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Putin Signs Law Prohibiting VPNs

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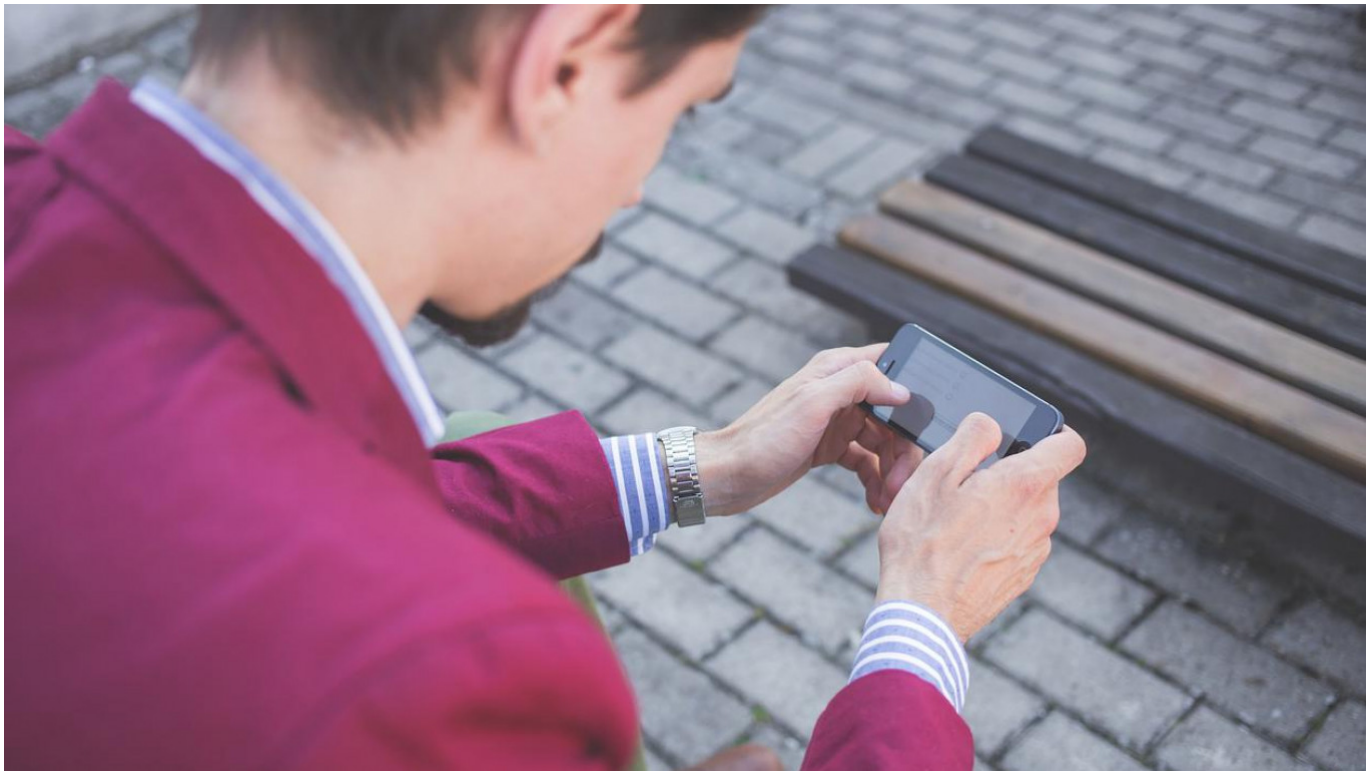

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President Vladimir Putin has signed amendments to an existing law that strengthens state control over the internet in a move the Kremlin claims is necessary to stop the spread of illegal content online.

The amendments, which come into force Nov. 1, forbid internet proxy services (VPNs), which help internet users gain access to websites that have been blocked by the government and surf the web anonymously.

The law will also require online messaging services to link users with their phone numbers and to block users engaged in the dissemination of "illegal information."

On July 20, Leonid Levin, head of the State Duma's committee for information policy, said: "there will be no fines or punishment for users," but that messenger operators would face fines.

Levin said the law set out to block access to "unlawful content," not impose restrictions on law-abiding citizens.

Putin signed the amendments to the law on “Information, Information Technology, and Protection of Information,” which passed the State Duma on July 21 and was approved by the Federation Council on July 25

Putin’s ratification of the amendments comes as no surprise. In May, he issued an executive order creating a government strategy through 2030 that will establish greater government regulation of the internet.

In a report published this month, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said that Russian authorities have clamped down on internet freedoms and introduced “invasive surveillance” online, under the pretext of fighting extremism.

The report criticized Russian authorities for unjustly imprisoning dozens of people based on their activity online and for introducing new laws that “restrict access to information, carry out unchecked surveillance and censor information the government designates as ‘extremist.’”

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