Kremlin steps up internet censorship

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On July 22, the State Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament) passed (306 votes to 67) in its third reading a law imposing fines for searching the internet for what the Kremlin classifies as "extremist material" and advertising VPN services. Virtual private networks (VPN) hide users' IP and thus enable people to access sites and apps that are otherwise banned. Many sites and encrypted messaging services in Russia, such as Signal, are no longer accessible without VPNs.

The bill is expected to be signed into law by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The bill means that if a user "deliberately" searches for "extremist material," they face administrative liability with all possible fines. The list of "extremist materials" includes neo-Nazi and radical Islamist literature, as well as literature by figures associated with the NATO-backed liberal opposition and generally critical of the war. The list, which has been significantly expanded in recent years, now includes more than 5,500 items.

Based on the bill, law enforcement agencies must prove that the user is doing this intentionally and did not come across the material by accident. This raises questions: How will the Russian secret service, the FSB, and the police "obtain evidence"? How will users be able to remember all 5,500 prohibited materials, the list of which is constantly being arbitrarily expanded and now includes many materials critical of the war in Ukraine?

The new law allows for increased pressure on anyone who does not "cooperate" with the authorities in providing information about users of VPN services and internet providers. Telecommunications operators, internet providers, and VPN service administrators will be required not to disclose information about their interactions with the state, otherwise they will face fines of millions of dollars.

For ordinary users, this means virtually no privacy in their online lives. Moreover, the constant updating of the list of extremist materials makes it possible to ban content that has long been publicly available and widely popular. In effect, this means virtually unlimited possibilities for restricting what remains of internet freedom in Russia.

Before the third reading, State Duma Deputy Speaker and leader of the New People party Vladislav Davankov conducted a poll on his Telegram channel about the new law. Seventy-five percent of participants voted against the law. A total of 430,000 people voted, which is impressive given that the poll was created just one day before the State Duma session. The results of the vote and Davankov's speech against the law did not convince Putin's party (United Russia) to reject the law. In the end, the misnamed "people's deputies" passed the reactionary law, clearly opposing themselves to the majority of the population.

The adoption of this extremely unpopular new law comes amid an increasingly fierce proxy war against NATO in Ukraine and economic stagnation in the country. Under conditions of growing social discontent and opposition to the war, it marks another step by Putin's regime to increase censorship and deprive them of all opportunities to obtain alternative information in the future.

The tightening of internet censorship in Russia has a long history. Back in 2012, a law on "blacklists" was passed, which created a register of websites that violate Russian law. In 2016, the Yarovaya laws were passed, requiring telecommunications operators and internet companies to store user metadata for three years. This metadata must be handed over to the authorities upon request, without a court order.

In effect, all these laws have allowed the authorities to begin building up their internet control apparatus. The general rehearsal for the use of the new technology took place in 2018, when a decision was made to ban

the popular messaging app Telegram, due to its unwillingness to comply with the authorities. In the end, the censors had to back down, partly because of mass discontent and partly because of the imperfection of their own blocking technology.

In the years leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian state further improved its ability to block and monitor the internet. Just before the beginning of the war, the news agencies Meduza and Dozhd, which are both associated with the NATO-backed liberal opposition in the oligarchy, were blocked. Since the start of the war, Putin's regime has banned Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, Signal, Discord, and slowed down YouTube. Amazon Web Services, an important cloud service for the IT industry, was also blocked. Starting in 2023, the blocking of popular VPN services intensified, and laws related to VPNs began to be tightened.

Most recently, the popular internet speed tester SpeedTest was blocked. The bitter irony is that SpeedTest was blocked just after a series of obvious failures of the Russian internet. At one point, the internet disappeared or slowed down dramatically in almost every region of the country. According to Sboy.rf, in the first month of 2025 alone, there were at least 195,000 complaints about mobile internet outages. This compares to 431,000 complaints in all of 2024.

The adoption of the new VPN law is only an intermediate step by the Putin regime to restrict the information space for the working class and the laboring masses. We must expect further intensification of censorship and attacks on the most basic democratic rights of the working class.

Most recently, the Kremlin has also floated a ban of WhatsApp, one of the few Western apps still available in Russia without a VPN. For many, it is an important means of communication, including with friends and family abroad.

It should be noted that the issue of internet censorship is not only one of basic democratic rights. It also has a major socioeconomic dimension.

By blocking numerous messengers, services, applications, and websites that are important for coordinating production, design, and development, the Kremlin is worsening economic chaos in the country, which no "domestic means" of development can resolve. In fact, censorship leads to the further isolation and decay of the economic foundations of Russian capitalism, threatening huge social disasters for the Russian working class.

Moreover, the efforts to restrict the internet for ordinary users forces the Russian oligarchy to invest huge amounts of money and resources in strengthening internet censorship, which could be spent on healthcare and education — areas where the oligarchy has made major cuts. This poses the same fundamental question for Russian workers as the working class of every country today: the question of who controls the social and economic resources and who has state power.

As long as Russia is ruled by a class of billionaire gangsters who are living off the export of raw materials and profiting from the war in Ukraine, while seeking to strike a deal with imperialism, workers are confronted with an existential threat. Through its bankrupt policies, the oligarchy is, in fact, contributing in every way to the ruin of the country and the outbreak of a third world war.

Major class battles are ahead. The extreme intensification of censorship in Russia is part of the preparations by the Russian oligarchy for these struggles. For the working class, this poses the need to develop an international socialist strategy to carry out the revolution in Russia, the former Soviet Union, and other countries around the world. This strategy cannot be built without learning the lessons of the past, including the October Revolution of 1917, the two world wars, Stalinism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the globalization of production.

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