

Russian Interior Ministry wants Software to Spy on Social Networks Users

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The Russian Interior Ministry publicly announced its search to buy software that will allow them to spy on social network users, the Znak news website reported Thursday.

The software, Zeus, allows law enforcement to read private messages, collect geolocation data and analyze connections between different users. The tender starts at 1.85 million rubles (\$28,000). Seven regions, including the Sverdlovsk region, are already using the software, through which police have identified “latent” members of informal extremist organizations that “allegedly carried out protests,” Znak reported.

An Interior Ministry spokesperson from Sverdlovsk confirmed the request for tender, noting that they need it to “counter terrorism and extremism,” the site reported. He also noted that “law-abiding citizens have no reason to worry about correspondence on social networks, as long as it doesn’t contain anything criminal, of course.” The software will only be used by court order, he said.

President Vladimir Putin's Internet ombudsman Dmitry Marinichev told Znak that announcing such a tender is "quite normal," comparing it to "buying a car to patrol the area." He noted that the monitoring would be carried out in "public places" because people make such information available to the public. He did not comment on Zeus' ability to read private messages.

Russian law enforcement has long had the ability to see personal information about social network users, Znak noted. The recently passed, controversial anti-terror laws "simply legalized existing practices, and allowed for the usage of this data as evidence in court," a source told Znak. He noted that usage of Zeus cannot be considered a legitimate investigation, but is simply primary data collection that can serve as the basis for formal investigations, making it essentially illegal information collection by law enforcement officers.

The Yarovaya laws, a package of anti-terrorist legislation authored by ultraconservative Duma deputy Irina Yarovaya, that has drawn criticism and protests across Russia and from human rights groups, was approved last month.

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