

How the Kremlin Set Its Sights on Artificial Intelligence

Kremlin's monopolization of AI could have major political consequences in Russia.

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Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency

A new experiment has been launched in Russia to harness artificial intelligence (AI), which the Kremlin hopes to use to its political advantage.

Russia's largest bank, Sberbank, plans to create a new platform that it will use to conduct experiments in AI and big data in partnership with the Moscow city municipality under a special legal framework, Kommersant newspaper reported on August 13.

Data — payments, parking tickets, health screenings, fines, and federal and regional information system records — will be anonymized and made available to solve problems in

federal and municipal government. A council will be set up to oversee the experiments, consisting of Sberbank CEO German Gref, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, two Kremlin representatives — first deputy chief of staff and former prime minister Sergei Kiriyenko and presidential aide Andrei Belousov — and experts in this field. The only cabinet member on the council is Deputy Prime Minister Maxim Akimov, whose portfolio includes the digital economy.

Essentially, the Kremlin is now planning to control the development of AI in Russia: A development that is not surprising in the context of the current Moscow protests. It is not the first convergence of interests between Sberbank, an institution with a strongly neoliberal agenda, and Kiriyenko, the key political operative in the Kremlin. Faced with a stagnating economy, Sberbank wants to squeeze as much as possible out of its clients, and needs some creative and unexpected solutions to do that. The Kremlin wants to extract as much information as possible about voters.

Through the government-sponsored new platform, Sberbank boss German Gref will firmly establish himself as AI national commercial director. Kiriyenko will get a chance to finish the job he started in 2016: Revamping the Kremlin's political machine by replacing television with well-targeted internet content, which can be made use of by the time of the 2024 presidential election campaign.

The use of AI and big data will enable the Kremlin to do much more than the wizards at Cambridge Analytica, which closed amid a scandal over the role it played in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and other votes. We are not just talking about the privatization of a specific sector of the economy, but of an entire digital platform overseeing the country's economic and social development.

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Other countries, such as China and the United States, which are Russia's competitors — especially where military applications of AI are concerned — have created diverse management structures, ensuring that none of the major stakeholders — the military, business, the White House, the Politburo — can monopolize this market.

Russia has apparently chosen a different scheme for the development of AI. Evidently, Sberbank will be responsible for so-called “nudge economics,” stimulating a certain kind of consumer behavior. The Kremlin, for its part, will be working on harnessing AI resources to create an invincible twenty-first-century political machine, trying to repeat what Cambridge Analytica did for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Moscow platform is a testing ground for new technology.

Nudge economics presupposes that AI and big data make it possible to almost constantly influence human behavior through algorithm-created reminders, information campaigns, push notifications, vibrating devices, and other stimuli. It's obvious why Sberbank needs this: if personal behavior can be managed, then risks and costs can be, too. We know how long a particular borrower will live because we'll manage his life until his mortgage is paid off.

As for Kiriyenko, he has a certain personal interest in AI. Since he started working in the

Kremlin, he has officially distanced himself from the old political techniques. The government still takes candidates off the ballots, manhandles opposition activists, and pays bloggers and opinion-makers for their Facebook posts. Kiriyenko has something more sophisticated in mind.

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During the 2018 presidential campaign, Kiriyenko tried out internet message targeting technology on Russian voters for the first time. The results were too crude, though, according to Kremlin officials. Those responsible for implementing the technology complained that not enough data were available, in comparison to the sophisticated data mining carried out by Cambridge Analytica.

The AI experiments using the Moscow platform will help Kiriyenko to fine-tune more sophisticated data collection. This will most likely be data on consumer behavior, lifestyle, health, informal economic ties, etc. It promises to create a state-of-the-art super-adaptive political machine.

However, if the Russian political establishment takes up this plan, it could have some dangerous and unintended consequences. Everything will come down to short-term political deliverables and the very possibility of strategic thinking could disappear. We will find ourselves chained to the digital infrastructure of a state that always thinks and acts in terms of short (one- or two-year-long), high-profile tactical campaigns.

The nudge techniques might create the impression that society is responding positively and that the authorities are winning political victories in the digital sphere. But in the end everything will end up in political stagnation once again.

There is also a risk of violence. For some reason, the Kremlin believes that adopting AI may obviate the need to use police units and the National Guard in the future. That is a dangerous misapprehension. The twentieth century showed us that places where the state sees the crime but can't prevent it quickly turn into ghettos. Hopes for a social network monitoring system or some kind of digital Robocop that will keep peace on the streets forever will never materialize if the current real-life offline police control infrastructure is dismantled.

Moreover, if the government has set itself the goal of bringing the country to a level of "data civilization," it has failed to discuss with the public who will participate in this process, how, and on what conditions.

For instance, should data ownership be active: can an individual manage their medical records and receive discounts for transferring them? Can a commercial operator mine data from public platforms, government services portals, and other sources? If so, on what legal basis? Should a commercial operator share the information it has gathered or a technology it developed in the form of a scientific publication?

Data civilization is a leap forward. The leap won't happen unless we understand the new capabilities of data intellect. It won't happen if people quietly surrender their digital rights. Neither Sberbank nor the Kremlin should be granted access to AI experiments without a broad

and impartial public debate.

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