The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

FSB Wiretaps Could Enforce Russia's New Anti-Terror Laws

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August 10, 2016



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Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) has offered phone companies the use of its own wiretap systems to enforce the country's new anti-terrorism legislation.

The equipment, which is already installed with telecom operators throughout Russia, is better known by its Russian acronym SORM (Operative-Search Activities System).

Russian officials have been tasked to report on the country's technological capability to enforce the new laws, which were signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin last month.

The legislation stipulates that Russian telecom operators and Internet providers must store all of their customers' traffic, including calls, letters, files, and conversations, for approximately six months as of July 1, 2018. Data relating to the time and date of the transmissions must be kept of on record for three years.

Officials were asked to inform President Vladimir Putin whether Russian manufacturers would be able to produce equipment needed to comply with a new law by Sept. 1.

The FSB currently uses SORM to continuously record the traffic of specific users and save it for up to 12 hours, one source explained. The FSB is currently proposing to expand the system, allowing it to record the traffic of all users and store it for months at a time.

Further changes would also be required. As the system currently only stores only data traffic, additional upgrades would be needed to record conversations.

Data retrieval also poses problems. SORM software is currently designed in a way which requires a user to scroll through all previous data in order to access a particular record. The new law requires so much information to be stored that this system would be completely impractical. A costly search and indexing system, developed from scratch, would also need to be incorporated into the equipment, another source said.

The cost of making these changes are likely to be passed straight to operators.

While the source declined to estimate the cost of the changes, the directors of Russia's four major communications companies — MTS, Megafon, Vympelcom, and Tele 2 — have already calculated that Russian operators would have to pay 2.2 trillion rubles to install and maintain traffic storage equipment.

SORM is a distributive system,
said Andrei Soldatov, the founder of the security service
information website
Agentura.ru website.
SORM'S hardware and software is located with
operators – who bear all expense
s – while intelligence agencies merely operate a control
unit remotely.
Soldatov is certain that SORM is already recording the full array of users' data, including voice conversations and Internet traffic.

Officials have already discussed the possibility of using the existing SORM system for implementing the new anti-terror laws, said Senator Lyudmila Bokova. The existing system is not designed for recording and storing voice communications, and its capabilities must be expanded to record, identify, and group that information.

New technology is required, and the authorities would prefer it be Russian-made, she said.

The FSB has already licensed several firms to develop wiretapping technologies, including MFI Soft, TekhArgos, and Norsi-Trans. An MFI Soft representative declined to comment, while other firms could not be reached for comment.

Representatives of MTS, Vympelcom, and Megafon also declined to comment. A Rostelecom representative said only that the company was awaiting the announcement of government rules, regulations, and procedures for implementing the law.

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