New Russian Law Gives Government Sweeping Power Over Internet

Demonstrators protest at a Free Internet rally in Moscow in March. A new law takes effect on Friday that could restrict Internet access. -Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP

A Russian law has taken effect that, in theory, would allow the Russian government to cut off the country's Internet from the rest of the world.

The "sovereign Internet law," as the government calls it, greatly enhances the Kremlin's control over the Web. It was passed earlier this year and allows Russia's government to cut off the Internet completely or from traffic outside Russia "in an emergency," as the BBC reported. But some of the applications could be more subtle, like the ability to block a single post.

It requires Internet service providers to install software that can "track, filter, and reroute internet traffic," as Human Rights Watch stated. Such technology allows the state telecommunications watchdog "to independently and extrajudicially block access to content that the government deems a threat."

The equipment would conduct what's known as "deep packet inspection," an advanced way to filter network traffic.

Such widespread control is alarming to human rights groups, which fear it could be used to silence dissent.

"Now the government can directly censor content or even turn Russia's Internet into a closed system without telling the public what they are doing or why," Rachel Denber, Human Rights Watch's deputy Europe and Central Asia director, said in a statement. "This jeopardizes the right of people in Russia to free speech and freedom of information online."

The Russian government has justified the law by saying it is needed to prevent U.S. cyberattacks. And, as the BBC reported, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has rejected the idea the law could be used to cut off Russia from the rest of the world: "No-one is suggesting cutting the Internet."

Regardless of what the government intends, some experts think it would be technically difficult for Russia to actually close its network if it wanted to, because of the sheer number of its international connections.

"What I found was that there were dozens of existing Internet exchange points in Russia, some of which have hundreds of participants — so hundreds of networks coming together there to exchange traffic," says David Belson, senior director of Internet Research & Analysis at Internet Society. Many of them are international network providers, he says, so "basically it's challenging — if not impossible, I think — to completely isolate the Russian Internet."

Belson says that the requirement for Internet service providers to install tracking software will very likely also be challenging in practice. He adds that it will be difficult to get hundreds of providers to deploy it and hard to coordinate that they're all filtering the same content. And blocking certain content could have "collateral damage" — effects that the government hasn't foreseen.

And how will this law ultimately change how Russians use the Internet? "It's not clear," Belson says. "There could be no change." Or, Russians may begin having difficulty accessing certain sites or be redirected to other sites when they request ones that are blocked.

Internet freedom has been on the decline in Russia for at least six years, according to Freedom House. Last year the government tried to block the messaging app Telegram and cracked down on virtual private networks, which encrypt Internet traffic.

Correction
In a previous version of this story, we misquoted David Belson of the Internet Society as saying that he found hundreds of Internet exchange points in Russia. Belson actually said he has found dozens of exchange points.