

Russian President Putin introduces widespread state monitoring of the Internet

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Russia's acting President Vladimir Putin has substantially strengthened the rights of the secret services and granted them extensive monitoring powers over the media, including the Internet.

At the beginning of January, Putin put a law into effect that grants eight different security authorities direct access to all Internet transactions. Beside the domestic secret service FSB, other agencies given access to Internet monitoring include the tax police; the Interior Ministry; the border guard; the customs committee; the security agencies of the Kremlin, the president and parliament, as well as the foreign intelligence agency.

The FSB had already forced all Russian Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to provide cable links to the secret service at their own expense. This not only establishes unrestricted control over Internet access, but also cuts off smaller ISPs that cannot pay the cost of the hook-up to the FSB. The remaining large providers can be more easily controlled, not infrequently they belong to the financial oligarchs that stand close to the Kremlin anyway.

Officially, Internet monitoring is said to aid the fight against widespread crime and corruption. The electronic bugging system carries the name "Sorm," the Russian acronym for "Rapid Investigation System". In reality it is being used as a means of censorship. This can clearly be seen from the fate of a report dealing with corruption accusations against Putin, stemming from the time when he was the right hand man of the St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak. The report, which was disseminated by an Internet Service Provider called *Lenta*, disappeared without trace after a few hours.

Television and newspapers are also being subjected to intensified censorship. The private station NTV, whose reporting is generally patriotic and quite friendly towards the government, was excluded from all organised journeys for journalists to Chechnya, after it dared to question the official numbers of Russian soldiers killed. Based on interviews with employees in military hospitals and railway officials, NTV concluded that the actual number was about ten times higher than officially admitted. Pavel Borodin, a key figure in Kremlin corruption scandals, who has since become under-secretary for the Union with White Russia, even threatened to have NTV closed down.

The journalist Alexander Chinstein, who had accused Kremlin financier Boris Berezovsky on Moscow television station *TV Zentr* of secret complicity with Chechen separatist leaders, was visited afterwards by armed militiamen wanting to commit him to a psychiatric hospital. The pretext was the claim that Chinstein had acquired his driving licence without a psychological certificate.

The strengthening of Kremlin control over the media was also accomplished by a decree by Putin placing the payment of state subsidies for local newspapers under the control of the Press Ministry in Moscow. Previously it was local government that had been responsible for it. Officially, this is supposed to end the power of provincial governors over the press. In fact, the papers are simply being placed at the mercy of central government, which can determine who will be supported or not.

Putin's efforts to bring the media into line are more than a tactical manoeuvre to secure his victory in the forthcoming presidential election on March 26. Since the former secret service man stepped into the political limelight, he has continually stressed that he regards his most important function as the stabilisation of the state apparatus-the police, army and secret services.

"For Russians, a strong state is not an anomaly that must be eliminated," he wrote in an article published at the end of last year on the web site of the Russian government. "Quite the opposite, they regard it as a source and guarantor of order, and as an initiator and main driving force of every change."

Putin appeals to the authoritarian and chauvinist traditions that made Tsarist Russia a symbol of reaction throughout Europe. In this, he receives the support of those sections of the Russian intelligentsia who went into raptures about Gorbachev at the end of the 1980s. This layer, which enthused over neo-liberal economics at the beginning of the 1990s, lost not only their illusions in Western capitalism with the financial crash of 1998, but also the major part of their fortunes. Now they rouse themselves for Russian values and greatness, and crowd around the new master in the Kremlin, the prospective election winner of March 26.

The Moscow correspondent of the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Kerstin Holm, described this "eerie play" as follows: "In Russia, a feverish movement is collecting

around the desired successor to Yeltsin. Since his election victory at the end of March seems already decided, politicians from across the entire spectrum—including political opponents of the past, even allegedly ideologically incompatible communists, and stars of cultural life and the intelligentsia—are hurrying to pay homage to the new ruler, so that they may one day stand close to his throne."

With Putin, a man has reached the pinnacle of the Russian state whose actions and thinking are marked in every regard by the police mentality of the professional informer. It brings to mind Joseph Fouché, who in the revolutionary France first served the Jacobins as police chief, then the Thermidorians, Napoleon and in the end the Bourbons—with the difference that Putin never came into contact with the revolution.

Putin operated for fifteen years as a foreign agent for the Soviet secret service KGB. Between 1998 and 1999 he headed the FSB, the KGB's successor. Today, he openly admits to this past with pride, even though the KGB was responsible for the worst crimes in Soviet history and murdered hundreds of thousands of the political opponents of Stalinism. In his New Year speech, Putin promised to extend the power of the secret services even further.

The Russian journalist Dmitri Furman pointed out that it is no coincidence that a former KGB man has become the saviour of the criminal elite gathered around the Yeltsin family. Professional conditions inside the KGB, he writes, called on its employees to possess abilities that are also characteristic of the Mafia: The secret service occupied itself with bugging, covert surveillance, intimidation, extortion, theft and murder. The KGB developed its own values. The professionalism of an agent concerned the question of whether a matter was carried out well or badly, and this was more important than whether the matter itself was good or bad.

Putin's professional and political career is marked by numerous scandals, which have always remained in the dark and were never completely cleared up. As a KGB agent in Germany, he recruited agents, spied upon and blackmailed Western visitors to the Leipzig trade fair.

At the beginning of the 1990s, he began his political career in St. Petersburg, and under Anatoly Sobchak rapidly ascended to become his right-hand man. Responsible for foreign trade matters, he maintained close relations with Western enterprises and was by no means unselfish in his actions. The head of the town council, Alexander Belyayev, accused him of spying inside the foreign trade committee, gathering information about companies that he then sold to foreign competitors. He was also accused of violating the privatisation laws in the sale of a five-star hotel, and of abusing his official position to conduct illegal trade. Finally, in order to avoid legal action for the theft of state property, Putin's sponsor Sobchak fled to Paris. Putin helped Sobchak get away and then moved himself to Moscow.

Putin was also involved in numerous scandals there. As head of the FSB, he played a key role in suppressing the corruption

and money laundering scandals around the Yeltsin family and their financier Boris Berezovsky. The FSB produced a video showing the Attorney General Yuri Skuratov, responsible for conducting the investigation into the Yeltsin scandal, with two prostitutes. According to reports in the Russian press, the house where the incriminating video was made was also used personally by Putin.

The Chechnya war finally created the conditions under which this modern Fouché could ascend to the apex of government. Here also, it seems there was far more political planning and preparation in play than might appear at first sight.

In Moscow, rumours persist that the bloody bombings of Russian homes, which fundamentally changed the climate in Russia overnight and boosted the mood of support for the war in the general population, were committed by the FSB. Without providing any proof, the government made "Chechen terrorists" responsible for the explosions and thus justified the attack on Chechnya.

A recent interview by Sergei Stepachin, Putin's predecessor as Prime Minister, with the press agency *Interfax*, acknowledged the suspicions that the long hand of Russia had prepared the Chechnya war. According to Stepachin, President Yeltsin and the government had already decided in March last year—long before the invasion of Chechen separatists into Dagestan and the bombings in Russia—on a military intervention.

The invasion should have taken place in August. However, only a "security zone" up to the river Terek was to be occupied and individual Chechen separatist guerrilla camps taken out. An attack on the capital Grozny and the conquest of all Chechnya were not planned.

The German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented on the interview with the words: "Stepachin's utterances, rejected by prominent military figures as untrue, are explosive. Some Russian and international observers suspect that Moscow regarded the military campaign mainly as a means of making the Kremlin popular again and to facilitate the installation of an acceptable successor to Yeltsin."

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the Chechen assault on Dagestan that had preceded Russia's attack on Chechnya is also "placed in another light following Stepachin's interview: Possibly, the rebels were trying to disturb Russian preparations to establish a new front for their invasion. And in fact the Russian army only invaded Chechnya at the beginning of October, after weeks of fighting in Dagestan."



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