

The internet, along with the advent of social media, has, over the past 20 years, been one of the most potent threats to the tight hold Russia has over its citizens and the recent Twitter shutdown demonstrates how determined Russia is to maintain its authoritarian control over its citizens. While most of the media in Russia is controlled by the state, there exists a small pocket of thriving culture on the internet. It is a place where protest and critique of the government have grown and prospered unrestricted by the Russian government. That was until last year. Russia had been silently testing out a new technology that enabled complete control over internet services in Russia. After Twitter had refused to take down certain posts that Russian Authorities had deemed “illegal” Russia took steps to drastically slow down Twitter service for users in Russia. This was a monumental moment in Russian history and censorship. For over 25 years, the internet had existed as an unregulated area in Russia, simply because it was too difficult to properly control. Now, advances in technology “could return the country to a deeper form of isolation, akin to the Cold War era.” (cite NYT article) After Vladimir Putin took office, this was, in part, his goal. For Russia to return to its Soviet Union economic status, it’s necessary that Russia maintain a level of censorship, lest its citizens use the internet to develop and coordinate pro-democracy anti authoritarian ideologies and protest the government’s actions. Similarly, “Russia is using the censorship technology to gain more leverage over Western internet companies in addition to other strong-arm tactics and legal intimidation.” In the past, tools for protest and information (newspaper, television, radio, etc...) were regulated shortly after being introduced. The internet was different. Not only is it difficult to regulate a force as large as the internet, it also existed unregulated for many years, allowing many Western companies to penetrate Russia and establish a presence in the country. This conflicted with Russia’s strict anti-western ideologies and the censorship in Russia has, in part, continued because of this Western presence. While Russia has been attempting to force Western companies out of their country for a while, their newfound censorship powers may be the last step in the process to isolate Russia from the outside world.