

Master's thesis abstract

Internet Governance in Putin's Russia – a long-term perspective

This longitudinal case study is dedicated to the analysis of the development behind Russia's approach to Internet governance. By qualitatively researching the development of the Kremlin's approach to Internet governance, this thesis aims to capture the learning process behind regulating the cyberspace in Russia. As such, the aim is to understand what kind of events have shaped its perception of how Internet and the underpinning infrastructure should be approached to increase the regime's stability. Building on the concepts of digital authoritarianism and authoritarian learning and by understanding learning as a long-term process with turning points, this thesis aims to answer these research questions. How does Russia's digital authoritarianism manifest? Which events, both domestic and international, hastened the pace and intensity of cyberspace regulation in Russia? Can we identify a learning process behind Russia's long-term approach towards Internet regulation? For these ends, the turning points refer to events after which we can identify a change in the perception of Internet governance and/or intensification in controlling the online information space. As such, with the help of periodization, the thesis traces the evolution of Russia's digital authoritarianism across events such as Putin's rise to power, colour revolutions, the Arab Spring and the 2011 mass protests in Moscow, Snowden's revelations about mass surveillance in the US, Euromaidan and the annexation of Crimea, and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While some events represented a serious red flag for the Kremlin's stability and prompted Russia to change its approach to Internet governance, some represented rather a rhetorical justification for such a change. Even though Russia's approach has for a long term been characterised as decentralised, the results of this research have identified a recent trend towards centralisation.

Key words: cyberspace, Putin, internet governance, authoritarian learning, Russia, digital authoritarianism

