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Russia's New Conscription Law Brings the Digital Gulag Much, Much Closer

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Mobilized men at a military commissariat of the Leninsky and Sverdlovsky Districts of Irkutsk. **Alexei Kushnirenko / TASS**

New legislation on drafting Russian nationals into military service rushed through the Russian parliament last week dramatically changes the relationship between the state and the people. With nothing to stop this approach from being expanded to other spheres to establish a state system of complete digital surveillance, coercion, and punishment, the Digital Gulag that has been widely discussed ever since the COVID-19 pandemic is now taking shape.

Under the new law passed at breakneck speed by both chambers of parliament, the authorities can issue call-up papers online and will set up a digital database of all Russians eligible for military service (most Russian men aged eighteen to thirty are expected to perform obligatory national service). Previously, people had to be served their draft papers in person, making it relatively easy to dodge the draft. Now draft notices can also be issued via the state services website Gosuslugi, used by millions of Russians for a plethora of day-to-day administrative

tasks such as paying fines and applying for passports.

Regardless of whether a person has a Gosuslugi account, or even uses the internet, they will still be penalized for failing to report to the recruitment office once a digital draft notice is issued. Those penalties include a ban on leaving the country, as well as on driving, buying and selling real estate, taking out loans, and registering a small business. Regional governments will also now be able to add other restrictions to the list, such as suspending social benefits.

The planned digital registry will gather information about potential draftees from every possible source, from medical and electoral records to courts and tax returns. Gosuslugi will merely serve as an interactive interface for this new digital reality. People can still appeal to be exempted from military service to the draft board or the courts, but by that time they are likely to have become subject to all of the above restrictions.

The Russian authorities came up with the idea of a digital mechanism for instant mobilization soon after their invasion of Ukraine, since the shortcomings of the existing draft system were already obvious, but the change proved hard to implement. Last November, following the partial mobilization carried out earlier in the fall, Russian President Vladimir Putin tasked several government agencies with creating a digital draft registry. Although military recruitment offices managed to digitize a significant part of their data, no unified database was created. The Defense Ministry was unwilling to provide civilian officials with access to their databases, nor was there any law obliging other government agencies to transfer information to it.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian counteroffensive expected any day now may require Russia to commit more troops to the front line. Accordingly, following a series of discussions and Putin's personal involvement, the Kremlin decided to drastically accelerate the process and pass corresponding legislation with very little regard for either public discussion or preparing Russian society for the changes.

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The passed amendments don't just accelerate the creation of a digital draft registry. They also facilitate the emergence of an entirely new system of controlling civic behavior in Russia. The authorities first conceived of such a system back in 2019, long before the war. Back then, they started discussing a new political order paradigm that would link people's comfort and well-being to their political loyalty by rewarding pro-government behavior and punishing dissent. Special administrative centers were set up in Russia's regions whose official job was to handle complaints from members of the public. In reality, they were tasked with scrutinizing any kind of public activity for political risks.

People labeled unreliable—for putting "likes" on social media posts by opposition leader Alexei Navalny, for example—could later face problems in school or at work, and might even be branded "foreign agents," an official label that carries a wide range of onerous restrictions. This approach affords the state far more flexibility in punishing dissenters than traditional courts.

The idea is to collect digital information on every individual so that the state can exercise control over them. This has been happening for several years now on a fairly large scale. So far, the system is disorganized, but the state apparatus is gradually learning.

In this respect, the pandemic came in especially helpful. During that time, the regions acquired face recognition systems, and public officials learned to work with various digital tools like QR codes, online vaccination registration (via Gosuslugi), and quarantine violation monitoring via cameras and phone apps.

That was essentially the first attempt to create a digital control system, in which conforming to certain requirements, like getting vaccinated, would give people full access to certain rights, while disobedience would bar them from some public services like transportation. Ultimately, however, the authorities failed to implement these innovations or enshrine them into law, fearing public discontent.

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Now the conditions are different: the public is unlikely to resist, and the negative consequences won't be felt immediately (it's no coincidence that the authorities keep repeating that there will be no second wave of mobilization).

The war has taken the state's need for digital control to a whole new level, but it's no longer just about regulating the draft or further mobilization. The state is seeking to overhaul the traditional system of government coercion, to automate control of individual behavior without involving those individuals, their lawyers, or the courts. Constitutional rights are becoming conditional upon a person's status within the state system of digital control.

Registers of different categories of "foreign agents" already exist, and another of individuals "associated with foreign agents" is currently in the pipeline. This process of digitizing repression has one goal: forging a loyal digital majority. Presidential administration officials say off the record that the new reality effectively negates the idea of voters. Instead, "there will be bosses and digital servers, and occasional protest rallies that will have no bearing on politics."

The government wants to create a digital system of social control by regulating individual access to rights and benefits. Being outside of this system will effectively spell social death. Digitization is no longer just a way to collect and store information: now it will tailor social profiles to state needs.

The digital draft notice legislation is the Russian state's first attempt to introduce elements of digital totalitarianism, but certainly not its last. The right mixture of care and fear, along with clearly delineated dos and don'ts, will allow the authorities to shape any political behavior. At this point, these are still mostly the Kremlin's plans, but they illustrate how radically politics can be transformed in the digital age.

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