REINING IN THE RUNET
THE KREMLIN'S STRUGGLE TO CONTROL CYBERSPACE

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Since 2011–2012, when the combination of the Arab Spring and anti-government demonstrations in the Russian Federation left the country's political elites determined to bring the Russian internet, or Runet, under state control, Russia has witnessed the establishment of a domestic internet control regime encompassing four strategies of control in cyberspace. These include

1) restricting internet users' access to problematic content and information;

2) passively deterring online dissent by limiting internet users' anonymity;

3) actively deterring online dissent by threatening internet users with punitive sanctions; and

4) competing with and drowning out online dissent by covertly producing and disseminating pro-government content and information.

This report provides an original framework for the study of Russia's evolving domestic internet control regime as well as a guide to understanding the online struggle between Russia's political elites and its non-systemic political opposition, an increasingly critical element of contemporary Russian politics.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Punitive measures under the guise of countering "extremism" serve as the government's primary method of active deterrence.

- The Kremlin has systematically disseminated pro-government content designed to counter those critics undeterred by limited anonymity and the threat of state retribution.

- While Russia's political elites have demonstrated that their intent to limit access to platforms benefiting the non-systemic opposition, they are simultaneously willing to engage on the very platforms they are trying to curtail.

- At the moment, Russia's primary strategy to restrict internet freedom focuses on restricting users' access to problematic content and information.

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Internet Freedom

Russia's political elites are uncomfortable with absolute internet freedom largely because such freedom primarily benefits the 'non-systemic' political opposition, which consists of parties and figures that are almost entirely excluded from participation in official politics.

66/100

Russia's current internet freedom score
(0 = most free, 100 = least free)
(Source: Freedom House)

VKontakte

Russian social network founded by Pavel Durov in 2006. He was dismissed as CEO in 2014 after refusing to give the government data on Ukrainian protestors and block Alexei Navalny's page.

50 million

Users in Russia, as of 2014.
By comparison, Facebook has 7.8 million Russian users.
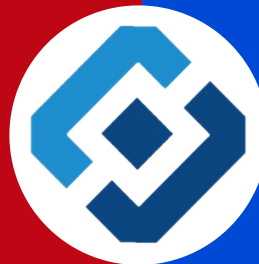
48,000

Between 2012-2017 VK removed 48K information sources at the government's behest.

(Source: Business Insider)

Roskomnadzor

Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media

257,000

Number of internet resources Roskomnadzor claims to have blocked since July 2017.

1,449

Estimated number of criminal charges leveled against internet users 2008-2018
(Source: Novaya Gazeta)

Telegram

Telegram has gained popularity with Bitcoin and other cryptocurrency users, meaning that the vast majority of its users are outside of Russia

200 million

Monthly users worldwide in 2018

15 million

Russian users

(Source: Business of Apps)