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Russians' Internet Increasingly Subject to Control

By Matthew Bodner

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Russia is upping regulation of the Internet, which it sees as a Western-controlled security threat

Russia's Security Council will convene on Monday to discuss the government's ability to isolate the Russian segment of the internet from the global network during times of crisis, such as military action or foreign-sponsored protests, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday, confirming earlier speculation in Russian media.

In comments carried by Interfax, Peskov denied that Russia was planning to entirely cut off the Russian Internet — known as RuNet — but said due to the "unpredictable behavior" of the U.S. and EU, "we have to think about how to ensure our national security."

Creeping Regulation

The Russian government has been gradually encroaching on Internet freedoms in recent years, with initiatives ranging from mandatory registration to access public wi-fi

to expanding limitations from the country prohibitive media law to individual internet blogs.

This year has seen the introduction of laws that allow authorities to issue arrest warrants for publishing "extremist material" online, and another forcing foreign internet companies to store Russian data on Russian soil, enabling Russian security services to access the servers at will.

On Friday, Russian lawmakers voted to move the deadline for storing data in Russia forward to January next year from September 2016.

Now, the government is looking to reorganize the Russian internet so authorities can isolate it from the world wide web in times of war and civil protest, as well as position itself as the ultimate authority on distributing IP-addresses and domain names, according to unidentified sources from Russian telecommunications companies, IT companies and NGOs quoted by the Vedomosti business daily on Friday.

Russian officials appear to be positioning themselves to take full control of the flow of information in and out of Russia via the internet, according to prominent Russian technology blogger Anton Nossik.

"There comes a moment to discuss the complete unplugging of Russia from the global Internet, so that no bytes would come here from abroad. This is the issue that has been raised and is being discussed," Nossik wrote on Facebook.

According to Vedomosti, Russia's national security council will meet with President Vladimir Putin on Monday to review a series of tests conducted by the Communications and Press Ministry in July aimed at evaluating the RuNet's stability and overall security.

The ministry found that the RuNet is vulnerable to foreign attack and influence, and several proposed measures to improve its security will be discussed, Vedomosti reported, citing unidentified sources in the Russian IT industry and various non-profit organizations involved in the RuNet's operation.

The most shocking proposal allegedly on the table is the development of a kill-switch that would allow the government to sever the RuNet from the global internet during times of war or large-scale civil protests. Telecoms industry sources told Vedomosti that they would require special equipment to isolate the RuNet, but that the government has asked that this be done by early 2015.

Under President Putin, authorities have kept a tight lid on protest in Russia. After widespread rigging was reported in parliamentary elections in 2011, a street protest movement briefly emerged, but targeted arrests and tougher legislation quickly snuffed out the movement's energy.

But although Putin remains hugely popular, Russia now faces a long period of economic hardship, as Western sanctions over Ukraine, a lack of structural economic reform and flat-or-falling oil prices negate the sources of possible economic growth. Harder economic times could feed through to popular discontent.

Kill-Switch Active

Andrei Soldatov, a security analyst, said the structure of the RuNet makes it possible to cut it off from the global network.

"We have very few Internet exchange points in the country and all are manned by national long-distance operators like [state-owned] Rostelecom, which is very close to the government," he told The Moscow Times Friday.

Previously, Russia's attempts at internet control were limited to securing government communications from foreign control, but now that aspiration has apparently expanded to include the entire national internet, Soldatov said

This is illustrated by another proposal that according to Vedomosti will be discussed at Monday's Security Council meeting — the transfer of control over the RU and .РФ domains away from the Coordination Center of Top Level RU Domains, an NGO that manages IP-address assignment on the RuNet.

"The talk about unplugging the internet is also about how to hand over control of the .Ru zone from the Coordination Center to the government," Soldatov said.

This would effectively give the government control over which servers are included on the RuNet.

Deputy Communications and Press Minister Alexei Volin said Friday he knows nothing of these plans, Novaya Gazeta reported.

Down With the Internet

Alarm over censorship of the Internet has been growing recently. The Russian government is notoriously suspicious of the internet — in particular, social media — believing it to be a tool for mobilizing society against the status-quo.

In April, Putin characterized the Internet as "a special project of the CIA," reflecting his long held suspicion of the Internet and unfamiliarity with it. Putin reportedly does not use the internet, in contrast to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, a well known technology enthusiast whose political clout has waned since he left the presidency in 2012.

In the wake of the Edward Snowden revelations about the extent of surveillance by the U.S. National Security Agency, or NSA, last year, Russian officials and lawmakers began talking about the need to establish "digital sovereignty."

One move that appeared to reflect these attitude was the law requiring foreign internet companies to store Russian data in servers on Russian territory. This would ostensibly keep foreign agencies like the NSA from easily accessing the data, while giving domestic intelligence agencies like the FSB the ability to install backdoors and keep tabs on their citizen's internet activity.

The FSB — the successor agency to the Soviet KGB — has been trying to develop a system analogous to the NSA's PRISM system, called SORM. The system, currently it its third

iteration, has been in development since 2009. SORM-3 allows for Russia's security services to monitor and analyze a wide range of personal data, such as the movements of cellphone users and their contacts, as well as bank transactions and household water consumptions. The program is not subject to any public oversight.

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