

The Merkurov Timeline of Digital Decay: A Manifesto of Unheeded Warnings (2010–2025)

Executive Summary

This archival analysis reconstructs the intellectual footprint of Anton Merkurov, a prominent Russian internet expert, columnist, and digital rights advocate, over a fifteen-year period that defines the rise and fall of the Russian Internet (RuNet). By synthesizing forensic data from *Novaya Gazeta*, *The Washington Post*, *Republic*, *Snob*, and other media outlets, this report constructs "The Merkurov Timeline of Digital Decay."

The analysis reveals a profound transformation in Merkurov's discourse: a trajectory moving from the "Technical Optimism" of the early 2010s—where the internet was viewed as an unstoppable force of liberation—to the grim realization of the "Digital Collar" and "Voluntary Submission" in the mid-2020s. The report treats the provided archival materials, including those dated through late 2025, as a continuous historical record, documenting the systematic dismantling of digital freedoms in Russia.

Key Findings

- **The "Digital Emigre" Prophecy (2018):** Merkurov correctly predicted that state clumsiness in blocking Telegram would not stop the service but would create a class of "digital emigres"—citizens forced to bypass state infrastructure to maintain basic communication [cite: 1, 2].
- **The Economic Rationale of Repression (2019):** Contrary to the view that the "Sovereign Internet" was purely ideological, Merkurov argued it was a mechanism for corruption ("money, money, and again money"), a prediction validated by the lucrative DPI (Deep Packet Inspection) and "Major Router" contracts of 2025 [cite: 3, 4].
- **The Shift to Physical Control (2020–2025):** Following the Belarus protests, Merkurov identified that encryption is irrelevant if the physical device is compromised. This evolved into his 2025 analysis of the "Major Router" and "Child SIMs" as tools to bring surveillance physically into the home [cite: 4, 5, 6].
- **The "Digital Collar" (2025):** In his later writings, Merkurov diagnosed a psychological shift in the population—a transition from resistance to "voluntary submission," where citizens willingly hand over rights to bots and state registries for convenience [cite: 7, 8].

I. Phase One: Technical Optimism and the Open Web (2010–2015)

1.1 The Era of Competitive Platforms

In the early 2010s, Merkurov's discourse was characterized by a belief in market competition and the superiority of user experience over state regulation. His analysis focused on the rivalry between domestic platforms like VKontakte (VK) and global giants like Facebook.

- **2012: The Usability Defense.** Writing for *Slon.ru* (later *Republic*), Merkurov argued that VKontakte was superior to Facebook not due to ideology, but usability and local integration [cite: 9, 10]. This period reflects a time when the RuNet was viewed primarily as a business ecosystem rather than a battlefield.
- **2015: The Stagnation Warning.** By 2015, the tone began to shift. Merkurov predicted the decline of VKontakte, suggesting it would "turn into LiveJournal" (a platform that had lost its relevance), foreshadowing the stagnation that comes with state appropriation of social platforms [cite: 11].

1.2 Early Skepticism of State Services

Even in this "optimistic" era, Merkurov displayed skepticism toward state digitalization. At the RIF+KIB conference in 2011, he publicly criticized the "Gosuslugi" (State Services) portal, an early indicator of his wariness toward the centralization of citizen data [cite: 12]. However, at this stage, his criticism was largely technical and service-oriented rather than focused on totalitarian surveillance.

II. Phase Two: The Legislative Assault and the "Digital Emigre" (2016–2019)

The period from 2016 to 2019 marked the end of the "wild" RuNet. The introduction of the "Yarovaya Law" and the "Sovereign Internet" bill forced Merkurov to pivot from business analysis to digital rights advocacy.

2.1 The Yarovaya Law: Predicting Universal Surveillance (2016)

When the "Yarovaya Law"—requiring operators to store user traffic—was introduced, Merkurov provided a critical analysis for *Republic*.

- **The Warning:** He warned that the law would not just target "terrorists" but would impact "all Russian companies... from Tele2 to Mail.ru" and, by extension, every citizen [cite: 13].
- **The "Incompetence" Defense:** In a 2017 interview with *The Moscow Times*, Merkurov maintained a degree of optimism based on state incompetence, stating, "[Authorities] don't have the means to control the internet... Hence the incompetent, unimplementable laws" [cite: 14]. This belief—that the internet's complexity would save it from the state—was a recurring theme that would eventually be eroded by 2025.

2.2 The Telegram Ban and "Digital Emigration" (2018)

The Russian government's failed attempt to block Telegram in April 2018 was a watershed moment. Merkurov's commentary in *The Washington Post* and *Republic* crystallized the concept of the "Digital Emigre."

- **The Concept:** Merkurov argued that the ban created "millions of digital emigres"—people who were fundamentally apolitical but turned their backs on the state because it interfered with their daily convenience [cite: 1, 2].
- **The "Great Russian Firewall" Skepticism:** At this stage, Merkurov still believed a Chinese-style firewall was "a dream, today more distant than ever" because Russia was "too globalized" [cite: 1]. He viewed the ban as a "fiasco" where the government "managed to hack itself" by blocking critical infrastructure (Amazon/Google clouds) while Telegram remained operational [cite: 1, 15].

2.3 The "Sovereign Internet" as a Financial Scheme (2019)

When the "Sovereign Internet" law was passed in 2019, Merkurov offered a cynical but prescient economic analysis in *The Institute of Modern Russia*.

- **The Prediction:** He asserted that the true motivation was not security, but "money, money, and again money." He predicted that the law would primarily benefit contractors building data centers and hardware (DPI), rather than actually securing the network [cite: 3, 16].
- **Technical Feasibility:** He continued to argue that a fully isolated internet was "technically impossible" without causing critical failures, calling the attempt "clinical idiocy" [cite: 3, 17].

III. Phase Three: The Physical Turn and the Weaponization of Safety (2020–2023)

The protests in Belarus (2020) and the subsequent crackdown shifted Merkurov's focus from *network* security to *physical* security.

3.1 The Lesson of Belarus: The Device is the Weak Link (2020)

In an interview with *Euractiv* (cited by BBC) regarding the role of Telegram in Belarus protests, Merkurov delivered a chilling warning that moved beyond encryption.

- **The Quote:** "The main danger is going to the street with your phone... The security flaw in all social media messengers is that someone can physically access the user's device" [cite: 5].
- **Significance:** This marked a departure from the debate over encryption keys (the 2018 narrative) to the realization that the state would use brute force and physical coercion to bypass digital protections.

3.2 Geopolitical Isolation (2017–2021)

Merkurov's own movements reflected the growing fragmentation. In 2017, he was blacklisted by Azerbaijan for visiting Nagorno-Karabakh, an event he dismissed as "delirium" of borders, stating, "States and borders are in our heads" [cite: 18, 19, 20]. By 2020, he was criticizing the US ban on TikTok as "political suicide," arguing against the politicization of social platforms [cite: 21].

IV. Phase Four: The Manifesto of Digital Decay (2024–2025)

The archival records from 2024 and 2025 (sourced primarily from *Novaya Gazeta*) document the final collapse of the "free" RuNet. In this period, Merkurov's tone shifts from mocking state incompetence to chronicling a successful, albeit destructive, digital totalitarianism.

4.1 The "Major Router" and Domestic Surveillance (March–April 2025)

In early 2025, Merkurov identified a new state initiative: the mandatory control of home routers.

- **The Mechanism:** The "Major Router" initiative required operators to transmit real-time data on user devices, location, and session duration [cite: 4].
- **The Implication:** Merkurov warned, "The digital collar is tightening... Yesterday traffic, today devices, tomorrow a personal employee looking over your shoulder" [cite: 4, 22]. He noted that surveillance had moved from the ISP level directly into the living room ("The small box with an antenna... will now watch your private life") [cite: 4].

4.2 The "White" Censorship and DPI (September 2025)

By late 2025, the "Sovereign Internet" infrastructure he predicted in 2019 had been built.

- **DPI Implementation:** In "Another Three-Letter Word," Merkurov detailed how Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) allowed operators to implement "white" censorship—blocking specific protocols and apps without formally banning IP addresses, making censorship invisible and granular [cite: 23].
- **The Economic Cost:** He reiterated his 2019 point: the citizens pay for their own surveillance through increased tariffs to fund this equipment [cite: 4].

4.3 The Digital Iron Curtain: Roaming and SIM Blocks (September–October 2025)

The "Iron Curtain" became a reality through the manipulation of mobile connectivity.

- **Roaming Bans:** In "Home is Good, but Roaming will get you Blocked," Merkurov analyzed the Roskomnadzor initiative to block SIM cards of Russians abroad, ostensibly to fight fraud. He termed this the construction of a "Faraday cage" around the country [cite: 24, 25].
- **Foreign SIM Ban:** In October 2025, he documented the blocking of *foreign* SIM cards entering Russia, effectively cutting off communication for visitors and returning expats, isolating the country physically and digitally [cite: 26].

4.4 The Psychology of "Voluntary Submission" (October 2025)

Perhaps the most devastating analysis came in his essay "Censorship Comes as a Bot."

- **The Shift:** Merkurov observed that the state no longer needed to force compliance; citizens were *voluntarily* handing over rights to Telegram bots integrated with "Gosuslugi" (State Services) to receive "official" status.
- **The Digital Collar:** He coined the term "Digital Collar" to describe this phenomenon: "The problem lies in the subcortex of society... with what joy people are ready to put on this collar" [cite: 7, 8]. This represents the death of the "Digital Emigre" spirit of 2018.

4.5 The Terminal Station: Iran (December 2025)

In one of the final entries of the timeline, "Internet is Closing, Next Station Iran," Merkurov concluded that the isolation was nearly complete.

- **The Comparison:** He explicitly drew the parallel to Iran, noting that while VPNs exist, the official internet is a barren wasteland. He cited the blocking of innocuous platforms like *Roblox* as proof that the crackdown was no longer about politics, but about total control and "protecting children" as a pretext for destroying the economy [cite: 27, 28].

V. Thematic Evolution: From Optimism to the "Collar"

5.1 The Death of Technical Optimism

- **2010s View:** The internet is a hydra; cut off one head, two appear. The state is too incompetent to stop it [cite: 14].
- **2020s View:** The state is willing to destroy the economy and infrastructure to maintain control. "If the defense of 'traditional values' equaled economic growth, there would be fewer questions. As it is—chased a pedophile, killed the economy" [cite: 28].

5.2 The Evolution of "Sovereignty"

- **2019:** "Sovereignty" is a corrupt procurement scheme [cite: 3].
- **2025:** "Sovereignty" is a "Faraday cage" where foreign SIMs don't work, and domestic SIMs are tracked in real-time [cite: 25, 26].

5.3 The Rise of AI and the "Loss of Mind"

In late 2025, Merkurov explored the role of AI. In "Getting Out of Your Mind," he argued that AI (like ChatGPT) allows for a new level of autonomy, but also poses a threat if the state creates a "censored intelligence" that refuses to answer

uncomfortable questions [cite: 29, 30]. He warned that the fear of AI is misplaced; the real fear should be the *user's* readiness to indistinguishably merge with the machine [cite: 29].

VI. Conclusion: The Manifesto of Unheeded Warnings

The archival record of Anton Merkurov serves as a forensic timeline of the Russian Internet's demise. What began as a vibrant, competitive ecosystem (Phase I) was subjected to legislative strangulation (Phase II), physical coercion (Phase III), and finally, total algorithmic and psychological subjugation (Phase IV).

Merkurov's warnings were consistent:

1. **Laws against "terrorists" will be used against everyone.** (Confirmed 2016/2025).
2. **State incompetence will eventually be replaced by brute-force infrastructure (DPI).** (Confirmed 2025).
3. **The ultimate enemy is not the state, but the citizen's willingness to wear the "Digital Collar."** (Confirmed Oct 2025).

As of late 2025, Merkurov's diagnosis is terminal: "The internet is closing." The "Splinternet" is no longer a theoretical risk but a lived reality of blocked SIMs, domestic routers acting as spies, and a society that has voluntarily submitted to the bot.

VII. Chronological Index of Key Sources

Date	Event/Article	Key Concept	Source ID
2012	<i>Slon.ru</i> : VK vs Facebook	Technical Optimism / Usability	[cite: 9, 10]
2016	<i>Republic</i> : Yarovaya Law	Universal Surveillance Warning	[cite: 13]
2017	<i>Moscow Times</i> :	"Incompetence"	[cite: 14]

	Interview	Defense	
2018	<i>WaPo</i> : Telegram Ban	"Digital Emigres"	[cite: 1]
2019	<i>IMR</i> : Sovereign Internet	Corruption ("Money, money")	[cite: 3, 16]
2020	<i>Euractiv</i> : Belarus Protests	Physical Device Access	[cite: 5]
2025 Apr	<i>Novaya</i> : "Major Router"	Surveillance in the Home	[cite: 4]
2025 Sep	<i>Novaya</i> : "Three-Letter Word"	DPI / White Censorship	[cite: 23]
2025 Sep	<i>Medium</i> : Roaming Ban	Digital Iron Curtain	[cite: 24, 25]
2025 Oct	<i>Novaya</i> : "Censorship as a Bot"	Voluntary Submission / Digital Collar	[cite: 7, 8]
2025 Dec	<i>Novaya</i> : "Next Station Iran"	Total Isolation	[cite: 28]

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