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The Kremlin versus the Internet: the end of Russia's zone of freedom?

Jadwiga Rogoża

On 5 May President Vladimir Putin signed a law which changes the rules regulating the transmission and dissemination of information on the Internet. The toughest restrictions in the law are placed on bloggers: all blogs that are visited by over 3,000 users daily will be included in the register of the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (*Roskomnadzor*) and their authors will be required to reveal personal data. Blogs will come under the provisions of the election law, laws relating to the protection of classified information, the protection of privacy and the prevention of extremism. Bloggers will also be held responsible for the credibility of the information they publish and the content of comments posted by other users. The law requires bloggers and web services, including foreign, to keep a record of content and user data (for example their IP numbers) for six months, to provide law enforcing bodies access to them and even to grant them confidential access to servers. The law enters into force on 1 August.

Commentary

- The law in fact equates blogs (those with over 3,000 visitors daily) with the mass media, while failing to grant them comparable legal protection. Bloggers will also be subject to numerous legal requirements and the practice of applying law in Russia, including broad interpretations of such notions as extremism and the invasion of privacy, may prevent them from raising issues linked with corruption (for example publishing information about the wealth of members of the elite) or to publicise infringements of election law. It should be expected that the law will be applied selectively in order to exert pressure on popular opposition bloggers and it will be used to force them to apply self-censorship under threat of being fined or suspended by the *Roskomnadzor*.
- There are doubts as to whether Moscow will be able to enforce the provisions concerning the storage of data and providing access to it in the case of foreign web services (such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and Skype). Moscow does not have any legal instruments to force foreign companies to observe the Russian law. It can, however, in line with the law, block their services on the Russian territory and this may spur these organisations to make specific concessions (for example to block selected contents or users) given the importance the Russian market has for them.

- The Russian segment of the Internet was practically an uncensored information space, despite the fact that the government had many instruments of technical surveillance (for example, via its control of operators). The current restrictions, targeting mainly content providers (blog authors), are being pushed through on the wave of social euphoria following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and greater consent to restrictions in internal policy. The pressure that has been put on Internet users is being compounded by Vladimir Putin's statements that the Internet was created as a "CIA project". As a result of this pressure the information policy of several popular portals (including Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru, Newsru.com) has been changed and the social media service Vkontakte has been taken over by a company that has ties with the Kremlin. Since March this year several popular opposition portals (Grani.ru, Ej.ru, Kasparov.ru, Alexei Navalny's blog) have been blocked in Russia. Another consequence of the Kremlin's policy is the fact that current leading opposition bloggers (Oleg Kashin, Andrei Malgin and Rustem Adagamov) have emigrated from Russia and blog from abroad.