Chapter 12

Public discussion on information society in Russia

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Introduction

There have been predictions that so called information society development would

help Russia to change and modernise (see, e.g., Peterson 2005, 3). In governmental

level, the state-aided development of information technology has been one of the

central questions. Russian language internet developed relatively rapidly in 1990s,

and the first governmental programs on information society development were

established in the beginning of 2000s during Vladimir Putin's first and second terms

as President of Russia. The burst in the information society programs was experienced

in the context of Dmitri Medvedev's presidency in 2008–2012. Promoting

information society, especially in form of information technology development, was

one of the cornerstones of Medvedev's modernisation program (Medvedev 2009b).[1]

This chapter takes a look on the concept of *information society* and its applicability to

Russian society, focusing on public discussion on information society in Russia,

especially in context of governmental programs, Medvedev's speeches as president,

[1] For a more detailed analysis on modernization as a political key concept under Medvedev's presidency, see Laine and Mustajoki in this volume.

and the media attention on the topic. The main material is collected from the official

webpage of Russian president and completed using Integrum database of media

texts.[2] The aim of the chapter is to discuss the different aspects on information society

in presidential outcomes and public discussion in Russia rather than to define an exact

meaning for information society or include a systematic analysis of the stances of

different media outlets.

The concept of *information society* is a complex one. It has been argued if

information society is a new sort of society or if it is a continuity of the long

established principles and practices. The first approach is supported by, for example,

post industrialism and postmodernism; the second one by, for example, neo Marxism,

reflexive modernisation, and public sphere theories (Webster 2014). Communication

scholar Frank Webster (2014) counts five aspects of information society, all based on

different criteria as the crucial ones: *technological, economic, occupational, spatial*,

and *cultural* aspect.

The basic argument for the *technological* definition as described by Webster (2014) is

that a large volume of technological innovation that the world has experienced must

lead to a reconstruction of the social reality. Of course, this leads to questions like

how much information and communication technology is required for a society in

order to become an information society or if technological innovations are enough to

distinguish the new society from the old one. The *economical* aspect includes the

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[2] In the analysis, both Russian (kremlin.ru) and English (en.kremlin.ru) versions of the webpage were used.

view that achievement of information economy is related to the proportion of gross national product accounted for by information business. It includes growth of information activity at the expense of agriculture or industrial manufacture. The *occupational* aspect takes into account labor force and states that we have achieved information society when we move to service economy where the most of occupations are found in information work (Bell 1979). Since the raw material of non-manual labor is information, substantial increases in such informational work announce the arrival of information society. This view has received critique because of its quantitative approach, since counting information workers has not been seeing as telling enough about hierarchies and variations in power and esteem of these people, overall occupational structure of the society (see e.g. Webster 2014).

In the *spatial* aspect as defined by Webster (2014), the main emphasis is on information networks connecting locations and how they can have effects on organizing time and space. This viewpoint fits also under the concept of *network society* as used by sociologist Manuel Castells. Castells (2010, xxxi–xii) describes how flows of information are leading to radical revision of time-space relations. In this kind of network society, clock and distance are radically relieved and actors are capable of managing their affairs on global scale in real time. For example, instead of going to the library, reading can be obtained through the internet.

The fifth aspect to information society in Webster's list is the *cultural* one. It refers to extraordinary increase in the information in social circulation while we inhabit in a media-laden society. Common to all of the above mentioned five definitions is a

conviction that quantitative changes in information are bringing into being a qualitatively new sort of social system, the *information society*. Webster proposes to add a sixth definition that could be tied with the character of information and how it has transformed the way how we life (Webster 2014). This aspect would focus not on the measure of quantitative results but on the qualitative change of people's lives.

The above mentioned dimensions can be fruitful also when assessing the development of Russian society and if it fits to definitions of information society. The concept of *information society*, or *network society*, allows to put Russia in a global context and adds a new dimension in addition to speaking about Russian society on terms of transitional specifics of the post-Soviet period (Vartanova 2004b, 85; Semenov 2002). Still, in the end of 1990s and beginning of 2000s Russian society was seen to be far from knowledge-based information economy but based on industrial economy and resources. As Manuel Castells and Emma Kiselyova put it, in the second half of 1990s there still was no informational economy in Russia since '(k)nowledge, and information (except specific knowledge of insider trading) is not at the source of productivity and competitiveness in the Russian economy'(Castells and Kiselyova 1998, 21). During the first decade of 2000s, the information technology development was rapid and a number of initiatives were implemented to stimulate it. The technical aspect seemed to prevail: in the Russian discussion, increasing volume of information, based on technological and scientific development, and the power of information in the society were central topics (Illarionov 2003, 15).

In what follows, this chapter will first describe the development towards so called information society in Russia. After that I move on to describe how the topic was addressed in Russian public discussion, and the conclusions part discusses the outcomes of the analysis of information society discussion.

Development of internet in Russia

Information society discussion became topical in Russia in 1990s when Internet was developing rapidly after a slow start. In the beginning of 2000s it was estimated that Russian language internet, often referred to as Runet, was lacking 3-5 years from European and North American development (Perfil'ev 2002, 26). However, the number of internet users doubled each year between 1993 and 1997, and while the progress initially started in big cities (mainly Moscow and St. Petersburg), the gap between geographical areas has been decreasing in 2000s (Vartanova 2015, 134).

In 2010s, according to statistics, Russia is relatively high in internet user numbers. This comes from the fact that internet is after the rapid technical development relatively widely available in Russia; thus access to information society services is guaranteed for many. The number of internet users in Russia is reported to be highest in Europe in absolute numbers: there were estimated 84.4 Million internet users in the country in 2014 (Internet Live Stats 2014). In cities of more than 100 000 inhabitants, over 74 percent of people in the age of 12 or older used internet at least once in a month (TNS Web Index Report, January 2014). According to a survey by FOM (2015), 53% of all Russians used the Internet on a daily base in the spring of 2015. The recent growth, especially in the countryside, is due to the increased amount of mobile phones with internet connections (Gorham, Lunde, and Paulsen 2014, 2).

Rank	Country	Internet users (2014)	Penetration (% of population)
1	China	641,601,070	46
2	United States	279,834,232	87
3	India	243,198,922	19
4	Japan	109,252,912	86
5	Brazil	107,822,831	53
6	Russia	84,437,793	59
7	Germany	71,727,551	87
8	Nigeria	67,101,452	38
9	United Kingdom	57,075,826	90
10	France	55,429,382	86

Table 1. Internet Users by Country: Ten Largest in 2014. Source: Internet Live Stats (2015).

Still, for the Russian information society discussion, it is interesting background that while internet and social media are used by a growing amount of people, TV has stayed as the main information channel. Over 90% of people watch TV regularly while the largest readerships in printed media are considerably lower.

However,established specialised publications also enjoy steady readerships (see e.g. Vartanova 2004a). This is very different pattern compared to Soviet Union where newspaper readership was very high. There are many reasons for the decline of printed press, including the growing costs of printing, relatively high subscribing fees and delivery problems due to the large size of the country and poor infrastructure. Television, in its turn, is very widely available in almost all parts of the country, as is also radio.

When it comes to state intervention level, Russia has been regarded as a relatively closed regime that pursues an open internet policy (E.g. Oates 2007; Toepfl 2012; Toepfl 2014). However, researcher Sarah Oates states that the Russian government still is capable of applying its power through online resources just as it does through print and TV media (Oates 2013, 8). It has been claimed that while the administration in the beginning of 2000s 'embraced information technology as a productivity enhancer in government and an economic motor in business, the Kremlin's active campaign to curtail media freedom and democratic activity suggests that the regime is not really interested in IT's potential to promote openness and accountability in government or politics or to promote an informed and engaged civil society' (Peterson 2005, 3).

However, in the beginning of 2000s, a number of local and international initiatives were implemented to stimulate the Russian government's use of information and communication technologies. A large volume of government information became available online. These materials included, for example, laws and draft legislation,

economic data, and contact information for governmental structures. Online services and databases were in use also in administration of social services, taxes and customs, and the banking system. (Peterson 2005, xiii–xiv.)

The role of internet in public discussion has grown in recent years (see, for example, Oates 2013; Lonkila 2012) and especially LiveJournal, a platform for blogging that started in early 2000s, is a popular space for discussion on politics and society in Runet. Internet platforms have provided a place to publish more wide critique and oppositional opinions than in television or printed press and to search for unmediated information (Toepfl 2012, 1438).

According to report published in 2011, around 40 million Russian internet users had a profile on at least one social network and 20 million were present on two or more. Among those with two or more accounts was President Dmitri Medvedev, who had a video blog, a LiveJournal account, a Facebook profile, and a Twitter account. (Pankin et al. 2011, 7.) He started these activities with the video blog in 2008, following with a LiveJournal account in 2009 (Yagodin 2012). Blogging has become popular also among regional Russian governors, of whom 35 % had an account in the beginning of 2010s (Toepfl 2012, 1435). When Russians use social media, they most probably choose a Russian service. Vkontakte, a Russian counterpart for Facebook, had twice more users than Facebook in the beginning of 2014 (Digit.ru 2014). Studies have demonstrated the more political nature of Facebook, for example, in the importance of it in helping to mobilise support for the anti-regime demonstrations in 2011 (White and McAllister 2014), while Vkontakte serves more as an entertaining environment

(e.g. Golynko-Volfson 2009). Researchers Stephen White and Ian McAllister (2014) propose that use of less popular Facebook in political mobilisation instead of Vkontakte has to do with surveillance: Vkontakte is Russian-owned, and having servers located in Russia. Thus, anti-regime protesters would have less security in Vkontakte platform than within Facebook, which as US-based platform is less a subject to Russian government interference.

Governmental programs to promote information society

The Russian initiatives to promote information society development have got names like *Electronic government* or *e-Russia*. These projects focus on improving the services and transparency in public sector. As researcher Jon Peterson argues, the underlying forces for this kind of programs seem to be more state-centric than the models of e-government in the West: to 'burnish the image of government and officials and, in the view of many, to improve the state's command-and-control capabilities *over* the economy and society' (Peterson 2005, xiv).

The first governmental program, related to information society development in Russia, was called *Electronic government* [Elektronnoe pravitelstvo] and was in force from 2002 to 2010. According to communication scholars Natalya Konradova and Henrike Schmidt (2014, 45), it was 'the first serious endeavor to bring public agencies and services into the digital age'. They saw that the initiative focused mainly on implementing e-government strategies and tools that would speed up the information

society development that was seen needed for economic growth and wealth in the future. The program had two main targets: to enhance electronic communication between government institutions, on the one hand, and the government and its citizens on the other (Minkomsviaz' Rossii 2014). The programme was criticised by domestic and foreign experts e.g. for not rising the actual efficiency of government structures and for corruption that impeded progress (Konradova and Schmidt 2014, 45; Oleinik 2010). Also Medvedev himself as a president acknowledged the failure of this federal programme, and government turned to revision the objectives for the next programme (see, for example, Yagodin 2012, 1419).

The next program, called as *Information society* [Informatsionnoe obshchestvo] was even more to the core question of information society. The program that was scheduled for years 2011–2020 covered many spheres of activities, and it should raise openness and make governance easier, to raise the ability to compete in economic terms.[3] There were plans to proceed with electronic governance, fighting digital divide, development of new technologies. The aim was to produce real gains to people: the quality of life should go up thanks to more easy-to-use services, like subscribing to the doctor via internet or paying fines by mobile phone. The program also targeted to have in Russia more available e-services, and a higher position in the information technology ratings. The program inherited the idea that e-services would enhance people's living.

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[3] "Госпрограмма охватывает все отрасли и сферы деятельности, она должна повысить прозрачность и управляемость, обеспечить устойчивость и конкурентоспособность экономики в целом." http://minsvyaz.ru/ru/directions/?direction=41, read 1 October 2014.

'Information society' in media database

The state-led Information society program was introduced in 2010, and was started officially in 2011. The amount of mentions on *information society* in Russian media, including national and regional media, seem to have peaked in 2010 for this reason like shown in the figure 1.[4] However, the frequency of *information society* was still relatively low, gaining in absolute numbers 1665 mentions while a relatively close concept of *information technology* [informatsionnaia tekhnologiia] was mentioned 10.673 times during the same year. Thus, although a key phrase in governmental program, *information society* didn't really make a breakthrough in public discussion,
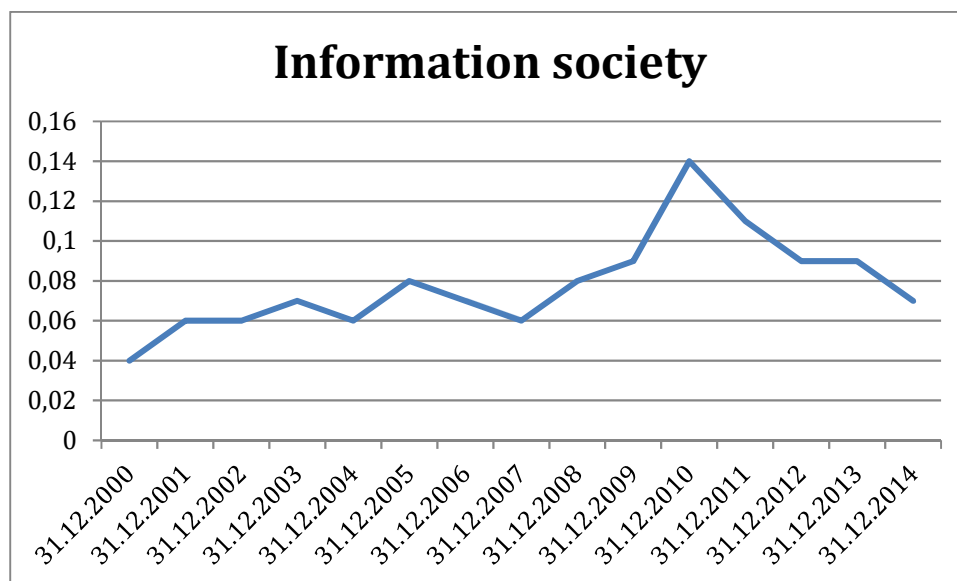

Figure 1. Relative frequency of *information society* in the publications in Integrum database, 2000–2014. Source: Integrum.

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[4] 1 October 2014. The search was made with phrase информационное :0 общество, which searches for words 'information' and 'society' as an exact phrase (information :0 society).

Information society program, however, had some concrete achievements. The government started to provide e-services in an united portal (https://www.gosuslugi.ru/). This internet portal gives citizens for example an opportunity to pay for fines, apply for passport, and use tax-paying related services. The services are mainly available in Russian only. The English version of the web page is mainly for giving instructions on how to obtain a residence permit in Russia.

Let us look in more details some key moments before the peak in the amount of mentions on information society in Russian media. The transcripts of President Medvedev's speeches before the start of the new information society program show a vast amount of technology-based logic. In a meeting of the State Council Presidium in Petrozavodsk (17 July 2008), Medvedev emphasised the need for further education in IT literacy of civil servants and fulfillment of electronic government goals, including, for example, submitting a tax return. He also called ministries and authorities to send their proposals by a set date, as well as remained about the schedule of the move to electronic documents. Thus, information society development was seen as a task force and completing a series of actions by the authorities is the key to its success.

In addition to modernisation of technology and streamlining the bureaucracy, the topic of qualitative change and connection to democratisation development can be tracked in Medvedev's statements like this one from 17 July 2008: 'And ultimately

the free access to information for our citizens is one of the most important

characteristics of democratic development."'(Medvedev 2008.)

Izvestiia commented the meeting in Karelia, saying that 'A threat to democracy,

according to this kind of logic by Medvedev, are, for example, civil cervants who are

unable to work on a computer.'[5] *Rossiiskaia gazeta* (Kuz'min 2008) emphasized the

same topic of the need to raise IT literacy among civil servants in order to build

information society. The emphasis of democratic element of information society

development seemed to be along also in the first meeting of the new Council for the

Development of the Information Society in February 2009. In the opening meeting,

Medvedev was critical towards the current state of information society development

in Russia – he was stating that no progress and modernisation are possible without

information technologies and that this concerns not only the scientific or technical

fields but also administration and even strengthening of democracy in the country. He

stated that Russia is not yet performing like it should in international rankings on use

of information and communication technologies in overall and especially in e-

governance. Medvedev also called for IT related reforms in education and healthcare,

and dealing with the digital divide between regions. The aim of the new Council for

the Development of the Information Society was to create groundings for integration

of Russia to 'global information society'. (Medvedev 2009d.)

> Today it is obvious that any sort of progress or modernisation is impossible
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> without information technology. This is the case in the scientific and technical
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> spheres, but not only there: it is also obligatory for dealing with administrative
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> issues and even the strengthening of democracy in the country. Today it is

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[5] 'Угрозу демократии, по такой логике Медведева, создают, например, чиновники, не умеющие работать на компьютере.' (Latyshev 2008.)

impossible to imagine a single enterprise, a single company that does not use computers or an automated accounting system, to some degree at any rate. And it's equally difficult to imagine ordinary business activity or our enterprises existing without the Internet. Telecommunication services are available in urban and rural areas, and it is encouraging that despite everything one in four Russian families has a computer.[6] (Medvedev 2009c.)

The aims of the council were linked to the tradition to speak about modernisation as associated with state efforts to stimulate greater economic productivity and to advance education and technical innovation without disturbing the social hierarchy or reforming the political order (on this discussion, see e.g. Ponomarev et al. 2009). This is a rather technocratic definition of modernisation.

Business newspaper *RBK-daily* took a grip to the economic aspect of information society in Medvedev's opening address, quoting Medvedev announcing that export of information technology and services was worth of one billion dollars in 2008, increasing by approximately 50 per cent a year (Bursak 2009). *RBK-daily* highlighted also the statement where Medvedev admitted that Russia still has a long way to go in order to achieve developed countries.[7]

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[6] The base of the analysis is done according to the official Russian language web page of the Russian president, but the cited translations of Medvedev's and Putin's speeches are from the official English language web page, if available. Otherwise translations from Russian to English are done by the author of this chapter.

[7] '"Однако по ключевым показателям мы еще страшно далеки от развитых стран", - подчеркнул президент.'

However, this speech at the council meeting had also something common with view of information society as changing people's lives and strengthening democracy. Modernisation and democracy were linked also in the first two presidential addresses by Medvedev: they were among the observers seen to include the definition of modernisation with a 'democratic' element, as renewal of institutions and social practices (Urban and Khestanov 2011, 327–328). This kind of call for modernisation, however, was also seen as aimed –'at the state itself rather than ordinary citizens, as it required the modernization of outdated, Soviet-made and Soviet-style technologies still in use' (Strukov 2014, 21). Media researcher Vlad Strukov sees Medvedev's call for modernisation an extension of the Soviet 'cyber-speak' and post-Soviet 'double-speak' (Strukov 2014, 21).

How, then, are these official-level speeches and addresses taken by the ordinary citizens? Some clues may give the responses to president during regular questions and answers sessions that are covered in media. One month after the first meeting of the Council for the Development of the Information Society, Medvedev had an online-based questions & answers session. *Kommersant* (Khamraev 2009) reported that people were pleased with Medvedev's ideas but eager also to see them fulfilled in practice. *Kommersant* quoted that Medvedev's optimism on information society is supported by the fact that 'in a couple of years, the Russian schools have been connected to internet', although this task seemed complicated in the beginning.[8]

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[8] 'Оптимизма господину Медведеву придает тот факт, что "за несколько лет удалось подключить школы России к интернету". Ведь "когда мы начинали эту тему", подчеркивает он, "то казалось, что эта задача исключительно сложная, тем не менее нам удалось это сделать".' (Khamraev 2009)

The same technocratic tone on the centrality of access and internet connections was expressed in Medvedev's address in his new video blog in April 2009: 'So what can and should the State do to develop the Internet in our country, in Russia? I think the main task is to create all the conditions for maximum accessibility to Internet services' (RT.com 2009). The main operator providing the access was the state, in the form of new Council for the Development of the Information Society.

In autumn 2009, the storyline continued, now in form of an article, written by Medvedev. The article was named *Go Russia!* [Rossiia, vpered!] and shared Medvedev's guidelines for modernisation, including the use of information technologies to fulfill this task. The article initiated a broad public discussion. While the text actually didn't use the concept of *information society,* speaking instead about how the growth of information technologies gives 'unprecedented opportunities for the realisation of fundamental political freedoms, such as freedom of speech and assembly' and how it 'allows us to identify and eliminate hotbeds of corruption' and 'Society is becoming more open and transparent than ever – even if the ruling class does not necessarily like this.' (Medvedev 2009a).

As these excerpts show, the topic of democratisation was closely tied to technological modernisation in Medvedev's thinking. About the closeness of information society and modernisation rhetoric during Medvedev's presidency tell also the comparison with the chapter by Veera Laine and Arto Mustajoki on the concept of *modernisation*. The peak of the use of *modernisation* occurred approximately at the same time as that of *information society*.

In 2011, the frequency of *information society* started to decline in media. This was the last full year for Medvedev as a president, and next year, 2012, when Vladimir Putin took over the role of president, the topic remained in the same level and went to decline in 2014. Thus, other concepts had replaced *information society* as a keyword in main governmental programs and political agenda.

Conclusions

The Russian case shows that the formal discussion on information society, at least in the governmental programs and president's speeches, is often based on the technological and economic logic, thus emphasizing the ability to modernise society and economy with the help of information and communication technology. Based on statistics on access to internet and mobile networks, information society is relatively well developed in technical terms in Russia. Also the fundaments of media use are moving towards a networked society. The use of internet and social media is growing, although TV still keeps the traditional central role as a source for news and entertainment.

Thus, the access to information society, or network society, is currently guaranteed for many Russians. The technological and economic aspects, emphasizing statistics and figures and goals of reaching some desired level compared to other countries, have prevailed in the governmental information society programs and the speeches of presidents on the topic. In addition, during the Dmitri Medvedev's presidency in

2008–2012, information society was in his speeches linked to the development of
more democratic society: they presented an idea that development of information
technology will help people to become more engaged in the political processes and
decision making that would in its turn enhance democracy. However, for many people
the information society development may still mean mainly a better access to
information networks and the rising amount of services offered over the internet. A
question can be asked if new internet-based services and a turn to participatory
democracy are actually linked. When it comes to media coverage on information
society discussion, it seems to largely follow the official statements. Different media
outlets, however, took different positions during the research period, but mainly
according to the tones of presidential speeches and addresses.

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