The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Bans Anonymous Public Wi-Fi

By Alexey Eremenko

August 10, 2014



Muscovites may not be able to enjoy the pleasure of convenient Wi-Fi Internet access in city parks much longer.

Users of public Wi-Fi spots in Russia will soon be required to disclose their identities, a top official said in the latest of many attempts to explain a cryptic new batch of regulations.

A variety of different sources can be used to identify would-be web surfers, from their bank card details to login information from the federal government's service portal, to codes texted to users' mobile phones, Mass Media and Communications Minister Nikolai Nikiforov said Friday.

"User identification ... is a worldwide practice," Nikiforov said on his Twitter feed.

Russian netizens have about a month of Wi-Fi anonymity left: ID procedures will be set up by early September, Federal Mass Media Inspection Service deputy head Maxim Ksenzov said Saturday.

The governmental decree on the matter, meanwhile, will enter into effect next Tuesday.

Passport or No Passport?

The vaguely worded document was initially understood by media and experts to require a passport to access Wi-Fi in a cafe or shopping mall.

But Nikiforov's ministry said Friday that passports will only be necessary at state-funded access points, mostly found at post offices in small towns nationwide. Still, some form of identification will be mandatory for public Wi-Fi elsewhere, the ministry said in a statement.

But apparently to the contrary, Ksenzov told ITAR-Tass on Friday that identification will only be required at post offices and Internet cafes, but not restaurants, shopping malls, airports and other public places.

The discrepancy could not immediately be reconciled.

Storing Personal Data

Providers of public Wi-Fi will also be required to store massive amounts of personal user data for six months at a time, Ksenzov said.

Wi-Fi providers, according to the decree, will have to hand over the stored used data to security services on request, which may be the real point of the law, said Artyom Kozlyuk of independent Internet freedom watchdog Rublacklist.net.

One thing that is clear is that personal Wi-Fi spots will not be affected by the new regulations: Any private individual can provide online access without asking users for a passport.

The new rules are meant to help fight terrorism, officials said.

Breathing Life Into the Blogger Law

Furthermore, the decree gives effect to a law signed in May best known for severely limiting freedoms for bloggers with a daily audience upward of 3,000 readers.

The May law also obliges Internet providers to store massive amounts of personal user data for six months or to provide security services with real-time access to such data.

Storing user data is expensive, and providers are reluctant to do it, Kozlyuk said.

'Chinese Template'

The new law seems to be an attempt to dump the responsibility for storing data onto Wi-Fi providers instead of Internet service providers, he said.

"But either they'll weasel out of it, or we'll see mass Wi-Fi closures," Kozlyuk said.

The Kremlin launched binge regulations targeting the Internet after the mass opposition protests of 2011-12, which were largely coordinated online.

In addition to making user data available for security services, Russia has set up an extrajudicial online blacklist that increasingly targets opposition blogs and media.

"All recent [Russian] Internet regulations are a clumsy copy of Kazakhstan, Belarussian and Chinese templates," Internet expert Anton Nossik said on Slon.ru on Friday.

See also:

No Passports Required to Use Public Wi-Fi, Moscow City Hall Says

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/10/russia-bans-anonymous-public-wi-fi-a38176