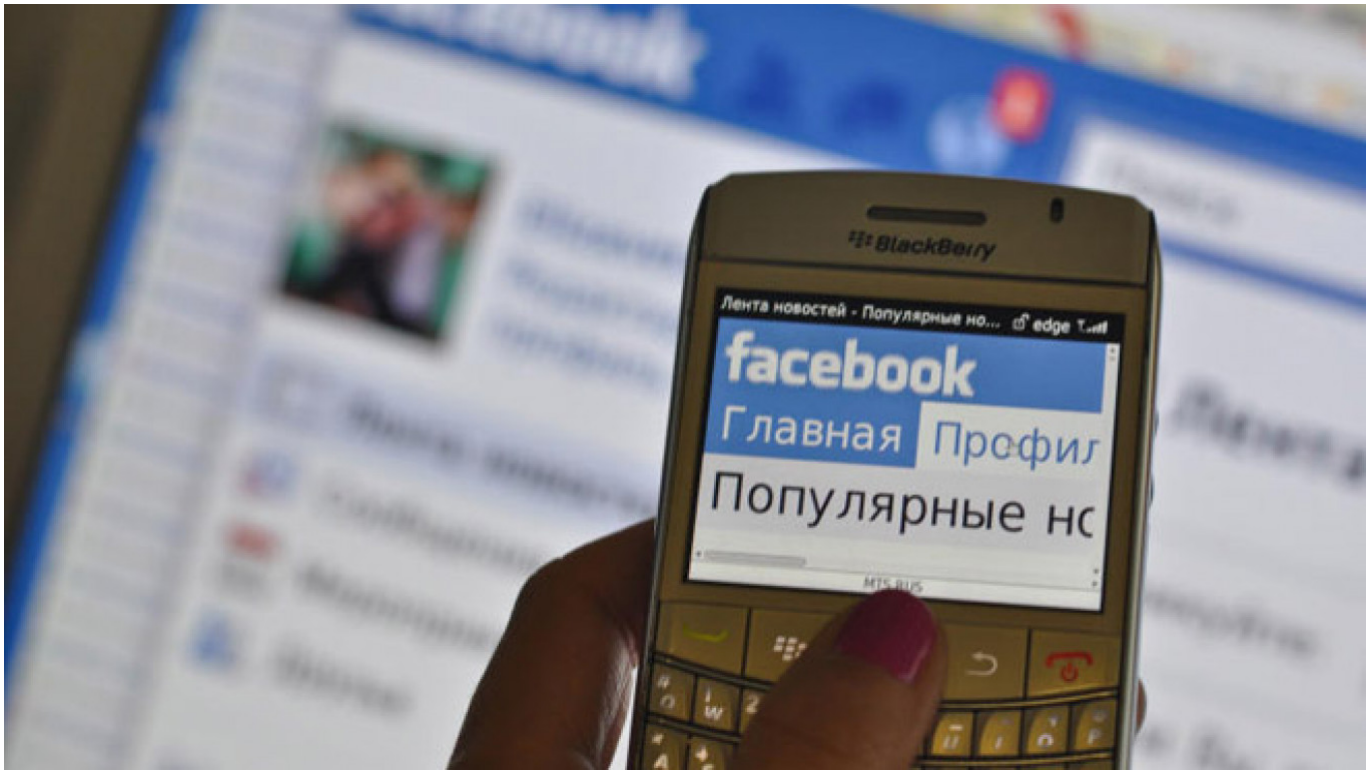
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Speeds Up Law to Ban Most Foreign Web Services

By Alexey Eremenko

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The State Duma approved a bill to expedite a new set of Internet regulations that, experts say, would provide for the banning of such web services as Facebook, Booking.com and Amazon.

A law requiring all online companies to store users' personal data on Russian territory was passed last July and was set to enter into effect in September 2016.

Concerned about the need to "ensure faster and more effective protection of Russian citizens' rights to telecommunication privacy and personal data safety," lawmakers submitted a bill to slide the deadline forward by more than a year, according to the Duma's website.

The bill to set the deadline to Jan. 1, 2015, passed in the crucial second reading on Wednesday.

Lobbying group the Information & Computer Technologies Industry Association said in an

open letter on Monday that the rule would cripple Russia's IT industry.

Russia simply lacks the technical facilities to host databases with users' personal data, and setting up the infrastructure within the remaining three months is impossible, the letter said.

"Most companies will be forced to put their operations on hold, inflicting untold damage on the Russian economy," the group said on its website.

But their appeal failed to sway lawmakers, who fast-tracked the bill — a procedure that, most political pundits say, implies endorsement from the Kremlin, which has not commented on the initiative.

The government intends to set up a roster of companies found to have violated the new law, a Duma representative was cited by Kommersant daily on Thursday as saying. He did not elaborate on penalties for lawbreakers, but Russia has been actively blacklisting websites since 2011.

The bill was understood by most IT experts to apply to a wide range of web services, including social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, reservation services such as Booking.com or Skyskanner and online retailers like Amazon.

It would make it easier for authorities to pressure web services by cracking down on their servers in Russia, said Artyom Kozlyuk of independent Internet freedom watchdog RuBlacklist.net.

"The bill follows the general trend toward strict state regulation of the Internet in Russia," Kozlyuk told The Moscow Times in e-mailed comments.

The fast-tracking was likely lawmakers gunning to impress the Kremlin without considering an impact on the industry, Kozlyuk said.

The authorities under Vladimir Putin largely ignored the Internet through the 2000s, fostering the spawning of a vibrant and fast-growing industry.

But the government has gone on a regulatory binge since late 2011, when Moscow was hit by large anti-Putin protests largely coordinated online.

Several extrajudicial Internet blacklists have been introduced, giving rise to concern of heightened political censorship. Among other things, popular "political" bloggers are now required to register with the government. Meanwhile, Skype, Twitter and Facebook have all been threatened.

"It's obvious that the government wants to monitor all private communications of its citizens around the clock," another RuBlacklist member, Sarkis Darbinyan, said on the group's site earlier this week.

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