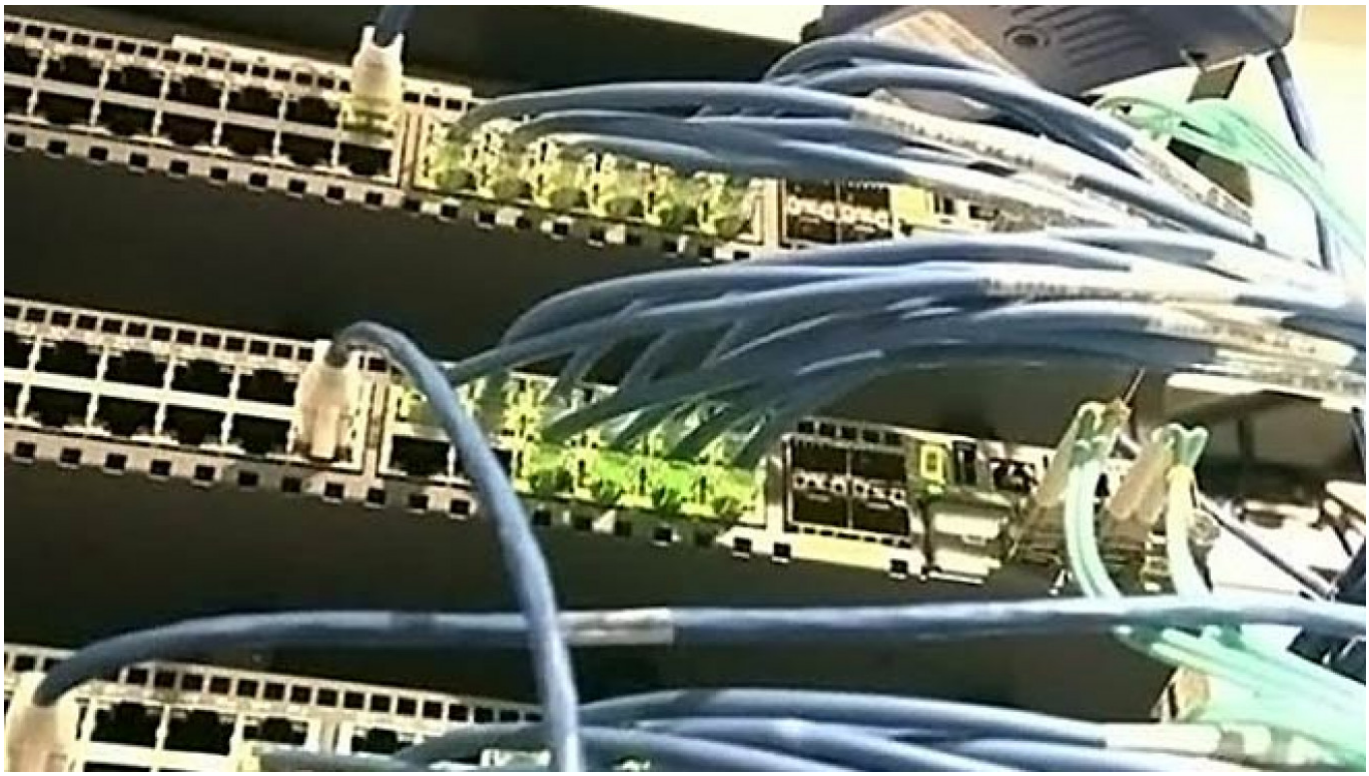
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The Kremlin's Digital Gulag

By Kevin Rothrock

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A Moscow city lawmaker, Alexei Lisovenko, is trying to resuscitate a government push to expand Russia's "digital sovereignty." On April 3, Lisovenko appealed to State Duma Deputy Sergei Zheleznyak, asking him to pass legislation that would require all online social networks to house users' personal data on servers located on Russian soil. Lisovenko, an active member of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, cites former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden's revelations about U.S. spying as a reason for the move. "Snowden has confirmed that the largest intelligence-gathering corporation there is — the National Security Agency — is monitoring our social media accounts," Lisovenko said.

But massive U.S. snooping is relatively old news. Last June, days before Snowden even arrived in Russia, Zheleznyak gave a speech in parliament, advocating exactly what Lisovenko is lobbying for today: relocating servers to Russia.

One thing that distinguishes Lisovenko's request today is that he also proposes Siberia as the ideal location for large data centers. Indeed, the cold weather and abundant energy resources there potentially make it an ideal place to house millions of dollars of burning-hot computer hardware. Just last year, Facebook opened a new data center in Sweden, south of the

Arctic Circle, to exploit precisely these natural advantages.

Lisovenko's proposal is consistent with Moscow's long-term development efforts in Siberia, as well as Russia's growing effort to halt capital flight. While the data on social networks beamed out of the country into the West is not often viewed as a drain on Russia, tying digital sovereignty to economic development could make it politically salient for those who are not fearful of U.S. spying.

Of course, forcing foreign networks to store users' data in Russia would also make the information more accessible to the Russian government, which already operates a PRISM-like spying program called SORM. In November, the online journal Expert.ru quoted an anonymous source within Russia's SORM infrastructure, who said the physical remoteness of Facebook's servers is the only obstacle to mining the website's archives.

According to Expert.ru's SORM insider, the Russian government has played an active role in the evolution of VK, Russia's most popular social network. Not only does the state monitor the website's users, the source claims, but it has also insured VK's popularity over Facebook by obligating Internet providers to dedicate greater bandwidth to VK traffic. The government also tolerates widespread copyright violations on VK — undeniably one of the service's greatest appeals for its users.

Digital sovereignty did not take off last June, but Russian efforts to expand policing of the media both new and old have not slowed. In fact, tensions in Ukraine have made matters worse. Last week, the parliament passed in its first reading a bill to criminalize "Nazi rehabilitation." If signed by President Vladimir Putin, this law will empower the state to ban journalists from the profession or even jail them for up to five years if they "falsely accuse" the Soviet Union of Nazi-like misdeeds during World War II.

Today, it is not necessary to stuff the country's dissidents and other "undesirables" into trains and cart them off to remote gulag prisons. The government can accomplish far more policing virtually, thanks to the Internet. That said, if Lisovenko gets his way, Siberia might still have a part to play.

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