

VPN law latest step in Kremlin online crackdown: experts

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A protester with tape covering her mouth takes part in the March for Free Internet in central Moscow in July.

A law coming into force on Wednesday will give the Kremlin greater control over what Russians can access online ahead of a presidential election next March.

Providers of virtual private networks (VPNs)—which let internet users

access sites banned in one country by making it appear that they are browsing from abroad—will be required to block websites listed by the Russian state communications watchdog.

The law is the latest in a raft of restrictions introduced by President Vladimir Putin's government and is expected to affect journalists and opposition activists, even though several VPN providers say they will not comply.

Videos by the punk band Pussy Riot and the blog of opposition leader Alexei Navalny have in the past been blocked under a law that allows authorities to blacklist websites they consider extremist.

"Journalists and activists who are using this to put out messages anonymously will be affected," Eva Galperin, director of cybersecurity at the US-based Electronic Frontier Foundation, told AFP.

Even if they are able to work around the new restrictions, the law will send a powerful message to activists, she said.

"If you're thinking about taking the steps that you need to stay anonymous from the government, you think maybe it's not worth it."

The law will likely be selectively applied and will probably not affect foreign business people using company VPNs, she said.

The measure is part of a wider crackdown on online communications, which this month saw the popular messaging app, Telegram, fined for failing to register with the Roskomnadzor communications watchdog and provide the FSB with information on user interactions.

Starting from 2018, companies on the Roskomnadzor register must also store all the data of Russian users inside the country, according to anti-

terror legislation which was passed last year and decried by the opposition and internet companies.

On Thursday, the Russian parliament's lower house approved a draft law that would let the attorney general blacklist the websites of "undesirable organisations" without a court order.

'Less safe, less free'

While falling short of a blanket ban on [virtual private networks](#), the new law undermines one of their key purposes and "essentially asks VPN services to help enforce Russia's censorship regime", Harold Li, vice president at ExpressVPN International, told AFP by email.

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