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IMPACT OF THE SOVEREIGNIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN INTERNET SEGMENT ON POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Bachelor's Thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

The digital revolution transformed the way in which people interact with one another and the state and redefined our means and manners of communication. This thesis examines the impact that internet restrictions can have on political activity using the example of Russia's "sovereign Internet" legislation and its impact on Russia's political opposition. The research touches upon the framework of digital sovereignization, its possible effects on "non-systemic" opposition, and potential impact on the Internet as a whole. The hypothesis of this work was largely proven correct following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which served as a catalyst for digital sovereignization processes in the Russian Federation. The findings indicate the factors that could be used by state authorities to determine which online platforms constitute the highest risks for a political regime and assess the likelihood of further developments.

The data used and assessed within the first chapter of this work was largely compiled prior to the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24th 2022 and reflects the author's estimates of the potential impact of different sovereignization scenarios on Russia's "non-systemic" opposition. The purpose of the second chapter was to document the effects of the war on Russia's efforts at Internet sovereignization, compare them to the prognoses made in the first chapter of the work, and evaluate the differences between the author's prognoses and practical implementation.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019 a long-running government policy to reign in the Russian segment of the Internet culminated in the adoption of the so-called "Sovereign Internet Law" - a set of legal mechanisms that allow the government of the Russian Federation to institute near-total online surveillance and the complete partition of Russia from the World Wide Web for national security purposes.

While as of 2022 Russia remains connected to the Internet, the deepening process of "sovereignization" of the Russian segment of the Internet (colloquially referred to as "the Runet") can significantly reduce the Russian population's access to information and restrict access to foreign-based online networks. With traditional media entirely consolidated by the regime following the closure of independent media outlets in the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian War, digital platforms have become the sole means for the Russian opposition to communicate its message and interact with the population in a meaningful way, making it the lifeblood of the Russian protest movement – and possibly its only lifeline. Therefore, their disappearance could deprive the "digital opposition" of their ability to use social networks for political engagement, which has historically been the primary means of their political mobilization (Myagkov, Shchekotin, Kashpur, Goiko, & Baryshev, 2018) and dissuade public protest activity.

This thesis assesses the reliance of the Russian political opposition on foreign online platforms for communication and political messaging. The objective for this thesis is to determine the potential impact of the implementation of the "Sovereign Internet Law" on opposition activity through the restriction of access to foreign-owned online platforms, with Russia-based platforms used as a point of reference. Social networks are the primary research focus of this paper, as they play the largest role in the proliferation of opposition media and have been the main target of Russian government's attempts at restricting information (Wijermars, 2019). Thus, the aim will be reached through an examination of political alignments of the userbases of online social networks selected for this thesis, which will be used to assess the likelihood of platform restrictions and their impact.

As such, the hypothesis of this thesis is that in the scenario of Internet sovereignization Russian opposition would lack the capacity to effectively distribute information and organize social movements without the use of Western-based social networks, due to its largely online nature; meanwhile social networks based in Russia lack the independence necessary to guarantee free

expression on their platforms. The research question is thus whether the political opposition can maintain its ability to communicate in the face of government-imposed Internet restrictions.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the theoretical basis of sovereignty in digital spaces and Russian government's interpretation of digital sovereignty. This allows to assess the overall methods and goals of "Internet sovereignization". This is followed by the empirical research, which utilizes social media influence statistics from Medialogia, a Russian online activity research company, to evaluate the level of political engagement and the political leaning of the userbases of select online platforms, followed by assessment of possible impact of various sovereignization scenarios on online platforms significant to the political opposition.

The second chapter of this thesis assesses the manner sovereignization measures have been implemented following the invasion of Ukraine and increased domestic repressions in Russia, assesses the emerging differences from the estimates made in the first part of the thesis, and provides prognoses for future developments based on observations made. The secondary research question which emerges in this part of the thesis, is whether it is possible to determine the criteria by which sovereignization targets have been chosen by state authorities.

As the process of sovereignization has only begun to intensify, academic research related to its effects on Russian society and political opposition is yet to be produced. This thesis will utilize existing data to evaluate the impact and implications of this current development and determine how the process of sovereignization has been implemented and where it can develop.

1. EVALUATION OF INTERNET SOVEREIGNIZATION IN RUSSIA

The first chapter will explore the concept of digital sovereignty, "sovereign Internet," and the methods and possible paths of development for Internet sovereignization in Russia. To achieve this objective, this chapter is divided into a theoretical part and an empirical research part.

The **theoretical** part will consult Western and Russian academic sources in order to assess the legal and practical prospects of Internet sovereignization in Russia. The primary sources will consist of legal analyses of the components of the "sovereign internet" program and assessments of its social impact, which will be used to estimate the possible consequences of the implementation of three sovereignization scenarios following the completion of the empirical segment of the chapter.

The **empirical** methodology will apply available statistics on social network userbases in order to determine the relative influence of opposition groups and public figures on different platforms, estimate the importance of particular social networks and social networks as a whole for opposition-minded communication prior to February 24th, 2022, and relate these results to previously evaluated sovereignization scenarios.

1.1. Digital sovereignty in Russia

Sovereignty is the foundational block of the nation state, but to what domains does sovereignty extend? Commonly accepted international laws agree upon a nation's sovereignty on its soil, in its waters, in its airspace – but what of the digital domain? While an attack on a nation's sovereign soil cannot be interpreted in any other way as aggression, as Estonia painfully found out in 2007 an attack on a nation's digital domain is an abstract thing, where sovereignty and rights of nations may not apply.

In Russia, the concept of "digital sovereignty" dates back by a decade and ties into the concept of geopolitics, with digital space treated as an environment to be delineated - just as nations establish borders between each other's lands, so should nations assess their right to digital sovereignty, control what enters and leaves their borders (Ristolainen, 2017). Although the Internet may appear to be a vast borderless space with little to no barriers, the official Russian concept of it emphasizes the role of statehood and national interest in the digital domain. Extending that logic, the unrestrained presence of Western online services and platforms in the Runet could be considered

a violation of said sovereignty, or even an act of conquest. While the People's Republic of China managed to isolate its people from the Internet behind the so-called "Great Firewall", Russia's approach has consistently differed from the Chinese model, developing the "Runet" more and more into what Rashid Gabdulhakov described as the "Digital Iron Curtain" (Gabdulhakov, 2020).

Enforcement of telecommunications and digital policies in the Russian Federation is largely handled by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, more commonly known by its Russian abbreviation *Roskomnadzor*. This agency has played a significant role in the enactment of the "Sovereign Internet" program, but its political prevalence is relatively recent. While Roskomnadzor has monitored Internet traffic since its inception as an agency in 2008, it did not engage in an active restrictive role until the restrictions introduced following 2011-2013 protests, at the time limited to websites violating the criminal code, such as illicit pornography websites and narcotics marketplaces. However, those categories soon expanded to include politicized charges such as unsanctioned protests and offending religious believers (Wijermars, 2019), creating a legal basis for censorship and politically motivated arrests under the guise of maintaining social order and public decency.

An important goalpost in the creeping digital sovereignization in Russia was the adoption of amendments popularly known as "Yarovaya's Law", named after one of its authors, mandating Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and service providers to follow, a bill requiring telecommunications companies to store messages, images, and videos for six months, and stored on servers located on Russian soil. Said data would be available to state security upon request, without any need for additional legal procedures – a red line for Western tech companies. By 2015 the legal requirement to store the private data of Russian citizens on servers located in Russia became part of the law, with a questionable level of success. While computer surveillance equipment has been in use in Russia since the 1990s, the tightening of the legislation in the 2010s brought about the widespread introduction of so-called "middleboxes", i.e. digital filters installed by ISPs to follow Roskomnadzor requirements as per the "Yarovaya Law". However, as noted in an article by Ksenia Ermoshina et al, the system of middlebox installations lacks consistency and is often ignored by the ISPs due to the price and complexity of installing and maintaining one (Ermoshina, Loveluck, & Musiani, 2021).

It should be noted that there is no single law concerning the "sovereign Internet", but rather a series of amendments to pre-existing laws, such as "On Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection" and "On Communication". The complex of laws has made it possible to exert legal control over Internet conduits entering Russian Federation's territory, and while officially the measures are promoted as a means of ensuring Russia's security from cyberthreats and foreign-imposed disturbances, the likely primary purpose is rather information control and the ability to restrict the "non-systemic" opposition's capacity for effective political communication. Non-parliamentary or "non-systemic" opposition in Russia is an umbrella term for a wide range of opposition groups in strict opposition to Vladimir Putin's government, lacking any formal organization or common leader. Although commonly associated in recent years with the supporters of Alexei Navalny, the currently imprisoned politician is only one of the "non-systemic" opposition's leading figures. As the Russian opposition largely consists of younger and digitally savvy demographic strata (Dollbaum & Semenov, 2021), their preferred platforms for communication and activism are foreign social networks, which are perceived as less beholden to government attempts at mass surveillance – this largely faceless digital presence also played a role in the movement's largely leaderless state. Although the "non-systemic" opposition largely relies on foreign networks for communication and political messaging, there has been considerate amount of protest activity coordinated on homegrown platforms like VKontakte (Poupin, 2021) in previous years. As demonstrated in the following analysis, the so-called "digital opposition" congregates on Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram – social media platforms located outside of Russia, but still well within the government's ability to retaliate.

For the purposes of this work, the term "sovereignization" is employed to describe the procedural advancement towards the establishment of a "sovereign Internet" as intended by Russian authorities, with distinct types of "sovereignization" described. "Sovereignization" is a general term for a wide spectrum of communications control measures; although the complex of laws and accompanying technical solutions are treated as a single political program by Russian authorities, the severity of control measures varies significantly. Therefore, for the purposes of the following analysis, the means of sovereignization will be defined by three generalized methods, which can be roughly described as sovereignization by legal means, sovereignization by technical means, and a mixture of the two:

- **„Legal" sovereignization**: The method of Internet sovereignization which relies on the application of legal pressure onto foreign "tech giants" to demand the removal of online content, using Russia's own laws and the "tech giants" guidelines to justify removal requests. This method relies on exploiting the importance of Russia's digital market to make up for the state's limited technical capacity for Internet service restriction. The primary advantage of this method is its relative precision, targeting specific content on online platforms rather than the platforms themselves, which lowers the risks of public dissatisfaction with the restriction of online services by the state, as was the case with Telegram's attempted ban in Russia in 2018. Recent implementation of "legal" sovereignization can be seen in Russia's content removal requests to Google, which far outmatch the number issued by any other nation in the same time period (Google, 2021).

- **"Soft" sovereignization**: A moderate approach that entails the localized storage of all data collected from Russian citizens by digital companies within the Russian Federation (Savelyev, 2016) (Taylor, 2020). Said method would provide the state with a greater degree of control over online media within Russia, without risking popular discontent by having to restrict access to foreign social networks and services entirely. "Soft" sovereignization entails the legal obligation for the establishment of local branches for content moderation within Russia. One way to describe "soft" sovereignization is as "data sovereignty", the principle of data collected or passing through a nation's territory falling under that nation's laws (Taylor, 2020).

  It is notable that "soft" sovereignization superficially resembles European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) with its requirements for localized storage and processing of European users' data. But while GDPR regulation is intended to ensure the preservation of users' digital privacy rights, Russian application of the same concept is rather cynically intended to ensure constant direct access to the users' private data by state authorities.

- **"Hard" sovereignization**: The most technically demanding and politically controversial method, "hard" sovereignization describes a range of solutions from the restriction of select online platforms to "total" sovereignization achieved via the implementation of a "national intranet" system, similar to the so-called "Great Firewall" of the People's Republic China, partitioning Runet from the World Wide Web. This method relies on the state's capacity to either filter incoming Internet traffic on a massive scale to restrict access to specific platforms via all Internet providers, or to develop a fully autonomous localized Internet infrastructure in

the event of a total partitioning of the Runet from the World Wide Web. Examples of this method include Russia's attempted ban of Telegram, and declarations by Russian authorities about the development of a localized Domain Name System (DNS) instead of the ICANN, in order to abolish Western web infrastructure entirely.

Both Telegram and Twitter have faced attempted shutdowns by government regulators prior to the events of 2022, with Telegram's block attempt failing and Twitter's "slowdown" by service providers limiting access to the network. As a result, Russian authorities largely avoided "hard" sovereignization, instead "trolling" opposition users and groups through court orders and ban requests (Gabdulhakov, 2020). However, public pressure in the West has largely prevented American-based tech giants from banning major opposition figures and movements on their networks, allowing the opposition to regroup and consolidate themselves online.

1.2.   Methodology

This thesis aims to evaluate the potential impact of sovereignization on political opposition activity in the event of restrictions on online platforms. For the purposes of this research, the following social networks were utilized: **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Telegram**, **VKontakte**, **Odnoklassniki**, and **YouTube**, representing social networks based both in and outside Russia. The reason for the selection of the listed platforms is their capacity for creating tangible communities; while Instagram and TikTok have been used for political messaging during previous street protests, they remain largely entertainment-oriented outside of periods of open public unrest. It should be noted that since the writing of this section TikTok unilaterally ceased operations in Russia, while Instagram has been banned by the Russian state regulator alongside Facebook, another platform owned by Meta, the implications of which are discussed in the second part of this thesis. Although an external observer might expect all online protest activity to be limited to Western-based social networks, VKontakte has demonstrated its potential as a protest platform during grassroots ecologic protests, such as 2018 Shies protests (Poupin, 2021), despite government-ordered shutdowns of activist groups. The importance of evaluating Russia-based social platforms is further emphasized by their relative safety from sovereignization on a practical level, despite the risks of censorship and legal persecution. As such, their capacity for anti-government communication should be evaluated with an analysis of the political alignments of their userbases.

Regarding the overall userbase alignment on online platforms, there is no reliable way of directly estimating what percentage of an online platform's userbase subscribes to a certain political belief. Additionally, both "loyalists" and "opposition" consist of a diverse range of individuals and groups with varied political beliefs, further complicating the task of estimating political alignment. As such, the method used in this work is to estimate the general political attitudes of a platform's userbase by evaluating the political leaning of the platform's top users.

For this purpose, it is necessary to determine who are a platform's top users. In order to do so it is necessary to choose a metric that most accurately reflects a platform's most influential accounts. While the obvious conclusion might be to employ the subscriber count as the defining metric, the number of subscribers alone does not account for the factors that determine a user's influence of the platform, such as user activity, reach, or the degree to which their content is shared by their followers. As such, for the purposes of this analysis, the work will rely on the Social Media Influence (SM Influence) index developed by Medialogia – a Russian-based statistical research company which specializes in the automated monitoring and analysis of mass media and social media in Russia, with a claimed reach of 250 000 platforms and 900 million social media accounts (Medialogia, 2022).

Medialogia's SM Influence index is calculated using a user's or community's total audience and the total audience of reposting users, together with the level of user's posts' engagement estimated by the number of likes, reposts, and comments on the user's social media posts (Medialogia, 2020). This method of user influence measurement aligns with the research tasks of userbase alignment analysis. It should be noted, that Medialogia is a source based in Russia, and as such data provided by the company should be treated with certain caution. However, as a company that has previously provided social media analysis tools for Russian state agencies and ministries, the data analyses provided by Medialogia can be expected to resemble statistical data utilized by Russian state institutions in their decision-making processes to this day.

The examination of each platform's top-20 most influential users' content and public statements using statistics provided by Medialogia will be used to estimate the political leaning of a platform's users as well as the generalized percentage of apolitical users among them. Therefore, the primary values that the following analysis will determine are each platform's **politicization** and **political leaning**, the two factors most likely to be used to determine whether a platform constitutes a

sociopolitical risk for the Russian political and security establishment. This data (available in Appendix) will be used with the theoretical framework to answer the primary research question, whether the political opposition can maintain its ability to communicate in the face of government-imposed Internet restrictions.

The three general categories that are used in this section are loyalist, opposition, and apolitical:

- **Loyalist** category is defined as accounts which demonstrate explicit, rather than implicit support for the Russian government, in the form of public pro-government statements or the distribution of pro-government information. The primary defining markers for the loyalist category are the endorsement of Vladimir Putin, official government policy, and Russian military involvement in Ukraine.

- **Opposition** category is defined as accounts which demonstrated explicit opposition to the Russian government or the Russian Federation as a whole, accounting for the presence of Russian-speaking but not Russia-based accounts on these social platforms. The primary defining markers are the repudiation of Vladimir Putin, official government policy, and Russian military involvement in Ukraine.

- **Apolitical** category is defined as accounts which demonstrate no explicit support for either loyalist or opposition viewpoints. While it can be assumed that a significant portion of nominally apolitical accounts are implicitly loyalist, in practice they are not used as a platform for pro-government policy. Accounts which share information from both loyalist and opposition sources without applying any personal commentary or support for either viewpoint, can also be considered functionally 'apolitical' or neutral.

While one of the primary subjects of this work is the Runet, defined earlier as the segment of the World Wide Web used within the Russian Federation, for the purposes of the following empirical research all Russian-speaking users on the aforementioned platforms will be evaluated regardless of their citizenship and location, as for all intents and purposes there are functionally no means to separate subscribers located within Russia from Russian-speaking users as a whole within available data sources.

1.3. Userbase alignment

In order to determine the generalized **politicization** and **political leaning** of each of the researched online platforms, the top-20 most influential users for each platform were evaluated and displayed in a graph subdivided into twenty slots. The color grading choices used to depict results of top users' political alignment are intended to display the politicization of researched platforms from the perspective of Russian authorities, with apolitical and loyalist users displayed in light and dark green accordingly, and opposition users displayed in red.

Userbase alignment analysis relies on the latest available figures from Medialogia, with the notable exception of Facebook, which utilizes data from another Russian analytical company, Brand Analytics (Brand Analytics, 2022). The latter employs a similar method of social media influence estimation to the methodology used by Medialogia and is thus sufficiently similar for the purposes of data consistency in the framework of this analysis. The data used in the following results can be found in the Appendix.

1.3.1. VKontakte

Commonly known outside of Russia as VK. Founded in 2006, VKontakte was marketed as a Russian alternative to Facebook while featuring more features than its Western counterpart, leading to the platform's significant popularity among Russian-speaking users. As Medialogia only provided its first assessment of the influence of individual bloggers on the platform in March 2022 (Medialogia, 2022) that dataset has been utilized for the following analysis. While there are earlier available analyses of most influential groups on the platform, that data did not fit this analysis as VK is dominated by entertainment-oriented groups with a limited degree of agency.

VKontakte [March 2022]
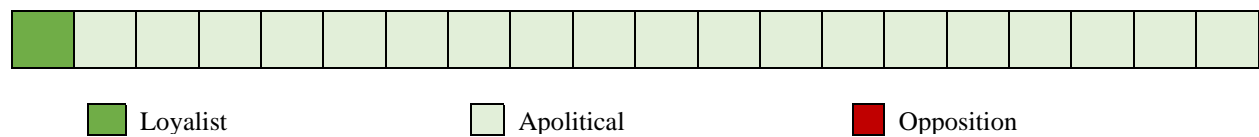

Loyalist   Apolitical   Opposition

Figure 1. VKontakte most influential users' political alignment.

As can be seen from the results, individual influencers on the platform are overwhelmingly apolitical. However, VK has a history of being a protest platform, with Alexei Navalny in particular having put the website to use for his 2017 presidential campaign (Dollbaum & Semenov, 2021). However, attempts to utilize VK for grassroots protest since then have largely failed, due

to the platform's cooperation with state authorities in suppressing protest groups and publications (Poupin, 2021). Considering the fact that a significant portion of the most significant users are now real-life celebrities, there is a financial incentive to avoid any sort of political statements, whether pro-government or anti-government, to avoid damage to reputation and incomes. Thus, the platform's politicization is a mere 5%, with a single explicitly loyalist influencer.

1.3.2. Odnoklassniki

Despite the platform being based in Russia and remaining largely apolitical, the sheer number of users, at 45.1% of Russia's total internet user count (Statista, 2022) makes Odnoklassniki worthy of further investigation. The website was originally marketed as an online platform for former classmates to reconnect digitally (hence the name "Odnoklassniki", Russian for "Classmates"), rather than a platform intended for users with a significantly large following, so the coordination of active anti-government protest on the platform has been rather limited.

Odnoklassniki [October 2021]
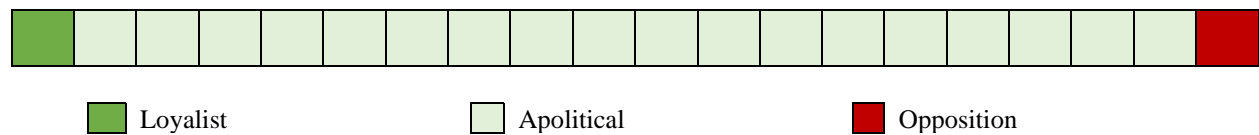
◼ Loyalist   ◻ Apolitical   ◼ Opposition

Figure 2. Odnoklassniki most influential users' political alignment.

Odnoklassniki is unsurprisingly an overwhelmingly apolitical website, which reflects Russia's public political culture. Curiously enough, according to Medialogia's social media influence analysis (Medialogia, 2022), the 10th most influential social group on Odnoklassniki is "Against Putin and the Party of Crooks and Thieves", an openly opposition-aligned community promoting materials from Alexei Navalny's associates. However, it should be noted that although the platform's largest group has a following of 8,9 million users, the group devoted to opposition politics has a modest following of 0,13 million users. While it is hard to describe the platform as currently politically significant, it is notable that elements of open dissent can be spotted even on a Russia-based social media platform such as Odnoklassniki. The platform's politization is a limited 10%, with an insignificant opposition presence.

1.3.3. Telegram

Telegram is the brainchild of Pavel Durov, former CEO of VKontakte. Following a break with VK, Durov created Telegram as a decentralized alternate to existing messengers. The platform's

permissive stance to content and political messaging made it the target of an attempted ban by Roskomnadzor in 2018. However, following the failed attempt to block access to Telegram within Russian borders, Russian authorities have taken a conciliatory stance towards the platform and began to actively use it for their own political messaging and communication, demonstrated by the significant number of official accounts of Russian political figures on Telegram.
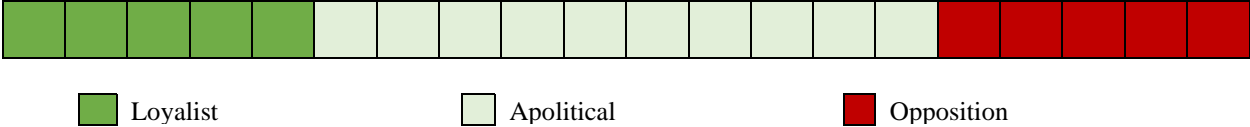
Telegram [February 2022]

Figure 3. Telegram's most influential users' political alignment.

As can be seen from the results, despite Telegram's reputation as a "rogue" platform, the degree of politicization on the platform amounts to only half of the engaged userbase, while the politicized segment of the userbase is divided in two between loyalist and opposition camps. It should be noted, that Medialogia also provides an overview of the most influential political Telegram channels in the same period (Medialogia, 2022). The rough balance between loyalist and opposition sides that can be seen in the general overview of the most popular Russian-language channels is also on display in the overview of political channels, with the top-20 consisting of 10 loyalist channels, nine opposition channels, and a single neutral channel aggregating news from both camps.

Telegram is unlikely to be blocked, both due to a previous unsuccessful attempt by the government to block the app, which was consequently lifted in 2020, the overall compliance by Telegram to Roskomnadzor's demands as seen in the temporary blockage of Alexei Navalny's "Smart Voting" services on Telegram in 2021, and the importance of Telegram as a media communication platform for Russian state officials, state media, and pro-government channels. The platform's politization stands at 50%, with the politicized portion of the most influential users roughly equally divided between pro-government and opposition camps.

1.3.4. Facebook

Due to a lack of qualitative analysis of engagement by Russian-speaking users on Facebook on Medialogia, this section refers to the analyses provided by Brand Analytics (Brand Analytics, 2022), which provides similar data on social media influence and user engagement statistics on

Russian-speaking segments of online platforms and social media. It is instrumental to reiterate that such engagement analytics include Russian-speaking users, rather than users necessarily based in the Russian Federation, as results of the analysis demonstrate that Facebook is dominated by Russian-speaking Ukrainians. This can be explained by Ukraine's ban on Russian social media platforms such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki in 2017, as sanctions on Russia in response to Russia's aggressive military actions in Crimea and Donbass.

It should be noted that the popularity of VKontakte in Russia was a major contributor to Russian users' preference for it over Facebook, as described earlier in the chapter. As such, registering on Facebook over VKontakte is a deliberate choice for its Russian-speaking userbase, picking a Western platform over a Russia-based one. Therefore, it can be assumed that Facebook has a selection for users with reasons to prefer Western platforms, whether political or otherwise.
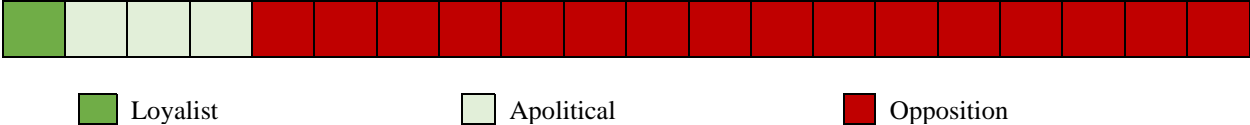
Facebook [October 2021]

Figure 4. Facebook's most influential users' political alignment.

As can be seen, Facebook's most influential Russian-speaking users are much likelier to oppose the Russian government than support it. Besides the aforementioned selection for Western leaning users, a major contributing factor is the ethnic composition of Facebook's userbase. Out of the top 20 most influential users, 12 are based in Ukraine. The sole influential loyalist is a member of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation.

Facebook's politicization thus stands at a significant 85%, dominated by opposition and anti-government viewpoints 16 to 1, making it the single most opposition-leaning platform researched in this analysis. It can be concluded that due to the majority of the platform's most influential users being openly opposition-minded and loyalists constituting a fraction of the userbase, it is likely that Facebook would be targeted in the event of "hard" sovereignization.

All of the Ukraine-based users in the dataset used have since taken a clear anti-Russian position following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24th, 2022. Facebook and Instagram, both owned by Meta, were consequently banned by Russian court orders on March 21st.

1.3.5. Twitter

A microblogging platform, Twitter enjoys a moderate popularity in Russia. Although used by the smallest number of Russian users out of any platform researched in this work, at 11.7% of total Russian internet users (Statista, 2022), Twitter has played a disproportionally important role in opposition activity and protest, as a platform of choice for a significant number of members of the Russian "non-systemic" opposition, including Alexei Navalny's allies. According to the latest results from Medialogia from October 2021, the importance of Twitter as a communication platform for the political opposition can clearly be seen.

Twitter [October 2021]

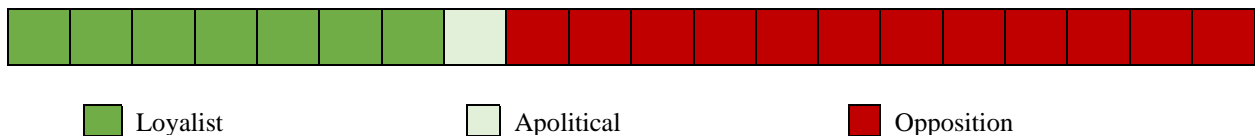   🟩 Loyalist   ◻️ Apolitical   🟥 Opposition

Figure 5. Twitter's most influential users' political alignment.

The results show Twitter to be the most heavily politicized platform out of the selection researched in this work. Twitter is also notable as a communication platform for various news outlets, including both traditional and digital media – out of the top 20 most influential accounts, 15 are media outlets. This can partially explain the high degree of political polarization among Twitter's most influential Russian accounts; Russian mass media has been largely taken under state control at the turn of the century, while independent media has been effectively forced into the opposition. It should be noted, that in this analysis Western media outlets such as the BBC are treated as opposition sources, due to these media outlets providing a platform for Russian opposition members and opinions, while facing restrictions from Russian state authorities.

Twitter is the single most politicized platform out of the selection researched in this work, with an overwhelming 95% politicization rate, and nearly two-thirds of the politicized users belonging to what can be described as the opposition camp, consisting of foreign and opposition media.

The high presence of Russian language media outlets on Twitter, combined with the generally irreverent attitude of the platform's users, make it a likely target for blocking in the event of "hard" sovereignization, as demonstrated by Roskomnadzor's attempt to "slow down" the platform in Russia in response to the platform's refusal to delete content flagged by the government watchdog in its "legal" sovereignization strategy.

1.3.6. YouTube

The world's largest video hosting platform, YouTube plays a major importance in most Russians lives, as the platform with the largest number of users of any online platform in Russia (Mediascope, 2022). Although predominantly used as an entertainment platform, as demonstrated in the following analysis, YouTube has also played the role of an "alternate television" for opposition-minded Russians unwilling to receive their news from government-controlled television channels, and an avenue for the opposition's political messaging. Most notably, YouTube has been actively used by Alexei Navalny and his affiliates to release investigation videos regarding Russian state officials. The latest social media influence assessment for YouTube from before February 24th, 2022, comes from January 2022. It should be noted that the results of this assessment by Medialogia come from before the banning of Russian state media on YouTube, severely restricting the capacity of Russian state media to utilize the platform for their political communication.

YouTube [January 2022]

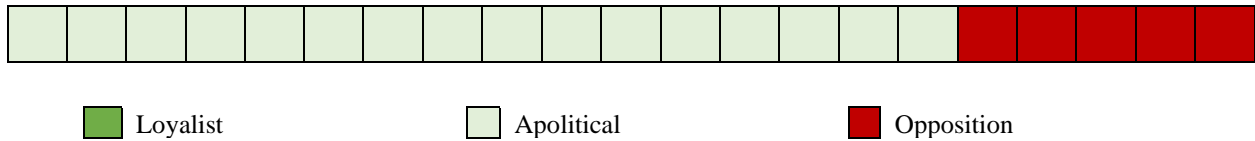Loyalist   Apolitical   Opposition

Figure 6. YouTube's most influential users' political alignment.

According to January 2022 data (Medialogia, 2022) YouTube demonstrates a relatively low politicization rate, at 25%. However, it is notable that out of those politicized 25%, all five users have expressed opposition views. Out of the five influential users currently marked as opposition-minded in this analysis, four were politically neutral entertainers until February 24th, the fifth influential user being the imprisoned political activist Alexei Navalny. Additionally, despite Russian state media channels and journalists having had a large following on YouTube prior to their ban by Google, their social media influence index was insufficient to reach the number of top 20 most influential Russian language users on the platform.

YouTube is a notable stand-out among foreign-based platforms in this analysis, which can be explained by its function as a video hosting platform, utilized largely for entertainment purposes. As such, the relatively low level of politicization on YouTube despite being a Western platform should come as no surprise. Considering the relative ease with which Russian authorities could

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restrict access to YouTube, due to the bandwidth requirements for high-definition video streaming, is it likely that Russian authorities exercise some degree of leverage over the platform. It is therefore unlikely to be banned, accounting for the low level of politicization and the importance of the platform for domestic consumers who rely on it for entertainment. As of the writing of this paper, YouTube remains in operation in the Russian Federation.

The results demonstrate that the networks stationed entirely in Russia cannot necessarily be described as pro-government, but rather as apolitical. This can reflect the general state of the sociopolitical system of the Russian Federation, where implicit loyalty to the state is expected without public expression of pro-government attitudes. Foreign-based resources demonstrate a greater degree of political polarization, ranging from Telegram's balanced political camps to Facebook's overwhelming opposition-leaning politicization. YouTube, as a video hosting platform, remains a notable exception out of the selection of researched platforms.

1.4. Possible sovereignization impacts

Using the data acquired from userbase alignment analysis, general estimates of the impact of various sovereignization scenarios can be made relying on theoretical background and empirical data. According to Statista, in 2021 approximately 19% of Russian Internet users got their news from social media such as Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki, while an additional 13% got their news from video hosting platforms such as YouTube (Statista, 2022), accounting together for roughly a third of Russia's Internet users, making platforms researched in this thesis an important source for both opposition and loyalist political communication and messaging.

It should be noted that the following sovereignization impact assessments are based on the circumstances prior to the events of February 24th, 2022, and as such do not reflect the effects of international sanctions on the Russian Federation in the prognoses.

1.4.1. "Legal" sovereignization

Russia has effectively utilized the means of "legal" sovereignization in its attempts to control the public narrative, with Russian authorities' requests being mostly honored by foreign companies, as can be seen from Russian Federation's share of content removal requests. Russia accounted for over 60% of Google content removal requests in the period of 2019-2021 (Google, 2021) and 25% of Twitter removal requests in 2021 (Twitter, 2022), with said requests largely fulfilled. However,

an important factor to consider here is the so-called "Streisand Effect" - as removal requests by Russian authorities are publicly visible, they can create a counterreaction of further popularizing banned content in defiance to state attempts at information control, as demonstrated by the attempted blockage of Alexei Navalny's "Smart Voting" initiative during 2021 parliamentary elections in Russia, designed to promote candidates most likely to beat Kremlin-appointed candidates. Following a request by Roskomnadzor, Apple and Google both removed the "Smart Voting" app off their respective stores, causing the app's contents to be widely spread across the Runet. As such, it can be concluded that while the effects of "legal" sovereignization may be a nuisance to the "non-systemic" opposition's operations, they fall short of meaningfully impeding the opposition or their online communication. Additionally, as the haste of a formal request's processing depends entirely on companies themselves, the targets of content removal requests may implement workarounds faster than the effects of removal requests can impact their operations.

In the author's opinion, the primary impediment in "legal" sovereignization is that a state's authority to request the removal of content from foreign online platforms is directly related to the state's international standing. A state perceived to be utilizing its domestic jurisdiction in order to negatively impact the wellbeing of its citizens can be denied its legal requests, both on ethical and reputational grounds, as complying with a repressive state's demands can negatively impact a Western-based company's public standing and business operations. Therefore, while Russian authorities may intensify their legal means of censoring opposition content in order to "damage control" the prevalence of opposition views on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, further attempts to restrict any form of internal dissent might limit Russia's capacity for "legal" sovereignization.

1.4.2. "Soft" sovereignization

Overall, "soft" sovereignization is the likeliest avenue for Russian authorities to pursue, based on Russia's continued attempts to mandate the presence of social media company branches in Russia, local moderation teams, and the physical storage of Russian user data on servers based in the Russian Federation. The choice of this scenario of sovereignization should not come as a surprise, as previously Russia has demonstrated a willingness to shape the information sphere, rather than exercise total control over it.

While the storage of local users' data in Russian jurisdiction does not necessarily guarantee state authority over said data or ease of access to it, it provides the state with significant leverage over the companies subjected to this technical measure. Counter-terrorist and anti-protest laws could be used as legal justification to demand private user data from social media platforms under the guise of battling political extremism. Additionally, the presence of a platform's servers on Russian soil could make it more easily susceptible to being compromised by state-aligned actors, in which case sensitive private information could be extracted for the use against opposition activists and politicians. As such, "soft" sovereignization could come with increased risks to members of both "systemic" and "non-systemic" opposition, by making their private communication more easily traceable and more susceptible to state-imposed censorship attempts.

Therefore, the primary danger of "soft" sovereignization is the leverage Russian authorities would possess over online platforms, which could be used to establish legal and extralegal demands. However, the attempts by Russian authorities to convince foreign online platforms to base their user data processing servers on Russian soil have largely been unsuccessful, with the notable exception of TikTok – a Chinese platform, which has faced repeated accusations of providing the private data of their users to the authorities in People's Republic of China. As such, most Western platforms remain uninfluenced by the risks of "soft" sovereignization and it is unlikely that they will bow to Russian authorities' demands, unless it came as a part of an international push to enforce such form of digital legislation across several major markets.

1.4.3. "Hard" sovereignization

Potentially the most impactful form of sovereignization, "hard" sovereignization or sovereignization by technical means could heavily impact the ability of "non-systemic" opposition to communicate, depending on the extent of platform restrictions. While the blockage of a single online platform, such as Telegram or Twitter, would not significantly impact opposition actors due to the diversity of available online platforms, systematic blockage of all foreign social media could deal a crippling effect to liberal opposition members, who rely almost entirely on the Internet to communicate. Additionally, the possibility of a "total" sovereignization, entailing the complete partitioning of the Runet from the World Wide Web, should not be entirely discounted, as in the event of intensifying public opposition physical severing of connections to opposition-dominated

Western platforms could be seen as a viable method of public opinion management during a state of crisis.

Accounting for the userbase alignment results, it can be concluded that if "hard" sovereignization were to be implemented by Russian state authorities, the likely targets would be opposition-dominated Western-based platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and potentially YouTube. While the apolitical domestic online platforms would remain intact, their functionality for organized political opposition is rather limited due to government influence over the platforms. Western platforms on the other hand constitute a political risk for Russia's political and security establishment and are thus likely to be targeted in an event where "hard" sovereignization were to become a politically necessary measure for Russian authorities.

"Hard" sovereignization would thus constitute a significant threat to the operations of the Russian opposition, including their ability to effectively communicate with one another and the public at large. The blocking of YouTube in particular would heavily impede the ability of Russian citizens to receive alternate sources of information, with YouTube acting as surrogate television for opposition-minded citizens due to state control over television networks in the Russian Federation. However, state authorities would have to strike a fine balance between depriving the political opposition of communication capacity and ensuring that the consumer needs of the population are fulfilled, including the online video entertainment niche currently occupied by YouTube.

At the time of this section's original composition, the likelihood of an immediate "hard" sovereignization was deemed unlikely due to potential social and economic repercussions, unless the status quo were to drastically change due to a domestic or international circumstance.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF SOVEREIGN INTERNET IN RUSSIA

The second chapter will evaluate the impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on the process of Internet sovereignization in Russia, and the opposition's capacity for political communication in the conditions of intensifying digital restrictions, followed by the evaluation of Russia's technical capacity to maintain or escalate current restrictions. The empirical part of this chapter will involve the comparison of the estimated sovereignization scenarios from the previous chapter with subsequent effects of Internet sovereignization in Russia, evaluation of the differences, and an attempt to determine a likely explanation for said differences. Conclusions drawn from the results of the empirical part will then be used to estimate the likelihood of further sovereignization and its viability as an information control strategy. Finally, the technical repercussions of sovereignization will be assessed, accounting for the effects of international sanctions on the Russian Federation.

2.1. War in Ukraine as a catalyst

By the end of the previous chapter, it had become seemingly apparent that "hard" sovereignization was unlikely to transpire in Russia in the near future due to previous flawed attempts at "hard" sovereignization by Russian authorities, unless a set of domestic or international circumstances made it politically necessary for Russian authorities to attempt to implement "hard" sovereignization despite previously established drawbacks and risks. The invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, put an end to the status quo and served as a catalyst for the digital sovereignization process and the ban on several Western social media platforms.

Spontaneous protests which followed soon after the invasion were quickly suppressed by state security services. Opposition to the invasion of Ukraine was used as a pretext for the implementation of *de facto* martial law and loosely defined laws against "war fakes" used in practice to prosecute any public anti-war sentiment or distribution differing from Russian state media reporting. With the Russian "non-systemic" opposition largely united in anti-war sentiment, the "war fakes" law has been effectively used by state authorities to prosecute any form of public protest with charges reaching up to 15-year long prison sentences. As Western social media platforms were the main locations of opposition messaging, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram soon became targets of "hard" sovereignization in the form of a total ban on the territory of the Russian Federation.

It should be noted that the organizational capacity of the "non-systemic" opposition in Russia has been severely crippled even before the so-called "special military operation", first with the designation of Alexei Navalny's "Anti-Corruption Fund" and other affiliated structures as extremist organizations, and then with the effective shutdown of the "Memorial" human rights and public advocacy group, which could have served as major organizational cores for an organized anti-war movement. With no public institutions available to coordinate protest activity, opposition activities have significantly decreased in intensity despite the remaining capacity for political communication and messaging on media platforms such as Telegram or YouTube.

As a result, despite serving as a catalyst for the process of Internet sovereignization in Russia, the War in Ukraine also obfuscates the effects increased sovereignization has had on the political opposition, as punitive "war fakes" laws severely limit the opposition's capacity for protesting or expressing their opposition to Russian government activities. Therefore, an alternative option for evaluation is to attempt to estimate the risks of the proliferation of anti-government attitudes from the perspective of state authorities, by determining the primary factors used in decision-making processes on further sovereignization.

2.2. Sovereignization in practice

The prognosis made in the first half of this thesis has largely been correct, with Russian authorities blocking access to Facebook and Twitter on March 4th, 2022, in retaliation to both platforms removing Russian state media outlets such as RT, Sputnik, and RIA as per sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and the European Union. On March 14th Roskomnadzor blocked access to Instagram, and finally on March 21st Meta, the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, got designated an "extremist organization" by court order.

While the previous attempt at blocking a major online platform was met with wide public protests across Russia in 2018 (Wijermars, 2019), after the short-lived ban on Telegram, wartime conditions made it possible to quickly implement bans on social media platforms with little to no public opposition. As such, *de facto* state of war has been used to push through the sort of "hard" sovereignization measures that would have normally incurred significant social repercussions. Although Russian authorities designated Meta to be an "extremist organization" and banned Facebook and Instagram, they stopped short of banning all social media platforms owned by Meta – namely the instant messaging application WhatsApp. This should not come as a surprise, as

WhatsApp has the highest penetration rate of any social media application in Russia at 80.9% in 2021 (Statista, 2022).

Although the overall results of "hard" sovereignization have followed the expected course of action, as outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, there are notable exceptions, namely the ban on Instagram and the continued functioning of YouTube in Russia. While it can be assumed that these exceptions are incidental or reflect the Russian authorities' attitude towards Meta and Alphabet accordingly, it is necessary to evaluate whether the deviation from the estimates made in the first chapter of this thesis is a result of some quantifiable factor that could explain the ban of a largely apolitical online platform. As such, the purpose of this subchapter is to assess the possible systemic reason for the politically unnecessary ban on Instagram.

A detailed analysis of Instagram's userbase alignment was not included in the first half of the thesis, due to the platform's largely apolitical userbase and a lack of clearly definable communities. For the purposes of this section, the userbase alignment analysis of Instagram has been additionally conducted by the same methodology as used in the first half of the thesis, as seen in Figure 7. Instagram features a large number of users in Russia and unusually high subscriber counts relative to the total userbase compared to other popular platforms, as will be demonstrated in the following analysis, and as such, the sheer audience of the platform is a factor to be reckoned with. Another crucial factor to consider in regard to the war's effects on the blocking of Instagram are the so-called "Black Square" social media protests, which spontaneously emerged within the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This social media protest took the form of Russian-speaking users posting empty black squares to demonstrate their opposition to the "special military operation" without any terminology that could be used against them. One of the most prominent platforms for "Black Square" protest was Instagram. Due to the low level of politicization on the platform, "Black Square" protests should be considered a marker of opposition activity, as they present a significantly visible protest in the face of major government policy, regardless of follow-up posts or a lack thereof – and the userbase size on Instagram makes them a possible public opinion risk.

As was mentioned previously, Instagram's defining features that differentiate it from other online platforms researched in this thesis are its substantial number of users and unusually high subscriber counts, as demonstrated in the following analysis. Combining the two, the logical conclusion is that the factor which makes Instagram a political risk could be the high fraction of the total

userbase potentially reachable by a single "influencer". However, in order to evaluate this hypothesis, additional data needs to be collected from statistics provided by Medialogia and Brand Identity, namely subscriber counts of top-20 most influential users on each platform and the total userbase numbers for said platforms, to expand on the previously used methodology.

The fraction of the total userbase reachable by a single influential user can be referred to as the **userbase reach potential ratio**, determined by the average of top-20 most influential users follower counts relative to the total Russian userbase of a platform. The type of average used in determining the userbase reach potential ratio will be the median of the subscriber counts, in order to account for statistical significance of outliers with an international following (e.g., mixed martial arts fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov's 33 million followers on Instagram). This analysis utilized Statista estimates of Russia's total internet user number (Statista, 2021), social media penetration by platform (Statista, 2022), and YouTube user number (Statista, 2021), for the statistical data.

Considering that Instagram's userbase is largely apolitical, despite the ban, a conclusion can be made that rather than being a benefit to Russian state authorities apolitical userbases could in fact be a potential risk. Indeed, if a platform already exhibits a high degree of politicization, then a high userbase reach potential ratio would likely not be a significant factor in influencing the views of a platform's userbase, with the majority of users having already "taken a side" politically. Therefore, a combination of an apolitical userbase with a high userbase reach potential ratio could hold a significant risk of swaying public opinion in the event of social dissatisfaction. Although VKontakte and Odnoklassniki are both notable due to the majority of their userbases being apolitical, they are excluded from the following analysis due to the high degree of control that Russian authorities exercise over these platforms. Due to both platforms being based in Russia, any public dissent on either platform could be contained using *de facto* wartime censorship legislation, with any resistance from the operating companies unlikely to emerge.

As can be seen on Figure 7, the ratios of representative users' median subscriber count to total userbases differ significantly between platforms, with no observable correlation to the politicization or political polarization of said platforms. Instagram displays a low degree of politicization, but even among the top-20 most influential users there were two users who took part in the "Black Square" social media protests. While those two users only constitute 10% of the

Telegram

Top: 2 987k	**Median**: 853k	**Total**: 57 010k

■ Loyalist   □ Apolitical   ■ Opposition

Facebook

Top: 582k	**Median**: 86k	**Total**: 34 003k

■ Loyalist   □ Apolitical   ■ Opposition

Twitter

Top: 4 500k	**Median**: 1 100k	**Total**: 13 130k

■ Loyalist   □ Apolitical   ■ Opposition

YouTube

Top: 39 600k	**Median**: 12 200k	**Total**: 91 350k

■ Loyalist   □ Apolitical   ■ Opposition

Instagram

Top: 33 400k	**Median**: 13 600k	**Total**: 71 484k

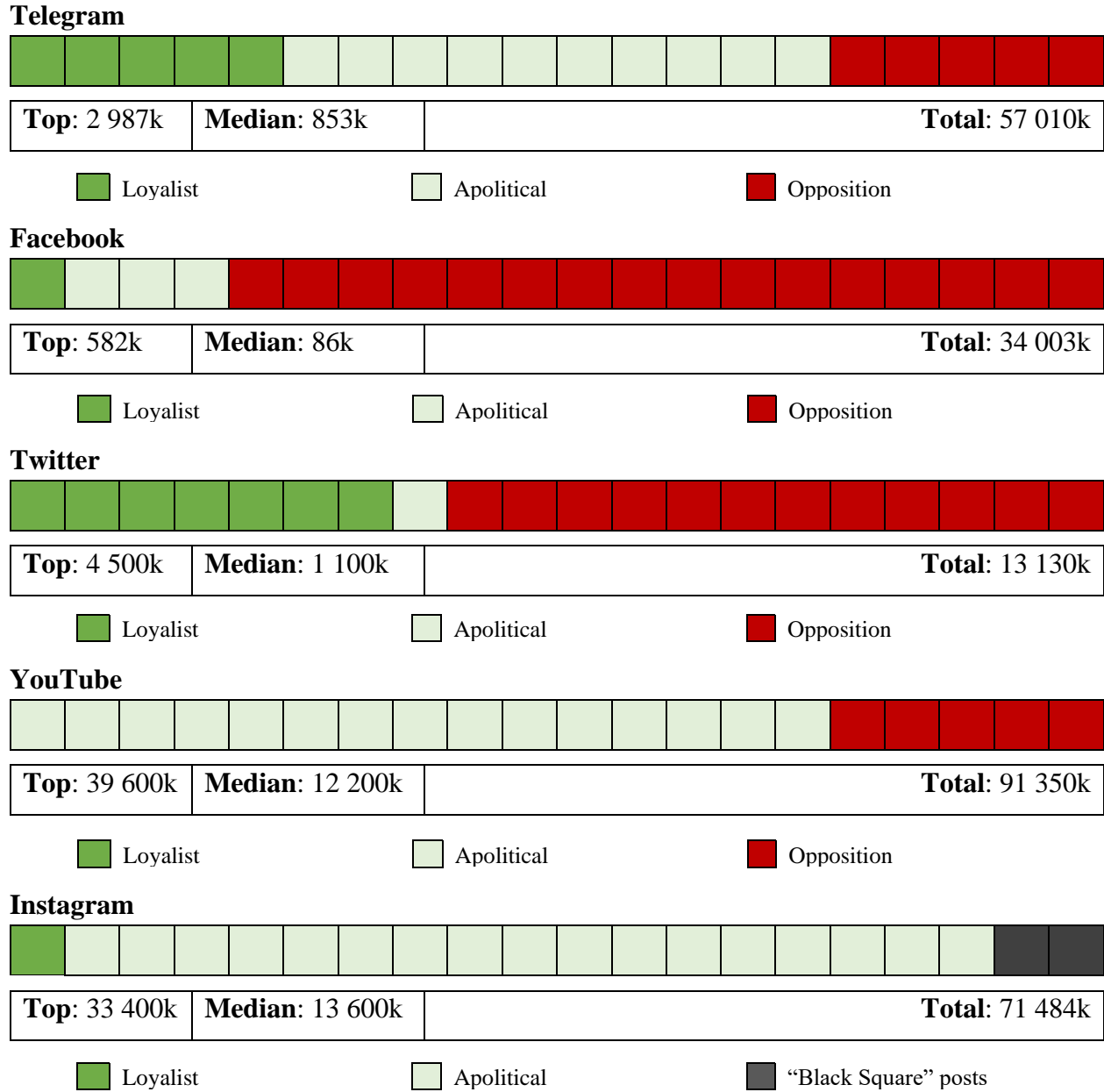■ Loyalist   □ Apolitical   ■ "Black Square" posts

Figure 7. Political alignment and userbase statistics of non-Russian social platforms.

graph, considering the sheer median subscriber reach of a top influencer on Instagram, the relatively small percentage of 10% should not by any means be discounted as insignificant, as it can amount to a user reach of potentially up to 27 million users. Additionally, Instagram is a platform that was favored by Russian celebrities up until its ban, meaning that Instagram's userbase has a reputation and social status beyond the app, further enhancing the platform's societal reach and the importance of its top influencers' opinions for their followers.
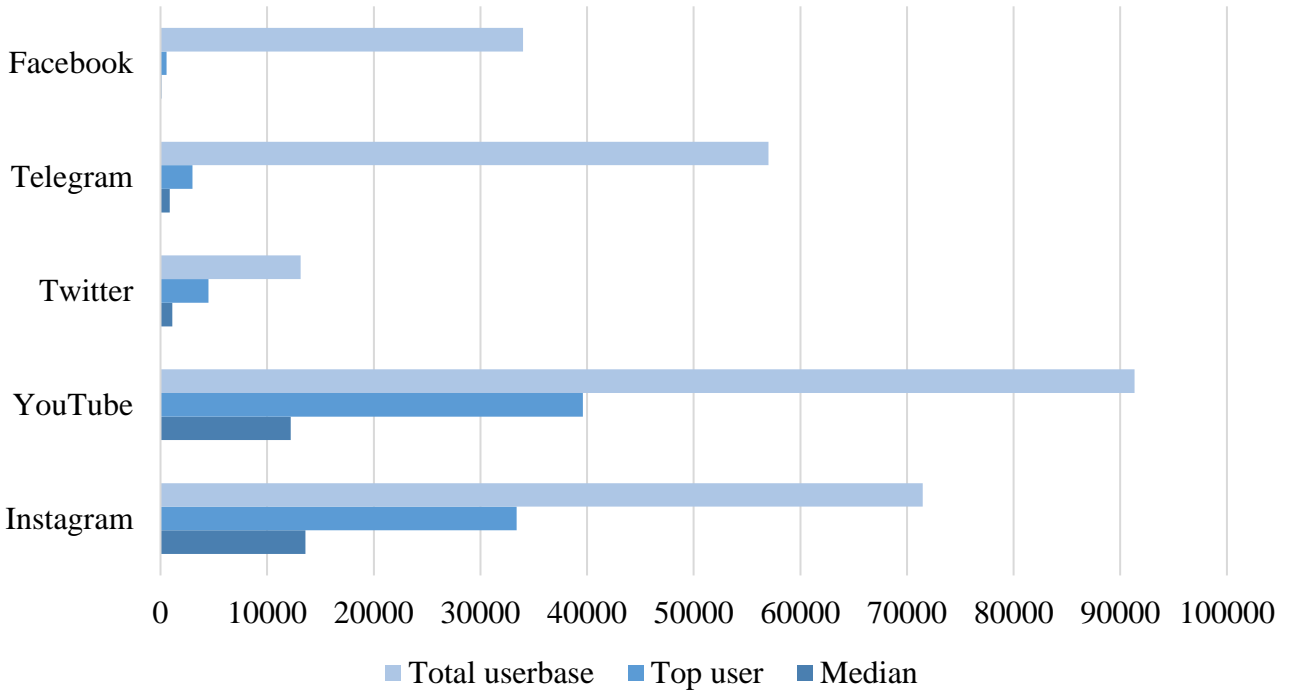
Figure 8. Top and median follower count of influential users on foreign media platforms, relative to total userbases in Russia (in thousands of users).

Now to estimate the userbase reach potential ratios of the five non-Russian platforms assessed in the updated analysis. As can be seen on Figure 8, Instagram demonstrates the highest userbase reach potential ratio, with a ratio of nearly 1:5. According to Statista, in 2021 the total number of internet users in Russia reached an estimated 112.22 million people (Statista, 2021). Accounting for the fact that until Instagram's ban in the Russian Federation its total userbase constituted nearly two thirds of all active Internet users in Russia, or roughly 71 million users, it can be concluded that a median influential Instagram user could reach an audience of nearly 14 million people – larger than the entire population of Moscow and larger than Twitter's entire Russian userbase prior to the ban on the platform. This constitutes a significant political risk in the event that Instagram's normally apolitical influencers were to become politicized and communicate opposition viewpoints to their largely apolitical followers, for instance in the event of increased domestic tensions or a rapid decline in living standards. If this viewpoint is considered together with Instagram's userbase reach potential ratio, the ban on Instagram becomes increasingly understandable from the perspective of public opinion management by Russian authorities. Additionally, this demonstrates a significant difference between Instagram and WhatsApp, both Meta platforms: while both platforms possess large userbases and are largely apolitical,

Instagram's follower model established conditions for a high userbase reach potential ratio, making it a political risk, unlike WhatsApp's instant messenger model.

YouTube is a close second to Instagram, with a userbase reach potential ratio of roughly 1:7. However, despite being a similar risk to Instagram it remains unblocked in Russia. The likely explanation for YouTube's seeming immunity to the repercussions of sovereignization are more likely dependent on technical issues with providing a suitable replacement for Russia's consumer base. Despite the lack of a ban, the rhetoric by public officials against YouTube and the expectations of the imminent ban on the platform have driven down the numbers of active users, with Brand Analytics reporting that by April 20th 2022 the number of active Russian-speaking creators on YouTube declined by 120 000 users, or roughly 21% of the total number (Brand Analytics, 2022). At the same time Russia has two homegrown YouTube counterparts: Rutube and Yandex Zen. However, despite attempts to promote Rutube, the platform remains largely underused compared to its foreign competitor. Yandex Zen has enjoyed a modicum of success due to its association with the widely used Yandex service platform but does not share its foreign competitor's entertainment potential. According to Brand Analytics data, out of the top twenty most followed accounts on Yandex Zen, eight are state-owned or state-aligned media outlets, such as newspapers and television channels (Brand Analytics, 2022). Russian alternatives to YouTube are also a prime example of media consolidation in Russia, as Rutube is owned by Gazprom-Media, while Yandex Zen has been purchased by VKontakte Group – a company that itself has been acquired by Gazprom at the end of 2021. The purchase of Yandex Zen by VK might signal a state-guided attempt to create a universal platform for Russian users to provide a replacement for foreign online platforms.

Finally, despite having a considerably smaller userbase than the previous two platforms, Twitter also has a significant userbase reach potential ratio of 1:12. However, as can be seen in the political alignment results, Twitter is a majority opposition platform with a limited share of apolitical users. As such the risks of userbase reach on Twitter are significantly smaller than on the previous two platforms, due to a lack of apolitical audiences that could be influenced by a change in the top users' political messaging. The remaining two platforms, Telegram and Facebook, have userbase reach potential ratios of 1:66 and 1:395 accordingly. Considering that the userbase of both

platforms are highly politicized, the real impact of userbase reach potential would be insignificant both due to low ratios and a low percentage of apolitical users.

A platform not included in this analysis is TikTok, which has not been banned by the Russian government, but chose to voluntarily suspend service to Russia-based users following the invasion of Ukraine. It should be noted however, that due to the specifics of TikTok as a platform, the vast majority of the most popular users are entertainers geared towards younger demographics, consistent with the target audience of TikTok in other markets as well.

As such, the conclusion can be drawn that Russian authorities could rely on three criteria when evaluating whether an online platform should be subject to a ban in the Russian Federation:

a)   Whether an online platform has foreign owners.

b)   Whether an online platform has significant opposition presence.

c)   Whether an online platform has a high userbase reach potential with apolitical users.

It can thus be argued that a platform's userbase reach potential is as significant to Russian authorities in their decision-making process, as the platform's ownership and politicization. Simply put, every apolitical user is a potential member of the opposition.

2.3.   Further sovereignization prognosis

While the consequences of "hard" sovereignization may seem disastrous with several major online platforms completely blocked in Russia, in reality Roskomnadzor's actual capacity for completely blocking off a site from the Russian internet segment is limited. Due to the widespread use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), the percentage of the according platforms' userbases affected by the ban is somewhat modest. While interest in VPNs has surged, it is hard to definitively estimate what percentage of the population uses VPNs to access blocked websites. However, it is possible to use the data from user statistics of social networks hit by Roskomnadzor bans to make a rough estimate based on the decline of active user numbers. According to data provided by Brand Analytics in their active user activity analysis (Brand Analytics, 2022), the active user losses indicate VPN use by a sizable portion of the population. Most notably, out of the networks blocked by Roskomnadzor, there is a 27% decline on Facebook, 28% decline on Twitter, and 56% decline on Instagram when it comes to the number of actively posting users (Brand Analytics, 2022). Considering that according to data provided by Statista Instagram was used by 63.7% of Russian

internet users in 2021 (Statista, 2022), a simple calculation shows that at a decline of 56% of the userbase Instagram should still be actively used by roughly 35% of the total number of Russian internet users. At the same time Facebook and Twitter, platforms with high opposition presence, have retained nearly three quarters of their original userbase. Concurrently, Telegram experienced a 24% and VKontakte a 22% growth, likely from Instagram's and TikTok's users.

It is therefore evident that "hard" sovereignization in its current form does little to effectively impede the opposition's capacity for online communication, or at least for as long as VPN services remain functional within the Runet. At the same time, it must be noted, that although the Russian opposition's communication capacity does not seem to have been significantly impacted, their capacity to reach a wider audience has been largely limited to YouTube. And while YouTube remains unblocked at the time of the writing of this thesis, the userbase reach potential ratio analysis demonstrates the risks that YouTube's apolitical audience may constitute from the perspective of Russian authorities. Instagram remains in use with half of its original Russian userbase despite a technologically imposed ban, likely due to the low amount of bandwidth required for loading images and text. YouTube as a video streaming service is resource-intensive, meaning that fully filtering access to it would be less complicated for Roskomnadzor, especially compared to text-based services such as Telegram.

However, the greatest variable in the question of Internet sovereignization may have little to do with social and political considerations. The central question is the technical capacity of Russian telecommunications authorities to maintain complex traffic filtering systems with modern Internet infrastructure, servers, and filtering equipment in the conditions of a wide-reaching ban on high-tech exports to Russia. With the world's biggest IT infrastructure providers such as Cisco, Ericsson and Nokia ceasing their business in Russia, it is questionable if Russian authorities will be able to maintain necessary infrastructure for the type of mass traffic filtering envisioned by current restrictions on foreign online platforms, and it is debatable whether Chinese equipment will be able to serve as a replacement for Western products in maintaining Russian digital infrastructure.

Due to the fact that foreign online platforms are perceived by Russian authorities as tools of foreign interference in sovereign Russian affairs, it is unlikely that the ban on Western social networks will be lifted by Russia. As such, Russian authorities are left with two general options:

a) Continue to expand the current filtering system to cover an increasing number of banned websites with limited capacity for maintenance or tech support, until the system can no longer effectively function without impacting the operation of online infrastructure, OR

b) Proceed with "total" sovereignization by partitioning the Runet from the World Wide Web.

The first option comes as the default course at the current conjecture, due to the increasing need to continue sovereignization processes. However, the technological and budgetary requirements for maintaining this option will likely become continuously more expensive to maintain in proper working order. The factors impeding the transition to a "total" sovereignization are trifold: consumer demand, tech sector competitiveness, and technical practicality. Consumer demand for Western platforms makes severing the Runet from the World Wide Web a politically dangerous act, the Russian tech sector depends on the international market which would be lost in the event of a "total" sovereignization, while technical practicality will decrease over time as digital infrastructure degrades. Therefore, the transition to a "total" sovereign Runet will likely be inevitable when consumer and business interests lose their weight with decreasing accessibility to foreign platforms, and digital infrastructure becomes increasingly difficult to maintain in working order. Simply put, it is easier to cut off the Internet than it is to filter it.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to address the reliance of the Russian political opposition on foreign online platforms for communication and political messaging, with the objective to determine the potential impact of the implementation of the "Sovereign Internet Law" legislation on opposition activity in Russia. In order to reach this goal a methodology was developed which utilized statistical data on the social media influence of Russian users on six different online platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and YouTube. The resulting data demonstrated which foreign-owned online platforms played the most significant role for Russia's political opposition and were thus the most likely to be targeted in the event of further sovereignization, as was detailed in the subsequent analysis of the possible sovereignization methods accounting for the data acquired from the social influence analysis.

However, the trajectory of this thesis was radically changed by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the resulting paradigm shift in Russia's foreign and domestic policy, which necessitated the intensification of Internet sovereignization, utilizing all three researched methods: "legal", "soft", and "hard" sovereignization. As a result, the conclusions of the original methodology were amended by revisiting the individual influencers to inspect their statements, if any, on the conflict in Ukraine. The general conclusions of the original methodology proved to be correct, with the two opposition-dominated platforms – Facebook and Twitter – entirely banned in the Russian Federation, as lined out in the "hard" sovereignization scenario. Unexpectedly however, another major online platform to be banned along with Facebook and Twitter was Instagram, a mainly apolitical platform which was excluded from analysis with the original methodology due to its overall insignificance to political activism in the Russian context.

In order to evaluate the divergence from the original methodology's results, a number of possible explanations were put forward. Following a thorough assessment of various factors, Instagram's high user count and engagement rates compared to other online platforms covered in the empirical research were assessed to be the likeliest explanation for its ban and the divergence from original methodology's suggested results. This necessitated the creation of a new methodology to evaluate the importance of this factor in Russian authorities decision-making processes and to determine whether the same factor applies to the other platforms researched earlier. The resulting methodology applied the original dataset combined with additional data on the total size of

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researched platforms' userbases to determine the 'userbase reach potential' ratio, i.e., the ratio of the median follower count of a major influencer relative to the total userbase size. This ratio would allow to determine the relative significance of a single major user and the potential reach of their social or political messaging. The results demonstrated that Instagram has the highest userbase reach potential ratio of any of the major platforms researched in this thesis, with a generalized major Instagram influencer having the potential reach of up to one fifth of the total Russian userbase of Instagram, or the equivalent of 14 million users. This not only demonstrated the empirical value of the userbase reach potential ratio for socio-political risk evaluation, but also a possible method of risk assessment: whereas the userbase of a politically polarized platform is unlikely to significantly alter its overall political leaning, an apolitical platform has the potential to be influenced by users with a high userbase reach capacity.

Unfortunately, due to the implementation of effective wartime censorship and the suppression of any form of public protest or political dissent in the Russian Federation, it is hard to estimate the exact influence that intensified sovereignization has had on Russian political opposition. While sovereignization measures by themselves could have significantly obstructed the activity and communication means of Russia's political opposition in regular circumstances, the introduction of wartime censorship and persecution of opposition viewpoints have raised legal obstacles to public activity of the opposition, making the precise assessment of opposition activity in the wake of further sovereignization hard to estimate in the absence of more varied data. However, userbase statistics demonstrate that the practical impact of sovereignization itself on the opposition has been negligible, with the original userbases remaining largely intact through the use of VPNs. With up to a third of Russia's internet users and up to three quarters of the opposition using VPN services, current sovereignization methods are evidently flawed.

In conclusion, the research accomplished the established goals and managed to successfully determine the main targets of sovereignization restrictions, while also expanding the original methodology to correct the method to account for deviations from originally expected results. However, the results of the work indicate that the process of sovereignization in Russia will continue to intensify for the foreseeable future, due to the unresolved risks of the political mobilization of apolitical platforms and the technological conditions faced by the Russian authorities in pursuing sovereignization policies in wartime conditions.

Appendix

VKontakte (Medialogia, March 2022)

Loyalist	Тимати
Apolitical	Valeri Chekalina, Аня Pokrov, Karna.val, Ольга Бузова, Kuplinov Play, EDISON FAMILY, Группа Брайна!, Даня Милохин, It's Mamix, DAVA, [BadComedian], GAVRILINA, Елена Сажина, Оксана Самойлова, Exile, INSTASAMKA, Rakhim, Михаил Литвин, KARA KROSS
Opposition	-

Odnoklassniki (Medialogia, October 2021)

Loyalist	Комсомольская правда
Apolitical	ДОМАШНИЕ ХИТРОСТИ, Народные советы, Одноклассники. Всё ОК!, Музыка Клипы и Хорошее Настроение, НАРОДНЫЕ СОВЕТЫ 2021!, Игра "Сокровища Пиратов" - официальная группа, Энциклопедия советов, Вернём СССР, Поздравления для друзей бесплатно, Целебник Журнал здорового образа жизни (ЗОЖ), Омар Хайям статусы цитаты афоризмы, волки-душа волка, Смейся до слёз!, Вкусная Еда с любовью, Корзинка Советов, Секреты долголетия О чем молчат врачи, Самые полезные советы, Народные Средства и Рецепты
Opposition	Против Путина и партии жуликов и воров

Telegram (Medialogia, February 2022)

Loyalist	@breakingmash, @kadyrov_95, @vv_volodin, @warfakes, @cbpub
Apolitical/Neutral	@nekogla1, @fak_tu, @moscowmap, @instasamkafuckyouб @dvachannel, @bazabazon, @bbbreaking, @DavydovIn, @polituprava, @jojohf
Opposition	@bloodysx, @varlamov_news, @ostorozhno_novosti, @redakciya_channel, @generalsvr

Facebook (Brand Analytics, October 2021)

Loyalist	Антон Беляков
Apolitical	Assol Moldokmatova, Diana Diana, Къци Вапцаров
Opposition	Виктория Булитко, Любовь Любушкина, Бурмака Дмитро, Виталий Портников, Borys Filatov, Valentin Gadenoff, Тарас Березовец, Евгений Черняк, Олексій Гончаренко, Дмитрий Чекалкин, Алина Гросу, Anton Shvets, Lida Moniava, Николай Подосокорский, Михайло Присяжнюк, David Sakvarelidze

Twitter (Medialogia, October 2021)

Loyalist	РИА Новости, НТВ, Лента.ру, МИД России, ВЕСТИ, ТАСС
Apolitical	Исторические Фото, Пьяный Твиттер
Opposition	Дождь, Новая Газета, Alexey Navalny, Эхо Москвы, Проф. Преображенский, DW на русском, TJ, Bbbcrussian, Евгений Ройзман, Перзидент Роисси, Радио Свобода, Ходорковский Михаил

YouTube (Medialogia, January 2022)

Loyalist	-
Apolitical	A4, Marmok, TheBrianMaps, EdisonPts, HiMan, SlivkiShow, Познаватель, Kuplinov Play, Данкар, Поззи, Lady Diana, ЕвгенБро, MrLololoshka, MetalFamily, Дима Гордей
Opposition	Алексей Навальный, вДудь, EeOneGuy, Magic Five, MORGENSHTERN

Instagram (Medialogia, January 2022)

Loyalist	Тимати
Apolitical	Оксана Самойлова, Хабиб Нурмагомедов, Гусейн Гасанов, Егор Крид, Гоар Аветисян, Валерия Чекалина, Ксения Бородина, Карина Кросс, Елена Сажина, Надин Серовски, Ольга Бузова, Вадя Карнавал, Брайн Мапс, Инстасамка, Аня Покров, Дина Саева
"Black Square"	Настя Ивлеева, Ирина Шейк

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