
Kremlin Wants to 'Protect Russian Cyberspace From Unpredictable West'

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The respected business daily Vedomosti, citing industry sources, said Putin will convene a meeting on Monday of the Security Council to discuss possible restrictions on Russian cyberspace, the last major forum for free expression in the country.

Vedomosti said authorities were contemplating measures, to be put in place by early next year, to unplug Russia from the global web in emergency situations such as major protests or military hostilities.

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The Kremlin could try to justify such a clamp-down by whipping up fears that it's the West that wants to disconnect Russia from the web, said industry experts.

Analysts say similar measures have been introduced by countries such as Iran and Cuba, which developed national Internet limits to curb the spread of Western culture and ideas.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed the Security Council meeting on Internet security would take place, but he declined to discuss details of the agenda.

Peskov said authorities have no plans to disconnect Russian cyberspace, but that they need measures to protect the country from the West.

"Taking into account the complete unpredictability of the United States and European Union, Russia is taking measures to ensure its own security," Peskov told AFP.

"Security measures for the Russian Internet are constantly discussed at various levels and at various ministries taking into account the unpredictability of our foreign partners."

- Russia not 'disconnecting itself' -

Asked whether Russia was preparing measures that would allow officials to bar Russian access to the global Internet, Peskov said:

"This is a question for other countries, first and foremost the United States. We are not talking about Russia disconnecting itself."

Russian communications minister Nikolai Nikiforov told Russian reporters late Friday that authorities were putting together measures in case "our respected partners suddenly decide to pull the plug on our Internet."

With mainstream media firmly under Kremlin control, social media and Internet news sites have become crucial outlets for independent reports, including on the alleged involvement of Russian troops in the Ukraine conflict.

While Putin enjoys popular support, with his approval ratings boosted by Russia's takeover of Crimea from Ukraine in March, the Kremlin is still wary about the possibility of mass unrest.

Russia's economy, now teetering on the verge of recession, is reeling from stringent Western sanctions imposed over Moscow's role in the Ukraine.

Russian authorities have already introduced tough curbs on cyberspace, including a law requiring Internet companies to store all personal data of Russian users at data centres in the country.

Putin has called the Internet a "CIA project" and warned Russians against using Google because, he said, all information "goes through servers that are in the (United) States, everything is monitored there".

There are some 70 million Internet users in Russia, about half of the population.

Earlier this year the founder of Russia's top social network VKontakte, Pavel Durov, fled the country after selling his shares under pressure from the security services, saying Russia was "incompatible with Internet business".

- 'North Korean model'? -

Authorities may face technical challenges in shutting the country off from the rest of the world because unlike its neighbour China, Russia is firmly integrated into the global web, experts said.

They laughed off Russian suggestions that it might be the West that would seek to disconnect Russia from the Internet.

"This threat is as surreal as an alien attack," Mikhail Gurevich, a media expert and head of venture fund 101StartUp, told AFP. He accused authorities of "aggressive isolationism".

Prominent Internet expert Anton Nosik added: "Russia's shift to the North Korean model of managing the Internet will have far-reaching consequences for the country's economy and public sentiment."

He called any possible plan to place Russian Internet under security service control a "mission impossible."

Internet ombudsman Dmitry Marinichev said although isolating Russian cyberspace was technically possible it would strike a huge blow to business.

"All companies communicate among themselves through the global web," he told AFP.

"Disconnection would be a path towards a serious degradation, this will threaten the very functioning of the national economy."
