# Russia wants to unplug its internet from the rest of the world. Is that even possible?



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting during a visit to the Interior Ministry in Moscow, Russia, on Feb. 28. (Alexei Nikolsky / Associated Press)

Russian lawmakers want to tighten the screws on Russia's internet access by creating an "sovereign" network that the Kremlin could shut off from the greater World Wide Web.

Proponents of a bill now working its way through the Russian parliament say passing the measure will protect the country's internet from foreign cyberattacks or other threats.

But international human rights groups and opponents say the law is an attempt to create a firewall around Russia's internet and restrict information flow. The law's introduction has drawn comparisons to China's restrictive Great Firewall.

Technology experts say beyond the concerns about freedom of information, even if the measure passes, it's unclear whether Russia would be able to build the technical infrastructure to pull it off.

**What does the law propose?**

The bill proposes routing all Russian internet and data through a central point controlled by the state. To make that happen, Russian internet service providers would have to install specialized equipment to monitor web traffic and block banned content. Theoretically, this would allow the government to cut off the Russian internet, sometimes called Runet, from the rest of the global network.

The law would grant more powers to Roskomnadzor, the Kremlin's federal censor, so it could oversee the government-ordered banning of websites and shutdowns.

The legislation calls also for the creation of a domestic Domain Name System, or DNS, which theoretically would give websites autonomy from the rest of the

global net.

## Why does Russia need a 'sovereign' internet?

Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2014 claimed the internet was created as a CIA project. (It was actually created by researchers at the U.S. Department of Defense.) It was the first time Putin hinted at the idea of building a purely Russian-run system to counter what the Kremlin sees as the West's dominance in the cyber world.

Since then, the U.S. has accused Russia of trying to interfere in the 2016 elections by hacking into the Democratic National Committee computers and spreading disinformation online, a claim the Kremlin has vehemently denied.

Moscow now fears the increasing tensions between Russia and the West could extend into cyberspace. Lawmakers backing the sovereign internet bill said it is needed to prepare the country should the U.S. or another foreign, hostile entity launch a cyberattack.

This is not a purely hypothetical fear. Last month, the Washington Post reported that the U.S. Cyber Command hacked into and temporarily disconnected the infamous St. Petersburg internet troll factory around the time of the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. A U.S. grand jury indicted the troll farm, the Internet Research Agency, in 2018 for conducting an influence campaign on behalf of the Kremlin during the 2016 election.

Putin on Feb. 20 threw his weight behind the bill, which is being heard again in the Russian parliament this month.

"They are sitting over there — this is their invention after all — and they're listening, watching and reading everything you say, and they're storing all this information," Putin told Interfax news agency, when asked why Russia needs the new internet legislation. "In general, the more sovereignty we have, including in the digital sphere, the better."

## Can Russia's internet really be cut off from the rest of the world?

Critics of the bill say that even if it passes — and it looks like it will — Russia will face several obstacles to enforcing the law.

It took China at least 10 years to build its Great Firewall, as its internet filtering system is known, said Karen Kazaryan, the general director of the Internet Research Institute, an analytical and consulting group in Moscow.

For Russia to do the same, "it would take a long time, a lot of resources and a lot of human resources, which we don't have," Kazaryan said.

Russia does not currently have the equipment available for telecom companies to filter the internet as required by the bill. That will mean "some entity will have to supply every Russian telecom and internet service provider" with the technology, he said.

That entity is likely to have a close connection to the Kremlin, he added. The state tends to award lucrative projects to private enterprises whose owners have close links to the Kremlin.

"Like everything in Russia, it's always about a commercial interest, and here it's pretty obvious," Kazaryan said.

Stanislav Shakirov, an internet freedom activist at the nonprofit Roskomsvoboda, which advocates for unrestricted internet access, told the news outlet Meduza that the other major hurdle to creating a China-like model would be the lack of domestic investment infrastructure for developing enough tech startups in Russia to compete with what's offered in the West.

"Not only are Russian internet users accustomed to having their pick of Western online services, but Russia's domestic market isn't big enough to sustain competition in isolation, and its unfriendly business climate remains a major hindrance," he told Meduza.

**Doesn't the Kremlin already restrict the Russian internet?**

The Kremlin in effect controls most of Russia's media, including television and newspapers. Many Russians still get their news from TV.

Still, a vigorous generation of web-based news portals have kept independent journalism alive in Russia, albeit with a fraction of the audience that Russian state media get. Social media and YouTube have become convenient mediums for opposition leaders and regular Ivans to express their opinions in Russia.

A handful of Russian media — including Meduza, in Riga, Latvia — have relocated and rebranded themselves outside the country.

The Kremlin has already armed itself with weapons to fight this threat.

The government passed a law in 2012 ordering Roskomnadzor to create a blacklist of websites deemed a threat to national security. Putin signed the law after a massive wave of street demonstrations erupted in 2011 and 2012 over what protesters said was a rigged election to put Putin back in power. According to Roskomsvoboda, Russia is blocking 154,000 websites from the blacklist registry.

Critics of the blacklist law argue that the definition of which sites should be included is unclear and it is frequently used to block political opposition groups and other dissenting voices.

That last claim is undeniable. Increasingly, Russian authorities have cracked down on dissent, even jailing people for "liking" posts on VKontakte, Russia's answer to Facebook. In a recent case, Russia convicted a video blogger on hate speech after he posted a video of himself playing Pokemon Go in a church.

In 2014, Russia passed a controversial data storage law, which requires social media websites to keep their servers — and all their data — in Russia. Some sites have refused, including LinkedIn, which is now blocked in Russia. Telegram, a messaging service popular in Russia and elsewhere, refused to comply with the law and is now technically banned. The program is still accessible through an IP-blocking application such as a virtual private network, or VPN.

Russia banned the use of VPNs and other software and websites used to circumventing the country's internet filtering system in June 2017. As is the case for the proposed sovereign internet law, Russia lacks a mechanism for completely enforcing the ban on VPN use.

Freedom House ranked Russia's internet as "not free" in its most recent global surveyreleased in late 2018. Although internet access increased among Russia's 143 million people, internet freedom in the country declined for the sixth year in a row, the watchdog group reported.

Human Rights Watch has expressed concern about the proposed sovereign

internet law.

"Russia's regressive internet laws have mostly been rushed, clumsy and chaotic, but that doesn't reduce their threat to freedom of speech and information," researcher Yulia Gorbunova wrote in a statement for Human Rights Watch.

"Russia is definitely beginning to look like one of the worst offenders in the world on internet freedom, but it's so sporadic," Kazaryan of the Internet Research Institute said. "It's just random prosecutors all around Russia, who block some random sites because, I guess, they need to report to their higher-ups that they are dealing with threats on the internet."

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