

# Russian internet controls risk domestic pushback

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**The Russian government is seeking to exert greater control over the internet within its borders. *Lincoln Pigman* examines how Russian technology companies and civil society are responding to this campaign and assesses the likelihood of a domestic pushback**

## Key Points

- The Russian government is seeking to exercise greater control over the physical infrastructure of the internet and to regulate the content that can be accessed by Russian internet users.
- The authorities have clamped down on Russian technology companies more forcefully than on their foreign counterparts, which has led to some resentment of foreign companies among Russian firms and civil society groups.
- Government efforts to control the content accessible to Russian internet users risk degrading access more broadly, which is likely to increase domestic political opposition to the government's internet censorship policies.

The outbreak of networked anti-government protests in Russia in 2011 put the country's political elites on the defensive. Since those protests, the Russian government has passed a series of laws regulating the internet. On 18 March 2019, President Vladimir Putin signed two measures into law, one banning the publication of "unreliable, socially significant information" on the internet and another introducing fines and jail time for internet users who "disrespect" the authorities.

Several other laws are being contemplated, including a bill currently in the State Duma that would mandate the creation of a 'sovereign internet'. This bill has drawn comparisons with China's so-called 'Great Firewall', the system that allows Beijing to regulate the content that is available to internet users in China.

In February 2019, Russian news website RBC reported that a working group of technology sector figures headed by Natalya Kasperskaya, co-founder of cybersecurity firm Kaspersky Lab, had proposed holding an exercise testing the vulnerabilities of Russia's internet infrastructure by briefly disconnecting the country from the rest of the world electronically. The findings of the exercise, which the news report said would be held no later than 1 April 2019, would inform the working group's recommendations to Russian lawmakers. However, at the time of writing, neither Russian nor non-Russian news media had reported such an exercise taking place.

The 'sovereign internet' bill and the two laws that Putin signed in March illustrate two trends in cyber policy in Russia. One trend is a growing emphasis on physical infrastructure.

Speaking to *Jane's* on 29 March, Noah Buyon, a research associate at the US-based non-governmental organisation Freedom House, described the Russian government's approach as an effort to "impose the logic of territorial sovereignty on the borderless net".



*A protester holds a placard reading "Putin - No" during an opposition rally to demand internet freedom in Russia, in central Moscow, on 10 March 2019. (Alexander Nemenov/AFP/Getty Images)*

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The other trend is a long-standing preoccupation with content that Russian political elites consider to be problematic. Since 2011, Russia has passed laws progressively restricting access to such content for internet users in Russia and enabling the prosecution of people who produce, host, or disseminate content deemed unacceptable.

### **Internet governance**

This intensification of efforts to regulate the internet comes after Putin decriminalised extremist speech on the internet in December 2018. That decision – a rare concession from the Kremlin – appears to have mostly halted the incarceration of social media users, some of them in their teens, in Russia's regions. Those users were being prosecuted under an article of the Criminal Code that punished people with up to five years in prison, among other penalties, for making extremist statements on the internet.

Denis Terekhov – a managing partner at the Social Networks Agency, a Russian social media marketing consultancy – told *Jane's* on 25 March, "It goes without saying that [Putin's] personal attention to this question gives hope that law enforcement officials will think first and then put bloggers on the defendant's stand."

In contrast, Tanya Lokot, an associate professor at Dublin City University and an expert on internet governance in Russia, was unsurprised by the expansion of what she called “a bouquet of articles under which users and organisations can be punished”. Speaking to *Jane's* on 25 March, Lokot said, “It turns out that the liberalisation” [on which Putin ostensibly embarked in December] was “quite illusory”. In addition to the chilling effects that the laws are likely to have on online speech, they increase the list of offences that internet users may be charged with.

With reference to the internet sovereignty bill, Lokot questioned the likelihood of Russia being able to isolate its segment of the internet, calling this a “fantastical scenario”. However, Artem Kozlyuk, who heads Roskomsvoboda – a digital-rights watchdog and campaign group whose name is a play on that of Roskomnadzor, the federal agency in charge of internet censorship – told *Jane's* that internet users still had much to fear from the bill.

**[Continued in full version...]**

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