

Duma Isolates Russians With Online Iron Curtain

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On the eve of its summer recess, the State Duma approved a bill that might go down in history as one of the most ignorant and stupid laws this convocation of the Duma has ever passed.

If signed by President Vladimir Putin, the law will require all websites that process user information to store that data on servers located in Russia. The law is scheduled to come into full force on Sept. 1, 2016, the deadline for transferring information processing to Russia. If companies fail to comply, they will be banned from operating in Russia.

The bill aims in part to protect Russians from foreign spy agencies like the NSA. Ever since former NSA leaker Edward Snowden fled from U.S. authorities, certain members of Russia's ruling class have become obsessed with battling foreign surveillance.

The new law will also make it easier for the state to control social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Officials fear these sites for their ability to stoke mass protest, as they did in the Arab Spring and in Ukraine's Maidan protests.

However, no matter the law's intent, its effect will be to cut Russia off from the outside world. Russia's share in the world economy is not so large as to make everyone strive to comply with the fantasies of Russia's lawmakers.

For instance, according to the Russian Association of Electronic Communications, the world's hotels and airlines are in no rush to move their servers to this country. If they are then banned under the new law, Russians will no longer be able to book hotels and flights with foreign companies. Those who drafted the law either do not understand how the modern Internet works or are intentionally striving to completely isolate Russia.

But the problem is not just with hotels. According to the new law, Russians would not be able to receive foreign visas because their personal data is processed abroad. The U.S. already requires European airlines to provide personal data for all passengers flying to the U.S. That means Russia would prohibit flights to the U.S. as the first order of business.

Money transfers abroad are also out of the question because the transactions require the names of the sender and recipient. In fact, the new law would make all financial transactions with foreign countries illegal, as well as online purchases and the use of GPS devices because they transfer personal data abroad. The law makes it impossible to use any software product produced abroad, including the Windows operating system. The reason: the license is personalized and automatic updates of the software transfer the user's personal data to that terrible outside world.

The law effectively makes all computing innovations such as "cloud" technology illegal, along with every iPhone and iPad — devices based on personal subscriptions to every possible service, many of which are based outside Russia. According to Russia's officials, the only solution is to ban it all. Even Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev will have to stop snapping pictures on his iPhone and posting messages on Twitter.

The law, in its most literal information, would also cut Russia off from scientific, technical and other information available abroad because most such periodicals are now published and subscribed to online.

Russian doctors — and, in fact, all professionals in any field — would find that they cannot subscribe to foreign medical journals to stay current with the latest developments in their fields.

Paradoxically, this law would even make it impossible for an official Russian delegation headed by the president to visit another country because, even if the group flew on its own airplane, his aides would have to stay in a hotel somewhere, and they would have to submit personal data online in order to book it.

It had seemed that Russian legislators had learned their lesson as recently as this spring when they passed a law requiring Visa and MasterCard to relocate the data processing of payments made by Russians onto Russian territory. If they refused, the law stipulated, they would have to pay a huge "security deposit" to do business here.

But Visa calculated that it made more sense to leave the Russian market, which accounts for only 2 percent of its global business, than to stay and pay the fee. After that, Russian

officials agreed to soften their demands. This new Internet bill has yet to be signed by Putin, and Visa's example shows that the law could be amended to make life more bearable for foreign companies.

But it is the logic behind the new law that makes it so objectionable. The new law is based on the idea that the personal data of Russian citizens does not belong to them. According to the already existing law on personal data, individuals must give written consent to authorize the notorious "processing" of their personal data, which de facto suggests that such data belongs to them.

However, in the Duma's new reading of the law, a person's name, patronymic, surname and all other personal data belong not to the individual, but to the state — like serfs who belonged to their masters. And Russia's leaders have decided that they need to hold today's serfs behind very high walls.

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