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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

6 Signs There's No Such Thing as Internet Freedom in Russia

The international human rights group Agora says Russian authorities have declared war on the Internet

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Writing about Crimea, Ukraine, Syria or religion on social media in Russia has become a dangerous business. Saying — or typing — the wrong thing on the internet could now land you a harsher sentence than if you beat your wife.

The most recent report on Internet and media freedom in Russia released by the Agora international human rights group paints a bleak picture. Since the beginning of 2015, at least 47 people have been imprisoned for their statements online.

Many more saw their websites and blogs classified as extremist or blocked by the government.

Others received threats or were subjected to physical violence after expressing their views online.

The state's attitude toward the internet has become increasingly hostile, says Agora's most recent report. "The Internet is perceived by Russian authorities as a battleground."

To put it simpler, Internet freedom in Russia is in deep trouble. The Moscow Times reviews the most alarming signs of this worrying trend.

1. Rock Bottom In Global Ratings

Russia's Internet audience is growing. According to the Public Opinion Foundation, 66 million Russians were active online as of August 2016. That figure grew by four million compared to 2015. But other estimates suggest the number may be as many as 84 million.

The Russian Internet is thriving, too. In 2016, it grew by some 400,000 domain names, reaching 5.4 million in total.

Despite the growth, Russia's international freedom ratings plummeted. Last year Freedom House ranked Russia 52 out of 65 countries on their internet freedom table, trailing behind Belarus, Libya and Sudan.

In the 2016 Press Freedom Index, released by Reporters Without Borders, Russia's ranking improved by 4 points from 152 to 148. But RWB attributed the shift not to any improvements in Russia, but to deteriorating freedoms in other countries.

Russia lacks freedom of expression on a scale not seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union, RWB said.

2. Persecuted for Speaking Online

In 2016, Russian law enforcement opened 298 criminal cases against people over their online statements. Of those, 29 were convicted and given prison sentences. Three were mandatorily sent to psychiatric hospitals. The average prison term in 2016 for online offences was two years. Combined, the 29 convicted Internet users were given 59 years behind bars.

Related article: Like, Share, Convict: Russian Authorities Target Social Media Users

The overall number is higher than in 2015, when just 202 cases were launched and 18 users sent to prison.

The likelihood of prosecution was higher for internet users who wrote▣ about Russia's military conflicts abroad. The success of military ▣campaigns in Syria and Ukraine depends on a strictly-policed state ▣narrative. Some of the most high-profile criminal cases involved online ▣statements related to these campaigns, according to Agora.

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In addition to legal prosecution, Russian bloggers and journalists received threats and were subjected to physical assaults. In 2015, Agora registered 28 cases of violence and physical threats against bloggers and reporters from online outlets. In 2016, the figure had doubled to nearly 50 cases.

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3. Blocking Websites and Regulating Internet

In 2016, Agora registered 24,000 cases in which some form of online content was banned. This figure was almost three times greater than 2015, when there were only 7,300 of these rulings. These statistics are all the more notable considering there were only 830 similar cases between 2011 and 2014.

Related article: Pornhub Hubbub: Russia Attempts to Police Sexuality Online

The number of regulatory initiatives on online information doubled between 2015 and 2016. Of 97 regulations put in place, the majority increased the liability of users and increased government surveillance.

4. Hacking the Opposition

Putting pressure on activists online is just another tool authorities use to tighten control over the Internet, Agora says. In April, several opposition figures reported attempts by intelligence services to access their accounts or intercept text messages.

Dozens of human rights activists and journalists were warned by Google that state-backed hackers were attempting to access their accounts. Analysts fingered the Fancy Bears hacker group suspected of harboring ties to the Kremlin. It's the same outfit accused of hacking U.S. politicians and the World Anti-Doping Agency.

Related article: WADA Hack: Is Russia Behind the Fancy Bears Hackers Group?

5. The Great (Fire) Wall of Russia

A total of 821 media outlets had to separate from their foreign owners in 2016, under legislation curbing international ownership of state media.

Related article: Foreign Publishers Quit Russia Over Media Ownership Law

In addition, Russian authorities are considering creating an alternative segment of the Internet that would be completely isolated from the global network, the report says. According to the state program "Information-Oriented Society," 99 percent of the Internet traffic would go through Russian networks by 2020.

In addition, Russian news reports occasionally surface about regional officials not being

allowed to use foreign and international internet services, Agora writes.

6. Keeping Tabs

Russia's parliament passed controversial anti-terror legislation known as the "Yarovaya Laws" in July 2016. One of the most contested aspects of the law enhances state surveillance of internet correspondence.

The new law, which go into effect July 1, 2018, requires all Russian telecom operators and Internet service providers to store records of their users' calls, messages, and files for six months. Providers must store information detailing the existence of the communications for three years.

Internet providers will be required to hand over to law enforcement agencies the keys to decrypt all such traffic. Agora says that an implementation of the law will seriously affect Russia's civil society and give law enforcement more scope for silencing political activists.

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