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How Russia's New Internet Restrictions Work and How to Get Around Them

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

On July 31, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law that would fine Russians who deliberately searched for "extremist" content. Owners of VPN services will also be fined for providing their services.

But how can this law actually be enforced? Will citizens be fined for stumbling across banned content? And how can Russians protect themselves from repression?

Restrictions on freedom of speech sharply intensified in Russia with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and continue to tighten today. According to Roskomsvoboda, some 25,000 websites have been blocked under military censorship laws since 2022. In 2024, the authorities banned writing about circumventing these restrictions, even in scientific articles. They also throttled YouTube, blocked Signal and Discord and banned advertising on "foreign agents."

In 2025, Russia blocked access to the Cloudflare web service, cutting off access to even greater swathes of the internet. Moscow also adopted new laws allowing the authorities to monitor user traffic and penalize people for reading banned material.

Censorship and surveillance in Russia are carried out on several levels, from physical through equipment (namely TSPU and SORM) to laws and political pressure on global companies.

Facebook and Instagram are blocked as "extremist," YouTube and X have been slowed down to the point of being impossible to use normally. There is even talk of blocking Telegram and WhatsApp. The only effective way for people to get beyond the Kremlin's digital iron curtain is to use VPNs and other tools to bypass blockades. But the state is fighting them hard.

Along with the tightening of legislation, the authorities are increasingly blocking VPN protocols. In this situation, reputable Western VPN providers have left the Russian market due to sanctions, lack of economic viability, and difficulty maintaining operations amid restrictions. Only services created by natives of Russia, who know the political context well and react quickly to changes, continue to work effectively.

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A new law introduces punishment for searching for Nazi or "knowingly extremist" materials from the almost 5,500 organizations on the Justice Ministry register, the vast majority of which relate to antisemitism and radical hate groups. Some materials are merely described as "1.jpg," which tells users nothing about the content of this material. Potentially, the presence of a file with the same name on a user's device could lead to criminal proceedings. Additionally, there is no searchable list that could allow someone to check whether what they are looking at is permitted.

How the authorities plan to prove that a person searched for banned material intentionally is unclear. It is also unclear how the Russian authorities are going to catch targeted searches for "extremist" content on Instagram and Facebook, which are not only unlikely to cooperate and are themselves owned by the recognized "extremist" organization Meta.

A little earlier, the State Duma simplified the application of administrative punishment, legalizing the recognition of an organization or community as extremist if the owner/administrator of the group has already been accused of creating an extremist community. Because of this, charity projects such as "Tales for Political Prisoners" began to close. The creator, the mother of political prisoner Yevgenia Berkovich, was afraid that some of the subscribers might be subject to prosecution. In addition, the bill allows not only legal entities, but also communities based in WhatsApp or Telegram group chats, to be included in the list of the Ministry of Justice.

Anastasia Burakova, founder of Kovcheg (The Ark), a non-profit organization and media outlet that helps anti-war Russians, is convinced that the purpose of any repressive laws, including this one, is to create an atmosphere of fear. The State Duma passes new laws and restrictions at an unthinkable speed, formulating them in such a way that the widest possible range of people would be affected. She told me that, even as a lawyer, she finds it difficult to keep track of all the changes. Ordinary people cannot stand a chance of understanding the

rules of the game.

Mazai Banzaev, founder of the popular Amnezia VPN, agrees with her and believes that the new legislation is primarily aimed at intimidating users to make them give up trying to search for information and cede access to the free internet for fear of punishment.

In addition, the new law envisages punishing VPN providers that refuse to connect to the registry of blocked sites to filter traffic and for refusing to restrict access to prohibited information. Authorities intend to fine VPN services between 50,000 ($624) and 5 million rubles ($62,386) in cases of repeated violation. Also, administrative punishment is introduced for failure to provide access to information systems or databases to the FSB, SVR and police.

Penalties for advertising VPN services are another attack on the opposition, in particular, "undesirable" media. Some of them — including The Insider, Novaya Gazeta Europe and Mediazona — have developed their own VPNs and are selling them to readers. However, they were already under pressure even before the amendments. State Duma deputy Mikhail Delyagin called for Kovcheg to be punished for advertising its VPN.

Formally, using a VPN is not enough for conviction alone. But it could be considered evidence of intent. The law says that the use of a VPN would be considered an aggravating circumstance in criminal convictions, but offers no details on how that would affect sentencing.

If a user has a VPN enabled, neither their internet provider nor law enforcement agencies will be able to find out what the user was looking for. This is probably the reason for tougher penalties for recalcitrant VPN providers. VPN creates a tunnel through which all traffic is encrypted, from basic metadata to the name of the resource the user is accessing.

Russian companies Yandex and VK share data with the FSB, so it will be easy to identify people who used them to search for banned media. For other search engines, social networks, messengers and torrent clients, requests for "extremist" materials are detected by automated monitoring systems such as Vepr and Oculus, which the authorities have access to. Neither of these systems de-anonymizes users: they analyze publicly available information by keywords.

The fight against VPNs has been going on for years. Accordingly, many of them have long since built resistance to such restrictions into their product architecture. For example, hidemy.name notes that the new round of censorship does not hinder their work. On the contrary, it increased interest in their product. Users are afraid that their usual online activity — let alone researching banned topics — may be misinterpreted and want to hide their activity from telecom operators. Whenever the audience has questions or the authorities pass new laws like this, the development team promptly publishes explanations and digital security tips.

Related article: Western Tech Companies Are Capitulating to Russian Censors. Here's How Russians Can Fight Back.

Restrictions on the Internet are causing discontent even among citizens with no desire to access restricted content. The head of the Ministry of Information told Putin that users who

unknowingly search for extremist material had no reason to worry.

Nevertheless, there is potential for penalties to become more severe. Fines could be raised and criminal charges could be added after the second offense. If even the meme with Pepe the frog in a rainbow wig, published by VK in 2020, was recognized as extremist, the space for charges under the new norms is immense.

In order to reduce your risk of falling foul of this law, there are steps you can take.

If you are going to use a free VPN, be careful about which one you choose. Some services sell user data to advertisers or more nefarious groups. It is better to choose a service from among reliable VPN providers, for example, those recommended by human rights activists from Roskomsvoboda or trusted services from the VPN Guild list.

Choose a VPN with a kill switch function. This severs your internet connection if the VPN disconnects while you are using it, protecting your traffic and IP address.

Do not use Russian browsers or services like Yandex, VK, Rutube or tools like the Alice LLM to search for anything political.

Set up your own VPN server. This is easier than it sounds; you can open source solutions such as Amnezia and Outline.

Despite the risks, independent media and VPNs do not plan to change their approach to their work. Burakova has already received a prison sentence of 7.5 years in absentia, so everything that could have happened has happened.

The founder of Amnezia VPN also says that the situation is already complicated, so little will change. VPNs that work for Russian users are already violating the law in the eyes of the state, so the new laws will not change much.

Timur Olevsky, editor-in-chief of The Insider, told me that the chilling effect of a lack of awareness of the new laws is more dangerous than the possible consequences for reading "extremist" materials.

"In the Soviet Union, information was completely controlled by the party and the KGB. But there were people who risked jail to listen to Western radio stations in secret. With access to independent information, they learned about the deadly levels of radiation after the Chernobyl accident, and it saved their health and lives. No placards or warnings will prevent people from urgently seeking out our or other media, finding out the information they care about," he said.

People will keep on searching for information that the state would rather they never saw. But they will learn to avoid leaving any traces of having done so.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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