



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme

Russia as a Network State

Vadim Kononenko

Finnish Institute of International Affairs

7 October 2011

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

The notion of the network state moves away from traditional understandings of the state based on legal-rational institutions towards a perception that recognises the ambiguity of the relationship between state institutions and statesmen. Political power is not vested in one statesman or institution, but distributed across networks. Putin is not a universal ruler – his power is checked by the networks, yet he remains their ‘supreme arbiter’. The choice of the term network is justified by its relative neutrality – it avoids presenting the Russian case as exceptional and allows historical comparisons. Although studying non-transparent networks posits challenges, their existence explains the erratic character of the state decision-making.

The speaker argued that Putin’s 2000-2008 presidency was marked by the appearance of the dualism of state institutions and ruling networks. Putin managed to consolidate and centralise the power of the state with the support of elite networks. The networks are now involved in policymaking and policy outputs, effectively blurring the distinction between private and public, formal and informal. It is in the interests of the networks for the state to remain powerful. By evoking the state, the elite networks can claim legitimacy for themselves. Yet, their informal character means they have no public accountability which they readily exploit. The strong attachment to the idea of the state is what sets the Russian network state apart from similar constructs elsewhere.

The future of networks in Russia is not certain. They have only emerged in the last ten years, under a favourable economic situation effected by high oil prices. The challenge for the networks is to reconcile the goal of preserving the status quo and the goal of modernisation, and to deal with the realities of economic crisis and the pressure on assets and property. They must address the gap between the projected image of the powerful state and the reality of its inefficiency.

There is also a basic contradiction; the network state can only exist in separation, which explains the rise of nationalism in Russia. Yet Russia cannot sustain nationalist discourses because of its loss of economic competitiveness and its depopulation. The recent wave of coloured revolutions throughout the former Soviet Union signalled the need for reform, but the fear is that reform will unleash freedom and pluralism, thus undermining the networks. Networks are not likely to implement radical reforms as they are mainly preoccupied with network interests, and securing short-term legitimacy. But they cannot act purely out of self-interest either; for example, they have to sustain state institutions. Their structure also rules out reform. It is impossible to recruit new members who could bring in resources

and ideas for addressing Russian economic and social problems – the non-transparent character of the networks, and the convoluted system of mutual attachments is ultimately alienating to anyone outside the networks.