

Russia unveils own 'almost Android' system

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Vladimir Putin (left) and Anatoly Chubais, general director of RusNano state corporation, look at a tablet PC screen. It seems Russia's defence ministry doesn't trust Google's tablet computers: a new Android device boasts encryption and works with software and a global positioning system made in Russia.

It seems that Russia's defence ministry has little faith in Google's operating systems: it has just unveiled its own encrypted version that has the remarkably familiar feel of an Android.

Russia's very first smart prototype was presented on the sidelines of a Berlin electronics show this week to Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin—an avowed nationalist who oversees the military's technological innovation.

A slimmed down version of the operating system in computer tablet form is actually meant to go public by the end of the year at a cost of

15,000 rubles (\$460) a pop.

But it would hardly be a defence gadget with consumer appeal. Developers at the ministry's Central Scientific Research Institute said their main client is—and will probably always be—the state and its top brass.

"The military version will be shock- and water-proof," Russian media quoted production unit director Andrei Starikovsky as telling Rogozin at the presentation.

"The operating system has all the functional capabilities of an Android operating system but none of its hidden features that send users' private data to Google headquarters," the researcher stressed.

Russia's top officials have been unnerved by the idea that data collected and stored for years in Google databases could slip into the hands of the US government and expose some of their most secret and sensitive communications.

Similar fears have already driven other expensive military projects with rewards for the masses that come primarily as an afterthought.

One such invention is GLONASS—a rival of the Global Position System (GPS) meant to help generals train their missiles on targets without relying on a US system that could be shut down as a precaution at any point.

GLONASS suffered through initial delays and some satellite crashes but was eventually included in the software of Apple's latest iPhone.

But the latest defence project is not entirely an echo of the Cold War.

It is run out of a military research facility but privately funded.

And its developers say that the operating system has been in the works for five whole years for the simple reason that Russians—mostly those who run ministries and firms such as the state energy behemoth Gazprom—have little trust in Google's security.

"They are not afraid of Google or the US government stealing things per se. They are afraid of leaks in general," the operating system's project manager Dmitry Mikhailov told AFP.

"There is nothing like this operating system on the market. It is hack-proof," Mikhailov claimed. "There are people who are clamouring for this."

Analysts question whether Russia has enough super-wealthy clients that treasure their records so much they are willing to pay premium prices for a services that in some cases are available elsewhere for free.

"The devil is in the details. If this is purely a defence ministry project, it is doomed," said Russian parliament member and professional IT specialist Ilya Ponomaryov.

"But if this is a completely new operating system made by and for the market, its prospects are as good as anyone else's," Ponomaryov told AFP.

Dmitry Konovalov of the Institute of Strategic Assessment said simply that he thought the tablet "only makes military sense. It makes no commercial sense at all."

But project manager Mikhailov said his company had plenty of pre-orders ahead of the system's release date that promised profits down the

line.

"It can go on smartphones as well," he added.

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