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The Incredible Shrinking RuNet

By Kevin Rothrock

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Over the past two years, the Russian government has armed itself to the teeth with regulatory powers that enable nearly every conceivable form of Internet censorship. In the summer of 2012, the state created a federal registry, where it can blacklist any website or entire web domain for hosting content deemed to be harmful to minors. Earlier this year, the Prosecutor General's Office gained the right to add to the registry extrajudicially any web address guilty of encouraging "extremism."

Since February, the Prosecutor General's Office has added more than 100 websites to the federal blacklist, including the well-known independent news portals Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru and Ej.ru. Additionally, prosecutors have banned several websites belonging to Russia's most prominent political blogger, Alexei Navalny, who is also under house arrest.

The Russian establishment certainly has not shied from stirring up trouble on the Internet, where Kremlin-friendly oligarchs have interfered with media outlets like Gazeta.ru, Lenta.ru, and Dozhd television, and forced Pavel Durov, the founder and CEO of the country's largest social network, Vkontakte, to emigrate. These intrusions on Internet freedom, however, have come in the familiar form of backroom machinations, where meddling shareholders, layoffs

and private phone calls intervene against independent-minded troublemakers.

Yet, despite the apparent reliability of micromanaging the Russian media with traditional pressures, lawmakers are signaling their interest in yet another wave of Internet regulations. The new proposals, still in the early development stage, would grant the government powers that are drastic, even in comparison to the recent "anti-terrorism" package.

The first suggestion belongs to Maxim Kavdzharadze, a senator in the Federation Council, who is calling on Russia to institute its own Internet separate from the U.S. and Europe. Citing security concerns about Western surveillance, Kavdzharadze warns that "everyone has joined social networks, where they tell where they've been and where they're going."

While the public laughed about Kavdzharadze's dreams of Internet autarky, Kommersant published an article on April 29 about another, seemingly far more serious government initiative. According to Kommersant's anonymous sources, a Kremlin working group is drafting new regulations that would grant the state, what reporters describe as, "total control" over the Internet.

The plan would force Internet providers to use DNS servers located in Russia, allowing the government to manage the way URL addresses match IP addresses, making it possible to disrupt the way Internet users access websites. Officials would also institute a tiered system for all online data transfers, barring "local" and "regional" networks from interacting with networks located abroad. At all levels of the Internet, the government intends to "filter content." Finally, the working group proposes transferring the duties of the Coordination Center for the .ru and .рф domains to an agency inside the Kremlin, laying the foundation for greater state control over what could become privileged domains inside Russia.

The government's accumulation of online censorship tools resembles an arms race. So far, the Kremlin has refrained from unloading its full arsenal on the country's 65 million Internet users. Yes, there have been isolated attacks on information freedom, as the Attorney General's persecution of Navalny and several news portals attests, but the RuNet's general independence survives, for the most part, albeit unsteadily. If this is indeed an arms race, however, the Kremlin might one day soon decide that it's well enough equipped to snuff out the political threat inherent in a free RuNet.

Should that moment arrive, Russia would become a very different place.

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