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Review article

Virtual State:
Scoping Review of Russian Political and Social Sciences

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Abstract. This review focuses on analysis and determination of problematic field based on phenomena and related concepts such as micronation, cyber-state, virtual state and others. Actualization of this topic is carried out due to the technological development of modern society, the emergence of new social, political, economic and other actors, the concentration of a large amount of resources by them which could make them an influential power or an alternative of social and political organization. Using scoping methods, comparative and content analysis, as well as services of network and statistical analysis the article examines the level of virtual states' embeddedness into Russian political and social sciences, the formation of the corresponding research field, direction or school. Special attention is paid to the Russian segment of world science in the framework of the study of virtual states and problems are faced by Russian researchers. This will allow researchers to see the context, the most relevant areas of work, help to correctly use the concepts in Russian and English academic texts.

Keywords: virtual state, micronation, cyber-state, scoping review, social sciences

Introduction

Alternative was and still is one of the most powerful driving forces in human history. It also characterizes our nature with the presence of free will, which is opposed to an overly strict and inevitable existence. In open living systems, variability and heterogeneity also contribute to system flexibility and adaptability. Speaking of social organization over last 5 thousand years a state has become almost the only alternative for big and complex societies. For a long time, it was believed that the transition from a pre-state to a state structure is natural for all communities and is associated with growing complexity. However, in the 20th and 21st centuries, political anthropologists, relying on archaeological finds, refute this thesis, pointing to a number of communities that developed and became more

complex for a long time without metamorphosis into a state. Moreover, the state was often established in society in an unnatural way as a result of its conquest by another state, which was especially characteristic of the emergence and spread of the early empires and the times of great geographical discoveries. With the development of the processes of globalization, the alternativeness of the social structure also decreased due to the spread of the principles of state building in its modern (Western) understanding.

Despite the objective monopoly of the state as a form of public organization, the obvious impossibility of solving a number of problems within the existing system led to the emergence of projects of an alternative social structure. Renaissance socio-utopian works ("Utopia" by Thomas More, "The City of the Sun" by Tommaso Campanella), Communist philosophy of 19th century, works of science-fiction writers and so on. Social and humanitarian upheavals of the 20th century led to the discrediting of historicism, the ideologization of society, the imposition of truths through political propaganda. On the other hand, the subsequent development and spread of pluralism, the development of the dissemination and protection of human rights and freedoms led to creative emancipation, the possibility of re-evaluating social reality not only within the framework of science and philosophy (post-modern and post-structuralism). Thus, from the middle of the 20th century, completely diverse associations of people began to appear around the world, characterizing themselves as states, often claiming some territory, benefits or defending their way of life and social structure.

This article looks closely how these phenomena are represented and embedded into scientific discourse of Russian political science and interdisciplinary field. Scoping review methodology and algorithms, content analysis, services of network and statistical analysis were being used for revealing the current shape of a subject field, main problems and complications. For that purpose, the author used scoping methods [1], content analysis, as well as services of network and statistical analysis (Google Trends, Yandex Wordstat).

Conceptual Basis

As follows from the title, the concept of the Virtual State was taken as a basis. This decision was influenced by its widest coverage of objects from the universum. The concept of Virtuality also has an additional philosophical basis and allows to correlate the considered phenomena with real (recognized) states, political bodies and organizations. Also, this concept was largely accepted by Russian researchers comparing with other concepts such as micronation, cyber-state, state of fantasy and so on. According to my Yandex Wordstat analysis It is 604 requests for virtual state vs 92 for micronation and 25 for cyber-state per month in Russian (August 2020). However, in the English-speaking environment, the most frequently used concept is Micronation, although the virtual state is not excluded.

Periodization

For a better understanding of the state of the subject field of the study of virtual states, it is necessary to understand the prerequisites and environment of its

formation. Especially if its segment is considered in a separate country. To do this, we propose to consider those milestones: the appearance of micronations, spread of the phenomenon, entering world scientific discourse, entering Russian scientific discourse.

There is no unanimity on the emergence of the first virtual states due to the existence of different approaches to the definition of this phenomenon. Scientists agree that a virtual state is some kind of entity claiming the status of a state, but for example, in one case, the absence of all the necessary attributes of the state is revealed, in the other, there is no recognition from other sovereign states or supranational organizations.
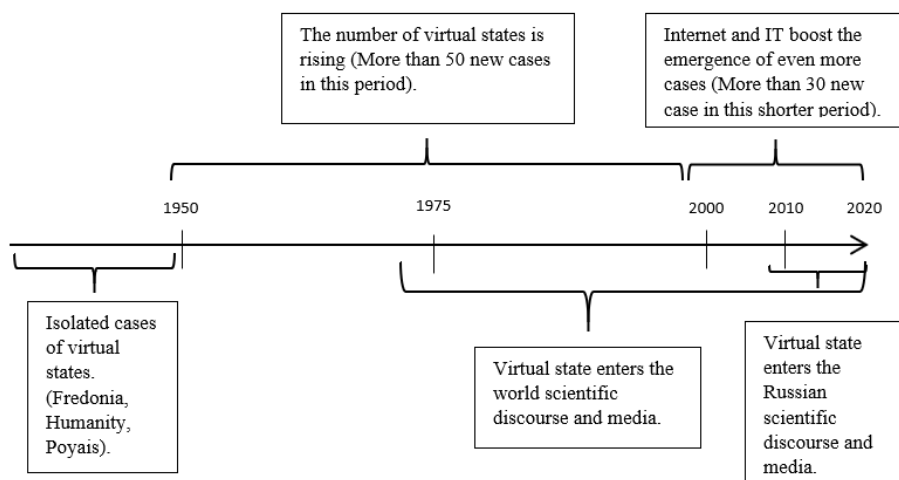

Fig. 1. Periodization of virtual states
Source: Researchers Own Survey (2020)

As you can see in the figure (Fig. 1), the phenomenon and concept under consideration have come into the spotlight of Russian researchers quite recently. The fist works were aimed at studying individual cases like «The Internet-State of Teachers: Three Years on Air!» by N.V. Nikulicheva in 2007. [2] and at conceptualization of virtual states like «Virtual States. Role and Significance» by A.V. Smirnova and V.P. Cherny in 2009 [3]. Figure 1 also displays a great world science's background (mostly in English) for Russian researchers and numerous cases as well.

Terminology Puzzle

Speaking of new concepts in the process of transit into the field of Russian science from outside we often face problems and difficulties from the beginning of their adaptation. Language problem is a hard one. Translating, we often run the risk of distorting the meaning of the original term, since different meanings can be put into the same words in different cultures. Left unchanged, the term can be difficult to understand and controversial, which makes it difficult to use and may even lead to its marginalization. Also, terms can be too close like virtual- and cyber- in context of digitalized reality.

Another one is Delays problem. Due to closed and politicized nature of Soviet social and humanitarian science most world theories, concepts and approaches enter

modern Russian scientific discourse with a long delay. This creates a specific bottleneck – huge number of publications must be translated, understood, approaches must be tested. Great efforts should be made to the systematic analysis of the subject field, to select areas of research that would have novelty and relevance. At the same time, there is always a risk that during this hard work described above, it may turn out that in world science the concept under consideration is already losing its relevance and new ones come to replace it.

In our case the delay is not so long due to the fact that virtual states began to be studied most actively in the West since the last decade of the 20th century, when Russian social and humanitarian science was restoring its connection with world science. The rapid expansion of the Internet and IT along with globalization also contributed to reducing latency.

In this article there are already mentioned 4 main terms used by Russian and foreign researchers: virtual state, micronation, cyber-state, state of fantasy. Each of these terms carries different meaning, prevailing experience of use and has a different heuristic potential. The following table accumulates the main meanings and the comparative aspect of the Russian-speaking and English-speaking segment of Western science (Table 1).

Table 1

Main terms of subject field with comments and comparison

Terms	Russian subject field	Western subject field
Virtual state	**Basic term** (at least in Russian language publications) for studied phenomena.	In social and human sciences Used by modern researchers who are trying to point out new forms of organization of the studied phenomena. Less common than micronation possibly because that term is most used in the field of quantum physics to describe unobservable and a very short-lived quantum state.
Micronation	Less common than Virtual state. The use of term is influenced by pre-existing Western research. Very close to nation-state tradition, which may not always reflect the essence of the studied phenomena. Can be used for typology	**Basic term** for studied phenomena.
Cyber-state	Can be used to describe virtual states that exist and operate only on the Internet. **But** mostly used to describe real state acting in digital space (e-government). Can be used for typology	Practically not used to describe the considered phenomena. More common for cyber-security and cyber-threats discourse.
State of fantasy	Can be used to describe virtual states that exist only in one's mind. Can be used for typology.	Used by researchers to represent phenomena as a theoretical basis in the search of alternative models of the socio-political structure.

Source: Researchers own survey (2020).

In addition to comments and comparisons in Table 1, the main terms for subject field are marked in green, the next in frequency of use are yellow and terms that can, but either are not used or are rarely used in gray.

The table shows the difference in the use of terms in Russia and in Western science, which should be taken into account in further domestic research in order to have a connection with already existing research in English, to be reflected in international databases. The wrong choice of the term or its use can hinder the perception of scientific work in the international scientific community and reduce its impact factor. The formation of a single language in the cancers of a separate research area is usually an important component of effectiveness.

Subject Field Status

As noted above, the first works in Russian began to appear in the middle of the 1st decade of the 20th century. Every year interest in the problem under consideration grew. Now So, at the request of "Virtual State" on the portal of the main Russian Electronic Library [4] 580 publications were recorded in 2020. But, at the stage of selection of relevant sources, it is noted that most of the works concern the phenomenon under consideration consensually, focusing on the study of the virtual space of social and political relations and e-government.

Generally, there are 3 directions revealed:

1. Attempts to conceptualize and theorize virtual state [5; 6].
2. Research of the activities of a real state in cyberspace and virtual reality [7].
3. Study of individual cases of virtual states [2; 8].

Second point was caused by a request from the state and the corresponding financial and resource support for the research of the Russian state in cyber space in the context of digitalization of public administration and cyber-security. Obviously, point 2 is outside the scope of our review, although in general, we consider the study of the phenomenon of cyber and virtual space a necessary condition for understanding and understanding the environment in which virtual states exist and operate.

Among the main problems considered by Russian researchers are: the search for new models of social and political structure, the problem of stability and separatism, the problem of unrecognized states, the theory and methodology of studying virtual states, the issues of unrecognized civilians and passports. However, despite the presence of diverse research, it is felt that researchers are still testing the waters, studying what is already known and looking for opportunities to obtain new knowledge for world science. This is evidenced by the lack of dissertations on this topic, methodological literature and training courses, although there are significant monographs like a work of Nikolay Dobronravin «Unrecognized states in the "gray zone" of world politics: the basics of survival and the rules of sovereignty» in which the author highlights the most important periods of the emergence of virtual states: the Second World War, the development of the UN and the Post-Soviet period [9].

Analysis of scientific publications revealed a weak point caused by the lack of translations of key works, which is generally explained by the desire of the authors to promote their research and create their own content, but that may lead to

backwardness and isolation from world science, as well as to duplication of information and plagiarism. Nevertheless, a lot of «blank spots» will enable scientists to conduct new original research. One of the most current issues in the near future will be the possibility of the emergence of a powerful virtual state within the real one and the problem of stability, separatism, anarchy, dual power and sovereignty, if a new political body is recognized by other states or supranational organizations (for example, to realize their geopolitical interests). Thus, it is about the transformation of the virtual into the real. The potential of virtual states can also be used by scientists to build models for overcoming modern crises and improving existing political systems.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

This review shows progressive movement towards the formation of a scientific direction aimed at the study of virtual states with its own methodology and terminological apparatus. But that is influenced by transitive processes, language factor, the level of interest of the scientific community, as well as the demand for research and support from the state. With regard to the subject field, Russian researchers are in solidarity with their foreign colleagues, they are concerned about the issues of alternative socio-political development, separatism, the calling and non-calling of states and organizations, the problems of cybersecurity and controllability in the virtual and networked world. At this stage, a critical mass of knowledge must be accumulated with systematization, conceptualization, new typologies and methods of researching virtual states and their activities. This is facilitated by the development of existing and the emergence of new virtual states, including in Russia [10].

A terminology issue is also on the scientific agenda. Russian researchers generally agree on the use of the term «virtual state» as the main and broadest one, which in turn leads to uncertainty as to how much our research will correlate with «micronation» the more commonly used abroad. In addition, the term virtual state is actively used in quantum physics. Nevertheless, taking into account the observed trends, the relevance of research within this subject field will grow in the context of diversification of forms of socio-political organization and crises of economic systems and states.

Recommendations

For researchers:

• Be especially careful about the terms used. The need to use this or that term may be dictated by the language in which you are preparing the publication and in which country it will be published. So, if you use the Virtual State in the Russian text, then sometimes it is better to use Micronation when translating.

• Networking your Russian and foreign colleagues to have scientific dialog, experience exchange, reviewing and better accumulation of knowledge.

• Translate key works and do reviews on new English books and articles for Russian-speaking community if you can.

• Do case study of different virtual state, including Russian, most of them is a unique experience of socio-political organization.

For academics:

• Include this problematic into your academic disciplines and supplementary courses.

• Organize round tables and workshops on this subject.

• Provide opportunities for the publication of research results on this issue.

• Promote interdisciplinary research, academic disciplines and departments.

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Обзорная статья

Виртуальное государство: обзор предметного поля в российской политологии и социальных науках

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Аннотация. Этот обзор посвящен анализу и определению проблемного поля таких явлений и связанных с ними понятий, как микрогосударство, кибергосударство, виртуальное государство и другие. Актуальность темы исследования основывается на технологическом развитии современного общества, появлении новых социальных,

политических, экономических и иных акторов, концентрацией в их руках большого объема ресурсов, делающих их влиятельной силой или альтернативой традиционной общественно-политической организации. С помощью методов обзора предметного поля, сравнительного и контентного анализа, а также сервисов сетевого и статистического анализа в статье исследуется степень интеграции виртуальных государств как предмета исследования в российскую политологию и социальные науки, формирование соответствующего исследовательского поля, основные направления и школы. Особое внимание уделяется российскому сегменту мировой науки в рамках исследования виртуальных государств и проблем, с которыми сталкиваются российские исследователи. Проведенный автором научный обзор позволит исследователям увидеть контекст, наиболее актуальные направления работы, поможет правильно использовать соответствующие понятия в русско- и англоязычных научных текстах.

Ключевые слова: виртуальное государство, микрогосударство, кибергосударство, обзор предметного поля, социальные науки

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