

Putin signs Russian internet censorship bills into law

By Clara Weiss
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On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law two bills that dramatically escalate the government's censorship of the internet and crackdown on free speech. The first bill provides for the removal of and ban on sites and blogs that allegedly spread "fake news", and the fining of their authors. The second outlaws the alleged disparaging of state symbols and the government, and the inciting of society to "hooliganism".

Individuals accused of spreading "unreliable information" on "socially significant" issues that could cause harm to individuals or social disorder, can be fined 30,000-100,000 rubles (US\$ 466-1,553) for their first violation of the law – an amount that surpasses what a sizable portion of the population make in a month – and up to 400,000 rubles (US\$ 6,211) for repeated offenses. Legal entities can be charged up to 1,5 million rubles (US\$ 23,292).

What constitutes "unreliable information" is nowhere defined and will be decided by the General Prosecutor's office, which will be overseeing the implementation of the law, as well as the state agency Roskomnadzor (Russian Communication Oversight), the main agency responsible for the surveillance and censorship of the internet in Russia.

The two laws are part of an international campaign by the ruling class to crack down on the internet, which has become the main platform for the dissemination and discussion of news and opinions that run counter to the official bourgeois mainstream media, as well as for the organization of demonstrations and strikes.

The bill had been approved in a first and second reading by the Russian parliament earlier this year, amid a strike of some 12,000 truckers in southern Russia. The signing of the bills by Putin occurred on the same day as medical personnel at several hospitals

in Novosibirsk launched a work-to-rule action to protest against their miserable salaries (about 20,000 rubles monthly or US\$ 314 with overtime) and the ongoing cuts in the health care sector.

If the US political establishment and corporate media have based their campaign of internet censorship ideologically on the fight against alleged "fake news" with reference to the "Russian meddling" in the election, the Russian government and state media have justified Moscow's own clamping down on free speech on the internet by citing the international campaign against "fake news" as well as the Ukraine conflict and the overt propaganda by the Western bourgeois media.

Amid escalating tensions with the US and European imperialist powers, and rising levels of social inequality, the Russian government in recent years has worked to set up what is now a comprehensive framework for the surveillance of the internet and individual users. It has banned the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) that hide users' actual internet IP, allowing them to surf on the internet without being automatically identifiable; public WiFis require personal identification for usage and the government has also obliged corporations running social media platforms to store their information about users on Russian servers and make them available upon request to the secret service. Meanwhile, a 2018 attempt to ban the popular messaging app Telegram, which enables encrypted communication, has largely failed.

In addition to these two new censorship laws, the Russian government is also actively preparing to create a Russian internet that would be separate from the World Wide Web. In February, the Russian parliament approved the first reading of a such a bill. The Kremlin has presented the law as a response to the US national

cybersecurity strategy that was passed in 2018, and Putin has defended the law as necessary to guarantee the “security” of Russian citizens.

While there is no question that the open war preparations by the United States and NATO against Russia are a major motivation for the efforts to create a separate Russian internet, at least as important a factor is the fear of the Russian oligarchy that the internet can be used by Russian workers and youth to access information about and link up their struggles with the growing struggles of the working class all over the world. Russia is the most unequal large economy in the world, with the top 1 percent owning as much as one-third of the country’s net wealth and the bottom 50 percent of the population owning less than 5 percent.

The yellow vest protests in France, as well as the strikes by Iranian workers and, most recently, the mass protests and strikes in Algeria have been closely followed in Russia, where over 90 percent of the population has expressed opposition to the raising of the retirement age by five years, which was rammed through in the summer and fall of last year.

The US media coverage of the new censorship laws in Russia, feigning outrage over the Kremlin’s crackdown, has been entirely hypocritical. Thus, the editorial board of the *Washington Post* denounced as an “authoritarian assault” on the “potential value of the Internet, and its very freedom”.

The same *Washington Post* has been fully complicit in the internet censorship campaign in the US. It has been one of most vociferous proponents of a campaign against “fake news”, and, in November 2016, it published a “black list” of anti-war and left-wing web sites, many of which, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, were subsequently demoted by Google in search results, and purged by Facebook.

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