



Putin Plots a Parallel Internet

July 3, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman, Matt Maldonado** *National Review*

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Science and Technology; Corruption; Russia

Vladimir Putin is stepping up his war on the World Wide Web. In late May, claiming that it was key to Russia's counterterrorism efforts, Putin signed a decree dramatically expanding his government's power to regulate — and limit — access to the Internet for the country's nearly 150 million inhabitants.

The edict, an update to the Kremlin's 2014 counterterrorism strategy, gives Russian authorities greater control than ever before over the dissemination of information on the Internet. The ostensible goal of the measure is to curb language that could incite hatred and violence along racial, ethnic, or religious lines. But the real objective, observers say, is to change the way Russia's netizens access the Internet and interact online.

This sort of censorship is by no means new. Over the past several years, even as it has stepped up its disinformation efforts abroad, Russia's government has gone to great lengths to make it more difficult for its own citizens to use the Internet to communicate, coordinate, and connect with the rest of the world.

In 2016, the Kremlin approved the so-called Yarovaya Packet, a series of laws that expanded the definition of "extremism" and allowed for the criminalization of a highly subjective range of acts. It also provided the Russian government with sweeping authority over the Internet, lowered the bar for what constitutes inciting or justifying terrorism online, granted Russia's powerful security agencies full access to the private communications of citizens, and mandated that telecommunications companies store data and decrypt information at the behest of the state.

That turned out to be just the beginning. Last November, the Kremlin formally enacted a long-discussed "sovereign Internet" law that gave it the power to cut off access to the World Wide Web in case of an "emergency" — and broad latitude to determine what might constitute such an emergency. The measure also required Russian ISPs to install software that tracks, filters, and even reroutes web traffic as authorities see fit, raising fears among human-rights watchdogs that Russia's president planned to turn the country's Internet into a "closed system."

Indeed, that seems to be precisely what Putin has in mind. On the heels of last fall's sovereign-Internet law, the Kremlin adopted a companion measure requiring that all smartphones, TVs, and personal computers sold in Russia come with a range of Russian apps preinstalled. As of this month, all such devices sold in Russia will be required to comply with the measure.

The *pièce de résistance* of Putin's efforts is undoubtedly RuNet, the Kremlin's own parallel Internet architecture. The concept of a community of Russian-language websites and services untethered from the larger Internet has percolated for years. But over the past half-decade, the Russian government's plans for a national Internet system that can serve as an alternative to the broader World Wide Web have kicked into high gear. These efforts, tech specialists say, aim to erect "the necessary infrastructure to maintain, essentially, a separate internal Internet should such a thing become necessary (or convenient)."

The project seems to be making significant progress. Back in December, Russia's Ministry of Communication announced that it had conducted its first successful test of the country-wide network, and that it was able to temporarily isolate the Russian Internet domain from the broader World Wide Web without Russian web users' noticing any difference. Further tests — and continued expansion of the system's capabilities — are likely in coming months as part of what opposition activists have termed a "fortress" strategy to control, censor, and isolate the Internet.

It is not surprising that Moscow has accelerated its efforts to control the domestic Internet as its relations with the West have continued to deteriorate. As Putin himself explained in a December interview, the steps his government has taken are aimed at "preventing adverse consequences of global disconnection from the global network, which is largely controlled from abroad."

That said, Russia's attempts to control and censor the Internet have a distinctly internal dimension as well, because recent months have seen a marked decline in Putin's domestic popularity. The causes are myriad, from the Kremlin's bungled coronavirus response to steadily deteriorating economic conditions. But the growing discontent is very real; even before the outbreak of the pandemic, Russia was experiencing an unprecedented surge in domestic protests. Today, as a result of the virus, experts believe the country's strongman faces an even more significant challenge to his long-term hold on power.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Putin and his cronies have clearly concluded that a tighter grip on the Internet will help the Kremlin to derail domestic discontent — or at least to better manage it. And they are now working overtime to make sure they have that power.

Ilan Berman is the senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC). Matt Maldonado is a junior fellow at AFPC.

