Russia Enacts Sovereign Internet Law

Russian President Vladimir Putin rolled out a new internet censorship law last week, which allows the Russian government to have more control over the information its citizens have access to. The new law, which has been widely condemned by human rights organizations, mandates internet service providers to install backdoor software that allows the Russian state to filter content on the internet. The new policy has been named the "sovereign internet law," and the Russian government says that it creates national networks that protect its online infrastructure from cyber-attacks.

Observers have likened the new legislation to China's "Great Firewall." In that case, a type of technology called deep packet inspection is used to inspect data online which allows the government to view and remove information that they view as potentially sensitive or damaging. The new Russian legislation includes deep packet inspection, which would allow Moscow to actively control information online in the same vein as Beijing.

Another element of the sovereign internet law is the ability it gives the Russian government to take Russia "offline." This would manifest itself in the Russian internet being completely separated from the rest of the world. Under this legislation, the Russian government could block domestic access to international internet servers, which would limit Russian users to websites and information approved by the Kremlin. This has drawn widespread condemnation from rights groups, who accuse Russia of limiting its citizens' access to information. Rachel Denber, Deputy Europe and Central Asia Director at the advocacy group Human Rights Watch, released a statement saying that the new law "jeopardizes the right of people in Russia to free speech and accurate information online."

The Russian government has defended the sovereign internet law, arguing that it is a vital part of their cybersecurity policy. The Kremlin points to the increased risk of cyberattack as justification for the legislation, and argues that by routing internet traffic through Russian servers instead of international servers, the risk of a cyberattack is reduced. Russia is also developing its own net address books which will allow the Russian internet to function completely independent of the international internet by 2021.

Despite Russia's best attempts to censor content online, experts believe that it will be difficult – if not impossible – for the Russian government to enact the legislation in the way it envisions. David Belson, Senior Director of Internet Research & Analysis at Internet Society, states that actually forcing internet service providers to install tracking software will be challenging in practice. Additionally, Belson predicts that getting the internet service providers to coordinate and filter the same content universally will be extraordinarily complicated. In practice, it is unlikely that ordinary Russians notice a significant change to their online browsing, although there is the possibility that users will be blocked from certain sites, or redirected to different sites altogether when the new legislation takes full effect.