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Are QR Coronavirus Quarantine Passes for Muscovites Workable? Experts Doubt It

By Jan Lindenau

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Moscow city authorities are planning to issue QR passes. **Aleksander Kradnikov / TASS**

What might have sounded like a dystopian scenario at the start of the year could become reality in Moscow very soon. Under a proposed system to fight the spread of the coronavirus, every trip outside — from buying essentials to walking the dog — will have to be approved in advance by the authorities.

Mayor Sergei Sobyanin on Sunday announced a so-called "smart control system" under which Muscovites' home addresses and pictures will be stored in a centralized database that police will have access to. From this cache, city authorities will automatically issue QR passes – special barcodes that can be scanned by devices like smartphones.

So far, details of how the scheme will be implemented and work are sketchy, and the plans

have attracted criticism from technical experts and human rights activists alike.

"In my opinion, it's unreal. It would take months," Dmitry Artimovich, a Russian database expert and inventor of one of the country's first digital payment systems, told The Moscow Times when asked about the likelihood of such a system being up and running fast.

Artimovich believes the plan for QR codes is more of a PR stunt than a realistic proposal, "because people think of them as something new and cool." In addition, not everyone has a smartphone, and according to Sobyanin's plans people without the devices would have to print out a unique QR code for every walk outside.

Related article: Moscow to Enforce Virus Quarantine With QR Codes, Smartphone App

It's also unclear how the personal data of 12 million Muscovites would be secured, who would have access to that database and if it would be used after the coronavirus outbreak has subsided.

"The pandemic will go away, but the system will stay," said Mikhail Klimarev, executive director of the Internet Protection Society, criticizing proposals for telecommunications providers to send user data to the authorities as part of the plan.

"One the one hand you have to fight the pandemic; on the other hand you have to be very conscious about the process of building a system like that," Klimarev said.

Both Klimarev and Artimovich agreed that for a loaded and highly frequented database like this one, the mayor's office would also need tried and tested server hardware. And providing every police officer with the required hardware and software could be an issue, Artimovich added.

Details of the smart control system have been leaked to the Russian media almost every day since Sobyanin announced it.

The Meduza news website first reported on Sunday that QR passes would be part of Moscow's lockdown. On Tuesday, the Kommersant business daily cited a leaked document from the city's administration shared on various Telegram channels saying that from April 4 Muscovites would have to register on the mayor's website before they could request a unique QR code.

The document also said those QR codes would be needed for trips beyond a person's immediate home district, including commutes to work and visits to *dachas*, or country cottages.

Other measures mentioned in the leaked document included police and National Guard patrols, the use of 175,000 surveillance cameras in the city and data provided by banks and telecommunications companies.

Extreme measures

For some, these measures are extreme, even to combat a pandemic that has so far killed more than 47,000 people worldwide.

Human Rights Watch's deputy Europe and Central Asia director Rachel Denber said that governments have rights, if not duties, to impose lockdowns in circumstances such as this global pandemic.

"But lockdowns are not a carte blanche to violate rights, including to privacy," she said. "They need to be necessary, proportionate, and lawful. Judging from what's been leaked about this proposal so far, it goes too far."

Denber added that Moscow's public awareness campaigns about social distancing, hand washing, and other preventative measures have been impressive.

"Authorities should stick with this and not intrusive, unjustified measures like snooping into people's bank records," she said.

Database expert Artimovich pointed out that such a database made up of every Muscovite's personal information would be a target for hackers. "There is the risk that it will get hacked. Even greater risks that unscrupulous officials will start selling this information," he said.

For other experts, including Sarkis Dabrinyan, chief lawyer for privacy NGO Roskomsvoboda, the plans are simply unconstitutional.

"People are not deer! You can't mark them and keep them in a pen no matter how the shepherd wants them," he said in a Facebook post.

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