The Russian 'Sovereign Internet' Facing Covid-19

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COVID-19 FROM THE MARGINS

PANDEMIC INVISIBILITIES, POLICIES AND RESISTANCE IN THE DATAFIED SOCIETY

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Despite the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia, a state of emergency has not been declared in the country; only specific regions have entered into a state of "high alert" since early April. "Compulsory holidays" are only partially respected by a population plunged into a growing vagueness that is health-related, legal and economic at once.[1] In this context, Russia is deploying and updating its digital strategy and infrastructure, which have been carefully scrutinized in recent years for centralizing authority. What does the COVID-19 crisis say about the Russian state's digital power, and the challenges it poses to public freedoms?

The Russian State Facing COVID-19: Digital Ambitions put to the Test

The Russian authorities have advocated the use of digital tools to control the movements of citizens and limit the circulation of the virus. These uses aimed at "securitization" are inspired by China, Korea, and Singapore, but are also part of the "sovereignty" logic of the Russian Internet (Runet). This logic was already engaged[2] before the start of the epidemic, consolidating surveillance systems whose existence dates back several years (e.g., video surveillance cameras, aggregation of geolocation data supplied to the authorities by mobile operators).[3]

As of February, Sergei Sobyanin, the mayor of Moscow, proposed using facial recognition to monitor people returning from abroad, using the surveillance cameras of the "Safe City" program, operating since 2018.[4] Between February and March, 200 people who broke their quarantine were identified, including a man who merely took out his trash. As a study by IT and SORM—a popular blog on Telegram devoted to Runet surveillance and regulation issues—shows, this device was a catalyst for inequality.[5] Surveillance cameras were mainly installed in the modest districts of Moscow because those who decided their location resided in the upscale districts, and did not wish their activities to be monitored.

1 Anna Colin-Lebedev, 'L'État Russe Face au Défi du Coronavirus', *The Conversation*, 2 April 2020, https://theconversation.com/letat-russe-face-au-defi-du-coronavirus-135272.

2 Francesca Musiani, Benjamin Loveluck, Françoise Daucé and Ksenia Ermoshina, 'Souveraineté Numérique : l'Internet Russe Peut-il se Couper du Reste du Monde ?', *The Conversation*, 18 March 2019, https://theconversation.com/souverainete-numerique-linternet-russe-peut-il-se-couper-du-reste-du-monde-113516.

3 Andrey Zakharov, 'Smart City or Big Brother? How the Mayor's Office Learned to Know Everything About Muscovites', *BBC News*, 10 April 2020, https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-52219260.

4 Felix Light, 'Coronavirus Outbreak Poses Major Challenge for Russian Face Recognition System', *The Moscow Times*, 26 March 2020, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/ru/2020/03/26/vspishka-koronavirusa-yavlyaetsya-sereznim-ispitaniem-dlya-rossiiskoi-tehnologii-raspoznavaniya-lits-a38.

5 IT and Sorm, Telegram, https://t.me/itsorm/1663.

On March 20, 2020, faced with an increase in contaminations, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin recommended[6] monitoring citizens who have been in contact with infected people by collecting geolocation data from operators, and transmitting them to local administrations.[7] A patient monitoring application "Social Monitoring" was made available on April 1, 2020 on GooglePlay. It quickly became controversial, since its surveillance goes far beyond the movement of patients and offers little protection of personal data. The application was later finally withdrawn.[8]

However, the Russian State has not abandoned the digital tracking of citizens. Since April 13, all trips within Moscow that involved public transportation were carried out under penalty of fines, without a digital pass generated on an official website.[9] In response to criticism of the "Social Monitoring" application, the Moscow municipality declared that with this new device, personal data will be stored in Russian territory and will be deleted when the "high alert" state is over.[10] The same system was active in Tatarstan and the Primorye region; QR-Code passes were also available and recommended but not mandatory in Nizhny-Novgorod, while other Russian regions resorted to lighter measures.[11]

Resistance and Mobilisations of the Free Internet

The use of digital data to strengthen surveillance of the population while coping with the disease is causing concern for defenders of online freedoms. Technologists, engineers, and developers discuss government projects and conduct independent investigations to uncover security vulnerabilities, technical issues, and other controversial aspects of the technologies deployed by the Russian state.

Several associations and independent media channels have alerted internet users to the growing attacks on the protection of personal data and the development of online surveillance. On March 27, the NGO Roskomsvoboda published avademecum on digital rights in a pandemic period, stressing that the use of personal data, especially biometric data, legally required the consent of individuals. But "the use of facial recognition is in a gray area," argues lawyer Sarkis Darbinyan.[12] The association is also launching, with other associations in the post-Soviet space, an inventory of restrictions on digital freedoms around the world.[13] The

6 Russian Government, 'Decisions following the meeting of the Presidium of the Coordination Council under the Government of the Russian Federation to combat the spread of the new coronavirus infection', 23 March 2020, government.ru/orders/selection/401/39243/.

7 'A system for tracking citizens who have been in contact with infected with coronavirus will be created', *Roskomsvoboda*, 23 March 2020, https://roskomsvoboda.org/56599/.

8 'The Moscow City Administration's application for "social monitoring" has appeared on Google Play', *Kommersant*, 1 April 2020, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4309778.

9 https://nedoma.mos.ru/.

10 'Digital passes: how the access system will work in the city', *Mos*, 11 April 2020, https://www.mos.ru/mayor/themes/2299/6434050/.

11 'Self-isolation and control: Russian regions introduce new restrictions on the movement of citizens', *Vesti*, 7 April 2020, https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=3254717.

12 Felix Light, 'Coronavirus outbreak poses major challenge for Russian face recognition system'.

13 Pandemic Big Brother, https://pandemicbigbrother.online/ru/.

Agora association is opening a legal aid service linked to the pandemic. Its lawyers are also concerned about the use of facial recognition to enforce quarantine.[14] Activists close to government-opposing personality Alexei Navalny (such as the Society for the Protection of the Internet)[15] denounced, even more boldly, the establishment of a "digital gulag",[16] and called on citizens not to transmit their personal data to the applications that control movements and trace contacts.

At the same time, solidarity initiatives are developing on the internet, aimed at supporting the poorest citizens and caregivers. The Makers vs. Covid collective uses 3D-printing techniques to provide doctors with the protective gear they need.[17] An online hackathon, "Covidhack," is developing a bot for Telegram that produces a citizen database allowing people with coronavirus to speak anonymously and map their symptoms. Internet infrastructures are also being weakened by the pandemic, due to the growth in traffic driven by new digital habits in confinement. Russian networks are frequently down, but the maintanance work of technicians and cable operators employed by the over three thousand Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that manage these networks comes at the risk of legal threats. OrderKom, a consulting firm for ISPs, offers these workers legal support, including the preparation of authorizations for movements due to on-site work, and a legal defense in the event of a fine.[18]

Faults and Paradoxes of Digital Surveillance

Over the days and the weeks, gaps emerged between the authorities' security ambitions and the realities of their implementation. Digital surveillance and health-related solutions were delegated to many public and private, federal and regional players, who often made contradictory decisions. The paradoxes and dysfunctions documented by online freedom activists show the limits of the announced "securitization" design. Perhaps the most obvious failure is that of digital passes in Moscow. The Nedoma.mos.ru site that generates the passes uses foreign hosting servers; the government was therefore accused of putting its own project of sovereign Runet in jeopardy.[19]

Digital freedom activists, such as Mikhail Klimarev of the Society for the Protection of the Internet, point to the ineffectiveness of technological solutions. Instead, he suggests that COVID-19 strategies should focus on civic responsibility, while digital surveillance infantilizes citizens and is likely to be circumvented. This crisis highlights the lack of mutual trust

14 'Agora opens legal aid operational headquarters in connection with the coronavirus pandemic', *Agora*, 19 March 2020, https://agora.legal/news/2020.03.19/Agora-otkryla-operativnyi-shtab-pravovoi-pomoshi-v-svyazi-s-pandemiei-koronavirusa/1002.

15 Internet Defense Society, https://ozi-ru.org/.

16 'Technical solutions to combat coronavirus. Second episode', *Navalny*, https://shtab.navalny.com/hq/ekaterinburg/3796/.

17 Makers vs COVID, https://makersvscovid.ru/.

18 Ordercom, www.ordercom.ru/.

19 IT and Sorm, Telegram, https://t.me/itsorm/1645.

between citizens and the state. Indeed, the information on the epidemic disseminated by the state is viewed with suspicion, oscillating between "they are hiding the true extent of the disaster to us" and "it is a plot to muzzle us even more." If the authorities take the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to re-open their hunt for "fake news," on their end, YouTubers and independent journalists denounce the incomplete or questionable information disseminated by representatives of power. They also object to the public behaviour of officials like Vladimir Putin's spokesperson, who showed up at a press conference with a highly contested "virus blocker" badge.[20] Sometimes, events are borderline ironic, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' opening of a thread of information for its nationals abroad on the Telegram application, which is officially banned in Russia.

Thus, part of civil society, without questioning the need for confinement, mobilizes against the threatening initiatives of the Russian "Big Brother." It denounces the incompetence of the authorities to manage the implementation of technical devices, as well as the institutional power's violation of its own laws (like the provision on the storage of Russian data on Russian territory), as well as the non-protection of personal data.

While the wide and ambitious Russian Internet surveillance and sovereignty project is gaining strength during the coronavirus crisis, its implementation is uncertain and often contradictory. The pandemic demonstrates the limits of the internet infrastructure centralization project. The government ends up being obliged to relax specific regulatory measures, such as the Yarovaya law, which requires ISPs to keep the history and metadata of users for the purpose of legal interception and fight against terrorism.[21] However, this apparent complexity is not necessarily synonymous with ineffectiveness. It is part of the flexible reconfigurations of digital constraints in Russia, adjusting to the recently rising challenges, and raising legitmate concerns of digital freedoms defenders.

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