Putin Seeks to Plug Gaps in Russia's State-Driven Tech Efforts

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While most media coverage of Vladimir Putin's Wednesday speech focused on moves that may extend his hold on power, the president also announced various measures meant to foster the country's technological efforts as well.

In his speech to the Russian parliament, Putin urged the Russian legislature to pass a "technological legislative package" intended to "launch a flexible mechanism of experimental legal regimes for the development and implementation of new technologies in Russia, such as artificial intelligence, to establish modern regulation of big data turnover based on the best world standards, as well as establish mechanisms for state support and instruments of direct and venture financing."

He offered no details, yet his speech marks a mid-point, of sorts, in national efforts to spur innovation. Recent years have seen a proliferation of government-sponsored projects intended to lead and facilitate the country's technological development. Yet Putin appears to understand that Russia's entrepreneurs are still not getting the necessary assistance and flexibility to be fully productive.

In the speech, Putin alluded to the difficulties Russian researchers, engineers, and entrepreneurs face, particularly in the realm of finance. While Western entrepreneurs can obtain venture capital, miss their goal, and move on to a new project, Russia lacks a similar ecosystem. Venture capital funds are only starting to appear that work like those in California or Israel.

"A technology entrepreneur should have the right to take risks so that an unsuccessful implementation of an idea would not automatically mean a misuse of funds, followed by possible criminal prosecution," he said.

Putin also called for reshaping legal and financial conditions "so that as many startups [and] innovative teams as possible can become strong, successful innovative companies." He also called for an effort to help Russian industry export its products and meet domestic demand.

The day after Putin's speech, he appointed a replacement for Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, who resigned, apparently, to facilitate the Russian president's transition plan. The replacement is Mikhail Mishustin, who has a degree in information technology, and who has led national initiatives involving data centers and online services for the national tax collection agency. Among other things, Mishustin will oversee Russia's "Digital Economy" national project, having an IT-capable technocrat at the highest levels of national power will probably help.

The Russian STEM community was quick to comment on Putin's speech.

Konstantin Vorontsov, who leads the machine intelligence laboratory at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, or MIPT, reiterated the need for a Russia-wide platform where scientists, researchers, engineers, and entrepreneurs could share their work and cooperate, and said that the country's tech drive urgently needed more engineers, researchers, and computer programmers.

"We are witnessing an explosive increase in vacancies for data analysis. We have literally several years to organize the mass training and retraining of engineers, analysts, task managers. Modern educational technologies can help here, and we have thousands of good engineers, but hundreds of thousands are needed," Vorontsov said.

In his speech, Putin seemed to acknowledge the problem, while suggesting that it was already under control. "The ability to work with unique equipment, to take on the most ambitious tasks, is an incentive for young people to enter the science field. This is already happening. It is estimated that by the middle of the decade, every second scientist in Russia will be under 40," he said.

Putin's concerns that legal restrictions on the use of people's personal data could slow the country's AI research. He noted that AI technology developers working in the medical field — disease diagnosis, treatment decisions — are required to seek the written consent of any person whose data they sought to use.

Sergey Garbuk, who chairs an AI group at the government-owned Russian Venture Company, echoed Putin's concerns that legal restrictions on the use of people's personal data could slow the country's AI research. He noted that AI technology developers working in the medical field — disease diagnosis, treatment decisions — are required to seek the written consent of any person whose data they sought to use.