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# Russia's Big Brother Is Trying To Watch You (But Is Annoyed You Won't Let Him.)

## Russian authorities want to wipe anonymity out of the Internet. But is it possible?

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The internet has long been a wild horse the Kremlin struggled to tame. Authorities first understood the scale of the problem during the 2011-12 Bolotnaya protests, which were organized and coordinated online.

A crackdown of sorts ensued as the authorities attempted to wrest back control. In short succession, they introduced new injunctions, restrictions, and new draconian legislation.

But the actions made little difference because Russian internet users learned to adapt. They learned to navigate online obstacles imposed by the government by using secure virtual

private networks (VPNs) and other anonymizing software. They moved their correspondence to encrypted messengers that can't be easily monitored. They used social networking sites that refused to store users' personal data on Russian servers. Protesters still coordinate demonstrations through social media and online messenger apps.

The authorities, however, are determined to catch up. This month, Russia's lower chamber of parliament is considering two bills that would restrict the internet even further.

One would heavily restrict the use of VPN services and anonymizing software. The other aims to wipe out anonymity in messengers by forcing them to tie user accounts with cell phone numbers and people's identities.

But even if introduced, there is no guarantee the new laws will work.

"[Authorities] don't have the means to control the internet," Anton Merkurov, an independent IT analyst, told The Moscow Times. "Hence the incompetent, unimplementable laws."

### U-turn on VPNs

The first of the new bills made headlines as a bill "banning VPN" services. That description is not entirely accurate.

Instead, the legislation would allow Roskomnadzor, Russia's infamous media and internet watchdog, to ban VPN services and anonymizing programs if they refuse to block access to websites already banned by Roskomnadzor.

According to Roskomsvoboda, an internet rights group, there are 6 million banned sites already. Far from all feature illicit content. Artyom Kozlyuk, head of the group, told The Moscow Times that when authorities want to block one website, they shut off an IP address, even though other sites use the same address.

"Thousands of websites end up being blocked, even though they don't violate any Russian laws," he said.

The head of Roskomnadzor, Alexander Zharov, told reporters one year ago that he doesn't see any point in fighting VPNs or online anonymizers.

"It is technically possible to start blocking anonymizers," Zharov said in an interview in February 2016. "But I consider it absolutely pointless... New ones will pop up to replace the ones we block."

The bill currently sitting in the parliament, however, was masterminded by Roskomnadzor, the Vedomosti newspaper reported, citing unidentified government sources.

The Moscow Times failed to reach either Zharov or his spokesman Vadim Ampelonsky for comment.

## Networks to benefit

The second bill, which focuses on the use of anonymous messengers, passed its first reading last week. If adopted, it would force online messengers to link user accounts with their phone numbers. It would also make users' personal data available to law enforcement agencies.

Another consequence of the bill is that it would require messenger companies to have contracts with cellular networks. Access to messengers that refused to comply with the legislation would be blocked.

Before March 2017, only Russian messaging services like Vkontakte or Odnoklassniki were required to register with authorities, says Kozlyuk from Roskomsvoboda. Since March, however, the watchdog has started adding international messengers to the list upon the request of the Federal Security Service.

"So far they've been only adding mid-sized ones," says Kozlyuk. Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp or Telegram have not made the list yet.

Kozlyuk believes the legislative initiative was lobbied by cellular networks unhappy with the fact that messengers are bypassing paid-for services.

Anna Lander, spokesperson for the Media and Communications Union — Russia's largest cellular networks Beeline, MTS, and Megafon are members — that helped draft the bill, echoes his sentiment: "Putting the messengers on legal radars ensures there are common competition rules in the field of messaging," she told The Moscow Times.

## Unclear prospects

If history is anything to go by, messaging giants — Facebook, WhatsApp or Telegram — are unlikely to comply with the legislation.

"Remember how authorities passed a law forcing foreign companies to store users' personal data on Russian servers? They just ignored it," says Merkurov.

Blocking any one of these extremely popular programs would require serious political will. It is not clear that such exists, says Kozlyuk: "Roskomnadzor has been dragging out negotiations with companies like Facebook for months. It isn't ready to take political responsibility and damage its own image even further."

Both bills have a long way to go. With lawmakers keen to avoid outrage, they will be cautious in pushing them through, says political scientist Yekaterina Schulmann.

"No one wants to repeat the 'success' of the notorious 'Yarovaya package' [a set of draconian anti-terrorism laws]," she told The Moscow Times. "The politicians use anonymizing software and encrypted messengers themselves. They feel safe with them and wouldn't want to lose this safety."

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