27.

[19] Vlad Strukov, "The (Im)Personal Connection: Computational Systems and (Post-)Soviet Cultural History", in ed. Michael Gorham, Ingunn Lunde and Martin Paulsen, *Digital Russia: The Language, Culture and Politics of New Media Communication* (London: Routledge, 2014), 11-33.

[20] Sergei Kuznetsov, *Oshchupyvaia slona. Zametki po istorii russkogo internet* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004).

purpose of our theoretical framework is to enable examination of these transformations.

Theoretical approaches to exploring Internet histories

This section situates our examination of RuNet within the context of different approaches to the historical investigation of the Internet's development. Some approaches investigate the history of the Internet as a technological development[21], others regard it as a media development.[22] The social, political and institutional aspects of the origins of the Internet have attracted particular attention. For instance, the Internet is seen either as a scientific or as a military innovation.[23] Another approach suggests focusing not only on the actors who participated in the development of technologies, but also exploring different perceptions of the Internet by deploying the concept of the social construction of technologies.[24] The concept of the shaping of technologies focuses on a particular aspect of construction and argues that to understand how technologies are shaped we should look into social, political and economic values.[25]

Gillespie highlighted that the design of the Internet is associated with discursive construction, observing that: 'every technology is shaped by a process of social definition, in which those invested in it struggle not only to implement the technology, but also to narrate what it is and what it is for'[26]. Accordingly, to trace the history of the Internet development we need to undertake a discursive analysis of the vision of the Internet and the process of negotiation that took place between different actors around the question: "What is the Internet?". Abbate maintains that the

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[21] Barry M. Leiner et.al., "A brief history of the Internet", *ACM SIGCOMM Computer Communication Review* 39 no. 5 (2009): 22-31.

[22] Lisa Gitelman, *Always already new: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).

[23] Janet Abbate, "Government, Business, and the Making of the Internet", *The Business History Review* 75, no.1 (Spring 2001): 147-176.

[24] Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker, "The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other", *Social Studies of Science* 14, no. 3 (August 1984): 399-441.

[25] Donald MacKenzie and Judy Waycman, *The social shaping of technology* (Buckingham: Open university press, 1985).

[26] Tarleton Gillespie, "Engineering a Principle: 'End-to-End' in the Design of the Internet" *Social Studies of Science* 36/3 (June 2006) 427-457, 428.

development of the Internet should be examined within the context of how the value of technological innovation is viewed by different actors.[27]

Flichy introduced the notion of 'Internet imaginaries', arguing that the 'imaginaire is at the center of design and use of the Internet'.[28] He posits that Internet development is driven by different types of myth and utopian visions about the role of information technologies in and for society, which can, in turn, become projects. The myths and utopias are rooted in discourses that propose 'a framework of interpretation and action for network computing" and show "what could be done with the Internet and how'.[29] Flichy highlighted how the dialectic nature of technology development was the outcome of the tension between an ideology that seeks to preserve a social order and a utopia that seeks to disrupt it. Mansell proposed the examination of how the Internet is imagined within a context of the imaginaries of the information society.[30] She suggests applying the concept of social imaginaries to explore the development of the Internet as a relationship between alternative imaginaries as 'different ways of seeing' the Internet, which represent different values, and the relationship of power between the actors that share these imaginaries.[31] She defines imaginaries as 'the way people in the information society make sense of their visions and practices and how this is influencing the communication system that is so central to people's lives'.[32]

The actors participating in the development and promotion of imaginaries may include hackers or counter-culture and cyber-culture activists.[33] Guice suggests that there is a need to add users, administrators, moderators and designers to the list of actors who construct the online-space.[34] He distinguishes between the architect's retrospective on Internet history and the users' point of view; the former relies on technical and official documents whilst the latter involves actors who are 'stimulating

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[27] Abbate, "Government, Business, and the Making of the Internet": 148.
[28] Patrice Flichy, "The Imaginary Internet: How Utopian Fantasy Shaped the Making of a New Information Infrastructure", *Business and Economic History On-Line*, no. 2 (2004): 11.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Robin Mansell, *Imagining the Internet: Communication, innovation, and governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[31] Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries", *Public Culture* 14, no.1 (2002): 91-124.
[32] Mansell, *Imagining the Internet*, 9.
[33] Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2010).
[34] Jon Guice, "Looking backward and forward at the Internet", *The Information Society* 14, no. 3 (1998): 201-211.

new applications and new directions of technical development for the engineers'.[35] Hauben suggested that the actors that participate in the development of the Net are not restricted by any sovereign boundaries and hence calls them 'netizens'.[36] Mansell emphasized the need to take into consideration the 'perceptions and experiences of everyday users, software developers, and other stakeholders in the development of the communication system'.[37] In the light of the above, the purpose of our conceptual framework is to enable an investigation of the historiography of RuNet as a series of changes in Internet imaginaries and the relationships between actors that can be associated with these imaginaries, without excluding any type of potential actors.

Conceptual framework: construction of the Internet and the circulation of Internet elites

The history of online space can be explored through the investigation of people who have shaped the Internet space either through technological development or/and through policy making or/and by its usage. We use the term 'Internet elites' to identify the different groups that play a part in the social construction of the Internet. Internet elites can be conceptualized in different ways; first, as the most significant hubs and content producers in online social networks; second, as the most influential designers and architects of platforms; and, third, as those who have the power to shape policies affecting the regulation of the Internet.[38] There is an inherent paradox in the notion of the 'Internet elites' given that formerly various online networks and communities were underground and counter-elitist actors. Moreover, a focus on elites suggests a focus on single actors, while Internet research literature tends to approach the Internet as a space for collective actors,

[35] Ibid: 202.

[36] Michael Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Computer Society Press), IX-XI.

[37] Mansell, *Imagining the Internet*, 11.

[38] Darya Radchenko, Dina Pisarevskaia, Irina Ksenofontova, "Logika virtual'nogo protesta: nedelia posle vyborov-2011", *Antropologicheskii forum*, no. 16 (2012): 108-126.

e.g. networks, crowds and communities.[39] Hence, to address these contradictions, the notion of elites requires clarification.

Elite theories have variously approached and defined 'elites' as actors controlling resources, occupying key positions and relating to each other through power networks[40] and as those who possess the material and/or symbolic resource to manifest power over others.[41] The literature also distinguishes between different types of elites including business elites, military elites, media elites, state administrative, religious elites and others according to what particular power resources the group shares.[42] Here, the economic and political power of specific actors dealing with the Internet, as well as their different forms of social and cultural capital, can operate as an indicator for exploring Internet elites.[43] The investigation of changes in the elites is addressed as a 'circulation of elites […] where elites are overturned by other elites'.[44]

In this paper, we are interested in elites as groups that have the resources to develop, promote and implement their imaginary of technology, in this case, that of the Internet. Following Flichy and Mansel we define Internet imaginaries as a way of seeing the social, political and cultural role of the Internet as well as the utopian vision of how the Internet can offer alternative ways of being, contribute to social change and challenge existent socio-political reality. Viewing the Internet as a process of social construction can help resolve some of the controversies that trouble the notion of 'Internet elites'; it does this by defining the elites as those single or collective actors who take an active part in the social construction of the Internet space through the mobilization of their resources. Accordingly, we conceptualize the

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[39] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000); Barry Wellman, Jeffrey Boase, Wenhong Chen, "The Networked Nature of Community: Online and Offline", *IT & Society* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 151-165.

[40] Alexis Yamokovski and Joshua Dubrow, "How Do Elites Define Influence? Personality and Respect as Sources of Social Power", *Sociological Forum* 41, no. 4 (2008): 319-336.

[41] Elisa Reis, "Perceptions of poverty and inequality among Brazilian elites" in *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality* ed. Elisa Reis and Mick Moore, *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality* (New York: Zed Books, 2005).

[42] Matias Lopez, "Elite Theory", *Sociopedia.isa* (2013): available at http://www.sagepub.net/isa/resources/pdf/Elitetheory.pdf, accessed 16 December 2016.

[43] Pierre Bourdieu, "The forms of capital", in ed. John Richardson, *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241-258.

[44] Lopez, "Elite Theory".

Internet elites as a group of actors that take an active part in the social construction of the Internet within a specific socio-political and cultural context.

The emergence of the Internet, however, presents a special case for an examination of who can be considered as an elite since the Internet can be approached not only as a technology, but also an as alternative socio-political space which needs to be differentiated from the traditional offline political domain. The early adopters of the Internet claimed that the Internet was an independent space for a counter-culture, that it stood in opposition to the traditional power structure and offered equal communication.[45] Flichy also points out that the Internet is a potential resource for the growth of disruptive political utopias.[46] In this context, the Internet can be considered not only as a constructed technology, but also as a space for the emergence of counter-elites.

In contrast to the literature focused on the shaping of technology, we do not consider the values of different actors, but instead argue that the construction of the Internet is an outcome of the relationship of power between actors who hold different values. Accordingly, we analyze not the values that drive the actors but the relationships between actors that can be associated with different imaginaries. The struggle between different imaginaries of the Internet has a dynamic nature. Accordingly, the circulation of the Internet elites is examined in the light of changes in power relations between traditional and counter-elites. These groups may rely on different resources, e.g. technological knowledge, economic capital or political influence, which support the symbolic capabilities enabling the construction of the Internet within a specific socio-political context. Accordingly, the historiography of the Internet needs to follow the transformation of Internet elites and the changes in the dominant Internet imaginaries.

Methodological framework

Our analysis seeks to explore the development of RuNet as a relationship between different elites who propose different imaginaries of the Internet and the change in the Internet elites. We are particularly interested in two questions: first,

[45] John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”, 8 February 1996, *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, available at https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence, accessed 16 December 2016.
[46] Flichy, “The Imaginary Internet”: 2.

what type of elites are successful in promoting and implementing their imaginaries of the Internet; second, what are the major tensions between different imaginaries at different periods of time. The purpose of the analysis is to identify the following: the major developmental stages, including the dominant Internet imaginaries; the dominant actors who can be considered as Internet elites; and the tensions between groups of actors.

Research into the changes in Internet elites can deploy various methods. For example, research may focus on the online ratings of popular content-producers and websites; it can explore the structure of the ownership of popular online platforms; it may analyze media to map Internet-related agendas; and it can follow the structure of membership of organizations that address Internet related policies. Internet elites can also be considered as network hubs which can be investigated using social network analysis. Exploring the business side of Internet elites requires that economic and financial data be taken into account. Our paper, however, presents a preliminary attempt to study the historiography of national and cultural segments with a focus on a change in the actors associated with dominant Internet imaginaries. Accordingly, our aim is to test this conceptual framework by reinterpreting an existing body of research into the Russian Internet.

The analysis seeks to identify periods in RuNet development marked by a change of Internet elite. For that purpose, we have conducted a top-down thematic analysis of the existing literature about RuNet.[47] In identifying themes we have built on the conceptual frameworks of those studies that introduced the notion of the Internet imaginarie; we understand Internet elites to be actors who construct and promote their imaginaries; we focus attention on the relationship of power between these actors; and we define periods according to a change in the type of elite. We analyze the data in terms of the following five themes and key questions:

[47] Richard E. Boyatzis, *Transforming Qualitative Information* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 1998).

Theme	Key questions
Imaginaries	What are the dominant imaginaries in the development of the Internet? What are the alternative (latent) imaginaries?
Actors	Who are the major actors that play an active part in the construction of dominant imaginaries and who opposes these imaginaries? What types of actors (Institutional/ individual) are associated with Internet imaginaries? What type of resources are associated with different type of actors?
Platforms	What digital platforms are used by the actors to implement the imaginaries?
Relationships	What are the major tensions/conflicts between the actors around imaginaries?
Circulation/ transition	What is the major change in the dominant imaginaries and the Internet elites compared with the previous period?

Table 1 *Thematic framework for analysis of RuNet development*

The stages of RuNet development

Drawing on thematic analysis of the literature, we have identified five periods marked by changes in RuNet elites and a shift in dominant imaginaries of RuNet.

Stage 1: The 1980s and earlier. Cyber-USSR

The first stage that we have identified is the scientific-technical stage. At this stage, there are two major groups of actors that can be associated with the development of the Internet. On the one hand, the development of the Internet was driven by a group of scientists who used it to support research-related collaboration. On the other hand, developers played a leading role. Both groups can be considered as creators and early adopters of the online space. The online space was dominated

by mailing lists (UseNet groups) and networks for communication between Bulletin Board Systems (e.g. FidoNet) which were initially used by communities of the first adopters including scientists, developers and engineers.[48]

According to Kuznetzov, two events that took place in 1990 mark the beginning of RuNet: first, the registration of the .su domain and, second, the creation of the computer network Relcom/Demos. Kuznetzov regards the members of the Kurchatov Institute to be the first Soviet Internet users to own e-mail accounts and observes that access to the Internet was limited by access to the modems of research centers.[49] However, while the early origins of the Internet can be linked to the Soviet ideological vision of cybernetics as a mechanism to build an efficient society, the informational networks of the early 1990s challenged the role of traditional institutions. They provided a space for the development of informal communities, contacts with foreigners, and contributed to democratization.

The early RuNet was also linked to the political change that took place in the USSR in the late 1980s, including the concepts of Perestroika and Glasnost. Kuznetzov recalls that it was hoped that the Internet would overcome the 'informational iron curtain'.[50] There is some evidence that Relcom/Demos network was a key source of independent information during the August coup in 1991.[51] Interestingly, one of the first Russian providers was called the 'Glasnost Network'. This provider opened access to the Internet to people beyond the scientific and technical communities. These new users started to shape the early RuNet.

To sum up, at the first stage the dominant imaginary of RuNet can be associated with a development of online communities among a group of experts, particularly scientists and geeks. There is also some evidence that suggests that RuNet was thought to be a space of and for free communication that breached borders and brought down political walls in the spirit of political transformation as a part of the broader collapse of the USSR. There is no evidence of significant tension between different imaginaries at this period, nor of conflicts between different groups of actors. The ideological and centralized vision of the Internet associated with the

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[48] See, for example, Soldatov and Borogan, *The Red Web*, 25-45; Anna Popkova, "Political Criticism From the Soviet Kitchen to the Russian Internet".
[49] Kuznetsov, *Oshcupyvaia slona*, 20.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Rohozinski, Mapping Russian Cyberspace, 1999; Soldatov and Borogan, The Red Web, 39-43.

communist ideological outlook did not play a substantial role in development of RuNet. The online space was dominated by early adopters who were at the same time the developers and the users of this space.

Stage 2: The late 1990s. The Internet as a space of cultural elites

In the middle of the 1990s, RuNet moved beyond online groups for communication within the communities of early adopters to website platforms that offered online content for any user. These were either media projects (e.g. zhurnal.ru) or cultural projects that provided a space for literature, poetry and art. According to Kuznetzov, literature was the central issue for RuNet between 1995-1998.[52] This encapsulated the idea of the Internet as *samizdat*, archive and library.[53] Early adopters at this stage were primarily content creators and people who were involved in cultural production, including journalists, writers, poets, scholars, artists and designers.

This group's active engagement with a new space can be also considered as part of the experimentation and development of this space. RuNet as a user-generated space enabled humanitarian scholars and writers to introduce new cultural experiments which took the form of the first web-journals and online community activity.[54] Some argued that the Internet as hypertext was the future of literature.[55] Some users approached the Internet not only as an alternative cultural space, but also as a zone of 'limitless freedom' and anarchy, which was manifested in projects such as Libertarium: 'All these ideas shared some type of utopian vision and the faith that the model of unselfish cooperation online would be viable'.[56]

Another field of experiment was the media. RuNet provided space not only for media organizations, but also for individual journalists (among the Russian-Israeli journalist Anton Nossik), whose personal journalism laid the foundation for personal blogging, a dominant feature of RuNet in early 2000s. This stage was marked by a

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[52] Kuznetsov, 45-63.

[53] Roman Leibov, "Occasional political poetry and the Culture of the Russian Internet" in ed. Michael Gorham, Ingunn Lunde and Martin Paulsen, *Digital Russia: The Language, Culture and Politics of New Media Communication* (London: Routledge, 2014), 194.

[54] Natalia Fedorova, "Where is E-LIT in RULINET?", *CyberText Yearbook 2012*, available at http://cybertext.hum.jyu.fi/articles/158.pdf, accessed 16 December 2016.

[55] Kuznetsov, 145.

[56] Ibid., 15.

high degree of user self-reflexivity. The journalists who used the Internet were primarily writing about what was happening online. As pointed out by Kuznetzov: 'The Russian Internet was so small at that time, that the appearance of any new page was an event'.[57] This self-reflexivity was also present in scientific publications by scholars like Gorny and Leibov.

Several influential users, like Nossik, were initially not based in Russia. The term 'RuNet' was invented in Israel by an emigrant from Baku who worked for the Russian-language Israeli-based media.[58] Emigrants were particularly active among the early adopters since the Internet allowed people who had emigrated from the former USSR to stay in touch and share a cultural and language space with their fellows in Russia. By the late 1990s RuNet offered a space to a global Russian-speaking network society.

At the end of the 1990s the growth of the Internet was fast enough to attract the attention of the non-user community. An alternative interpretation of the role of the Internet emerged:

> In the first publications the Internet was presented as an archive of pornography, a space that was inhabited by hackers, racists and xenophobes. […] In that sense, Internet construction relied on the same arguments as a construction of the image of the 'alien' in a society – a foreigner, a stranger, a mad person.[59]

In addition to being a space of 'pornography and fascists', the Internet also started to be seen as a threat to offline actors and institutions including traditional media and business. This was the first time that a contradiction between two imaginaries of the Internet emerged: the Internet as an alternative socio-cultural space and the Internet as an antisocial underground. At this stage, the line demarcating those who represented different imaginaries separated Internet users from the non-users.

Around 2000 Gleb Pavlovsky, head of the pro-Kremlin Fund of Effective Politics (FEP), conducted the first political experiments with online technologies around the 2000 presidential elections. The development of major online media,

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[57] Ibid., 28.
[58] Nikita Likhachev, "21-letiye Runeta", 7 April 2015, *TJournal*, available at tjournal.ru/paper/runet-21. accessed on 16 December 2016.
[59] Kuznetsov, 12.

starting with Gazeta.ru, and the participation of major business actors contributed to the gradual politicization of the online space. With the first election of Putin as president, the Internet became a topic of major discussion among politicians. In 1999 Putin, then prime-minister, organized his first meeting with representatives of the Internet community. At that meeting people considered to be the leaders of RuNet at that time blocked the minister of communication's, Lesin's, proposal to increase the role of the state in the regulation of the Internet.[60]

Another event that marked the transition towards a new type of elite and new imaginaries of RuNet was the emergence of the Livejournal blogosphere platform, first used in Russian in 1999. Podshibiakin cites Goralik who described the first two years of LiveJournal as: 'a touching time when only 40-50 people were writing in Russian, everyone was introduced, welcomed and people added to friends almost anyone'.[61] According to Podshibiakin, at that time, Russian LiveJournal conjured up the image of a 'Soviet kitchen'. [62] The Internet as alternative space for communication was also compared to a 'domestic kitchen' 'in which philosophical and political debates took place'.[63] That said, the Livejournal's 'kitchen' gradually started to open up and attract more members of the public. While initially users could only join Livejournal through personal invitation, in December 2003 Livejournal cancelled the 'invite-only' requirement, which opened the platform for more people to join and simplified the generation of content for mass users.

To sum up, during the second stage the imaginary of the Internet as an alternative cultural, social and political space was developed and promoted through usage by early nontechnical adopters including journalists, writers, social scientists, etc. At the same time, this was a relatively small community and a group of people with a relatively dense offline network of connections. These elites approached the Internet as a space for experiment driven by their visions of the Internet. That said, this was also a time when the Internet space started to attract the attention of

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[60] Soldatov and Borogan, *The Red Web, 94-97.*

[61] Andrey Podshibiakin, *Po-Zhivomu. 1999-2009. LiveJournal v Rossii* (Moscow: Kolibri, 2010), 7.

[62] Ibid, 8.

[63] Karina Alexanyan and Olessya Koltsova, "Blogging in Russia is not Russian blogging", in ed. Adrienne Russell and Nabil Echchaibi, *International blogging: Identity, politics, and networked publics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 67.

political institutions and a broad offline audience; this eventually lead to the emergence of new tensions, which can be seen in the next stages

Stage 3: The 2000s. An alternative media space and networked public sphere

Livejournal was one of the most popular platforms for user-generated content in RuNet in the 2000s. Popular bloggers became known as 'tysyachniki' [Russian diminutive for 'the thousands'], blog owners with more than 1000 followers. The number of 'followers' became a key indicator of online popularity. The members of Internet elites that had emerged during the previous stage numbered among the 'tysyachniki' and came first in the popularity ratings. However, many new actors joined this group of popular users, including well-known journalists from traditional media, celebrities, politicians and mainstream writers, as well as 'anonims' (people who wrote without disclosing their identity). Some politicians were early adopters, while others joined later.[64] Unlike during previous stages, when the Internet was dominated by cultural elites little-known to a broad public offline, but dominant online, now a range of offline media, cultural, business and political (both oppositional and state-affiliated) elites offline, started to occupy the online space.

As highlighted by Podshibiakin, what was special about Livejournal was that "almost everyone there was a source of newsworthy information".[65] People who could be considered newsmakers started to use blogs, as well as activists who used their blogs for different types of campaigning. With the rise of 'newsworthy' bloggers and investigative journalists, in the second half of 2000s, Livejournal started to set the news agenda. Marina Litvinovich, a former consultant for Pavlovsky's Fund for Effective Politics and a liberal blogger, argued that Livejournal enabled the creation of 'blog-waves'. According to Litvinovich, these can generate a 'massive networking campaign' when an issue raised by a particular blog starts to proliferate online and reaches traditional media.[66] For instance, it was LiveJournal blogs that triggered a broad anti-police campaign and the 'Blue buckets' campaign against Russian

[64] President Medvedev's blog appeared in 2009.

[65] Podshibiakin, *Po-Zhivomu,* 10.

[66] Gregory Asmolov, "Russia: Leading Activist Blogger on How Internet Changes Politics Global voices", 30 November 2010, *Global Voices*, available at https://globalvoices.org/2010/11/30/russia-leading-activist-blogger-on-how-internet-changes-politics/ accessed 16 December 2016.

officials who abused usage of emergency signals on their cars.[67] Blogs also started to be used to conduct independent investigations into (and against) corruption (e.g. as carried out by Aleksey Navalny, Russia' s most prominent opposition activist).

Research undertaken by the Berkman Centre suggested that the Russian blogosphere at that time could be considered a 'networked public sphere'.[68] The Berkman research highlighted that the Russian blogosphere offered alternative frameworks for discussing news and politics, and an alternative to broadcast and print media.[69] Scholars identified the 'occurrence of bottom-up agenda setting' in mainstream media.[70] The researchers also highlighted RuNet's 'watchdog function' which '…identif[ied] problems of common concern and coming together online to push back against abuses of the state or powerful corporate interests'.[71] Gorny argued that unlike traditional media, 'the Russian blogosphere remains a place of free speech and uncensored discussion'.[72]

Research suggests that the blogosphere as an alternative media space posed a challenge to the traditional political and media elites, though these elites also tried to engage with the online space. That said, Toepfl, who examined a number of scandals that started online through social media, questioned online users' capacity to pose a threat to the traditional ruling elites. He concluded that 'Russia's ruling elites are currently very much capable of managing public outrage arising from the new sphere of social media according to their specific political aims'.[73]

Interestingly, by the middle of the 2000s, popularity measurement had become an important feature of RuNet. Several ratings, including the Yandex blog rating, were used to identify the most popular bloggers and to measure the significance of specific topics. Ratings played an important role in defining online

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[67] For more details, see, Samuel Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 167-202.

[68] Etling, "Public discourse in the Russian blogosphere".

[69] Karina Alexanyan, Vladimir Barash, Bruce Etling et al, "Exploring Russian cyberspace: Digitally-mediated collective action and the networked public sphere", Berkman Center Research Publication, no. 2012-2 (2012), available at https://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Exploring_Russian_Cyberspace_2012.pdf, accessed 16 December 2016.

[70] Ibid., 6.

[71] Ibid., 7.

[72] Gorny, "Understanding the Real Impact of Russian Blogs": 9.

[73] Florian Toepfl, "Managing public outrage: Power, scandal, and new media in contemporary Russia", *New Media & Society* 13 no. 8 (2011): 1314.

elites. The Yandex rating was, however, later closed. This can be approached as a struggle not only around the visibility of certain content, but also about who are considered to be the online leaders, through control over the mechanisms that provide indicators of popularity.

To summarize, the third stage is associated with a substantial increase in the number of Internet users and the first efforts by the traditional offline elites to adopt online space. This stage displayed a shift in the imaginary of RuNet from an elitist cultural and community space to an imaginary of RuNet as space for an alternative agenda and framing of events, as well as a politicized public sphere. This was also the first time that significant competition between different type of elites became visible, particularly around agenda setting and the media framing of events. There ensued a struggle between traditional media/state-affiliated elites and the alternative elites that had emerged online.

Stage four: The 2010s. Networked and connected action

Fossato et al argued that 'the liberation promise' heralded by the Internet had been limited in Russia, and they criticized RuNet for failing to bring about political change and increase political participation.[74] In the late 2000s RuNet nevertheless displayed 'growing use of digital platforms in social mobilization and civic action'. This political mobilization was not necessary associated with NGOs or any political organization, but rather with 'issue-based campaign[s]' initiated by Internet users.[75] This type of mobilization resembles the notion of 'connected action', that is, when the Internet facilitates collective action without any organizational framework.[76]

One of the most significant cases of digital media civic mobilization was the response to wildfires in 2010.[77] This was the first time that RuNet users used crowdsourcing platforms to coordinate mobilization. In the same year, 2010, crowdsourcing platforms started to be used to monitor urban problems, including

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[74] Fossato, Lloyd and Verkhovskii, *The Web that failed.*

[75] Alexanyan et al, "Exploring Russian cyberspace": 2-3.

[76] W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics", *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 739-768.

[77] Gregory Asmolov, "Natural disasters and alternative modes of governance: The role of social networks and crowd sourcing platforms in Russia" in ed. S. Livingston and G. Walter-Drop, *Bits and Atoms: Information and Communication Technology in Areas of Limited Statehood* (New York: Oxford University Press 2014): 98–114.

potholes (the first project was initiated by Alexey Navalny), and in the struggle against corruption.[78] Unlike those who see the Internet as a public sphere that provides an online space for discussion and information sharing, activism required an offline type of activity including user participation in data collection and the solution of specific problems.

One of the first instances when RuNet was used for political protests occurred during the so-called Twitter revolution in Moldova in 2009. On a more mass scale, RuNet was used for political mobilization in the winter of 2011-2012. Social networks, crowdsourcing platforms and dedicated websites were employed to monitor electoral fraud and to coordinate different type of offline activity and protest against the rigging of both the parliamentary and presidential elections.[79] One of the most successful Facebook event pages was created by a journalist, Ilya Klishin, to call a protest at Bolotnaya Square in Moscow on 10 December 2011. More than 35,000 people joined the event page.[80] Two months later a platform was developed to facilitate the 'White Circle' protest where people created a live chain to surround the centre of Moscow. A crowdsourcing platform 'Map of Violations' (kartanarusheniy.ru) was launched by the election monitoring NGO *Golos* to monitor election fraud.

All the above cases illustrate instances of political innovation by RuNet users.[81] The political innovators were those individuals who introduced novel practices on RuNet to facilitate various form of social and political action, which included both the development of new platforms and innovative usage of these platforms for various forms of mobilization. They can be considered as the RuNet elites who shaped a RuNet imaginary through their practices. This type of elite also includes the moderators of the big online groups and event pages on social

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[78] Josh Machleder and Gregory Asmolov, "Social Change and The Russian Network Society", *Internews*, August 2011, available at https://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_Research_RussiaNetworkSociety1.pdf, accessed 16 December 2016.

[79] Stephen White and Ian McAllister, "Did Russia (Nearly) have a Facebook Revolution in 2011? Social Media's Challenge to Authoritarianism", *Politics*, 34, no.1 (2014): 72-84; Oates, *Revolution stalled*, 165-184.

[80] The actual number of participants in the rally was between 29,000 (according to police data) and 120,000 (according to organizers' data).

[81] Gregory Asmolov, "Dynamics of innovation and the balance of power in Russia" in ed. Muzammil M. Hussain and Philip N. Howard, *State Power 2.0. Authoritarian Entrenchment and Political Engagement Worldwide* (London: Ashgate, 2013): 139-152.

networking websites who controlled the proliferation of information among target audiences.

One can argue that the growing role of the Internet for mobilization can be also associated with a change in the type of dominant platforms; these shifted from being platforms for the generation of content by users to platforms for social interaction. While the third stage suggested the dominant role of Livejournal, now we can see an increase in the popularity of social networks, including Vkontakte and Facebook. Alexanyan had noted as early as 2004 that 'the locus of online social activity in Russia may be shifting from blogs and blog/social network hybrids to pure social networking sites'.[82] However, the socio-political role of social networking websites would be a later development in RuNet. The increasing role of social networks can be linked to a process of polarization between the online and the offline communities. Bodrunova and Litvinenko argue that 'the Russian Facebook segment formed an echo chamber'[83] which became disconnected from other Russian communities and political groups.

The fourth stage of RuNet development presents a shift from Internet as a space of alternative content to Internet as a space of social and political mobilization. As highlighted by Koltsova and Shcherbak, 'political activity on the Internet is not simply an online projection of offline political activity: it can itself provoke activity in offline political life'.[84] Unlike the imaginary of the RuNet as a public sphere, in this next case the Internet is not only a sphere for discussion, but a set of political instruments used for offline impact. However, active political innovation that facilitated connective actions and the emergence of a new generation of online leaders who used RuNet to organize offline activism, generated a new conflict.[85] This time, the RuNet elites seemed to present a significant political threat to traditional political elites, either through challenging the legitimacy of elections or through their capacity to facilitate large scale political action. The increasing awareness that RuNet presented a political threat marked the beginning of a new

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[82] Karina Alexanyan, "Social networking on Runet: The view from a moving train" *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 1, no. 2 (2004): 1-12.

[83] Bodrunova and Litvinenko, "Fragmentation of society and media hybridisation in today's Russia": 122.

[84] Olessia Koltsova and Andrei Scherbak, "'Livejournal Libra!': The Political Blogosphere and Voting Preferences in Russia 2011-2012", *New Media & Society* 17, no. 10 (2015): 1715.

[85] Bennett and Segerberg, "The logic of connective action".

stage of RuNet development; this saw a significant increase in state-led regulation of online space.

Stage five: The Internet under state control

As early as the 2011-2012 electoral cycle the Russian authorities began restricting oppositional activist activity. This included DDoS [Distributed Denial of Service] attacks on media and crowdsourcing projects, new legal regulations as well as the prosecution of selected activists. The founder of Vkontakte, Pavel Durov, publically refused a FSB request to disclose information about political activists who used Vkontakte. A couple of years later he had to sell his business and leave Russia.

Anna Klyueva argues that events of the winter 2011-2012 were a 'turning point' in the development of the socio-political role of RuNet. '[T]he successes of the protest movement initiated a government crackdown on the Russian Internet and social media', she maintains, 'with the Russian government actively seeking to tame and control online communicative processes through a set of laws regulating online activity, increasing the presence of government and pro-government forces online, and fostering self-censorship'. She concludes that 'the pro-government actors were able to monopolize and control the public sphere with their issues and messages, eliminating rational debate and thus limiting the functioning public sphere essential for a fully functioning society'.[86] Seva Gunitsky suggests that the case of RuNet illustrates a '"shift from contestation to co-optation" of social media'.[87]

State control is not a new thing in Russian cyberspace, although RuNet enjoyed relative freedom compared to the Internet in authoritarian environments. Following the elections, a significant increase in Internet regulation could be observed, which can also be linked to the Arab Spring and the Snowden revelations.[88] This took the form of the sovereignization of control over the Internet, that is, the type and the scale of control over online space became more and more

[86] Anna Klyueva, "Taming Online Political Engagement in Russia: Disempowered Publics, Empowered State and Challenges of the Fully Functioning Society", *International Journal of Communication*, no. 10 (2016): 4674.
[87] Seva Gunitsky, "Corrupting the cyber-commons: Social media as a tool of autocratic stability", *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 1 (2015): 50.
[88] Julien Nocetti, "Russia's' dictatorship-of-the-law's approach to internet policy", *Internet Policy Review* 4, no. 4 (2015), DOI: 10.14763/2015.4.380.

like the control exercised over offline space. In addition to new legislation, the oppositional media was either blocked by inclusion on a blacklist or taken under state control (e.g. the popular news website Lenta.ru), while state-sponsored media played an increasingly dominant role online. Several influential platforms were taken under state control through changes in the ownership structure of the media in general. The state also supported groups of cyber guards, who search for prohibited content online and report it to the authorities.[89]

Traditional offline elites, including the media elites, increasingly took control of online space. It with worth noting that the majority of Russians support Internet regulation and trust state institutions as regulators.[90] These developments gave rise to new RuNet elites: the regulators, for example, the security services and RoskomNadzor, a state's communication control agency, which shapes the agenda and sets the tone for what is permitted and what is prohibited. The shift in Internet elites is also reflected in the changes of the type of participant invited to a meeting with the Russian president as representatives of the Internet from users and activists (who were invited to meet President Medvedev in 2011) to the owners and managers of Russia's IT-industry (who were invited to meet President Putin in 2015).

In addition to regulation and sovereignization, the fifth stage of RuNet development displays evidence of the increasing securitization of Russian online space. These tendencies had been visible in RuNet since the cyber conflict with Estonia in 2007, which included a large-scale attack on Estonian governmental websites that were attributed to Russian hackers, and the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008. The Internet played an even greater role in information warfare during the conflict between Russian and Ukraine (2014-2016). This securitization of RuNet elevated traditional security elites to the level of traditional political, business and media elites (see Kiriya's article in this issue).

To sum up, this most recent stage in the development of RuNet is associated with the state's response to the increasing role of the Internet in social and political

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[89] Tom Balmforth, "Meet The Kremlin's Young Army Of Cybersnitches", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 26 March 2015, available at http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-mediagvardia-stalin-era-internet-snitching/26921838.html, accessed 16 December 2016.

[90] Eric Nisbet, Benchmarking Public Demand: Russia's Appetite for Internet Control (Philadelphia: Center for Global Communications Studies, 2015), available at http://www.global.asc.upenn.edu/publications/benchmarking-public-demand-russias-appetite-for-internet-control/, accessed 16 December 2016.

mobilization. Regulation of online space substantially increased; state-affiliated political, security, and media elites have penetrated online space, and the role of online space for agenda setting and activism has decreased. The dominant imaginaries associated with RuNet are those of sovereignization and securitization. The former elites are contained in platforms like Facebook, which present a space for 'echo chambers', while the platforms for previous elites have either been co-opted, taken under control or restricted through regulation. That said, the former elites still endeavour to promote their vision of the Internet through the development of new tools, practices and the generation of content.

Conclusion

We proposed a conceptual framework that would trace the development of RuNet by focusing on the actors associated with the dominant imaginaries of Russian cyberspace at different periods of time. We defined these actors as Internet elites; that is, the key actors to have participated in the social construction of the Internet and in the promotion of dominant Internet imaginaries. We also said that we would consider the conflict between different types of actors associated with different types of imaginaries.

We identified five stages in the development of RuNet which are associated with different types of elites, different imaginaries, different types of relationships between elites and platforms dominant in the context of a specific imaginary. The following table presents a summary of this analysis.

Internet imaginary	Timeline	Dominant actors	Type of actors	Relationship between actors	Dominant platforms
1.Era of geeks/ scientists	1985-1995	Scientists, programmers	Developers	Unchallenged leadership	newsgroups; BBS; FidoNet
2. Alternative cultural space	1995-2003	Creative class: writers, poets, journalist, humanitarians	Users (early adopters/ experimenters)	Unchallenged leadership	Web pages
3. Public Sphere/ Alternative media space	2003-2009	Newsmakers, journalists, popular bloggers, celebrities	Users/ content-generators	Tension with traditional media elites	Blogosphere
4. Political/ social mobilization	2010-2012	Volunteers, social/ political activists	Users/ Innovators	Tension with political/ security elites	Social networks
5. Regulation/ sovereignization / securitization	2013-present	Roskomnadzor; cyber guards; security, media & political elites	Regulators	Domination	Online platforms under regulation; circumvention tools; black list

Table 2 *Stages in development of RuNet imaginaries.*

To follow the circulation of Internet elites and the dynamics of change in the Internet imaginaries, we looked into three aspects: the type of actors associated with dominant Internet imaginaries; the type of resources that are mobilized by actors; and the type of relationships between the actors. Although the first and the last stages were driven by actors with institutional affiliation, research institutes and political institutions present very different types of institutional actors. In the three middle stages, we can see that the imaginaries are mostly associated with individual actors. We can also trace a shift from imaginaries associated with online space

developers to user-driven imaginaries. The final stage shows an imaginary driven by institutional regulators.

The analysis of data also allows us to establish whether given elites originated from an offline space or if they emerged online. In the case of the scientists, these are epistemic communities which existed offline and, as the architects of the new environment, took part in the development of the online space. In the case of the next three stages we can see a combination of online and offline elites. For instance, at the second stage, cultural elites from an offline background form a new type of identity online and become more empowered in the online space through maintaining exclusive networks. The third stage consisted of a combination of existing online elites and individual actors associated with offline elites trying to adopt online space. The stage of mobilization meant that elites formed online rely on their capacity to use digital platforms in order to facilitate offline action.

The online elites can be also classified according to the resources that are mobilized to develop and implement a particular type of imaginary. In the case of the scientist and developers their major resources are knowledge and technology. The way they implemented their imaginaries is through a combination of technical development of online space and usage of this space. The imaginaries at the second and third stages were implemented by drawing on the social and cultural capital of the actors. These actors shaped RuNet through their online practices, such as content generation and networking. The fourth stage revolves around social capital and its political mobilization, or more specifically, something that has been conceptualized as ‘crowd capital’ as well as innovation that relies on knowledge and creativity.[91] The implementation of the dominant imaginary of the latest fifth stage relies on the traditional institutional power of the state, which is achieved through domination and governance. The origins of resources are linked to the origins of the actors. Some of the resources, e.g. knowledge and traditional political power, stem from offline domains. The resources that are associated with the three middle stages accumulated mostly online. Hence, the transition of imaginaries is linked to a change in the structure of resources that are mobilized to promote these imaginaries.

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[91] John Prpić, and Prashant Shukla, “The Theory of Crowd Capital”, *Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, no. 46 (January 2013): available at https://ssrn.com/abstract=2193115, accessed 16 December 2016.

Our analysis suggests that the shift in the imaginaries of RuNet is associated with a relationship of power between different Internet elites. We could not identify any substantial tensions or conflicts between the different actors at the first two stages of RuNet development. The third stage is the first when tensions between online elites and traditional offline media elites emerged. The online space is nevertheless strongly shaped by online actors. The fourth stage showed tensions between online oppositional elites and traditional offline political elites. The latest stage indicates domination by traditional offline political institutions, as well as traditional media and security elites

The shift in the type of online elites that takes place in the social construction of the Internet from developers through users and towards state-affiliated institutional actors can be used as the basis for a model for the transformation of the Internet as an alternative socio-political space. First, the space was created relying on the resources of knowledge. At the second stage the new domain was inhabited by first adopters, who sought to develop the space as an alternative to where they had come from. Then the space started to be a field of contest between those who were interested in preserving it as an alternative space and those who tried to adjust this space to fit in with existent offline reality. At some point, those who promoted alternative visions of cyberspace space try to move from online to offline space, and accordingly alter the offline space by relying on online technologies. However, that leads to a crackdown by offline reality on the opposition in the online domain, which is manifested in what we have described as the sovereignization and securitization of cyberspace.

It needs be stressed that there is no clear differentiation between stages, and at every point of time there can be found a complex mixture of relationships, actors, resources and imaginaries. That said, the stages that we have identified enable the dynamics of the relationship between online space as an alternative space and the offline space as we described above to be traced. It is also important to highlight that while we have used RuNet as a case study to follow the role of online elites in the construction of the social-political and cultural segment of the Internet, the model can be also applied to other segments of the global Internet as an outcome of social construction and relationships of power between different actors.

Our paper suggests a starting point for further examination of the historiography of RuNet as well as the historiography of other cultural and socio-

political segments of the Internet. Future research should also address a number of methodological and empirical limitations that have been indicated in our paper. For instance, our analysis neglected economic factors and the role of business elites that can be associated with any stage of RuNet development. Further analysis could also focus on the identification of latent imaginaries that have the potential to turn into dominant imaginaries in the future. That said, we sought to demonstrate that the ‘unique destiny’ of RuNet has its own internal logic. Exploring this logic enriches our understanding of the history of the Internet on local and global levels.