

# FSB Backs Away From Gmail Ban

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The Federal Security Service called for a ban on Skype, Gmail and Hotmail as a major threat to national security — but quickly backtracked after a squabble erupted between the camps of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Analysts speculated that the FSB was simply looking to access the encryption codes for the three communication services — while a Gmail representative said if officials needed information on suspects, they could just ask.

The incident began when senior FSB official Alexander Andreyechkin voiced distrust Friday of foreign-based services using cryptographic algorithms that Russian security services could not access.

"The uncontrollable use of such services can lead to a major threat to Russia's security," Andreyechkin said at the beginning of a government meeting, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

Andreyechkin explicitly proposed a ban on Skype, Gmail and Hotmail during the second part

of the meeting, which was closed to the media, Deputy Communications and Press Minister Ilya Massukh [told](#) RIA-Novosti.

No official identified the types of wrongdoers targeted by the proposal. Terrorists and ultranationalists are the authorities' usual suspects, but online media have also contributed much to recent popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes in the Arab world.

A stream of conflicting comments by officials and legal bodies followed the leak about the proposed ban, beginning with Massukh's own ministry, which said Andreyechkin had only proposed to draft regulations for the online communication services, not to ban them.

The Kremlin kept official silence on the matter, but an unidentified official in the presidential administration [told](#) RIA-Novosti that Andreyechkin had only voiced his "personal opinion" that "doesn't reflect state policy on Internet development."

Andreyechkin went "beyond his authority" because security services have no right to "define state policy in the sphere of Internet technologies," the official said.

The Kremlin official's comments were soon discredited by Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who said Andreyechkin was voicing the FSB's official position on the matter.

Under the law, the FSB reports to the president, not the prime minister, but Putin, himself a former KGB officer and patron of Medvedev, is believed to still hold much sway over the agency.

In the end, the FSB itself backed down, officially [denying](#) Saturday that it had any plans to control Skype, Gmail or Hotmail. "On the contrary, the development of modern technologies is a natural process that needs to be assisted," not limited, an FSB spokesman told RIA-Novosti.

Still, new legislation to regulate cryptography in public communication networks such as Skype, Gmail and Hotmail will be drafted by October, Massukh said.

Regular users "will probably not be restricted in any technical way," he said, adding that telecom operators would not be invited to help draft the bill.

This is the first time that e-mail services Gmail and Hotmail have faced the threat of a ban in Russia, but the Skype voice call service has come under fire since at least 2009, when the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs proposed outlawing it. The business lobby cited the fact that security services could not access the program's encrypted traffic, but critics said at the time that the move was actually lobbied by cell phone operators losing clients to Skype. Nothing came of the proposal.

A 2000 law authorizes the FSB and other security agencies to monitor the telephone and Internet conversations of suspects without a court ruling. But encrypted traffic remains de-facto out of their reach.

It is not impossible to crack the encryption algorithms of public communication networks, but the procedure may take too long, rendering the obtained information obsolete, Alexander

Nemoshkalov, a manager with the Security Code information security firm, told The Moscow Times.

His stance was echoed by Ilya Ponomaryov, a member of the State Duma's Committee for Information Policy, who said by telephone that the FSB was capable of cracking Skype and other services but that would require "much effort, which they, of course, don't want to expend."

But the authorities also have the option to contact the communication services directly to request access to communication by suspects — although this is apparently a rarely used option.

"Experience shows that when a cipher is sophisticated, the appropriate authorities ask its producers for the key to it," said Andrei Richter, head of the Moscow Media Law and Policy Institute.

Google, which owns Gmail, [said](#) Friday that it was willing to cooperate with Russian law enforcement agencies. But company spokeswoman Alla Zabrovskaya also said the FSB has never filed a request for information about users. By contrast, U.S. security services filed more than 4,200 data requests last year, and 83 percent of them were granted, according to the Google Transparency Report, which the company releases online.

Hotmail owner Microsoft also said it was willing to cooperate with the FSB on security, while Skype did not comment, Gazeta.ru [reported](#).

The FSB may be pressuring Skype, Gmail or Hotmail to disclose source codes of their services, said Andrei Soldatov, a security analyst with the Agentura.ru think tank. Disclosure would allow the FSB to monitor communication over those services without cooperating with their owners.

But the whole story may have been staged to allow the Kremlin to play the "good cop" to the FSB's bad one in the eyes of the global community, Soldatov said.

He said the Kremlin's criticism of the proposal could be seen as an attempt by the Medvedev camp to impress the U.S. government, which is concerned about Internet freedom worldwide. "They were trying to debunk the statements to avoid difficult relations with the United States," he said.

The U.S. State Department on Friday released its annual global report on human rights. The report criticized Russia but also pointed out that the country is not affected by a current trend among governments to crack down on Internet freedoms, present in 40 countries worldwide.

A ban on services like Skype or Gmail "would not lead to anything because as soon as a new means of communication appears, people appear who find a way to protect it," said Ponomaryov of the Duma.

Russia should collaborate with service owners and request encryption keys instead of banning popular means of communication, said Gennady Gudkov, deputy head of the Duma's Security Committee. "If we go down that road, we might as well ban computers" because they are also

foreign make, he said, according to RIA-Novosti.

Richter said encrypted communications function in many countries and few have placed limits on them. If Russia banned them, it would become "the black sheep" of the world, Richter said.

It would still have company, though. Iran banned Gmail amid protests over disputed elections in February 2010, while India has threatened to ban Gmail, Skype and Blackberry devices over national security concerns. U.S. and Australian officials have floated ideas to ban Gmail and Hotmail from government computers in the interest of national security. Security was also cited for temporary bans or threatened bans on Blackberry devices in Algeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in recent years.

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