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Spying on Russians and Selling the Data

By The Moscow Times

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It is becoming increasingly difficult to guarantee that personal information and Internet communications remain secret. The Federal Security Service intends to force Internet providers to install new equipment enabling the agency to conduct comprehensive monitoring of Internet traffic and e-mail correspondences. A joint project by the FSB and Communications and Press Ministry indicates that the Chekists intend to gain remote access to data packets, phone numbers, IP addresses, user account information, e-mail addresses and other personal data of Internet and mobile communications users.

There is nothing new about the state monitoring Russians' communications. According to intelligence experts, the government has been doing so ever since it instituted the SORM program in 2008 that enables the siloviki to monitor Internet activity of their choosing. But the new proposal would greatly expand the FSB's technical ability to control the huge flow of data, which has grown considerably since 2008, enabling the agency to remotely intercept messages and data without informing the communications provider. The FSB intends to monitor e-mail correspondence sent through both domestic and foreign providers, including Gmail and Yahoo.

But intelligence agencies around the world are attempting to gain total control of the e-mail messages and telephone calls of millions of citizens in order to detect and combat crime. Just last week, it was reported that the U.S. National Security Agency had tapped 70 million phone conversations by French citizens.

From the viewpoint of data flow control, Russia is not unique. Russia's great distinction is its level of state corruption.

First, it may very well be that the FSB's plan to force Internet providers to install new surveillance equipment on their servers was devised with one dominant goal in mind: so that the siloviki could profit from bribes and graft when this extremely expensive equipment is ordered and installed.

Second, Russian intelligence agencies have a habit of leaking or selling confidential information for political or financial gain. It would come as no surprise if compact disks containing the private correspondence of prominent individuals were later sold to business rivals or even simply to voyeurs.

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