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Status: Not Free

Total Score: 67/100 (0 = Best, 100 = Worst)

Population: 144,495,044

Internet Penetration: 76.0%

Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked: Yes

Political/Social Content Blocked: Yes

Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested: Yes

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Key Developments, June 1, 2017 – May 31, 2018

- In April 2018, authorities blocked the communication app Telegram for refusing to provide encryption keys to the Federal Security Service, resulting in extensive collateral blocking and nationwide protests (see Blocking and Filtering and Digital Activism).
- Authorities continue to block websites, and new laws allow for the blocking of pirate mirror websites and those distributing online content that discredits "honor, dignity or business reputation" (see Blocking and Filtering).
- In November 2017, the government moved to designate media outlets receiving foreign funding as "foreign agents" (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).
- Lawmakers sought to restrict anonymity online, passing legislation that limits the use of virtual private networks and requires messaging platforms to link users to their personal information (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).

Introduction:

Internet freedom declined in Russia for the sixth year in a row, following the government's efforts to block the popular messaging app Telegram and numerous legislative proposals aimed at restricting online anonymity and increasing censorship.

In the lead-up to the March 2018 elections, in which President Vladimir Putin secured his second consecutive term, authorities ramped up efforts to increase their already tight grip on the internet. Several new troubling pieces of legislation were passed and implemented. In June 2017, restrictions to virtual private networks (VPNs) were passed, while in November 2017 the government moved to designate media outlets receiving foreign funding as "foreign agents." A 2018 amendment to the Law on Information, Information Technology and Information Security requires social media and communication platforms to connect accounts with users' phone numbers, limiting the opportunity for anonymity online. Meanwhile, some components of the controversial Yarovaya Law came into force in July 2018, which require telecommunications operators and companies to store content of users' online communications for up to six months, in addition to metadata, and provide the Federal Security Service (FSB) with unfettered access to both.

Blocking Telegram in April 2018 was one of this year's most obvious manifestations of the government's repressive approach to the internet. While other social media and communication platforms, such as LinkedIn and Zello, remain blocked in Russia, blocking a platform as popular as Telegram, with about 10 million Russian users, was unprecedented. Authorities restricted the platform after it refused to provide encryption keys to the FSB. When Telegram used various methods to overcome the initial blocking, Roskomnadzor, the state internet regulator, targeted millions of IP addresses, bringing down online stores, banks, airline ticketing systems, and other messaging platforms in the process.

Many Russians made their frustrations known over the government's increasing online repression. In the summer of 2017, multiple demonstrations across the country focused on internet freedom and exonerating those arrested for their online activity. Following efforts to block Telegram in April, over 14,000 people protested in the country.

Obstacles to Access:

Access to the internet is affordable in Russia, and connection speeds are high compared with those in the rest of the region. Internet penetration rates continue to increase. However, the information and communication technology (ICT) industry is concentrated, with a state-owned internet service provider (ISP) dominating the market.

Availability and Ease of Access

Internet access in Russia continues to expand gradually. Internet penetration reached about 74 percent by the end of 2017, and the proportion of those who use the internet daily or at least several times a week is more than 50 percent.^[1]

Despite economic strains and recent currency fluctuations, connections to the internet remain relatively affordable for most of the population. The average cost is equivalent to about 1 percent of an average salary. Monthly fees for both fixed-line broadband internet and mobile internet service in Moscow are as low as US\$5. High competition in the ISP market is one of the most important factors that restrain price growth.^[2] However, while people with medium and higher incomes can easily afford access, a significant part of the population lives below the poverty line.

In 2017, the total market volume of the telecommunications market reached RUB 1.62 trillion (approximately US\$24 million). The revenue growth rate in the industry was 1.3 percent, which is higher than in the previous year. The broadband penetration reached 58 percent and the subscriber base increased by 4 percent.^[3] The number of new mobile subscribers in 2017 dropped for the first time in 12 years.^[4] However, in the first nine months of 2017, the number of mobile users increased to about 123 million people. During the same time period, Russian mobile subscribers transferred more than 4,480 petabytes of data, which is almost 90 percent higher than a year earlier.^[5]

A regional divide persists in Russia, with users in smaller, more remote towns and villages paying significantly more than users in major urban areas. Residents of the subarctic cities of Yakutsk and Novy Urengoy pay the highest prices in Russia, more than double the national average for monthly internet access. In most regions, the cost of internet connection is correlated with the average income level of the population. There are not clear religious, intergenerational, and gender divides related to the availability and ease of access to ICTs in Russia. Any existing divides do not differ significantly from the European Union (EU) countries.

Internet speed in the country remains stable, with average connection speeds of 11.8 Mbps reported in the first quarter of 2017. This places Russia ahead of many of its Eurasian neighbors, but behind most EU countries.^[6]

Restrictions on Connectivity

During the coverage period, the government did not intentionally restrict internet connectivity. However, in April 2018, the government blocked Telegram, the popular messaging service with over 10 million Russian users, because the platform refused to provide encryption keys to the FSB.^[7]

On court orders, Roskomnadzor began restricting access not only to IP addresses associated with Telegram, but also to cloud services such as Amazon Web Services, Google Cloud, Fiber, Microsoft Azure, and Alibaba Cloud. At one point, over 18 million IP addresses of popular hosting providers were blocked (see Blocking and Filtering).^[8] As a result, from mid-April to early June, some third-party services were disrupted, including social networks, communication platforms, online shops, and payment systems. For example, users of messaging service Viber and social network Odnoklassniki experienced connectivity issues.^[9]

In May 2017, President Putin approved a new "Information Society Development Strategy," which aims to guide ICT policy development until 2030. The policy broadly seeks to increase the autonomy of Russia's internet, signalling the authorities' intention to wield greater control online. Among other things, the policy states that imported ICT equipment should gradually be replaced with domestically made alternatives.^[10] The strategy document also directs officials to ensure that Russian "spiritual and cultural values" are represented in internet governance policy (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).

ICT Market

The communications market in Russia, despite high competition on the level of small ISPs, is still relatively concentrated on the national level. In 2017 and 2016, 68 percent of the market was controlled by five companies.^[11] State-owned company Rostelecom holds 37 percent of the broadband internet market, followed by ER-Telecom with 10 percent, Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) with 9 percent, VimpelCom (the brand Beeline) with 7 percent, and TransTeleKom (TTK) with 5 percent. The remaining market share is split among smaller local ISPs.

The lion's share of the mobile communications market is controlled by four operators. According to the latest available data, from 2016, four large companies – MTS, Megafon, VimpelCom, and Tele2 – controlled 99 percent of the market.^[12] In 2017, two prominent companies lost major Western investors. In October, the Swedish operator Telia Company sold all its shares in Megafon to Gazprombank.^[13] The Norwegian Telenor company got rid of its stake in VEON, the owner of VimpelCom.^[14]

Regulatory Bodies

The ICT and media sector is regulated by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor), under the control of the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media. The head of Roskomnadzor, Aleksandr Zharov, was appointed by executive decree on May 3, 2012.

Roskomnadzor is responsible for implementing many laws regulating the internet. It carries out orders issued by the Prosecutor General's Office to block content deemed to be extremist or containing calls for participation in unsanctioned public actions, according to a law that went into effect on February 1, 2014. Roskomnadzor is also in charge of implementing the so-called "Bloggers' Law," requiring bloggers with more than 3,000 daily readers to register with the regulator; the data localization law requiring that international companies store the personal data of Russian users within the country; and the set of antiterrorism amendments known as "Yarovaya law" (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).

In addition to conducting its own monitoring, Roskomnadzor fields complaints about online content from the public and "crowdsourcing censors," the courts, and other official bodies including the General Prosecutor's Office.^[15] Russian citizens can visit a "Unified Registry" website to suggest websites to be blocked. The extent to which Roskomnadzor effectively blocks websites is unclear, and reports indicate that over half of the websites blacklisted by the regulator continue to operate.¹⁶

Limits on Content:

The Russian authorities censor a wide range of topics online, most often under the pretext of combating "extremism." Content subject to blacklisting or removal includes LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) expression, information on the conflict in Ukraine, and material related to the political opposition. Authorities moved to block Telegram in April after the platform refused to provide the FSB encryption keys, resulting in massive collateral blocking and catalysing thousands of Russians to take to the streets in protest. Online outlets are subject to political and economic pressure to publish Kremlin-friendly

content, and the government actively manipulates public opinion through state-controlled media and paid commentators.

Blocking and Filtering

Russian authorities have continued to develop and implement laws that allow government agencies to restrict access to websites and content related to the political opposition, the conflict in Ukraine, and the LGBTI community. Using a range of justifications, the government has attempted to restrict, with some success, many social media and communication platforms, including LinkedIn, Zello, Blackberry Messenger, Line, WeChat, and, most recently in April 2018, Telegram.^[17]

The authorities have wide discretion to block content online. From 2012 to 2013, the government enacted legal amendments that gave several agencies – including Roskomnadzor, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor), and the Federal Drug Control Service – the authority to make decisions about blocking various categories of information. Currently, these agencies have the power to block the following types of content without a court order: information about suicide, drug propaganda, images of child sexual abuse, information about juvenile victims of crimes, materials that violate copyright, content related to extremism, and calls for unsanctioned public actions or rallies. Any other information may be blocked by a court order, provided that the court finds the content illegal.

In most cases the legal framework offers no clear criteria for evaluating the legality of content, and authorities do not always offer a detailed explanation for blocking decisions. The lack of precise guidelines sometimes leads telecom operators, which are responsible for complying with blocking orders, to carry out the widest blocking possible so as to avoid fines and threats to their licenses. Telecom operators are obliged to regularly consult the "blacklist" of banned websites, updated by Roskomnadzor. Moreover, the law does not specify how ISPs should restrict access; they could focus, for example, on the IP address, the domain name, or the URL of the targeted page. Often the authorities do not consider it necessary to clearly indicate the specific pages that are meant to be blocked on a given site. According to RosKomSvoboda, which monitors online censorship, there were more than 10 million websites blocked by IP addresses as of March 2018.^[18] Among accidental blockings, 97 percent were caused by blocking orders carried out on the basis of IP addresses.^[19]

In April 2018, the government moved to block Telegram.^[20] On April 13, the Tagansky District Court ruled to block the messaging app for refusing to comply with Yarovaya law, which obliges online services to provide encryption keys to the government (see Legal Environment). The government has also repeatedly asserted that Telegram is used for terrorism-related purposes.^[21] Telegram employed various methods to overcome the initial blocking, using other hosting sites to bypass it. Roskomnadzor then targeted these other hosting sites, which included Amazon Web Services, Google Cloud, Fiber, Microsoft Azure, and Alibaba Cloud, resulting in extensive collateral blocking. At one point, over 18 million IP addresses of popular hosting providers were blocked, affecting online stores, banks, airline ticketing systems, news sites, and other platforms such as Viber and Odnoklassniki.^[22] Starting in mid-May, Roskomnadzor reportedly began unblocking IP addresses of cloud services and the number of blocks has stabilized.^[23] Despite the government's efforts, Telegram remains available to many within the country; within a week of the blocking, there was only an estimated 7 percent decrease in Russian users of the app.^[24]

In addition to Telegram, the government has blocked a number of other communication and social media apps. Zello, blocked in April 2017, remained unavailable during the reporting period. The app, which allows mobile phones to be used like walkie-talkies, was blocked under the Law on Information, Information Technology and Information Security ostensibly for failing to register as an information disseminator, which would grant authorities access to much of the service's data.^[25] Previously, Russian truck drivers had employed Zello to coordinate protests and strike actions against a controversial road-tax program.^[26] Messengers like Line and BlackBerry Messenger are also blocked under the same law.^[27] The Chinese messaging app WeChat was blocked in May 2017 also for failing to register as a disseminator of information, though it was subsequently unblocked after complying with Roskomnadzor's requests.^[28] Data localization rules are also used as a pretext to restrict certain platforms. In November 2016, LinkedIn became the first major international platform to be blocked in Russia for failing to comply with data localization requirements (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity).^[29] In April 2018, head of Roskomnadzor Alexander Zharov

announced a large-scale inspection of Facebook to be completed in 2018. The inspection will investigate whether the platform is adhering to data localization requirements, removing prohibited content, and complying with other relevant legislation. If Facebook is not properly complying, Zharov raised the possibility of blocking the platform.^[30]

In December 2017, the Prosecutor General's Office blocked a number of websites of foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that were labeled "undesirable" under a 2015 law (see Content Removal). The websites included those of the National Democratic Institute, the Media Development Investment Fund, Open Society Foundations, the Institute of Modern Russia, and five websites connected to Open Russia, an NGO founded by Kremlin-critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky.^[31] The Russian Prosecutor's Office said that the Open Russia sites were "calling for disorder."^[32] In February 2018, Roskomnadzor also blocked the news outlet MBK Media, which is funded by Khodorkovsky, after a request from the Prosecutor General's Office.^[33]

The government frequently relies on extremism laws to censor critical content. In November 2017, the Prosecutor General's Office blocked a page for containing "extremist" information due to its content about a rally and its call for the resignation of Kuban Cossack judges.^[34] In January 2018, Roskomnadzor blocked the site Russiangate for "extremist" content.^[35] A few hours before the blocking, Russiangate published an investigation into real estate holdings of the head of the FSB, Alexander Bortnikov. A case of inciting hatred under article 282 of the criminal code was considered, but at the end of the reporting period the case had not been filed.^[36]

Websites with content relating to a broad host of issues, such as corruption, religious beliefs, traditional family values, and pornography, are also subject to blocking. Pages on opposition leader Alexei Navalny's website detailing an anticorruption investigation were blocked in February 2018 based on a decision of the Ust-Labinsky District Court of the Krasnodar Krai. The government justified the blocking because Navalny had failed to comply with a court order requiring removal of photos and videos from his website (see Content Removal). Navalny claimed that the blocking was to suppress his campaign to boycott the March presidential election.^[37] Separately, some websites featuring the works of renowned American photographer John Sturges continued to be blocked during the reporting period,^[38] despite the Russian Investigative Committee in November 2017 finding no signs of child pornography in his work.^[39] In addition, in February 2018, it was reported that the local prosecutor's office in Kabardino-Balkaria sent four cases to the court in order to restrict access to the websites of Jehovah's Witnesses.^[40]

During the coverage period, several laws and amendments were enacted that affected blocking and filtering in Russia. In October 2017, legal amendments^[41] that block pirate mirror websites went into effect, which led to Roskomnadzor blocking more than 600 such websites as of February 2018.^[42] In November 2017, a law^[43] went into effect regulating VPNs, anonymizers, and search engines, which requires VPNs to register or risk being blocked (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity). However, the law had not been used as of February 2018.^[44] At the end of April 2018, new amendments were adopted that established a mechanism for blocking websites that distributed online content discrediting "honor, dignity or business reputation" based on a court decision.^[45] The law provides content owners 24 hours to remove the defaming content after first being notified, or risk being blocked.^[46]

In cooperation with specialists from various telecom operators, Roskomnadzor started testing a new content filtering system that is expected to significantly speed up the website blocking process.^[47] At the end of March, new rules for blocking illegal content were published on Roskomnadzor's website.^[48] The rules mentioned a new method of blocking at the IP address level called "blackholing," a method that allows for isolation of individual segments of the internet, preventing traffic from reaching its destination. Usually blackholing is used as a countermeasure against a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack; however, Roskomnadzor cites use of the method to block websites.^[49] During the reporting period, Roskomnadzor did not employ the method, including when blocking Telegram.

In September 2017, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) began considering complaints about the blocking of the websites Kasparov.ru, Grani.ru, EZh.ru, RosKomSvoboda, and Worldview of Russian Civilization and its effects on freedom of expression.^[50] The ECtHR has inquired with the Russian

government, including a request on whether blocking laws are “sufficiently accurate and predictable in their application.” The Russian Ministry of Justice replied that restricting access to information by IP addresses is justified.^[51]

Providers of public internet access, including libraries, cafés, and educational institutions are responsible for ensuring that the content available to their users is filtered in compliance with Article 6.17 of the administrative code on protecting children from harmful information.^[52]

Content Removal

Roskomnadzor typically receives orders from government bodies, including the Prosecutor General's Office and the Main Directorate for Drugs Control, to enforce the censorship of content deemed illegal; in some cases, Roskomnadzor itself identifies illegal content. The agency must then instruct the hosting provider to issue a warning to the website. Website owners have the right to appeal the restriction in court, but they are often given a short time interval in which to do so. As a result, most owners quickly delete the banned information rather than take a risk of having the entire site blocked. If the content is not removed, the page is included on a blacklist, and ISPs must block it within 24 hours of receiving a warning from Roskomnadzor or face fines.

For websites that are registered as mass media, Roskomnadzor has additional powers to issue warnings to the editorial board about “abuse of the freedom of mass media.” Article 4 of the Law on Mass Media indicates that such abuse can include, among other things, incitement to terrorism, extremism, propaganda of violence and cruelty, information about illegal drugs, and obscene language. If a media outlet receives two warnings within a year, Roskomnadzor has the right to apply for a court order to shut it down. By August 2017, Roskomnadzor had issued 10 such warnings for use of obscene language within the calendar year, compared to 34 in 2016 and 47 in 2015.^[53] The total number of violations of the law in relation to the media has decreased by 25 percent.^[54]

During the reporting period, there were several cases in which Roskomnadzor mandated the removal of content. In August 2017, Roskomnadzor fined six media outlets for posting a video with obscene language of a rap-battle between Russian rappers Oxxxymiron and Gnoynoy. An additional 26 media outlets received warning letters for sharing the video.^[55]

On February 14, 2018, Roskomnadzor mandated that 29 internet sources, including Instagram and YouTube,^[56] remove information about Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) investigation into the connections of businessman Oleg Deripaska and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko.^[57] This came as a result of a lawsuit Deripaska filed claiming that photos and videos of himself posted online included “unlawful information” about his private life. The photos and videos were of Deripaska and Prikhodko on Deripaska's yacht with model Nastia Rybka. After Navalny refused to comply with the removal order, on February 15, Roskomnadzor ordered communication service providers to block access to pages of his website (see Blocking and Filtering).^[58] Most media outlets complied with the removal request and did not have their webpages blocked.^[59]

Russian website owners have been held liable for hyperlinks to materials from foreign organizations deemed “undesirable.”^[60] Between June and November 2017, the government charged eight Russian organizations under the 2015 law on “undesirable organizations.” In all cases, the hyperlinks were posted prior to the banning of the foreign organizations. One example was an attempt to impose an administrative penalty on Russian extremism watchdog the SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis and its director Alexander Verkhovsky for hyperlinks to the National Endowment for Democracy and Open Society Foundations.^[61] The case was dismissed by the court.^[62] However, seven other organizations lost in court. In December 2017, Roskomnadzor stated that it considers hyperlinks to content from “undesirable organizations” as a means to distribute such content.^[63]

In February 2018, it was reported that Roskomnadzor was imposing penalties on certain regional telecom operators for using Google Global Cache, the servers of which increase the speed of access to Google resources. According to the agency, Russian operators cannot install or use these noncertified systems. Those that did not comply were fined approximately RUB 300,000 (US\$4,500),^[64] although the government

reportedly stopped imposing fines in spring 2018. Roskomnadzor first informed operators in September 2017 about uncertified Google Global Cache servers, referring to information received from the FSB.^[65]

In July 2017, members of the United Russia party proposed a bill aimed at combatting "fake news." The initial bill received much criticism, and a revised version was passed in a first reading in April 2018.^[66] The law would require webpages, including social media platforms, with over 100,000 visitors per day and comment sections to remove posts with inaccurate information within 24 hours of being notified.^[67] If the information is not removed, a fine of up to RUB 50 million (about US\$800,000) can be imposed. The legislation defines "inaccurate" information in a vague and broad way, allowing for politically motivated removals and threats to free expression. The bill also requests that tech companies that own major online platforms have a separate legal entity based in Russia. A second reading is scheduled for November 2018, however the bill has been criticized by Roskomnadzor officials and the Ministry of Digital Development.

Foreign companies do not always comply with the Russian authorities' demands to remove content. Twitter, according to its transparency report, complied with only 51 percent of 1,292 requests for content removal from July to December 2017. Russia is second to Turkey for having the most such requests to Twitter.^[68] During the same period, Facebook restricted access to 174 items that violated "laws related to extremism, self-harm, suicide promotion, and unauthorized disclosure of personally identifiable information" and one item relating to defamation.^[69] Google received 12,060 requests from the Russian government to restrict content in that timeframe and complied in 78 percent of cases. Of the requests, 51 percent were on national security grounds and 22 percent related to regulated goods and services.^[70]

There were at least two cases of content removal under "the right to be forgotten" during the reporting period. In July 2015, President Putin approved the law requiring search engines to remove links to false or outdated information about an individual.^[71] The petitioning individual must prove that the information warrants removal, though a court order is not required. In August 2017, a St. Petersburg court ordered internet company Yandex to remove search results regarding businessman Ilya Kligman.^[72] In another instance, a court ordered Yandex to remove links with information that it said defamed the dignity and business reputation of former minister of agriculture Elena Skrynnik.^[73] The SOVA Centre and RosKomSvoboda have unsuccessfully challenged the current application of the law in the Arbitration Court of the Moscow District.^[74] Yandex has also opposed the law, arguing that altering search results violates the constitutional right to seek, obtain, produce, and spread information.^[75]

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

As the space for independent print and broadcast media in Russia shrinks, online publications and social networks have become increasingly important platforms for critical expression and civic mobilization. Several online resources, including Google, Yandex, VKontakte (VK), YouTube, and Mail.ru, are more popular than the biggest television channels among younger urban audiences.^[76] Polls conducted in the first half of 2017 show the influence of video blogs in Russia. Between 20 and 25 percent of Russian adults watch video blog channels, and about 50 percent of Russians between the ages of 18 and 24 watch video bloggers.^[77]

While Russians are still able to access a wide variety of foreign sources, many independent online media outlets within Russia have been forced to shut down over recent years due to increasing government pressure. Self-censorship is encouraged by the vague wording of restrictive legislation, the seemingly arbitrary manner in which these laws are enforced, and the near-total ineffectiveness of judicial remedies.^[78] Laws prohibiting "extremist" content and the government's crackdown on certain media outlets have had a chilling effect on free expression, particularly on sensitive topics such as governance failures, corruption, the conflict in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, human rights violations, religion, and the LGBTI community. The new "Information Society Development Strategy" adopted in May 2017 directs officials to ensure that Russian "spiritual and cultural values" are represented in internet governance policy,^[79] potentially foreshadowing further censorship.

The 2015 data localization law mandates an expensive exercise to place Russian users' data on local servers, one that Russian authorities have haphazardly enforced. LinkedIn was blocked in Russia in November 2016 for failing to comply with data localization requirements (see Blocking and Filtering). Government officials

have indicated that larger foreign platforms, such as Facebook, could face a similar fate if they fail to comply with data localization rules (see Content Removal).^[80] Twitter told the government that they planned to localize Russian users' data in 2018.^[81]

Prior to the presidential election in March 2018, authorities ramped up pressure on Russian platforms to comply with restrictive legislation. LiveJournal, a popular Russian-owned blogging platform with approximately 15 million active monthly users,^[82] agreed to move its servers from the United States to Russia in December 2016 in compliance with the data localization law.^[83] Following the move, LiveJournal updated its terms of service, banning "political solicitation" on the platform, as well as content that violates Russian law.^[84]

In January 2018, Roskomnadzor blocked the Russian news site Russiangate three hours after it published an investigation into real estate holdings of the head of the FSB Alexander Bortnikov (see Blocking and Filtering). Russiangate subsequently shut down after losing funding from investors.^[85]

Russian authorities use paid commentators to influence online content. This issue came to international prominence following revelations that Russian trolls had attempted to influence the US presidential election in 2016 by manipulating discussions and disseminating fake news.^[86] Well before that controversy, however, journalistic investigations had revealed that a "troll factory," the Internet Research Agency located in St. Petersburg, stood at the center of coordinated Russian trolling activities, attacking both domestic and international targets.^[87] The trolling company has uploaded content to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, blog platform Tumblr, and meme website 9gag.^[88]

Domestically, Russian trolls have been observed commenting on news sites and on social media, zealously defending Putin while smearing his critics. They frequently interject to promote a Kremlin-friendly narrative in response to controversial topics, asserting, for example, that opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was killed by his own friends, not at the order of the Kremlin.^[89] Russian women have reported being subject to especially vicious, though less organized, trolling. An October 2017 *Wired* report^[90] revealed that Anna Zhavnerovich, a Moscow woman who was severely beaten in a domestic violence incident, was subjected to a deluge of incessant online harassment after publishing her story online. The abuse focused on her gender, and images of her bloodied face were transformed into memes celebrating violence against women that were widely circulated on online forums.

Onerous regulatory requirements and restrictive laws affecting online media have pushed some outlets to downsize, change owners, or exit the market altogether. Amendments to the Law on Mass Media that came into force in January 2016 prohibit foreign citizens and organizations from owning more than a 20 percent stake in a Russian media outlet. As a result, foreign media holdings have left Russia and, in some cases, transferred ownership to Russian entities.^[91] According to Roskomnadzor, 821 media outlets changed their shareholder structure following the legislation's introduction.^[92] For example, in 2015 German publishing house Axel Springer sold its Russian assets, including the Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine and website, to Aleksandr Fedotov, the owner of Artcom Media Group.^[93]

Authorities are increasingly using Russia's 2012 "foreign agents" law to smear organizations known to be critical of the government. The law, which was strongly opposed by Russian and international human rights organizations,^[94] requires NGOs that receive some foreign funding and engage in vaguely defined "political activities" in Russia to register as "foreign agents." In November 2017, President Putin signed a law "On Mass Media Outlets as Foreign Agents and Simplification of the Blocking of Websites of Undesirable Organizations."^[95] The legislation allows the government to designate media outlets receiving foreign funding as "foreign agents," thus requiring them to reveal their funding sources.^[96] Outlets now considered as foreign agents include *Voice of America*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, and local services of *RFE/RL*.^[97] These changes were reportedly in response to the United States naming *Russia Today* a foreign agent. In January, the State Duma was also considering amendments to the Code on Administrative Offenses that would impose fines for violating the law on Mass Media.^[98] In late May, the Ministry of Justice said it was ready to prosecute media outlets not complying with the latest amendments to the law.^[99]

In January 2018, the State Duma had a first reading of amendments to the "Law on Mass Media" and the "Federal Law on Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection."^[100] The amendments would require media outlets recognized as foreign agents to establish a local "legal entity" and ensure that any content published is labelled in accordance with their foreign agent status.^[101] If content is not accurately labeled, the website could be blocked. Additionally, individual journalists can be designated as foreign agents if they directly or indirectly receive funding from foreign organizations or countries.^[102]

A May 2015 law allowed the government to designate foreign organizations as "undesirable," barring the dissemination of information from them (see Content Removal). Individuals and smaller, independent outlets have been affected by the 2014 "Bloggers' Law," which requires sites with 3,000 or more daily visitors to register as mass media outlets. Such registration means bloggers can no longer remain anonymous and are held legally responsible for the content posted on their site, including comments made by third parties.

Russian users can still access critical content online, but independent Russian outlets are increasingly publishing from abroad due to the repressive environment at home.

Digital Activism

Despite continued government pressure, the internet remains the most versatile and effective tool for activism in the country, hosting frequent efforts to confront state propaganda, fight corruption, and organize protests.

Following the government's efforts to block Telegram, thousands took to the streets across the country against the restrictions and against internet censorship more broadly.^[103] The unregistered Libertarian Party of Russia organized an April 30 rally in Moscow that over 12,000 people attended. #Digitalresistance was used during the protests on Twitter,^[104] while Navalny livestreamed the rally on his YouTube channel.^[105] Prior to the demonstration, all Russian Telegram users received a message from the app's founder, Pavel Durov, urging them to participate in order to change the course of Russian history.^[106] On May 13 in Moscow, a broad coalition of opposition parties and organizations organized another demonstration against Telegram's blocking. Approximately 2,400 people attended.^[107]

During the reporting period, Durov announced the start of a "Digital Resistance," a decentralized movement to support digital rights.^[108] Digital resistance communities online remain small, with only a few group and pages on Telegram, Twitter, and Russian social media site VK.^[109] However, the movement gained more followers after Telegram was blocked, and Durov vowed in April that he would donate millions of dollars of his own money for the effort.

In July 2017, approximately 1,000 people demonstrated in Moscow against increasing online repression and for the exoneration of people arrested for their online activity, including video blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky and a mathematician detained for allegedly advocating terrorism online (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).^[110] The protesters chanted "Truth is stronger than censorship" and "Free country, free internet." At least three were reportedly arrested.^[111]

A month later, in August, there were multiple demonstrations in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and several other cities in support of internet freedom. Demonstrators again rallied against online censorship and legal restrictions, and called for the release of those jailed for online activity.^[112] During the demonstration in Moscow, more than 10 people were arrested.^[113]

Opposition politician and activist Navalny, who actively uses the internet to organize rallies and publish results of anticorruption investigations, continues to be a popular source for information on corruption. As of June 2018, over 2.1 million people were subscribed to his YouTube channel.^[114]

Violations of User Rights:

In recent years, Russian authorities have substantially restricted user rights by passing laws that increase penalties for expression online while expanding the government's access to personal data. More social media users than ever before have been arrested for voicing dissent and many face lengthy prison sentences. The government has increasingly passed laws restricting anonymity online, and broad antiterrorism legislation compels service providers to grant authorities access to encrypted communications.

Legal Environment

Although the constitution grants the right to free speech, this right is routinely violated, and there are no special laws protecting online expression. Online journalists do not possess the same rights as traditional journalists unless they register their websites as mass media. Russia remains a member of the Council of Europe and a party to the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which enshrines the right to freedom of expression. However, over the past few years, the country has adopted a set of laws and other acts that, coupled with repressive law enforcement and judicial systems, have eroded freedom of expression in practice. Courts tend to side with the executive authorities, refusing to apply provisions of the constitution and international treaties that protect the basic rights of journalists and internet users.

In July 2016, the Russian government introduced some of the harshest legislative amendments in post-Soviet Russia. Collectively known as Yarovaya Law, they altered nearly a dozen laws with wide ramifications for internet freedom.^[115] The changes introduced prison terms of up to seven years for publicly calling for or justifying terrorism online.^[116] The harsh penalties and broad wording of the offenses open the door to abuse, namely the criminalization of legitimate, nonviolent expression on the internet.

Penalties for extremism were increased in 2014 with the passage of a series of amendments to the criminal code. The maximum punishment for online incitement to separatism or calls for extremism was set at five years in prison,^[117] while that for incitement to hatred was set at six years.^[118] In addition, the mere opening of a criminal case could serve as a basis for the inclusion of the accused on a list of extremists maintained by the Federal Financial Monitoring Service. Individuals on this list are restricted from certain professions, and their bank accounts can be frozen, even if they have not been convicted.

Russia's definition of extremism is particularly broad. Russia penalizes expression that is not necessarily abusive or discriminatory in nature.^[119] Moreover, the interpretation of extremism has expanded to include not only incitement of national, racial, or religious enmity, or humiliation of national dignity, but also propaganda of exceptionalism, superiority, or inferiority of citizens on grounds of their religion, nationality, or race, and public justification of terrorism.

Russian users may also be prosecuted under a host of older laws in the criminal code that can be applied to online speech. Russian law establishes penalties for general defamation (Article 128.1 of the criminal code), defamation against a judge or prosecutor (Article 298.1), insulting the authorities (Article 319), calls for terrorism (Article 205.1), insulting religious feelings (Article 148), calls for extremism (Article 280), calls for separatism (Article 280.1), and incitement of hatred (Article 282). The law also proscribes spreading false information on the activities of the Soviet Union in World War II (Article 354.1), displaying Nazi symbols or symbols of organizations deemed extremist (Article 20.3 of the administrative code), and the dissemination of extremist materials (Article 20.29 of the administrative code).

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Criminal charges are widely used in Russia to stifle critical discussion online. Individuals have been targeted for their posts on social media, including reposts. Most arrests within the coverage period fell under Article 282 ("actions aimed at inciting hate or enmity"), Article 280 ("public calls for extremist activity"), and Article 280.1 ("public calls for actions aimed at violating the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation") of the criminal code.

The total number of criminal cases related to internet activity or real threats of criminal charges being brought increased in 2017 to 411 compared with 298 in 2016.^[120] Over the past 10 years, there have been 1,449 criminal cases or threats of charges being brought in connection with online activity, including 98 sentences requiring imprisonment.^[121] An annual report from the SOVA Centre found that 96 percent of sentences for "extremism" in 2017 related to content posted online.^[122] In the first six months of 2018, there were 762 "extremism" cases, many of which related to online activity.^[123]

- On January 30, 2018, math teacher Dmitry Bogatov was released from house arrest.^[124] He was originally charged in April 2017 with inciting mass disorder and making public calls for terrorism. The charges related to two comments on an online forum made by a user with Bogatov's IP address. One

comment called on protesters to bring improvised weapons to a demonstration, and the other linked to a Kanye West video clip that depicts protesters attacking police with Molotov cocktails. Bogatov maintained that he did not post the comments, and insisted that, because he uses the Tor anonymity network, his IP address could have been shared by other users within the network.^[125]

- In August 2017, Alexander Sokolov, an investigative journalist for RBC,^[126] was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for "extremism."^[127] He was originally detained in July 2015 for alleged involvement in a banned left-wing movement. He denies the charge, claiming that he is being punished for his reporting, which has included anticorruption investigations. Sokolov stresses that the case against him was opened soon after he defended his PhD dissertation about corruption within corporations Rosatom, Rostech, Rosnano, and Olympstroy.^[128]
- Sofiko Arifdzhanova, a journalist with the online outlet OtkrytayaRossiya (Open Russia), was fined 10 thousand rubles in June 2017.^[129] She was first detained after she reported on anticorruption protests in March 2017. She was one of 17 journalists arrested across the country during the demonstrations.^[130]
- In June 2017, the Kaluga District Court sentenced Roman Grishin to 320 hours of forced labor on charges of inciting ethnic hatred under part 1 of Article 282 of the criminal code. Grishin shared a video on his VK page that included a song called "A new hit from Kharkov! This is Russism, baby" The song contains criticism of Russia's actions in Ukraine.^[131]
- In November 2017, the Petrogradsky District Court of St. Petersburg convicted Anatoly Pleshanov to a year suspended sentence under part 1 of Article 282. Pleshanov was charged because of his comments on VK in the group "Konakovo and Konakovskiy district" on August 11, 2014. His post was critical of Ukrainians who move to Russia, as well as on the annexation of Crimea.^[132]

Russian authorities displayed an increasing intolerance for critical expression about religion, particularly any expression that could undermine the Russian Orthodox Church. Several social media users have been prosecuted for violating the 2013 law criminalizing public actions that "insult believers' religious feelings."^[133]

- Ruslan Sokolovsky, a blogger from Yekaterinburg, was convicted of inciting religious hatred and insulting believers' religious feelings in May 2017 after posting a YouTube video of himself playing the popular gaming app Pokémon Go in a Russian Orthodox Church. The judge, declaring that Sokolovsky's video disrespected society and offended religious sentiments, handed down a three-and-a-half-year suspended sentence. Sokolovsky said he would have likely been sentenced to prison if not for the significant media interest in the case.^[134]
- In September 2017, musician Daniil Sukachev was fined RUB 30,000 after being found guilty of desecrating sacred objects. Sukachev posted to his VK page a video with a song by the Polish black metal band Batushka. The video included images of Orthodox worship edited with special effects.^[135]

A number of Russians have been charged in relation to satirical memes, often connected to religion, shared on social media.

- 19-year-old student Daniil Markin was charged with inciting hate speech for images posted on his VK page, including a picture likening *Game of Thrones* character Jon Snow to Jesus Christ with the caption "Jon Snow is risen!"^[136] Police raided his home and seized his computer in July 2017 and the trial began in July 2018.^[137] Markin faces up to five years in prison, and he has already been placed on the government's extremism list, which restricts access to his bank accounts.^[138]
- Maria Motuznaya faces up to six years in prison on extremism and hate speech charges for memes she posted, including one with nuns smoking cigarettes. The police searched her apartment in May 2018 and her trial was expected to begin in August 2018.^[139] The government has included her on its extremist registry.^[140]
- Andrei Shasherin was charged with inciting hatred and "insulting believers' religious sensibilities" for images posted on VK.^[141] In March 2018, police raided his home and detained him; he was pressured

to confess to sharing images with "malicious intent," a statement that he later recanted. Shasherin has also been placed on the extremist list.

- In August 2018, after the reporting period, journalist and activist Oyumaa Dongak was charged for inciting hatred for an image^[142] shared four years previously comparing Nazi Germany with the Soviet era.^[143]

LGBTI activists have been punished under Russia's law against promoting "nontraditional sexual relations" for their expression and activism online.

- Yevdokiya Romanova, an LGBTI activist, was found guilty of "spreading propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships among minors on the internet" in October 2017 after she shared information on Facebook about the Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, a group that advocates for access to information about health and sexuality. Romanova was fined RUB 50,000 (US\$865).^[144]

During the May protests against Putin's inauguration, more than 1,600 people were detained.^[145] The authorities charged 28 people from Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation with inciting riots, using their tweets and retweets as evidence.^[146] Many were fined, while some were sentenced to 30 days in prison.

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Russian lawmakers have continued to enact legislation giving authorities ever-increasing powers to conduct intrusive surveillance. In the year leading up to the March 2018 presidential election, the parliament also passed laws that erode opportunities for anonymous activity online.

A law that calls for the blocking of VPN services that allow access to banned content was adopted in July 2017.^[147] VPNs that agree to restrict their clients' access to websites deemed illegal will not be blocked. The government, however, has had difficulty limiting VPNs in practice, as most services have refused to comply with or have ignored the law.^[148] In response to this, the State Duma passed amendments to the administrative code in a second reading in May 2018 that impose fines on both VPNs and search engines for providing access to prohibited sites.^[149] Prior to these pieces of legislation, VPN provider *Private Internet Access* decided to pull out of the country in July 2016 after some of its servers were seized by authorities; it had refused to log user activity as required by Yarovaya Law.^[150] Authorities have haphazardly blocked smaller VPN services (see Blocking and Filtering). Separately,

In January 2018, an amendment to the Law on Information, Information Technology and Information Security went into force. Originally adopted in July 2017, the law prohibits social media and communication platforms from letting users remain anonymous.^[151] Platforms must connect user accounts with their phone numbers, effectively linking online activity with their real identity.^[152] The government has had difficulty with the law's implementation.^[153]

Courts have also blocked anonymity tools at the behest of regional prosecutors. For example, in March 2018, a prosecutor's office in the Kirov region found 10 anonymous websites that were making drug-related content accessible. The Perm Kirovsky District Court ordered the IP addresses blocked.^[154]

Russian lawmakers have also sought to limit the privacy safeguards of encryption. The package of antiterrorism amendments passed in July 2016, known as Yarovaya Law, mandates that online services offering encryption assist the FSB with decoding encrypted data. Though this is an impossible task for many service providers – those, for example, that use end-to-end encryption – companies that fail to cooperate could face a RUB 1 million fine (US\$15,000). The Electronic Frontier Foundation has suggested that the impossibility of full compliance is a deliberate feature of the law, giving Russian authorities great leverage over the affected companies.^[155] Yarovaya Law also gives the authorities increased access to user data by requiring telecoms and "organizers of information distribution on the internet" to store the content of users' online communications – including text, video, and audio communications – for up to six months, while metadata must be stored for up to three years in the case of telecoms and one year in the case of the other entities, such as websites and apps. Russian authorities will have access to this data without a court order.^[156] Some of the law's provisions concerning data storage went into effect in July 2018, after the reporting period.^[157]

The FSB and Roskomnadzor continue to include Russian and foreign websites and platforms in the Register of Information-Dissemination Organizers.^[158] Once a website or platform is included on the registry, it must begin to collect, store, and provide users' metadata to the Russian authorities.^[159]

The data localization law enacted in September 2015 requires foreign companies that possess Russian citizens' personal data to store their servers on Russian territory, potentially enabling easier access for security services.^[160] Some foreign companies, such as Uber and Viber,^[161] have reportedly moved to comply with the law. The blogging platform LiveJournal, which is Russian owned but was founded in the United States, transferred its servers from the United States to Russia in December 2016, sparking concerns about censorship and privacy on the platform (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).

The Russian government employs SORM, or "system for operational investigative measures," for its online surveillance activities. Under current legislation, in order to receive an operating license, ISPs are required to install technology that allows security services to monitor internet traffic. ISPs that do not comply with SORM system requirements are promptly fined and may lose their licenses if problems persist. The current version, SORM-3, uses deep packet inspection technology, enhancing the ability of the security services to monitor content on all telecommunications networks in Russia. SORM has been used for political purposes in the past, including the targeting of opposition leaders. In a November 2012 Supreme Court case involving Maksim Petlin, an opposition leader in the city of Yekaterinburg, the court upheld the government's right to eavesdrop on Petlin's phone conversations because he had taken part in "extremist activities," namely antigovernment protests.

Russian authorities are technically required to obtain a court order before accessing an individual's electronic communications data. However, the authorities are not required to show the warrant to ISPs or telecom providers, and FSB officers have direct access to operators' servers through local control centers. Experts note that there is no information about government efforts to punish security officers who abuse their power.^[162] ISPs and mobile providers are required to grant network access to law enforcement agencies conducting search operations and to turn over other information requested by the Prosecutor General's Office, the Interior Ministry, the FSB, or the Investigative Committee.

Intimidation and Violence

Attacks on journalists are relatively common in Russia, and authorities display a lack of will to meaningfully investigate instances of violence. In its 2017 report,^[163] the human rights group Agora marked the increase in violence against journalists and bloggers. More than 60 people were threatened or attacked, some of them repeatedly, because of their online activity. In 29 cases, the assailants were identified as police officers or local administrators. In 24 cases, the attackers remained unknown. For example, in August 2017, *Znak.com* correspondent Ekaterina Vinokurova received death threats on her Facebook page after her article on the Orthodox activists' campaign against the movie *Matilda*.^[164]

In April 2018, investigative journalist Maksim Borodin, who reported for the independent news website *Novy Den*, was found unconscious after falling from his balcony.^[165] He later died in the hospital and police treated his death as either an accident or suicide. *Novy Den's* editor-in-chief denied that Borodin's death was by suicide.^[166] Borodin previously reported on sensitive topics including corruption, the prison system, and, most recently, the deaths of secret Russian military contractors in Syria. A number of NGOs have called for a full investigation into his death.^[167]

Previous attacks in Russia have not been investigated. For example, the murder of journalist Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev has been unsolved for more than four years, and the murder of journalist Gadzhimurad Kamalov has been unsolved for over seven years. In March 2017, the Investigative Committee of Russia refused to open a criminal case related to the beating of photographer David Frenkel while he was at the 78th police department of St. Petersburg.^[168]

Yelena Milashina, a journalist working for the independent newspaper and website *Novaya Gazeta*, was subjected to a campaign of threats after publishing an investigation about the systematic abuse and murder of gay men in Chechnya.^[169] After the piece was published, religious clerics in Chechnya delivered a sermon calling for violent retribution against Milashina and other journalists. The sermon, read out in a mosque in the regional capital, Grozny, was broadcast on state television. Shortly afterward, *Novaya Gazeta* received

envelopes in the mail containing an unidentified white powder.^[170] Milashina has since fled Russia amid increasing threats to her safety.^[171]

In May 2017, Dmitriy Popkov, editor in chief of the local newspaper and online outlet *Ton-M* in Minusinsk, was shot and killed in his home by unidentified assailants. Popkov was known for his critical reporting on corruption and abuse of power in the city and its region.^[172]

Technical Attacks

Cyberattacks against independent media, blogs, and news portals continue to inhibit Russian internet users' ability to access such sites.

In October 2017, the websites of several websites and media outlets – including *Interfax*, *Fontanka.Ru*, and *Novaya Gazeta* – experienced powerful attacks from the badrabbit virus.^[173] The virus hit nearly 200 targets in Russia and also affected sites in Ukraine, Germany, and Turkey.^[174] Also in October 2017, the website of the popular Russian news source *The Village* was subjected to a large-scale DDoS attack.^[175]

Election officials reported that on March 17, 2018, the night before the presidential election, the website of the National Public Monitoring, an independent network that tracks up-to-date information on violations in the presidential electoral process, experienced a DDoS attack.^[176] Officials claimed that the attack was sourced to 15 countries,^[177] but others have seriously questioned the alleged attack's authenticity and suggested that it feeds into the government's narrative that foreign powers want to influence Russian elections.^[178]

In recent years, dozens of Russian civil society activists and journalists have been notified of attempts to compromise their accounts online, including Telegram and Gmail accounts, suggesting a coordinated campaign to access their private information. The pro-Russian "hacktivist" group CyberBerkut has been known to target Kremlin critics, leaking private information it obtained using phishing tactics. A May 2017 report by Citizen Lab found that personal files belonging to David Satter, an American journalist and author who has published books critical of the Kremlin, were stolen and leaked on CyberBerkut's blog. The documents had been modified in an attempt to create the appearance that opposition activists, including Navalny, were paid by foreign governments.^[179]

In February 2018, Putin signed a decree that gave the Federal Security Service power to fight cyberattacks and to protect the personal data of individuals and their families who are under state protections.^[180]

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