

Actors to be Distinguished: Case of NGO as Stakeholders of Russian Internet

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Abstract. Internet governance is supposed to include a number of stakeholders with own agenda. However the mapping of stakeholders on the national level demonstrate that there can be different imaginaries of the internet owned by one actor. We analyze this diversity in historical context basing on one stakeholder: the civic society or, in organizational terms, NGO. Using performance metaphor, we suggest to understand this stakeholder as the one which is played out by different organizations depending on the historical context. Russian context specifics also include the state as an actor enabling the other ones, including NGO.

Keywords: internet governance, stakeholder analysis, internet in Russia

Introduction

Internet as an infrastructure, bunch of services and a communication space is important for different groups as well as individual actors. Both on a country-level and a global level they contribute to the internet development and therefore are interested in its regulation. This interest is a basis for the multistakeholderism approach to internet governance.

The very idea of multistakeholderism arises from the organizational studies and used to be primarily applied to corporations where stakeholders have been both economical and political actor who “can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” [1]. Internet stakeholders, therefore, are all the users as they might be affected by its objectives, if we understand this literally. And this is not a utopian view, but an everyday agenda for practice of multinational organizations like ICANN or Internet Governance Forum who aim to include a plenty of people from different regions into governance process [2]. However people are rarely included in such process by themselves, but more often as group representatives. Conflicts and controversies which help to develop internet are based on the group interests, e.g. service and domain providers, media and governments. This framework of multiple stakeholders negotiations of global associations like UN, UNESCO etc. Jeanette Hoffman states that one of the key problems of this is, as she calls it, that “multi-stakeholder narrative clearly represents the romantic ‘mode of emplotment’ (White 1978, 66). The various political and academic origins of the multi-stakeholder concept described above all share a sense of change for the better” [3]. The very idea of the shared sense puts a question of boundaries between actors based on whether they have this sense or not. Of course, these boundaries might not be the same as the institutional ones. Following Robin Mansell study, we argue, that the imaginary internet of various governance participants is different and might be more connected with their roots, than with their role in governing process [4].

Stakeholders on a national level might not share this sense as well as the global ones. One of the reasons is that they are not included into specific governing practices like those which exist on the global level. Moreover, if we try to indicate controversies, e.g. between commercial and

non-commercial stakeholders, you firstly need to make a clear distinction between them. It is particularly important when we are dealing with countries which are not typical Western ones (it is a big question if there is any really typical one, however). Working with the Russian case of Internet governance we realised that the pure types of actors are difficult to separate from each other. The borderline between the state and business seems to be blurred and it is difficult to understand how society might participate in such a configuration. Therefore, we decided to map at least a part of the field in order to understand how the stakeholders might be distinguished.

This study is aimed at problematising the boundaries which might constitute the social or NGO sector of internet governance in Russia. The research is mostly based on historical open data and it is more about posing the problem, then solving it. Taking into consideration post-Soviet context, it is important to make this research historically-structured and context-sensitive. Therefore we provide a linear narrative of how the actors came into being, who organized them, what is their key role and finally, how they are connected with social and public sphere, state and business. Finally we shall analyze their boundaries and return to the problematization of the multistakeholder framework.

The fieldwork included the key organizations observation based on their participation in any group discussions and political events featured in media and public political discussions. So first stage of the study was to figure out associations and events and then to distinguish particular organizations. We have used open resources and Web Archive to find them as well as information of their actions.

There was a problem with the definition, as non-governmental organizations are not the same as Civic society (as this group is named, e.g. in ICANN classifications). Therefore we use a more official name NGO which includes non-governmental and non-commercial organizations which might have a claim of being social. This is rather weak definition, and we return to its problematization in the conclusion.

1990-th: the melting pot

One of the first NGO in the Russian internet was established in 1992 by Kurchatovsky Institute and RSFSR government. Its name is Russian Institute for Public Networks (RIPN, ROSNIIROS in Russian) and it was responsible for domain registration until 2001. Kurchatovsky Institute was the first organization where internet connection with other countries took place in USSR in 1991. If we try to categorize RIPN, we should be context-sensitive to what particular government it was back then and what was the role of the institute. The state in 1992 was quite different from what it is in 2018 as well as the internet (for example there was no WWW at that period). The next nine years RIPN had been registering domains therefore it became a business structure. It had its own rules and was not strongly connected with international organizations of the same type, e.g. ICANN.

Later another educational initiative was organized, it was called RELARN (Russian Educational Academic Research Network). In 1994-1998 there were several grant programs for universities from Russian Scientific Foundation and George Soros foundation which helped universities to buy computers and start using internet. In the next decade universities and scientific organizations became less engaged in internet development both in means of infrastructure and content.

In 1993 the Coordination Center for TLD RU (CC for TLD RU) was established in order to coordinate RIPN by Internet Service Provider companies of that time: Demos Plus, Techno, GlasNet, SovAm Teleport, EUnet/Relcom, X-Atom, FREEnet. It later became the key administrator of domains in Russia: .ru, .рф and also works with new domains which appeared in 2010-th, like .MOSCOW or .ДЕТИ. Probably, CC structure had representatives from almost all the possible stakeholders and it was almost possible during all the 1990-th when state was not very interested in internet, IT-business was not developed and the percentage of internet users in Russia was rather low (below 3%) [5].

ROCIT (Regional Social Center for Internet Technologies) is now also a hub where social, business and state structures work together. It started in 1996 and organized a first Russian Internet Forum (RIF) in 1997. At that period it was mostly a space and event for informal communication of internet pioneers. There were also several complete grassroots organizations, which were established by online activists and key persons of RuNet. Probably the most comprising was EZHE which called themselves "a professional association, self-regulatory organ, in fact a guild of Russian Internet actors". There were "journalists, designers, advertisement producers, programmers, ideologists, analysts who contributed to internet development"[6]. It was established in 1997 by Alexander Malyukov and Leonid Delitsyn. EZHE activity started at the same year with several initiatives like mailing list, newspaper EZHE-Pravda, FRI-gallery (Fizionomii Russkogo Interneta, Faces of Russian Internet), network competition ROTOR etc. EZHE is very close to that group which is described in "Our Runet" as a densely connected group[7].

Different groups which were both NGOs, but with quite different background and ways of operating, acted in 1990-th and almost never met all together. Probably if we tell them today that they were one type of actor/stakeholder they would be very surprised. The government made the first attempt to bring them all together in 1999, and the meeting was not successful in terms of unifying the two groups. We see the evidences of those who had been there and also journalists' book "The Red Web" which described these events many years ago after conversations with those who had been there[8]. Despite their commercial interests, they had very little in common as organizations, meaning structure, resources and ideology. 1990-th was a period when civic and social sector was forming on the basis of post-soviet, early business structures and groups of enthusiasts. The most well-documented imaginary was connected with the latter, as these enthusiasts also participated in media and public events.

2000-th: business becomes the issue

Business structures became more and more important in the 2000th. If the first RIFs were almost amateur, later they developed in business meetings. Their structures changed accordingly. RIPN was no longer the registration organ, it was replaced by a distributed network of business registrars controlled by CC as a root registrar. To the end of 2000-th RAEC appeared and becomes more important structure than ROCIT and both worked more with business actors than with enthusiasts.

Enthusiasm moved to blogosphere which was amateur, politicised and at the same time more open and easy to enter than the web. Livejournal, Liveinternet and Diary.ru became very popular. Livejournal was also a politically saturated platform in Russia, sometimes serving as a public space. There were several attempts to make a bloggers association. One was Alexander Morozov's Kant club (Moscow), also Livejournal ambassadors organized groups of people in different regions and sometimes these communities survived until nowadays. The word "blogger" became synonymous to "civic" and "contemporary". Almost at this time a president became a blogger.

In 2008 Dmitry Medvedev was elected as a president of Russian Federation and he started a number of reforms called "modernisation". In fact it was partly digitalization, e.g. one of the initiatives was e-government, e-democracy, open government, open data etc [9]. All these initiatives started top-down, there was almost no open data initiative on the national level until the state became interested in it.

Pirate Party of Russia was also established in 2009 and it was not as oppositional to government at the first period, but mostly anti-copyright. Until 2011 the relations between social and state organizations were supposed to become better and warmer day by day. 2000-th was a period of

more close connection of social and business actors. At the same time infrastructure providers (like Internet Service providers) and content providers (services and web resources, online diaries etc.) became further from each other as the IT-sector grew and became more diverse. From 2009 to 2011 internet regular users percentage almost doubled and became more than a half-Russia.

Despite being a very unsaturated period in terms of a new association and public events this decade became a basis for associations. It also set up an imaginary of the internet as a part of IT-industry, rather than a sphere of enthusiasts' interest (which was before) or government control which followed.

2010-th: here comes the State

2011 was a year of probably most important political and social momentum when the internet became an issue for the state. It is rather difficult to articulate the exact reason. In some way it was due to Bolotnaya protests or electoral falsifications discussed online. In my previous research with Alexandra Shubenkova we have studied internet as a social good or threat and in analysis of government documents we have seen the turn to the idea that there are two types of technologies: "ours" and potentially dangerous "foreign/global"[10].

Government became a more significant actor in providing infrastructure and laws, both encouraging the industry, censoring content and creating new barriers like Yarovaya law. It also established organizations like ASI (Agency for Strategic Initiatives) and FEED (Foundation for Internet Initiatives Development, FRII in Russian) both aimed at developing startup culture and increasing the usage of technologies for civic purposes.

One more aspect was growth of censorship and restrictive initiatives which came not only from the government, but also from non-governmental organizations. One is Liga of Secure Internet organized in 2011 by an orthodox businessman Konstantin Malofeev who worked with kazaks and cyber-patrols ("kiberdruzhina") to protect people and especially children from "unsecure content". They were not the only one, e.g. in Tyumen cyber-patrol started as a grassroot movement which became more and more popular in the middle 2010-th. Cyber-patrol means that people who see the inappropriate content, inform their providers and ask to place it to a blacklist.

Contrary to that some of the Pirate party members and other internet activists established RosKomSvoboda in 2012. It was organized after a government law of making a list of prohibited websites and rapidly became a prominent organization opposing governmental laws about the internet. They use a radical manner, organize online and offline protest initiatives and make an index of Internet freedom which indicates Russia's low standing in it. After Yarovaya law and Telegram blockings RosKomSvoboda each time acted as a social organization connected to technology specialists (mostly Internet Service Providers in different regions) and lawyers. In contrast with RAEC who participate in government discussions and lobbying process, they are mostly activists with all the activist repertoire and resources which excludes direct participation in policy-making.

To sum up this period, it is a turn to internet development which included government as well as new activists with radically different positions of how they imagine the internet: as a space of threats (cyberpatrol) or a space of freedom (RosKomSvoboda). Following the 2000th state went on understanding the internet as an entity to develop and control and became an important actor.

Analysis and Conclusion

Following the very brief historical research above we see that the boundaries of "social" were constructed as a response to the external challenge or initiative. The initiatives had come from educational, worldwide and Russian government and business in 1990-th and in that period what can be called "non-commercial" actor was in fact a mixture of quite different organizations. A decade later

most of them became parts of business or disappeared and for almost ten years there were no new actors on this stage, but instead what happened was the rebuilding of the stage itself: the IT-industry came into being, the language and imaginary changed. Finally, in 2010th the government, which previously initiated new structures and actors, became also a trigger for new grassroots movements. RAEC as a critical structure, RosKovSvoboda and finally, Liga for the safe internet, all of them acted out as stakeholders of the internet from the participant also known as society.

The framework of this research was focused on finding exclusively the actors who are displayed in some public events and/or associations. Themselves they are, like the global institutions, a frame for acting out a performance of being a stakeholder.

Developing this metaphor, we can describe the whole process of internet governance debates as the performance process, following Erving Goffman approach [11]. It might therefore include the material conditions, division to frontstage and backstage, the public which changed in different periods as well as the participants of the performance. At the global level multistakeholder approach is analysed as the one being constructed or debated[12], but rarely performed. Even working with imaginaries, like Robin Mansell or “fiction” like Jeanette Hoffman cited above, researchers miss the performance, moving towards documentation. Of course, this theoretical frame is more difficult to apply to historical data, however it can be fruitful at least to set the problem and question conditions of each actor.

Applying it to this data we figure out, that the process of internet governance in Russia can be described as a play in several acts with different stages. The division into decades is not the ideal one, however even using it, we see that the first did not include such actors as the state or even business as a leading actor. So the actor performing “social” acted out with educational and business ones, being at the same time close to them and not defining itself as an opposition to any. The second act was conducted in a different situation, mostly in terms of material conditions: all the participants became more business-oriented than before and the internet became an issue for those who own money and power. However the performance of how “social” might act started in 2010-th with the resistance to state initiatives or their co-development (like Liga for the Safe Internet). When the state appeared on this stage, the NGO changed their role and started acting out reacting to its action.

This analysis demonstrates a high degree of context dependence in understanding of what we can call a stakeholder of the internet and what “society” means. There is no core ideology like “users rights” or “privacy” or anything similar to what we can see in the global scene. However, it does not mean that there are no stakeholders, but probably it can be a reason to revise the frameworks of understanding which could include this variety as well. As far as “stakeholder” is a term which refers to organization theory, we can rethink it in a more universal way, talking about collective beings, but not organizations. We hope to develop this approach at the workshop to finalize it with a more theoretically grounded conclusion.

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