Written by **Bob Adelmann** on January 5, 2015

Putin Demands All Data About His Citizens Be Stored Inside Russia

On December 31, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the latest version of his country's "personal data law" that, starting September 1, 2015, will require all companies to store data about Russian users only on computer servers inside the country. That way, according to the *New York Times*, "it will be easier for the government to get access to it."

Whether those companies — Facebook, Twitter, and Google, among others — will comply is an open question. When Putin's Internet "regulator" Roskomnadzor demanded that Facebook take down a page promoting a rally in support of political activist Alexei Navalny (whom the *Wall Street Journal* called "the man Vladimir Putin fears most"), Facebook complied. But within hours dozens of copycat pages popped up elsewhere, creating even more publicity for the January 15 event.

This encouraged Anton Nosik (another prominent Russian blogger who has also run afoul of Putin's Internet regulator) to call such a move absurd: "The reader wants to see what he was prevented from seeing. All that blocking doesn't work."

In March, when Turkey's Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdogan ordered Twitter to stop publishing documents showing extensive corruption in his administration and Twitter ignored him, he shut the social network site down in Turkey. Once again, within hours other sites began replicating the evidence, with some bloggers even spray-painting instructions on the walls of buildings on how to do workarounds. As Asli Tunc, a communications professor at Istanbul's Bilgi University, explained: "We all became hackers. And we all got on Twitter."

On the surface, such victories seem to prove the mantra long expressed by bloggers that the Internet would sound the death knell for totalitarian regimes around the world. As Andrew Bell wrote at his blog, The Daily Bell, back in 2010:

> The education that takes place every day [through the Internet] is eroding the elite's hold on government, economics, military power and, most importantly, on the minds and psyches of the once easily-controlled masses.

Instead, those governments are increasingly using their totalitarian police powers to shut down websites, arrest anti-government bloggers, and sentence them to slave labor camps. Some of them have been subjected to physical attacks and beatings as a warning to others inclined to promote the same

positions. That way, it may appear that the Internet is free of government interference, thanks to the "self-regulation" imposed by those threats.

As Russian blogger Nosik noted, Putin has sufficient dictatorial power all by himself to shut down any Internet companies he wants, at any time. At present, according to Nosik, he is stalling, partly because his country needs the economic boost that can come from Russians doing commerce on the web. As one critic of Putin's personal data law explained:

> It [would] become impossible for Russian citizens to book an air ticket via the website of a foreign airline or to book a hotel room via international booking systems, since personal data [would] be collected and stored [outside Russia]."

Said Nosik: "The moment Putin wants it done, it will be done ... and no law will be required."

It's not just Russia's Putin who is seeking to limit the Internet to rid it of those bucking the system such as Nosik and Navalny, either. The Freedom House just issued its fifth annual report, "Freedom On The Net 2014," which noted that

> Internet freedom around the world has declined for the fourth consecutive year, with a growing number of countries introducing online censorship and monitoring practices that are simultaneously more aggressive and more sophisticated in their targeting of individual users....

> As a result, more people are being arrested for their internet activity than ever before, online media outlets are increasingly being pressured to censor themselves or face legal penalties, and private companies are facing new demands to comply with government requests for data or deletions.

Those governments are becoming more physically aggressive as well, with many countries "now preferring to simply imprison users who post undesirable content, thereby deterring others and encouraging self-censorship." The advantage to such a tactic is that it "can present the appearance of a technically uncensored internet while effectively limiting certain types of speech," according to the report.

It's not just Russia and Turkey that are engaging in such barbarism, either. Iran, Syria, and China "were the worst abusers of internet freedom overall," wrote the authors. Users in China were "intimidated and arrested" when they protested Chinese President Xi Jinping's expansion of his government's control over social media last September. Some of those arrested were tried, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment, noted the authors.

Syria is the most dangerous country "in the world for citizen journalists," said the report, "with dozens killed in the past year." Iran wasn't far behind, where 16 employees of the gadget review site Narenji were arrested, with 11 of them found guilty and sentenced to jail terms up to 11 years.

Happily, there is pushback against such incursions, including Greatfire.org, which began hosting Internet content that was unblockable by the Chinese dictatorship, along with FireChat, which enabled protesters in Hong Kong to communicate with each other through a network of Bluetooth connections.

There's also Freegate, a software app that enables Internet users in China, Syria, Iran, Vietnam, and the United Arab Emirates to access websites blocked by their governments. And there's Ultrasurf, another software app to bypass China's Internet firewall, boasting more than 11 million users worldwide.

As the authors of the Freedom House report noted in concluding their survey,

In these and a growing number of other countries, the internet is a crucial medium not just for personal communication or new information but for political participation and civic engagement.

The struggle for internet freedom is consequently inseparable from the struggle for freedom of every kind.

Photo Russian President Vladimir Putin: AP Images

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