

Slower Internet for Google

The Kremlin may punish foreign Internet giants, but Russian users will foot the bill

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The Kremlin and State Duma, in their typical legislative fashion, are considering an initiative that would slow Internet connections. Not only would the initiative be difficult to implement, it would be expensive and ultimately ineffective.

The political and repressive motives behind it outweigh economic considerations and it would most adversely affect end users.

On the table is a proposal to force foreign companies to carry out decisions made by Russian courts and state institutions by punishing non-compliance with slower Internet access to their sites — in the same way that some mobile phone plans slow Internet access after users

exceed a predetermined limit.

But whereas mobile operators already have the equipment in place to slow Internet speeds, other companies do not: (It would cost Rostelecom, Russia's state-controlled telecom giant, hundreds of millions of dollars to install, for example.)

What's more, these complex and costly efforts would go to waste because users can make use of increasingly popular tools for circumventing such restrictions.

The political and repressive logic behind the initiative is obvious, unlike the economic or corporate rationale. During this pre-election period, the authorities want to impede access to politically undesirable online resources (the investigative film on Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev produced by opposition leader Alexei Navalny and posted on YouTube has garnered 8.7 million views in less than two weeks). At the same time, officials want to come across as civilized regulators.

The law would complicate life for operators and Russian IT developers while also compromising the neutrality of the Internet.

Transnational companies do indeed regularly ignore decisions made by the authorities in specific countries, and that is a problem. The European Commission, for example, has some issues with Google and Microsoft.

In addition to Google's refusal to comply with Russia's Federal Anti-Monopoly Service, Facebook and Twitter have ignored rulings by Russian courts. Until now, the only coercive tools the authorities had at their disposal were fines and the threat of blocking the sites completely – as they did to LinkedIn.

In principle, there are civilized ways to oblige foreign companies to cooperate with the authorities and to comply with the law and demands made by Russian courts.

An example is the so-called "tax on Google" law in force since the start of this year that applies VAT to the sale of electronic services by foreign companies. Of course, Russian users ending up footing the bill: prices for the use of a number of Google services rose in January, Russian eBay users began paying VAT in February, and Apple is promising to raise prices on some of its services.

Misunderstandings are generally resolved in an atmosphere of trust and with clear rules of the game. But foreign companies have lost confidence in the Russian authorities, seeing in their actions not concern for Russian users, but a desire for total control, or an effort to protect the interests of specific Russian companies.

For their part, IT developers the world over have traditionally looked for ways to speed up their Internet resources or apps. The initiative now under discussion in Russia would present them with a diametrically opposed task. Achieving it will not be easy, but as the authorities like to remind us,

Russians are unaccustomed to retreating.

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